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# THE LAMB SACRIFICE EXPRESSED IN RELIGIOUS ART<sup>†</sup>

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## Abstract

The lamb, as special offer in God-believers relations, represents a symbol for the perfect sacrifice fulfilled in Jesus Christ life. Beginning from Genesis, where Abel and Abraham reveal their believing in God, this study focused on sacrificial language founded in Exodus, Isaiah, also in the writings of Philo and Flavius Josephus, reflected in the life of Jesus and in the language of the Revelation book. The 'Lamb of God' expression is also reflected in the Christian art, from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD.

In Eastern and Western Christianity it's know another title, with mystical sense: *Agnus Dei*, painted or carved on church walls. Both Christian traditions reflect the tension of the end of the World, lived inside or outside the new temple of God.

The Lamb sacrifice has a perpetual and sacrificial dimension, more than an image of the Lion from Judah the conqueror.

*Keywords:* lamb, sacrifice, Bible, Jesus, art

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## 1. Introduction

Among the religious reasons found from the beginning to the end of the Bible, the sacrificed lamb constantly remains an example to relate with God. The creature, encompassing both fidelity and humility, required in this relation, is the lamb. We know the *baby lamb*, slaughtered at about 6-10 weeks, the *spring lamb*, slaughtered at about 5-6 months, the *yearling mutton*, slaughtered at 12-20 months and the *mutton*, from a Ewe or Ram older than 20 months.

The semantic domain of sheep is broad and deep in biblical traditions. According to Pinney, sheep are directly referred to 742 times in the Bible. „The [sheep] assumed a vital role in Hebrew culture, bound up indivisibly with the religious, civil, and domestic life of the Israelites.” [1] A smaller, but still significant part of this broader domain is the more limited semantic domain of young sheep, or lambs, of one kind or another.

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The semantic field is complex, with more than 25 different Hebrew-Greek combinations. Approximately two-thirds of those appearances are from the Pentateuch, all of which refer to literal lambs. With the exception of Ezekiel, the lambs in the Prophets are all symbolic (Isaiah 5.17, 11.6, 34.6, 40.11, 53.7, 65.25; Jeremiah 11.19, 50.45, 51.40). Ἀμνὸς is the favoured word when speaking of lambs as burnt offerings. According to the Bible, the characteristic purification offering was “the blood of bulls and goats” (Hebrews 9.13, 10.4), not the lamb [2]. Lambs also played no role in atonement for sin. The bull was normally required for the purification offering (Leviticus 4.1-21). Alternatively, a goat (Leviticus 4.22-31), a ram (Leviticus 5.14-19), a sheep (Leviticus 4.32-35), or birds or grain (Leviticus 1.14-2.16, 5.7-13, 9.3, 14.21) could be used for the purification offering. In some settings the lamb was used for the reparation offering (see Numbers 6.14) [3].

## 2. Abel's sacrifice

Agriculture and livestock are the two basic human activities. They also reflect two ways of life. The farmer is a sedentary person, strongly attached to his land and all the more anxious to preserve his property from which he draws, the price of hard work, and his subsistence. The shepherd, by contrast, has no fixed abode. He is a nomad travelling over the country in search of pasture which grew spontaneously, the grass needed for his flocks, without human intrusion.

Cain is a farmer, and Abel is a shepherd. The activity of the two brothers appeared together as complementary. The story of their sacrifices is very terse. We are at the end of the agricultural year. According to the natural order of primogeniture, Cain naturally brings first and his sacrifice to God has products of the earth. Abel, meanwhile, brings the firstborn of his flock. Everyone, in short, brings to God the rewards of its activity. The delivery of these products to God is not a sacrifice per se, or a spontaneous gift, as indicated in the name *minhah*, tribute of homage, remission occurs in a very precise legal. It is primarily a mark of homage. It expresses the allegiance of Cain and Abel to God, their submission that they recognize Him as their Lord [4]. This offering is also a fee paid to God who, as owner of the land - and therefore everything in it and everything it produces - is entitled to the fruits of production.

The narrator, who until then had insisted on what distinguished Cain and Abel, seems here to have the hassle to put on exactly the same plan by presenting both as subjects fully subject to God and respectful of their rights. In looking more closely, however, was the impression he wants to promote the offering of Abel, which he states that it consists of first-born, that they come from his herd and insisting on the quality of his offering: what Abel calls to God is the best of his firstborn, their fat. Whereas Cain merely specifies that the fee is returned to God as *minhah*. As if to suggest a nuance in the relationship with God is that Cain is a strictly legal - submits to God what is his by right - while Abel moves to a more personal level, more emotional, it offers the best of his

generation. What have made some commentators was to say that Abel had prepared his offering carefully, completely unlike Cain, who would have done it with certain casualness. One can easily imagine the scene. Cain and Abel appear side by side, before God, who stands in front them. Successively, or perhaps simultaneously, but each in turn, they place before Him the share of their production due to Him. There is no mention of an altar on which this part would be filled. And there is no question of any combustion. This is because God being physically present, there is no need to go through mediation. That will be the case that once God has left the Earth and he will reside in Heaven, the altar and the burning became so indispensable to achieve communication between the human world and God, now separated. And both await the reaction of God. The latter, who reads on its face, is quite unexpected: God looks what it brings Abel, and he has no respect for the offering of Cain. As for putting out even more clearly the attitude diametrically opposed to God, the divine narrator describes the reaction by inverting the following words: God looked to Abel and his offering, and Cain and to his offering he did not look, without any explanation. God remains silent. The atmosphere is suddenly heavy. Cain and Abel set against each other. Brothers, they become all of a sudden rivals. What was supposed to be a mere ceremony of homage and acknowledgment of royalties God has turned into a sort of competition, similar to that which will compete Elijah and the prophets of Baal (see 1 Kings 18.16-40), where there can be only one winner and a loser.

In the third century BC, when the Genesis was translated into Greek, the translators have tried to make the story more palatable and to provide a satisfactory explanation. Consequently, they modified the Hebrew text so that God himself explains to Cain's reasons for his choice. Those reasons are for ritual order: Cain would not properly share the material he presents to God, but would have done in a way that endangers it.

