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The Agnus Dei: Towards a Missional Dimension

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Abstract

As a devotional part of the eucharistic liturgy, the Agnus Dei also carries a missional aspect. Exegeting the verse Jn 1.29 ('Behold the Lamb of God . . .') two major theories of the atonement are seen to be involved and are applicable to the meaning of the Agnus Dei. These two theories of the atonement (ransom and substitutionary) in their relationship to each other are noted, and a primary emphasis on the ransom theory and its background of the Passover is argued for. The Passover Lamb focus is seen as liberative and missional. This leads to seeing the Agnus Dei in its referring to the redeeming death of Christ ('Lamb of God') as appropriately accompanied by the fraction of the bread. The history of the Agnus Dei and its Eastern Orthodox roots are brought to bear, as are our modern Anglican liturgical forms.

Keywords: Agnus Dei, atonement, history, liturgy, mission

Introduction

The Agnus Dei is a precious devotion for many eucharistic worshippers. The development of the argument in this paper will be based on an exploration of the scriptural foundation of the Agnus Dei early in John's Gospel: 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!' (1.29). The overall thrust of the paper will be to see that the Lamb focus, with its meaning in terms of deliverance, presents implications for understanding the Agnus Dei.

In the first section the double meaning in this verse will be attended to, in relation to the person of Christ who is both the Lamb and the One who frees the world of sin. The background of the Jewish festivals of Passover with the sacrifice of lambs, commemorating the deliverance from Egypt, and of Yom Kippur with the sacrifice for sins, will be noted, to include how these were understood in first-century Judaism and in early Christianity.

The second section is concerned with the two major theories of the atonement – deliverance from the powers of evil (ransom) and personal and communal forgiveness (substitution) – and their relationship to each other. Aspects of contemporary

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life, as they are seen in connection to the redemptive work of Christ, will also be included.

This discussion will lead into considering the eucharistic community as caught up in Christ's mission of deliverance in the world, of people's struggles with the forces of evil, personally, communally and nationally (third section).

These developments will provide the groundwork for an informed discussion of the Agnus Dei. Fourthly, then, the topic of the Agnus Dei itself will be surveyed – its history and place in Anglican liturgical practice. Picking up on the theme of deliverance from evil powers in the ransom theory as well as Lamb Christology, the missional dimension of the Agnus Dei will be emphasized, as it goes hand-in-hand with its devotional focus. Turning to the Eastern Orthodox tradition (the historical source of the Agnus Dei) intercession as a definitive quality within Eastern rites can have implications for the meaning of the Agnus Dei in the West.

The Scriptural Foundation: A Double Meaning

In Anglican eucharistic practice, it is often the case that while the priest breaks the bread the words of the Agnus Dei, 'Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us . . .', are recited. There is here a moment of devotion in preparation for communion, which may include recognition of the Real Presence of the Lord in the Sacrament. However, another layer of meaning emerges when we look at the biblical basis of the Agnus Dei.

In Jn 1.29, referring to John the Baptist, the text states: 'The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"' (NRSV). What is noteworthy in this acclamation, as it is placed early on in the Gospel, is the combining of an allusion to the two great festivals of God's People. 'The Lamb of God' refers to the annual sacrifice of lambs, commemorating at the Passover festival the deliverance of God's People from slavery; but now the Baptist points to One as 'the Lamb of God' in the person of Jesus. Then, there are the words 'who takes away the sins of the world'. The taking away of sins refers to the annual great sacrifice for Israel's emission of sins at Yom Kippur, but now for the Baptist it is Jesus who will take away the sins of *the world*.

We have here a combining of two meanings of Christ's redemptive work about to take place. Regarding the expression 'the Lamb of God', the Passover was held with the sacrifice of lambs by faithful families coming to Jerusalem and the temple, celebrating every year the deliverance from slavery to freedom, in the Exodus from Egypt. Now, John is saying, a New Covenant is inaugurated in which there is the new Lamb of God who will transform the prior Passover practice, as this Lamb, Jesus, comes to bring about the new liberating redemption for all humanity by his death on the cross. 'For Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed,' Paul writes in 1 Cor. 5.7b, conveying that Christ will initiate the conquering of the powers of evil that have dominated the world. Therefore, Christ is leading his people into a new future of promise in the New Covenant, with the Consummation in view (the Marriage Supper of the Lamb – Rev. 19.9).

