

The Lamb of God. Bethesda Meditation. 1 January 2012.

We just spoke to God about 'the blood of Christ, Thy spotless Lamb'. And I want us to focus in particular on that description of our Lord as the 'spotless Lamb'.

The fact that today is the first day of a New Year prompted me to think of the opening of Exodus 12, when God informed Moses, 'This month shall be for you the beginning of months' – a declaration which introduced a religious calendar alongside the existing civil calendar – a calendar which commenced six months ahead of the other, to be used for sacred purposes, to regulate the nation's annual festivals.¹

Let me read a few extracts from Exodus 12 ...

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, "This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household ...

Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year old male (taken in the prime – the full vigour – of life, that is)... and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, and the whole congregation of the assembly of Israel shall kill it between the evenings.² And they shall take of the blood, and put it on the two door-posts and on the lintel of the houses in which they eat it ... Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inward parts

It is the Lord's Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast ... and the blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt.³

Clearly God spoke to Moses and Aaron before the 10th of the month. And one of the greatest of Jewish scholars ventured the opinion, not unreasonably I suggest, that it was, and I quote, 'On the first day of the first month of the new year' that God communicated with the two brothers.⁴

I want you to note the emphasis on God's requirement that the lamb needed to be 'without blemish' – without flaw or fault.⁵ This is the first occasion when this expression occurs in scripture, but it is by no means the last – occurring as it does almost 40 times in the Old Testament,⁶ and always as a divinely appointed requirement concerning animals to be slain. The Lord stated the principle clearly to Moses later, 'you shall offer of your own free will a male without blemish from the cattle, from the sheep, or from the goats. Whatever has a defect, you shall not offer, for it shall not be acceptable for you'.⁷ 'No blemish ... no defect' was the rule, without exception.

I am sure that I don't need to remind you that exactly one a week ago was Christmas day – which in 2011 happened to coincide with the first day of one of the great Jewish festivals – that of Hanukkah, a festival which commemorates the cleansing and rededication of the Second Temple in the days of the Maccabees.⁸

I was interested to learn that it was on that day that the Israeli Antiquities Authority chose to reveal the discovery of a tiny clay seal discovered on the route of a street which once ran through ancient Jerusalem just outside the Temple Mount. The seal is dated to around the time when our Lord was here.⁹ And the seal carries two Hebrew words, which translated read 'Pure to (or 'for') the Lord'. In the light of ancient Jewish writings (the Mishnah), top Jewish archaeologists say that the seal would have been used by temple officials to certify that objects brought into the Temple were ceremonially clean and therefore fit to be offered to God – including animals intended for sacrifice.¹⁰

You can easily follow the reasoning of the Israeli Antiquities Authority, that there was no better day on which to draw attention to a relic concerned with the approval of offerings in the Temple as pure and acceptable to God than on the first day of a festival which commemorated the purification and rededication of the Temple¹¹ – purified and rededicated because it had earlier been desecrated by the erecting of an image of the Greek god Zeus on its altar – spoken of by Daniel the prophet as 'the abomination of desolation'.¹²

But as we have seen, from the very first Passover onwards God required that every sacrifice offered to Him had to be free from any flaw or fault – from any deformity or defilement.

And as you know well, the apostle Peter picked up on the words of Exodus 12 in the first chapter of his first epistle ... 'Knowing that you have been redeemed', he wrote, 'not with corruptible things, as silver¹³ or gold,¹⁴ from your futile way of life inherited from your fathers, but with precious ('with highly-valued') blood, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, the blood of Christ'.¹⁵

Peter's point was not that our Lord was, as the lambs of Exodus 12, externally and ceremonially unblemished and unspotted, but that He was pure and holy in His character ... and not only so, but as Peter makes clear towards the close of his second chapter, that He (our Lord) was as sinless in His *conduct* as He was in His *character*... 'who did no sin' are the apostle's words.

As has often been pointed out, Peter was not alone among the apostles in drawing attention to the Saviour as the antitype and fulfilment of the paschal lamb. The apostle Paul did so in chapter 5 of his first epistle to the Corinthians – which epistle makes explicit reference to no less than four of the so-called 'Feasts of the Lord'¹⁶ – in this case, '*our* Passover has been sacrificed, even Christ'.¹⁷

For his part, the apostle John directs our attention in his gospel to Jesus as the Lamb, not only by recording in his opening chapter John the Baptist's double invitation, 'Behold, the Lamb of God', but by making no less than seven references to the Passover in his narrative of Passion Week,¹⁸ and by recording – and he only of the gospel writers – that, on account of our Lord's sudden death, His legs were not broken along with those of the two criminals crucified alongside Him – in fulfilment, as John points out, of the scripture, 'A bone of Him shall not be broken' – words found concerning the Passover lamb in Exodus 12.¹⁹ It is John also, of course, who makes constant reference to our Lord as 'the Lamb' in his Book of the Revelation.²⁰

And we cannot miss the way in which each of these three apostles (Peter, Paul and John) link our Lord's sinlessness with His sacrificial death for us.