Agriculture is not merely a form of human activity. It appears as the consequence of sin, as a punishment inflicted by God to punish the original couple's disobedience (see Genesis 3.17). The products hardly obtained on the ground are, therefore, necessarily the mark of the divine curse. Clearly, in these circumstances, that such an offering reminiscent of insubordination can not serve *minhah*, and that God does not look favourably products that evoke the sin, the curse and death. Abel is also in the continuity of God's plan that had created the animals to help humans. The firstborn of his flock that he brings to God are the sign of the multiplication of life. Thus they relate to the life intended by God, and not, as the products of the Earth to death that the original couple has, by its transgression, introduced in the world. Thus it is natural that God, who is basically associated with life, accepts better the offering of Cain.

The eye of God is not turned on the offer of the bidder. The emphasis is not, as might have been expected on the offering, but on the one who brings him. This suggests that the attitude of God is not finally determined by the nature of the offering. So, in this event God contravenes the order established by focusing on younger rather than older. This type of explanation is found in the New

Testament, 1 John 3.12, where the works of Cain is described as bad, those of Abel, and Abel do fair. Still others felt that Abel's offering was valued higher than that of Cain. Such is the thesis of the author of Hebrews epistle 11.4, and also Philo, Jewish philosopher of the first century AD [5].

### 3. Abraham's sacrifice

In the narrative of Genesis 4 the sacrifice has already produced a murder. But this murder was an accident consecutive after the sacrifice; an epiphenomenon that had nothing to do with the sacrifice itself and that was only due to the jealousy of Cain. In Genesis 22.1-19 however, Isaac's death is programmed from the start, and it is God himself who ordered Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, more precisely, a burnt offering, a form of sacrifice where the victim is fully burned on the altar.

Because this divine application is quite surprising, the author of this story is forced to underline from the outset that this is a test. Abraham left his servants and the donkey, going alone with his son, on mountain road. They share the load between him and his son, Isaac carrying the wood to be used at the cremation and Abraham the instruments of execution of his son - the knife. A share that already shows the distribution of roles: Abraham presents the active elements of sacrifice, and Isaac -the victim- the passive elements. This long silent march is interrupted by a brief dialogue in which Isaac questioned the absence of a sacrificial victim - the Hebrew term *seh*, commonly translated as 'lamb' is actually a generic name for small livestock - a question to which Abraham responds only in a very evasive, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt-offering". The reaction of the angel, who, after stopping at the crucial moment the hand of Abraham, paid tribute to the piety of Abraham, his 'fear of God', also confirms the exceptional nature of the gesture and asked clearly indicates that it is a test [6]. Moreover, this unusual way of describing the offering of a holocaust is found in verse 13 where it is said that Abraham "took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt-offering".

For just as the first fruits of the harvest and the firstborn of the flock rightfully belong to God, as the owner of the land, even the first-born son belong to Him as sovereign. The divine require offering him the eldest son is expressly and repeatedly made in the Pentateuch. It occurs, for example in Exodus 13.2, 34.19, and particularly in Exodus 10.28: "You give me the firstborn of thy son". But, in general, remission of the elder to God is a symbolic way, by substituting an animal victim. What is extraordinary in this story is that the demand is expressly understood in its literal sense: Abraham does not simply provide a substitute for God, but it must actually offer his son as a sacrifice to God.

In the story of Cain and Abel, God is silent, instead of explaining his choice. Also Cain was silent, in a possible dialogue with Abel. In both cases, the dialogue would have defused the crisis and finally disarmed the man who had intended to kill his brother. In both cases, the dialogue would have defused the crisis and disarmed the man who had intended to kill another. Now, to be able to

offer a burnt offering to God, Abraham prepared to kill Isaac. Because God is not a cruel and bloodthirsty, sacrifice could never be implemented in full.

The biblical text states explicitly that the ram offered instead of Isaac, serves as a substitute. This sacrifice shows that his son Abraham, in his capacity of first-born, actually belongs to God. By substituting his son with a ram, it recognizes the legitimacy of the divine demand. And it is ultimately the redemption that saves Isaac's death (Figure 1a). But we can go one step further and see this gesture as an expression of the willingness of Abraham to surrender to God all his descendants. Abraham did not take into account only the demand of God concerning Isaac. By his action, he fulfils God's statement in Genesis 12 to raise his descendants in a great nation (Figure 1b). Just as God responds to the offering of first fruits of the harvest and the firstborn of the flock by increasing soil fertility and increasing the fertility of the flock, so he reacts to the offering of the firstborn of Abraham by multiplying his seed.



**Figure 1.** (a) Abraham sacrifice, column head on Saint Isidore Church (1140), Sanguesa (Spain), <http://artsymbol.wordpress.com/category/romanesque/>;  
(b) Abraham sacrifice depicted on San Vitale in Ravenna, [http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/arth212/san\\_vitale.html](http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/arth212/san_vitale.html).

The name Abraham gave to the mountain, *Yahweh yiré*, ‘Yahweh will see’ characterized this mountain as the place where God sees his people which would appear before him. This obligation has been condensed in the form of the saying “the mountain of Yahweh we will present”, verbatim, “it will be seen”, *yéraèh* [7]. By placing this promise after the offering of the ram, the narrator

points out that not only because Abraham was obedient, but also because he offered to God the line of Isaac, God grants him the great descent. In fact, the Hebrew expression used *Yahweh yérahèh*, has a specific technical meaning. It is found repeatedly in the texts that set out the duties that God requires his people through the covenant He has with him, in Exodus 23.17, 34.23-24 and Deuteronomy 16.16. He refers to it specifically to the obligation of every Jewish male to appear three times a year in pilgrimage before God, and bring him a gift in token of homage and submission. The Israelites, who are the subjects of God, under his authority, must, therefore, go at regular intervals at the residence of their divine King to show him their subjection. And, for the same reason, they must also redeem their firstborn son (Exodus 34.20), give him the firstborn of their herds (see Exodus 22.29, 34.19) and the beginnings of their harvest (see Exodus 23.19, 34.26).

From this story we also learn how we proceeded to redeem the eldest son. Curiously, while the Old Testament says how the firstborn of the flock is the offering of - by offering a sacrifice fellowship (Deuteronomy 15.19-20) - it gives us no indication of this point, but it is simply to make the requirement of redemption. Abraham's act of offering a ram as a burnt offering instead of his son may reflect the usual practice in this area.

