

# 5.

## Salvation as Liberation

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### Preface

I am delighted to contribute to this celebration of Dorothy Lee's life and ministry as she reaches this milestone. Dorothy has been my teacher, advisor, mentor, inspiration and, of course, my friend within the Melbournian Johannine "Schule."<sup>1</sup> Dorothy's work on symbolic narratives,<sup>2</sup> and her award-winning book on the ramifications of the incarnation,<sup>3</sup> have been very influential in my research and writing. In particular, I am indebted to her careful analysis of the symbolism of divine fatherhood. She writes,

The Johannine understanding of divine fatherhood thus involves a two-way movement. On the one hand, God's fatherhood, symbolically portrayed in the Father-Son relationship, is an outward movement of giving away power, surrendering selfhood as autonomous and self-sufficient. Such vulnerability places God on the side of the vulnerable, the outcast, and the

1. The "Schule" consists of Dorothy Lee, Frank Moloney, Brendan Byrne and myself; we have all written on the Gospel of John and companioned each other in our research.

2. Lee, *Symbolic Narratives*.

3. Lee, *Flesh and Glory*.

powerless. On the other hand, divine fatherhood draws others into the filial relationship between God and Jesus, so that the Father-Son relationship becomes the fundamental icon of God's relations with the world.<sup>4</sup>

Becoming children of God is a statement of Jesus' mission (1:13) and provides an essential metaphor for understanding the nature of "salvation" in this Gospel. As always in John, metaphors coalesce, as will become clearer in this essay.



In the Johannine narrative, the first title ascribed to Jesus comes from the lips of John, the one who bears witness to Jesus: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Since John has been introduced with high credentials as one coming from God to bear witness (1:6), his words, and therefore this first title, must shape our reading of the following narrative, and our understanding of Jesus' mission. In what follows, I will examine the two key phrases in John's title—"lamb of God" and "sin of the world"—and then what it might mean to "take away" the sin of the world. I believe that this examination will reveal John's particular understanding of salvation as an act of liberation.

## Lamb of God

As a title, this phrase is ambiguous, since within Israel's tradition and rituals there are many possible references, with three common suggestions: the paschal lamb (Exod 12:1–14), the Suffering Servant who is compared to a lamb that is silent at its slaughter (Isa 53:7–8) and the lamb that God provides for Abraham, to replace the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22:1–20).<sup>5</sup> In addition, there is the apocalyptic lamb (Rev 7:17) favored by Dodd,<sup>6</sup> and also the twice-daily holocaust sacrifice of the Tamid Lamb.<sup>7</sup> The meaning of the title remains suspended until the narrative has unfolded, only then will this first title of Jesus be clarified.

4. Lee, "Iconic 'Father' of Jesus."

5. In her 2010 Presidential Address to the Catholic Biblical Association of America, Sandra Schneiders summarized these three suggestions. See, Schneiders, "Lamb of God and the Forgiveness of Sin(s)," 1–29.

6. Dodd, *Interpretation*, 230–238.

7. I proposed this Tamid lamb in 2013, but have since changed my view, as this essay will show. See, Coloe, "Behold the Lamb of God," 337–50.

There are clues in John's passion narrative that Jesus dies as "the Passover lamb." John follows a different time sequence to the Synoptic Gospels and portrays Jesus' death occurring on the eve of Passover. The Jewish authorities do not enter the Praetorium to avoid ritual defilement that would prevent them eating the Passover (19:28). Several times, it is noted that his death occurs on "the day of preparation" (19:14, 31, 42). The time detail when Pilate hands Jesus over to death, at the sixth hour (19:14), coincides with the time the first lambs are taken into the Temple for ritual killing (m. Pesah 5.3). In response to Jesus' thirst, a soldier dips a sponge into a jar of sour wine and passes this up to Jesus on a "branch of hyssop" (19:29). When the people of Israel were preparing for the escape from Egypt, they used a bunch of hyssop to brush the blood of the lamb on the lintels of their doors (Exod 12:22). John uses hyssop in this scene, not for its practical use, but as an allusion to the Exodus event, and the slaying of the Passover lamb. Following Jesus' death, the soldiers break the legs of the two crucified with Jesus, but note that he is already dead. They confirm his death by piercing his side followed by a scripture reference: "none of his bones shall be broken" (19:36). Given the constellation of Passover imagery, the most likely reference is to the Passover lamb (Exod 12:46).