Paul by telling us at the close of 2 Corinthians 5 that 'Him who knew *no sin* He (God) has made *sin* for us'.²¹

Peter by informing us in chapter 2 of his letter not only of what our Lord didn't do – namely, that He 'did *no sin*' – but what He did do – namely, that He 'Himself bore *our sins* in His body on the tree'.

And John in chapter 3 of his first epistle that 'He was manifested to take away *sins*; and in Him is *no sin*'.²²

We read earlier of the Passover lamb's 'head', 'legs' and 'inward parts'.²³ When I find that, between them, these three apostles certify that the Lord Jesus '*knew no sin*', that He '*did no sin*', and that '*in Him is no sin*', I cannot help feeling that Paul spoke, as it were, for the Lamb of God's head, Peter for His legs and John for His inward parts.

And, thinking back to the words 'Pure for God' on the clay Temple seal found recently at Jerusalem, I cannot but recall the statement made by John concerning our Saviour in 1 John 3, '*He is pure*'.²⁴ He is indeed.²⁵

But the apostles Peter, Paul and John are not the only New Testament writers who focus on our Lord's sinlessness. So too does the writer to the Hebrews. We have only to think of his words at the close of his chapter 4 concerning the One 'who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet *without sin*', and at the close of his chapter 7 concerning the High Priest suited to our need, that He is '*holy, harmless and undefiled*'.²⁶

And just as the three apostles link our Lord's sinlessness with His sacrificial death, so too does the author of the Hebrew epistle. When writing in chapter 9 about the power of 'the blood of Christ' to purify our conscience, he says of our Lord Jesus that He 'offered *Himself without blemish* to God'.²⁷ For He (Jesus) alone among men was 'without blemish' in respect of His person, character and conduct, and He alone therefore was qualified, in offering Himself, to take the sinner's place and punishment – to take *our* place and punishment.

Well then did we sing at the outset, 'the blood of Christ, Thy spotless Lamb, O God, is all my plea'.²⁸

And when we later take the bread and wine, we would do well to bear in mind the words of a hymn written long before by Samuel Wesley – the father of Charles and John – 'O Lamb of God! was ever pain, was ever love, like Thine?'²⁹

Footnotes

¹ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book I, Chapter III, Paragraph 3.

² The first evening began right after noon and the second began when the sun set. In Josephus' day, which was also Jesus' day, the Jews slew the Passover lamb in mid-afternoon. The Lord Jesus Christ died during this time.

³ Exod. 12. 1-13.

⁴ Marking, as the scholar added, 'a new historic epoch in the life of Israel', U. Cassuto on Exodus 12 verse 1.

⁵ Exod. 12. 5.

⁶ It is found 30 times in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Else only in the Book of Ezekiel.

⁷ Lev. 22. 17-21.

⁸ Following their victory over the forces of Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

⁹ Between the 1st century B.C. and 70 AD, when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans.

¹⁰ See ... <https://anneinpt.wordpress.com/2011/12/26/second-temple-seal-discovered-in-jerusalem-perfect-timing-for-channukah/>

http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter_article.php?id=2365

http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/History/Early+History+-+Archaeology/Rare_find_activity_Temple_25-Dec-2011.htm

<http://www.jpost.com/VideoArticles/Video/Article.aspx?id=250844;>

<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/151057#.Tv9mx9Tsmdd;>

http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-205_162-57348374/clay-seal-finding-linked-to-ancient-jerusalem-temple/

¹¹ Chiefly by the erecting of an idol of Olympian Zeus on the altar of the Temple.

¹² Dan 9. 31. Our Lord's words in Matthew 24 verse 15 refer to Daniel 12 verse 11, and refer to the future.

¹³ Exod. 30. 11-16.

¹⁴ See Num. 31. 50.

¹⁵ 1 Pet. 1. 18-19.

¹⁶ The apostle refers to all four Spring feasts; to the Passover and Unleavened Bread, 1 Cor. 5. 7-8, to Firstfruits, 15. 20, 23, and to Pentecost, 16. 8. Given his plans to tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost, it is at least possible that he sent his letter sometime around the Passover time.

¹⁷ 1 Cor. 5. 7.

¹⁸ Between John 11. 55 and 19. 14.

¹⁹ Exod. 12. 46.

²⁰ John uses the title 'the Lamb' 26 times in the Book of the Revelation.

²¹ 2 Cor. 5. 21.

²² 1 John 3. 5.

²³ Exod. 12. 9.

²⁴ 1 John 3. 3.

²⁵ Without a trace of Adam's sin
As Man unique in origin
All fair without all pure within
Our blessed Lord.

Isaac Ewan.

²⁶ Heb. 7. 26.

²⁷ Heb. 9. 14.

²⁸ Hymn 802 in 'Hymns of Light and Love'. This hymn was written by Mr W S W Pond.

²⁹ The hymn commences 'Behold the Saviour of mankind nailed to the shameful tree'. It appears as number 22 in 'A Collection of Hymns for the use of the people called Methodists', published 1780.