In the Islamic tradition, founded by the prophet Muhammad 570–632 A.D., a sheep is sacrificed during Eidul-Adha, a festival to commemorate Abraham's obedience to Allah by demonstrating his willingness to sacrifice Ishmael even though the devil tempted Abraham to spare his son. Allah intervened as Abraham was about to perform the sacrifice and instead Allah provided a lamb as the sacrifice. The sacrificed animal is called 'Udhya' [8].

Another religious practice in which Muslims sacrifice a lamb, goat or mutton is the birth of a new baby, male or female. It is strongly recommended in such an occasion to sacrifice at least one lamb, goat or mutton. Because Islam tradition rejects any iconic representation, the lamb sacrifice isn't reflected in religious and profane art.

#### **4. Lamb sacrifice on Passover**

Exodus 12 gives instructions for, and the chronology of, the Passover. "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. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbour shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.'" (Exodus 12.1-6)

In the Old Testament, only *some* sacrifices were considered expiatory [9]. Sacrifice was the central feature of worship in Israelite religion. A lamb could be offered in various situations: a common person could offer a lamb as a sin offering in atonement for his sin (Leviticus 4.32-35), or as part of a purification rite (Leviticus 12.1-8, 14.10-32), or as a communion sacrifice (Leviticus 3.7-10); the Passover lamb was, in fact, a special type of communion sacrifice (Exodus 12.1-14, 21-28). The burnt offering was prominent in Israel's theology and practice of sacrifice, but expiation was not the focus of burnt offering, and the lamb was not the primary offering of expiation [10]. In other words, *lamb* was not an obvious symbol for expiation in the sacrificial cult. Another class of sacrifice which frequently involved the offering of a lamb was 'burnt offering' or 'holocaust' (Leviticus 1.10-13). On the daily service the lamb sacrifice was called the 'continual holocaust' that symbolizes total consecration and return to God, and on the other hand the continual presence of humankind before him. We can link also the lamb sacrifice with the Day of Atonement when in the morning service the lamb fulfils an expiatory function analogous to that of the blood of the sin offerings to God [11].

When the daily sacrifice was suspended temporarily in Antiochus Epiphanes time and definitively in 70 A.D., Jesus Christ death became 'continual holocaust', fulfilling the ancient sacrificial cult of Israel (Matthew 5.17-19), in unique and eternal sacrifice from all believers.

## **5. Sacrificial language in Isaiah chapter fifty-three**

The prophet Isaiah spoke in that chapter of a man who would embody within Himself all the elements of acceptable sacrifice.

On Isaiah 53.1-11 named "the fourth and last Servant Song" we find also an occurrence concerning the lamb. The fourth Servant Song mentions the apparent failure of the servant in a description of the suffering and tormented figure whose message nobody believes (53.1-3). The narratives about the servant's God underline his innocence and humility are prominent in the account of his suffering and death (53.7-9), when it is compared to a lamb and a sheep (53.7) [12]. Isaiah said that this person would shed his blood as patiently as a sacrificial lamb or sheep: "*like a lamb [ἀμνός] that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep [πρόβατον] that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth*" Isaiah 53.7b. In this verse the focus of acts is on his meekness and unresisting attitude when confronted with death. The understanding of the servant as one who suffers innocently as replacing person belongs to the period after the narrated events.

Francisco de Zurbaran (1596-1664) reflects in his *Agnus Dei* in symbolic manner the linking between this text and his fulfilment [13]. As one who innocently and undeservedly suffers and dies, the death of the substituting servant is underlined. In the narrative context of Isaiah 53, the comparison with lamb underline the willingness and defencelessness of Servant faced with humiliation and pain. He is stricken for the sins of the people (53.8) [14, 15].

The last part of this section (53.10-11a) is also spoken with a deepened insight into the servant's purpose and function. In this paragraph the life, death, and exaltation of the servant are interpreted as a part of God's plan. His life fulfils the will of God because he dies as replacing person, as an offering for sin (53:10) [16] and after this redemption act inherits a long life (53.10b) or light and knowledge (53.11).

## 6. Lamb of God

Early on, at the time of Jesus, the Holy Spirit gave John the Baptist an inkling of what was going to happen. He saw Jesus coming and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

In John 1.29 Jesus is described by the Baptist as 'the lamb of God' meaning that the death of Christ produces the effect of forgiveness of sin. The concept of atoning sacrifice present in John 1.29 reflects the meaning of 'the lamb of God' rooted in the Aramaic *aylm* means either 'lamb' or 'servant'. Based on the Aramaic background of John 1.29, Jeremias argues that this claim is a tradition which interprets Isaiah 53.12 prophecy as fulfilled in the coming of Jesus as the Servant of YHWH [17]. Four other possibilities for this lamb are suggested by other scholars: it is the messianic horned ram of Jewish apocalyptic, the paschal lamb, the Servant of Isaiah, who suffers like a 'lamb led to the slaughter' (Isaiah 53.7), or the sacrifice of Isaac [18-21].

Many centuries before, it was the blood of the Passover lamb, applied by their ancestors to the doorposts of their houses, which spared them on that fateful night when God passed through Egypt striking the first born.

The people were spared because the lamb was not. They remembered this and re-enacted it every year. And that's what Jesus and his disciples were doing on the night when he was betrayed, he changed *everything*. "This is now my body, given for you", he said. "This is my blood, shed for you." Jesus was on the cross, the Lamb of God sacrificed. The Passover now reshaped, redefined. Not just for Israel but now for the world.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that one year a census was taken of the number of lambs slain for Passover and that the figure was 256,500 [22]. In other words, with numbers this large, lambs must literally have been driven up to Jerusalem throughout the entire day. Consequently, whenever Jesus entered the city he must have done so surrounded by lambs, Himself being the greatest of lambs.

Barrett, for instance, notes the paschal lamb (cf. Exodus 12), the servant lamb (Isaiah 53.7), the goat of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), and the ram provided in place of Isaac (Genesis 22) could identified the expiatory role of Jesus the Lamb of God. The lamb of Isaiah 53.7 might rise to prominence, however, in view of the fact that the Baptist has just cited Isaiah (John 1.23), and in view of the Isaianic overtones in John 1.32-34 [23].