In these many ways, Jesus is imaged as the Passover lamb. The Passover lamb, therefore, is the most likely referent to John's statement "Behold the lamb of God" (1:29).<sup>8</sup> But this raises a serious difficulty, since the Passover Lamb was not associated with "taking away sin." More will be said on "taking away" following the analysis of the second part of John's title—"sin of the world."

## The Sin of the World

When reading John's Gospel, Adele Reinhartz proposes that we read the narrative as telling three different "tales." At one level, the Gospel narrates the story of the historical Jesus in the early part of the first-century CE. At another level, it provides insight into the experience of the later Johannine community in their struggle with Judaism after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. But beyond these "tales" lies a larger "meta-tale" that has "the cosmos as its setting and eternity as its time-frame."<sup>9</sup>

8. Zumstein notes that the evangelist creates a significant *inclusio* between the beginning and end of the narrative through the "Passover lamb" imagery. Zumstein, *L'Évangile*, 79.

9. Reinhartz, *Word in the World*, 4.

John's title "lamb of God," then speaks of the "sin of the world." He is not referring to the personal sins of individuals, but cosmic sin as a world power of evil. The view that the current age was held captive by a power of evil developed in "segments of early Judaism from ca. 200 B.C.E to ca. 200 C.E."<sup>10</sup> David Aune describes this way of thinking as narrative theology:

" . . . centering in the belief that (1) the present world order, regarded as both evil and oppressive, is under the temporary control of Satan and his human accomplices, and (2) that this present evil world order will shortly be destroyed by God and replaced by a new and perfect order corresponding to Eden before the fall. During the present evil age, the people of God are an oppressed minority who fervently expect God, or his specially chosen agent the Messiah, to rescue them."<sup>11</sup>

This apocalyptic view pervades the Gospel, and colors what is meant by "the world," which has various meanings in the Fourth Gospel; both the world as the arena of God's creation (1:1) and love (3:16), but also the world as an "inimical force" in opposition to God's purposes (15:18).<sup>12</sup> The cosmic force opposed to God is termed sin and it has power to enslave: "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin" (8:34). To take away this world-sin requires more than atonement, or forgiveness, it is a power-struggle between Jesus and the "Ruler of this world," and Jesus is victorious: "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out" (12:31; also 16:18, 33). The human drama is penetrated by cosmic powers and depicted through the characters in the narrative in their response to Jesus.

In the trial before Pilate, Jesus testifies/witnesses to the truth (18:37), but Pilate and the Jewish authorities refuse to believe him. When the chief priests and police demand that he be crucified (19:6) and Pilate surrenders Jesus to them, these characters enact the desires of their "father, the devil" (8:44). On this human stage, the power of God, incarnate in Jesus, confronts the cosmic power of Evil, embodied in Pilate, the chief priests and police who call for his crucifixion (19:6).

Furthermore, while Pilate appears to be the judge, it is unclear who is seated on the judgment bench (19:13)—Pilate or Jesus<sup>13</sup>—the narrative

10. Aune, "Understanding Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic," 236.

11. Aune, "Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic," 256.

12. Stuckenbruck, "Evil in Johannine and Apocalyptic Perspective," 200–201.

13. If it is Pilate, it means reading the verb *ἐκάθισεν* in an intransitive sense—Pilate sat himself. But it could also be read in a transitive sense with Jesus as the object—Pilate sat Jesus on the judgment seat (*βήμα*). Grammatically, either sense is possible. The question is, what might the evangelist have intended—to be historically plausible—in

calls for the readers to decide. I think Jesus is seated on the judgment seat.<sup>14</sup> While Jesus sits in silence on the judgment seat, his judgment has already been proleptically given, “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out” (12:31). As Judith Kovacs states, “[T]he cross is not merely the metaphorical jumping off point for Jesus’s ascent to his heavenly Father. It is the locus of a cosmic battle, in which Jesus achieves a decisive victory over Satan.”<sup>15</sup> Jesus had assured his disciples: “In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world” (16:33).