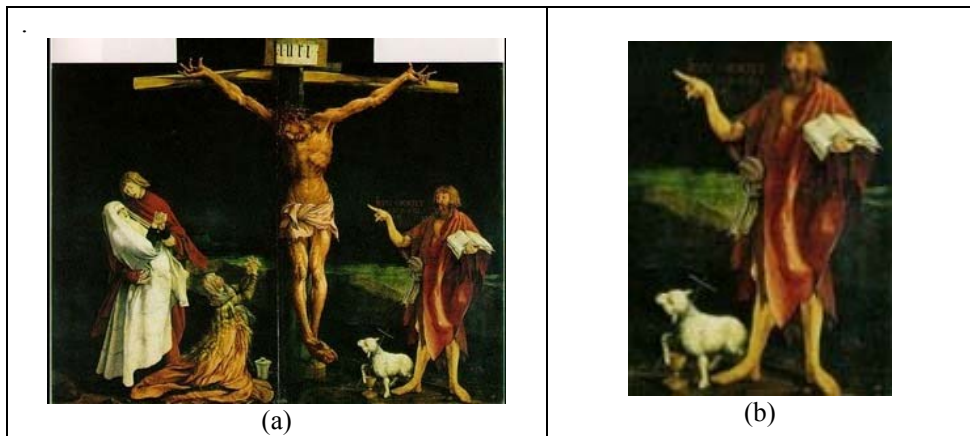


John the Baptist recognized Jesus as the person who would be sacrificed for sins. John was able to recognize Him, because the Spirit of God had come down upon Jesus and remained on Him (John 1.32-34).

Shortly after John baptized Jesus, he saw Jesus walking toward him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” John 1.29b (Figure 2b).

The next day John the Baptist saw Jesus walking by and said again: “Behold, the Lamb of God!” (John 1:36).

On the one hand, Jesus is the incarnate Logos whom John identifies with God as ‘my First’. On the other hand, he is ‘the Lamb of God’ who will eventually be sacrificed at the third Passover in the narrative world of the Gospel. But how could the one before whom John is unworthy even to loosen his sandal strap, the incarnate Logos, be a sacrificial lamb? There are no biblical antecedents or typologies that would elucidate this identification. As Dodd has observed, “the lamb is not in the Old Testament the characteristic sin-offering” [18]. There is no antecedent in Old Testament of a human being substitute the function of a sacrificial animal, specifically that of a lamb that *removes* the sin of the world. The Suffering Servant of Yahweh from Isaiah 53 is considered a possible parallel with the Gospel’s portrayal of Jesus as the Lamb of God.



**Figure 2.** (a) Matthias Grunewald, Crucifixion, from the Isenheim Altarpiece, Museum Unterlinden, Colmar, 1510-1515, <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~fellows/hart206/nren.htm>; (b) John the Apostle, detail on Matthias Grunewald Crucifixion.

The cultic institution of sacrifices maintained the relationship between God and Israel and guaranteed God’s uninterrupted presence through the expiatory rituals that effected atonement and purification. It is significant that Jesus, as the ultimate sacrifice for sin and redemption of humanity, never says anything about the need to offer animal sacrifices, because He knew that the day for animal sacrifices was passing away. According to John’s testimony, Jesus’ accomplishment - by his sacrificial offering that eradicates the human infection of sin - as ‘the Lamb of God’ represents the abolition of sin [24].

In connection with the crucifixion of Jesus, the allusions to the Passover lamb are abundant. On the cross Jesus is related to the Passover lamb (Figure 2). When is thirsty he is given a sponge filled with sour wine on hyssop (John 19.29). Hyssop is a kind of bush, used for the application of the Passover lamb's blood on the doorposts (Exodus 12.22). After the death on the cross, Jesus' bones are not broken – similarly with rituals statements from Passover lamb sacrifice - but the side of his corpse is pierced. From his pierced side blood and water come forth. “The blood alludes to the blood of the Passover lamb that was applied to the doorposts to obtain the apotropaic effect of the Passover ritual. The conclusion must be that the crucifixion in the Fourth Gospel is construed in a way that allows Jesus to appear not only as the true Passover lamb, but as the Lamb of God that includes both the Passover elements and the potential of Isaiah 53”. [12, p. 253]

## 7. The sacrifice of Christ

It remained for the writer of the book of Hebrews to speak at some length about Christ's sacrifice. He said that the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sins (Hebrews 10.4). He supported this assertion by saying that sacrifices had to be repeated over and over under the Law of Moses (Hebrews 10.1-3), which would not have been necessary if sacrifices had really taken away sin. Instead of animal sacrifice, Jesus offered His own blood (Hebrews 9.12.14). He offered Himself once for all time (Hebrews 10.10, 12) and His sacrifice does not need to be repeated.

The symbolism works best when one is dependent for one's own biological life on the creature that is slain in offering to God. When Hebrews speaks of Christ entering the sanctuary with his own blood, it means that Christ's entry into God's presence was through the violent and bloody death on the cross. For blood in association with Christ's death in the New Testament, see John 19.34; Matthew 27.24-25; Ephesians 1.7, 2.13; 1 Peter 1.2, 9; Revelation 1.5, 5.9 [25].

This indicates that no one should try to offer up Jesus again as a sacrifice, for even if it were possible for a human to offer up the Son of God, it would not be necessary (Figure 3). That is because once sins are forgiven, no further sacrifice is needed for them. The book of Hebrews says: “*And where these [sins] have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.*” (Hebrews 10.18)

After Jesus offered Himself on the cross, He was raised up and seated at the right hand of God in heaven (Hebrews 10.12), where He ever lives to make intercession for His people (Hebrews 7.25).

He bears both parties within himself. His offering of his own blood makes him at once priest and sacrifice. Because he is at once the one bearing the express image of God (1.3) even as he is like his brothers in every way apart from sin (4.15), Christ mediates and reconciles within himself. Christ's 'blameless' offering of himself shows, as Jeremiah prophesied, that this

covenant is not only ‘new’ chronologically but ontologically, for it essentially engages the internal dispositions of humans, enabling them to ‘know God’ (8.11).



**Figure 3.** Jesus sacrificial death in mystical interpretation on Voronet Monastery fresco (personal photo).

As the blood of the lamb delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt so the blood of the Passover Lamb delivers believers from the bondage of sin. The Apostle Peter declared that Christians are, “Ransomed . . . not with perishable things, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1.18-19). Exodus 12.5 commands Israel that the Passover lamb must be without blemish, pointing the physical or external blemish. Thinking at that typology Saint Peter, writes that Jesus was a lamb without blemish, identifying Jesus as the Passover Lamb, focused on moral quality of innocence and integrity.

If there is still any doubt as to whether Jesus is the Passover Lamb, the Apostle Paul settles the matter. He clearly stated, “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5.7), because Jesus Christ death replace the sacrificial slaughter of the Passover Lamb. Therefore Jesus had to die during the Passover.

As Jesus’ flesh and blood means supreme sacrifice, so is this same dying and rising Jesus “a great priest over the house of God” (cf. Hebrews 4.14), conceived not as a physical building but as a living people: “Christ is son over all the house, whose house we are” (3.6).

Hebrews interprets this as God’s testifying over his gifts, and this is taken, in turn, as a ‘witness’ to the fact that Abel was a ‘righteous one’, even though this is also not stated explicitly in Old Testament. In Hebrews 12.24 the author will speak - with respect to Jesus as the mediator of a new covenant - of a blood

that speaks: better or more greatly than does Abel. In an obscure fashion, then, Abel anticipates resurrection and demonstrates that ‘the righteous one will live: from faith’.

The suffering experienced by Jesus was integral to his obedient and faithful response to God. In just the same manner, the author here insists, the sufferings experienced by these discouraged and dispirited Christians are the very means by which they are now to be educated into the status of ‘sons’ like the Son of God, Jesus. When the author declares in 12.7 that “God is treating you as sons”, he means also that “God is treating you as God treated his own beloved Son”.

## 8. The Lamb in the Book of Revelation

No one having read the passages that we have presented in this chapter concerning animal sacrifices will have difficulty in recognizing the identity of the one who in the book of Revelation is called ‘the Lamb’. When the book of Revelation says that the four living creatures in Heaven (Figure 4a) and the twenty-four elders fall down before the Lamb to worship Him (Revelation 5.8), we know that it speaks of the resurrected Jesus. ‘The Lamb’ is mentioned throughout the book of Revelation [26].



**Figure 4.** (a) The living creatures round about Lamb, Dimitrios Tsiantas, Kopsidas church, detail; (b) Mystical Lamb on exterior picture of Moldovita Monastery (personal photo).

As David Aune presents: „While it is likely that the figure of the Lamb in Revelation must be understood at least in part on the basis of O[ld] T[estament] sacrificial ritual, it is not at all clear which type of sacrifice is primarily in view, for sheep or lambs were used as sacrificial victims in several different types of sacrifice in the Old Testament and early Judaism” [27].

John the Disciple, in his canonical Revelation uses the Greek word σφάζω to conclude the slaughtering of Lamb, rather than θύω, term used from ritually ‘sacrificing’ an animal. The verb θύω does not appear in Revelation. Σφάζω is slaughterhouse language, not Temple language. Though all animal sacrifice involved slaughter, not all slaughter involved sacrifice [28]. Σφάζω means to kill or to slaughter.

A useful and necessary first step is to articulate the meaning of the two symbols which make up the lion/Lamb metaphor by identifying the main interpretations. The primary issue has to do with the relationship between the two symbols, but it is helpful first to consider them individually.

The ‘lamb’ (ἀρνίον, literally, ‘little lamb’) occurs 29 times in Revelation. Ἀρνίον is a diminutive form - which should probably not translate it as a diminutive (‘little lamb’ or ‘lambkin’) - used probably to underline its vulnerability (Figure 4b). In Septuagint ἀρνίον use refers only to vulnerable lambs, whereas ἀμνὸς is used almost exclusively from sacrificial lambs [29]. In all cases but one (13.11), the term appears as a title for Jesus; notably, it is actually the title *most often* used for Jesus in Revelation. Apparently, then, it is significant for understanding Jesus in the Apocalypse. The only other occurrence of this term in the New Testament is in John 21.15 where the plural form (τὰ ἀρνία) refers to the Christian community [30].

A consideration of the texts where the word occur yields the following results (Tables 1-4).

A consideration of the term ‘slain’ (σφάζω) is enlightening. Although it can be used in the sense of sacrifice, its more usual meaning is ‘to kill a person with violence’ (cf. 2 Kings 10.7, Jeremiah 52.10, Josephus *Against Apion* 1.76). In the New Testament, the term clearly refers to slaughter (Revelation 6.4, 13.3), martyrdom (Revelation 6.7, 18.24), and fratricide (1 John 3.12).

Revelation 5.5-6 is an image overflowing with Old Testament traditions, because Jesus is called Lion of Judah (cf. Genesis 49.9), Root of David (cf. Isaiah 11.1.10), and Lamb (cf. Isaiah 53.7). The redemption by the ‘blood of the Lamb’ is important for the Christian message of hope. The final sacrifice was brought through Christ’s death on the cross. For believers this means that redemption is already completed, something that is implied in the worship son of Revelation 12. From this sense the New Jerusalem does not have a temple (Revelation 21-22), as no sacrifice will be necessary in the future to obtain salvation. The sacrifice of the Lamb is sufficient and final [31].

Ford suggests that with this context in mind, perhaps the death of the Lamb most likely should be viewed in terms of martyrdom or death in battle rather than sacrifice. This would link the death of the Lamb more closely with the souls under the altar (Revelation 6.9) and the deaths of the prophets and saints (Revelation 18.24) (Figure 5c). Ford further notes that in rabbinic thought, the martyr is associated with the sacrifice of Isaac, in which Isaac is ultimately not killed. He suggests that in the early Church, the apocalyptic idea of the powerful Lamb became ‘fused’ with the concept of Passover, the suffering Servant, and the Eucharist [32].

**Table 1.** The Lamb is closely associated with God, the One on the Throne.

Verse no.	Quotation
5.7	He stands near the Throne.
5.8	He receives adoration from the heavenly worshippers (Figures 4a & 5a).
22.1, 3	He shares the throne with God.
21.22	He is associated with the heavenly Temple.