The final words in Jesus’ public ministry are on judgment—“The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge, for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak” (12:48–49). In the “hour” of Jesus, the last day has come and so the “ruler of this world” now sits under the judgment of Jesus’ word. Haenchen observes that it is not Pilate who is the judge but Jesus, and “he speaks in silence, by sitting on the seat of judgment with his mock crown, and purple mantle.”<sup>16</sup>

Jesus was sent to bring salvation and eternity life to all who believe (3:16). Opposed to him is a power of evil called Satan (13:27), the devil (13:2), the evil one (17:15) and the ruler of this world (12:31; 14:30; 16:11).<sup>17</sup> Jesus is in the world, but does not belong to this world as he says to “the Jews” opposed to him, “You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world” (8:23). This power of evil influences the actions of the characters such as Judas, entering into him when he had received the morsel of bread (13:21).

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which case Pilate would sit in judgment; or ironically to stress that it is Jesus who is making the judgment? For more detail on this extensive debate among interpreters see Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, vol. 2: 1388–93.

14. This position is well argued by Lincoln, *Gospel according to Saint John*, 469. Here, Lincoln refers to Justin’s *Apology* (1.35) where it is understood that Jesus sat on the judgment seat: “And as the prophet spoke, they tormented Him, and set Him on the judgment-seat, and said, Judge us.”

15. Kovacs, “Now shall the ruler of this world be driven out,” 246.

16. Haenchen, *John 2*, 188. Haenchen also refers to Justin, *Apology* 1.35.6, and *Gospel of Peter* 1:7 to show that this tradition of Jesus sitting on the judgment seat was known in the early centuries (187).

17. On the power of Evil operating in the crucifixion see Kovacs, “Now shall the ruler of this world be driven out,” 227–47; Koester, “Why was the Messiah Crucified?,” 163–80; and Dennis, “Lifting up of the Son of Man” 678–91.

## Taking away World Sin

Having established that Jesus dies as the Passover lamb and that in his ministry and death he conquers the cosmic power of evil called “the ruler of the world,” what is the relationship between the Passover lamb and “taking away” world sin?

First, some clarification about the function of the Passover lamb. This was not considered a sacrifice for atonement or forgiveness of sin, “bulls and goats were the more common offering for these purposes (Lev 4:1–31).”<sup>18</sup> While the Passover lamb was not considered a sin-offering, Hylen writes, that “at Jesus death, John evokes the story of Israel’s salvation from slavery in Egypt.”<sup>19</sup> Liberation from slavery is explicitly raised in John’s Gospel in Jesus’ heated dialogue with his former followers and this dialogue sheds light on the significance of the Passover lamb imagery in the Johannine passion.

Then Jesus said to the Jews *who had believed in him*,<sup>20</sup> “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free (ἐλευθερώσει).” They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone (οὐδενὶ δεδουλεύκαμεν πώποτε). What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’” (8:31–33).

In answering this question, Jesus speaks of those who sin as being “slaves” and then draws a contrast between the slave whose place in a household is not guaranteed, but reliant on the will of the master, whereas the son, because of his filial relationship, has a permanent place in the household.

Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever” (8:34–35)

This brief parable is then applied to himself as the son able to liberate a slave. “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed (John 8:36).”

Lying behind this discussion about freedom and slavery lies an apocalyptic understanding that the current world, is ensnared by a power of Evil, leading individuals to sin.

18. Hylen, “Lamb,” *NIDB* 3 (2008) 563. Similarly, Menken writes, “the blood of the Passover sacrifice has an apotropaic, not an expiatory function.” See, Menken, “Lamb of God” 4–7.