**Table 2.** The Lamb has a special role.

Verse no.	Quotation
5.10	He has made people into a kingdom and priests.
7.10, 17	He is Saviour, leader and shepherd of others (Figures 5b and 5c).
13.8, 14.10, 21.27	He is judge.

**Table 3.** The Lamb is associated with death; he has been slain, and has been victorious through his death.

Verse no.	Quotation
5.6	He is a lamb as though slain; because of this, he is worthy to open the sealed scroll.
5.9, 12; 13.8	He has been slain.
5.9	He has bought people by his blood.
7.14	People have washed their robes in his blood.

**Table 4.** Lamb is associated with doing violence.

Verse no.	Quotation
6.16	The kings, generals, and people on Earth hide in terror from the wrath of the Lamb.
14.1-5	He is standing on Mount Zion with the 144,000 imagery, which most scholars agree should be associated with the eschatological battle.
17.14	He engages in, and is victorious in, war.

Bauckham adds an element to the Lamb concept. He notes that lambs in apocalyptic literature (e.g., Enoch 85–90) were associated with leadership [33]. Aune agrees with Bauckham and suggests that Revelation 5.5-6 synthesizes the ideas of lamb as leader and lamb as sacrifice [27, p. 76]. The Lamb, then, in the world of the Apocalypse, should most likely be viewed as multifaceted: certainly the idea of death (whether sacrificial or martyrological) is present; the Lamb, however, is not a defeated victim (Figure 6).

*The Lamb Sacrifice expressed in Religious Art*



(a)



(b)

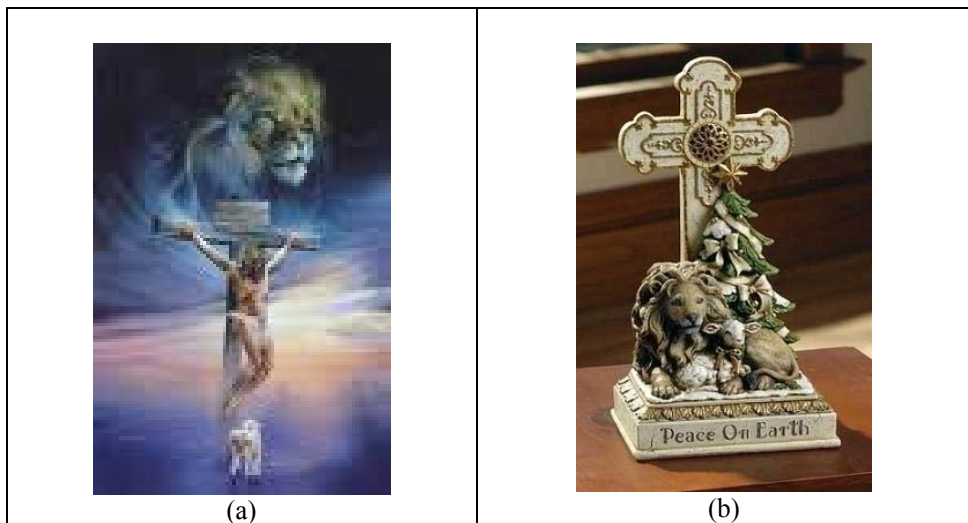


(c)

**Figure 5.** (a) Tapestry XIV century, Angers, Lamb sacrifice, <http://architecture.relig.free.fr/apocalypse.htm>; (b) Lamb flanked by seraphim's, in Probota Monastery painting XVI century (personal photo); (c) Jan and Hubert van Eyck, Adoration of the Lamb, Bottom central panel of the Ghent Altarpiece (1432) in Saint Bavon Cathedral, Belgium, [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Adoration\\_of\\_the\\_Lamb.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Adoration_of_the_Lamb.jpg).

Whether his apocalyptic nature as ram is accepted or not, the Lamb definitely appears as strong. The Lamb is worthy (ἄξιόν) because He has conquered, and He has conquered by being slaughtered on the cross. There is great irony in this image of the sacrifice by the Lamb: *theologia crucis* becoming a *theologia gloriae* [27, p. 352]. The sacrificial death of Jesus Christ became his greatest victory, a victory over the powers of sin (Revelation 1.5, 12.11, cf. 1 Corinthians 1.23-24) whereas His resurrection became a final victory against death (cf. Revelation 1.18-19).

The title 'Lamb', which is used almost exclusively for Christ, is 'meant to control and interpret all the rest of the symbolism. It is almost as if John is saying to us at one point or another: "wherever the Old Testament says 'lion', read 'lamb'" [34]. Steve Moyise refers to this position as the 'hermeneutic of replacement' and criticizes Caird for failing to focus on the main problem. According to him, Caird fails to struggle with the tension between the two images and hence, he falls short in the search to resolve what this means for the understanding of a Messiah who is represented by both a lion and a Lamb (see Figure 6a) [35, 36].



**Figure 6.** (a) Modern image reflecting the sacrifice of Jesus; (b) Lamb and lion under cross shadow.

The image of Revelation 19.11 is a further example of the portrayal of Jesus as the ultimate Conqueror (Figure 6) in the battle with the evil powers, although it is aimed at the return of Christ in the *Parousia* (Figure 5b). It is another image drawn from the Old Testament (Isaiah 63.1-3), where it was originally applied to Yahweh. John portrays the victory of the Lamb as a past event; it is something that has been completed at the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is significant that the chapter on the Lamb's investiture follows directly on the chapter about God's majesty and almighty power. The Lamb has not just



conquered through his blood, but He is reigning with God. In Revelation 19.16 He is called “the King of kings and the Lord of lords”, the supreme Ruler over all.

## **9. Why sacrifice of Lamb in religious art?**

Jesus, if we believe the Gospels Greek terms, calls them ‘lambs’ the believers and ‘sheep’ the apostles. But it seems that painters and sculptors have followed exactly this distinction.

On the first century’s monuments, lambs and sheep represent the large number of believers. When clustered together, symbolize the meeting - either the current or the eschatological. Two lambs in front, left and right a vessel, tree or wreath, actually have the same meaning as the peacocks in the same attitude. It's about the Church, the Eucharist or keeper gilts divine glory in resurrection [37].