19. Hylen, “Lamb,” 563.

20. Emphasis added.

“... let not the spirit of Belial rule over them to accuse them before Thee, and to ensnare them from all the paths of righteousness, so that they may perish from before Thy face. But they are Thy people and Thy inheritance, which thou hast delivered with thy great power from the hands of the Egyptians: create in them a clean heart and a holy spirit, and let them not be ensnared in their sins from henceforth until eternity.”(Jubilees 1:19–20).<sup>21</sup>

### Who is your father?<sup>22</sup>

The comparison between the freedom of son/daughter, and the bondage of slavery within the household, leads into the issue of one’s paternity. Jesus’ former followers claim to have the freedom of being children of Abraham (8:33, 39), but Jesus’ challenges this claim by pointing to their behavior.

In an earlier confrontation regarding the Sabbath, Jesus had argued from a principle, that sons do what their father does—“whatever the father does, the son does likewise” (5:19). This same principle is now restated—“If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did” (8:39). In trying to kill Jesus, these opponents show that “you are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning” (8:44).<sup>23</sup> Rather than being children in the household of God, these opponents show by their behavior that they are children of Satan, in bondage to the “ruler of this world.”

Taking away world sin is, therefore, not a matter of forgiveness, or expiation for personal sins, but an act of liberation from the cosmic power of evil. Only such liberation will enable individuals to live with the freedom of

21. Similarly, the Dead Sea Scrolls describes Israel living under the “dominion of Belial” 1QS Col. i:18; 4Q256 Col. ii:3; 4Q390 Frag. 2 i:4. The Qumran documents clearly show a first century belief that the world was under the rule of demonic powers and needed the protection of God to be free from these powers. See the discussion of Jesus’s prayer (John 17) in Warren, “What do Angels Have against the Blind and the Deaf?” 115–29.

22. I have discussed the function of Abraham and the issue of sonship in an earlier article, Coloe, “Like Father, Like Son,” 1–11.

23. It is important when reading these harsh words of Jesus, that the narrative context is recognized, namely, that he is not speaking to “the Jews” in general, but to a group of his former followers “who had believed in him” (8:31). In their response to him, they accuse him of having a demon (8:52). The charge and counter-charge of demonic possession seems to have been part of the rhetoric in disputes. Jesus even accuses Peter of being “Satan” (Mark 8:33), and Jesus is accused of being Beelzebul (Mark 3:22). See Setzer, *Jewish Responses to Early Christians*. And for an alternative view Reinhartz, “Children of the Devil,” 43–54.

the son/daughter in the household. And this liberation requires Jesus, the son, to act. “If the son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (8:36).

### Children in the Household of God<sup>24</sup>

Among the many unique aspects of the crucifixion in John’s Gospel is the change of relationship Jesus establishes with his mother and the beloved disciple.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her as his own (εἰς τὰ ἴδια)” (19:26–27).

This declaration establishes the woman as the mother of the disciple, and in so doing establishes the disciple as Jesus’ brother, and in a filial relationship with the God Jesus calls “father.” The nature of discipleship is changed to one of siblings within the Father’s house. Jesus confirms this reality in his words to Mary following his resurrection:

Jesus said to her, “Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and sisters (τοὺς ἀδελφούς) and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (20:17)

Jesus’ followers now have the freedom of being children in the household of God, and are no longer living under the dominion of Satan.

### Conclusion

The Johannine model of salvation is, in the light of the Exodus, an act of liberation from the dominion of slavery under the Ruler of this world,<sup>25</sup> to the freedom of children within the household of God. In this model, there is a liberation from sin, where sin is perceived as a power which enslaves

24. Over many years I have written on the Johannine Crucifixion as the establishing of the “Father’s House.” See for example Coloe, “Raising the Johannine Temple (Jn 19:19–37)”;*God Dwells with Us; Dwelling in the Household of God*. For the most recent expression of this, see Coloe, *John 10–11*.

25. “By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of bondage” (Exod 13:14).



humanity, just as Israel was once held captive within the house of slavery.<sup>26</sup> To bring humanity from the status of “slave” to the status of “children” is liberative and the quintessential image of such liberation for Israel is the Passover lamb. John, the witness, is correct in identifying Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29).

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26. “Take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve and by his name alone shall you swear. Do not follow other gods . . .” (Deut 6:12–14a. cf. 5:6; 13:10).

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