The type called the Good Shepherd is an extension of the use of lamb as a symbol of lost believer that Christ will seek, according to the parable of Luke 14.4-6.

Jesus claims that the door is he himself, and the revelation that will gather the flock together, forming a single meeting, with eschatological messianic sense. In fulfilling this covenant the ultimate shepherd must willingly give his life, He who is Life, He who has the power to give life and take life. Without forcing too many the images, it could be said that Jesus is compared with bearing of *Thau's* door marked with lamb’s blood.

Among all primitive Christian symbols, the Good Shepherd, with *Oranta*, is the most developed, and along with *Ichtus* the most prevalent [38]. From *De Pudicitia* of Tertullian, c. VII, X, we find that the image of the Good Shepherd is common to decorate sacred vessels. The more elaborate because it is a representation which, in most cases, shows some realism. The reason is simple. It is a current representation in the pagan world, which is related mainly with the cult of Hermes. Greek geographer Pausanias (II century), in his Description of Greece writes: “Beside the sanctuary of Dionysus at Tanagra are three temples, one of Themis, another of Aphrodite, and the third of Apollo; with Apollo are joined Artemis and Leto. There are sanctuaries of Hermes Ram-bearer and of Hermes called Champion. They account for the former surname by a story that Hermes averted a pestilence from the city by carrying a ram round the walls; to commemorate this, Calamis made an image of Hermes carrying a ram upon his shoulders. Whichever of the youths is judged to be the most handsome goes round the walls at the feast of Hermes, carrying a lamb on his shoulders.” [39]

We know that Hermes was the one who helps souls to pass beyond. Therefore we may think that the lamb which he bears symbolizes the souls of those who have died of plague and he leads them to eternal peace. As well but we can move forward and take on the idea that his lamb take all plague and Hermes then kill him for the gods to stop the scourge.

On sarcophagus no. 177, stored in the Lateran Museum, the central image is the young Christ, with nimbus and staff. On each side were carved six apostles [40]. Each one has a lamb on his legs. All apostles have hailed gesture (right hand raised toward Christ), except at the extreme right, like a sign of innocence. On the far right and far left of the stage, there can be observed two shepherds with their flocks and green trees.

The Divine Lamb was usually represented in apsidal mosaics standing on the mystic mount whence the four streams of Paradise symbolizing the Evangelists flow; twelve sheep - six on either side, were further represented, coming from the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem (indicated by small houses at the extremities of the scenes) and proceeding towards the lamb. The lower zone, no longer in existence, of the famous fourth-century mosaic in the church of Saint Pudenzia-Rome, originally represented the lamb on the mountain and probably also the twelve sheep; the existing sixth-century apse mosaic of Saints Cosmas and Damian at Rome gives a good idea of the manner in which this subject was represented.

From the fifth century the head of the lamb began to be encircled by the nimbus. Several monuments also show the lamb with its head surmounted by various forms of the Cross (Figure 7a); one monument discovered by de Vogüé in Central Syria shows the lamb with the Cross on its back [41].

At Saint Maxim of Aix, in France, are two sarcophagi with a lamb which has a cross over the forehead. It is the kind of prototype of the Lamb keeping with the foot the banner of Resurrection which appears until the seventh century. We mention an inscription kept in Como Civic Museum, on which are carved in front two lambs, for symmetry, which have a cross shaft and keep a bowl [42]. It is probable that some old Christian monuments, which are directly associated with the lamb, cross, crucifixion would have wanted to appear in a more direct way than previously encountered symbols, which we class as belonging to the early fourth century.

W.C. Van Unnik showed that Revelation was known in Rome since the middle of the second century, because the Gnostic Valentine it is used [43]. But it is clear that the original model of the lamb was to be the propitiation, with reference to the sacrifices of the Old Testament.

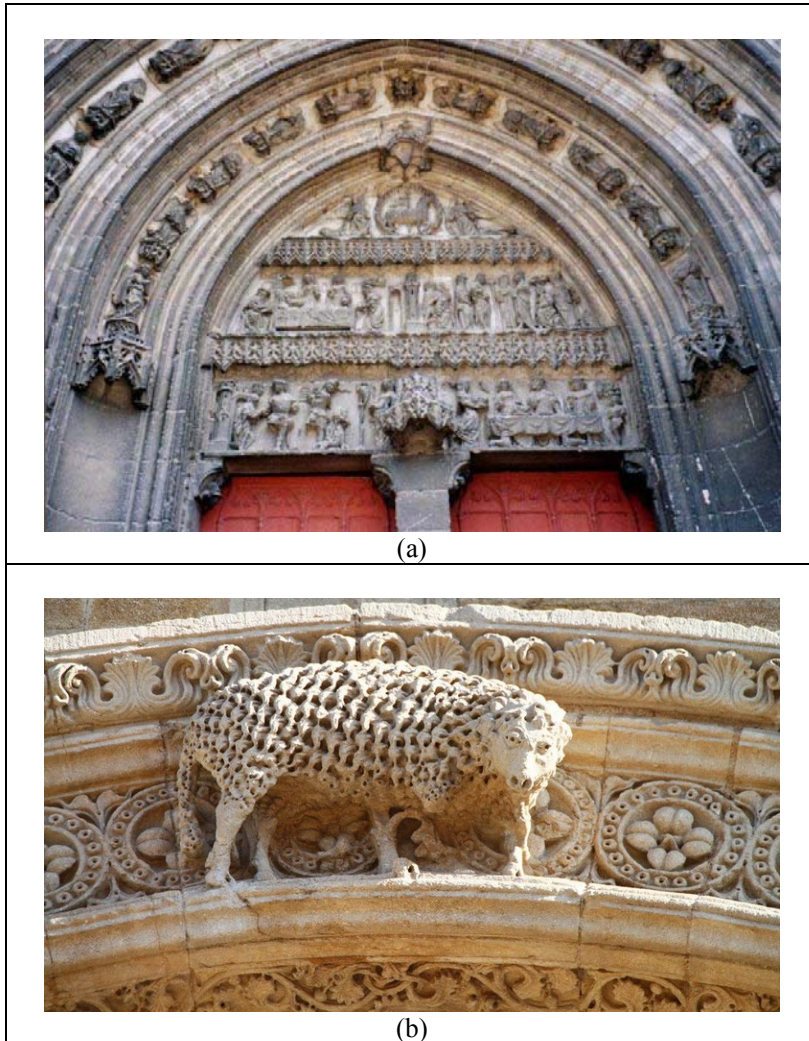
The next step in the development of associating the Cross with the lamb was depicted in a sixth-century mosaic of the Vatican Basilica which represented the lamb standing on a throne, at the foot of a Cross studded with gems. From the pierced side of this lamb, blood flowed into a chalice whence again it issued in five streams, thus recalling Christ's five wounds [44]. Finally, another sixth-century monument, now forming part of the ciborium of Saint Mark's, Venice, presents a crucifixion scene with the two thieves nailed to the cross, while Christ is represented as a lamb, standing at the junction of the crossbeams [45].

Because religious painting was supported and directed by the undivided Christian Church, the theological interpretation of bishops in council's assembly became a rule in the canon 82 of Trullan (692 A.D): "In some pictures of the venerable icons, a lamb is painted to which the Precursor points his finger,

which is received as a type of grace, indicating beforehand through the Law, our true Lamb, Christ our God. Embracing therefore the ancient types and shadows as symbols of the truth, and patterns given to the Church, we prefer ‘grace and truth’, receiving it as the fulfilment of the Law. In order therefore that ‘that which is perfect’ may be delineated to the eyes of all, at least in coloured expression, we decree that the figure in human form of the Lamb who take away the sin of the world, Christ our God, be henceforth exhibited in images, instead of the ancient lamb, so that all may understand by means of it the depths of the humiliation of the Word of God, and that we may recall to our memory his conversation in the flesh, his passion and salutary death, and his redemption which was wrought for the whole world.” [46]



**Figure 7.** (a) Central place of Lamb in Tayybat al Imam Mosaic; (b) Lamb who blesses the bread, half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, fresco catacomb Commodilla, Rome, [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Agnello\\_che\\_benedice\\_i\\_pani,\\_met%C3%A0\\_del\\_IV\\_secolo,\\_affresco\\_40x28cm\\_catacomba\\_di\\_commodilla,\\_roma.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Agnello_che_benedice_i_pani,_met%C3%A0_del_IV_secolo,_affresco_40x28cm_catacomba_di_commodilla,_roma.jpg).

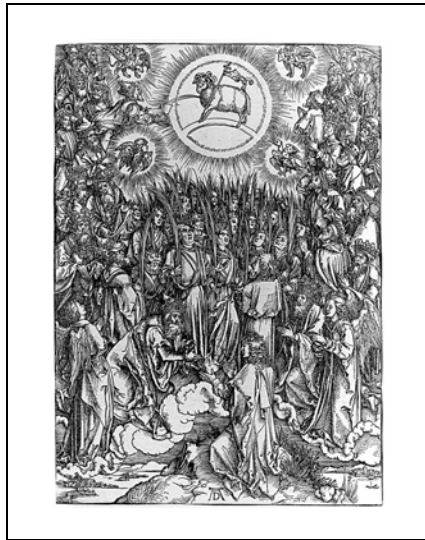


**Figure 8.** (a) the cathedral Saint Stephen, Meaux, general view of porch; (b) the cathedral of Cluny, detail of porch.

Unfortunately, the iconoclastic battle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century made difficult to preserve or perceive the evolution in Christian iconography. Jesus is represented only in human form, even the Lamb of God is occasionally reflected in illuminated manuscripts related with Revelation. Because the biblical book of Revelation was less used in cultic lecture and iconography – thinking that Holy Liturgy reflects the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven – only some mystical representations were found in Eastern iconography. In Latin Christianity iconography and monumental art are developed a fruitful religious representations of Lamb sacrifice. If the Eastern Christians attend the coming of kingdom inside the church, in Latin Europe the Kingdom is outside church edifice, on central porch, sometime ornate with imagined animals (Figure 8).

The Middle Ages bestiaries combine animal behaviour - real or imaginary - to religious interpretations. A bestiary includes a drawing or highly decorative illumination of each animal along with a short description of its attributes and behaviours.

The *Agnus Dei* (Latin for ‘Lamb of God’) may appear in several postures. Seated on a book with seven seals, it represents the final judgment when Christ returns in glory. Standing with a banner, *Agnus Dei* represents the risen Christ who triumphs over death. The banners are two bands, red and white, symbolizing the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, or blood and water sprinkling from His left side (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** A. Durer (1471 - 1528), The adoration of Lamb, [http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/ARTH/Images/ARTH\\_214images/Durer/durer\\_apoc\\_adoration\\_lamb.jpg](http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/ARTH/Images/ARTH_214images/Durer/durer_apoc_adoration_lamb.jpg).

## **10. Conclusions:**

The purpose of this study has been to articulate and clarify the relation between the Lamb reflected in the word of the Holy Bible and the religious art. From the foregoing consideration of the scholarly issues regarding the symbols of the Lamb in the biblical text itself, we suggest that the following points emerge with a fair amount of clarity:

1. The Lamb is a powerful warrior *who conquers through sacrifice*. Being the firstborn and sign of life multiplication before God, the lamb can substitute the sinful men, until the right and perfect human living joint with Son of God in Jesus Christ person, fulfilling by his sacrifice on cross the redemption of humanity. He is victorious, but in eternal sacrifice stage, the Mediator between God and manhood. It is imperative to note that although the Lamb acts like a warrior, he retains the aspect of having ‘been slain’ (as in the first

- mention of Him, Revelation 5.6) as aspect of sacrifice. Clearly, he is the powerful warrior whose intrinsic characteristic is having been slain [47].
2. The Lamb is a powerful warrior who conquers through sacrifice. Jesus as slaughtered Lamb provides the role-model for his followers: as he courageously witnessed to God, even unto death, so his followers should also actively commit to witness even unto death.
  3. Putting together the sacrifice and the mystical sense of Lamb sacrifice, the religious art keeps alive this God-human relation, in the cultic space of Church. The Christian art expresses the tension of believers waiting the return in glory of Jesus Christ, at the end of World.

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