Next, looking at 'taking away of sins of the world', at Yom Kippur, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies in the temple annually to take one of two goats

(the other becoming the scape goat) to be sacrificed for the remission of sins of the nation and its people, according to Levitical law. The words that the Baptist utters point to the sacrifice of Christ, which is for the whole world and as emphasized in the letter to the Hebrews, a sacrifice that is 'once and for all'.

Back in the late 1950s, reflecting on John the Baptist's words, C.K. Barret wrote in his distinguished commentary on the Fourth Gospel: 'The two propositions a) Christ was the Passover Lamb, b) Christ bore, or took away sins, originally unconnected, are combined.'²

I have not found a similar comment regarding this text in more modern commentaries, as important as this insight is. However, in N.T. Wright's recent book, *The Day the Revolution Began* (not a commentary) on the death of Christ, a reference is made to the significance of this combination:

In the time of Jesus many Jews were looking for a great event that would be both a new Passover and the forgiveness of sins, it is possible to see that the two might somehow be combined. Jeremiah had spoken of a new covenant in which (the nation) would be forgiven (Jer. 31.31–34). All this generates a framework of potential meaning within which the actions of Jesus himself and the perceptions of his followers could find fertile soil.³

The combining of the two senses of the atonement could well therefore have been alive and active at the time of Jesus and could have provided a background to the text in John's Gospel that we are exploring.

The importance of Yom Kippur in the early church as an arguable possibility has been put forward by Daniel Stokl Ben Ezra.⁴ This writer suggests that Yom Kippur was observed by one or more Christian Jewish Christian communities into the second century and maybe beyond, an idea that challenges the general agreed view that the first Christians no longer commemorated Yom Kippur due to Christ accomplishing the once-and-for-all atonement. Mainly reliant upon Acts 27.9,⁵ Ben Ezra argues that Luke, who does not include interpretations of Jesus' death as atonement, did not have any theological reason to abolish Yom Kippur. Consequently, it was observed in his community.

As we shall see, the presence of ransom theory in the life of the early church was clearly active. Hence, if Ben Ezra's argument is correct, we see a veritable living out of both theories within parts of early Christianity such that, as church communities go forward into later times, the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ is not a bare remembrance but is participated in. At a later time, while leaving behind any actual commemoration of Yom Kippur, the commemoration of Christ's sacrifice is performed by way of the Christian community's eucharistic action.

In summary then, at this point, Jn 1.29 emphasizes a double intent in the acclamation of John the Baptist, as the foundational verse for the Agnus Dei. First, Jesus

²C.K. Barret, *The Gospel according to St John* (London: SPCK, 1958), p. 147.

³N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), p. 64.

⁴Daniel Stokl Ben Ezra, *Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

⁵The fast' referred to in this verse is understood as the Day of Atonement.

is the new Passover Lamb who is to be victorious over the powers of evil. Secondly, this perception is united with the proclamation that he will also take away the sins of the world. This double emphasis was prefigured in Judaism immediately prior to Jesus' coming and may have had expression in the form Ben Ezra suggests.

Two Major Atonement Theories – in Relation to Each Other

The two big festivals of the first Covenant commemorated that which in Christian thought developed into the two great theories of the atonement, the ransom theory and the substitutionary theory.⁶ The question we survey in this section is to ask how these two theories related to each other historically. Contemporary concerns will then be turned to as they impact upon atonement theory and vice versa. This focus will then inform the way in which we can develop our understanding of the Agnus Dei, based as it is on the double meaning of John the Baptist's exclamation.

Historical Trends

Turning first to the ransom theory, then to the substitutionary theory – to see the relationship between them both – the ransom theory had a chequered history in the West for many centuries but was re-enlivened in the 1950s by the Swedish bishop Gustav Aulen in his book, *Christus Victor*.⁷

The manner in which the ransom theory progressed through the patristic period was in part to view the ransom that Christ made on the cross as to the devil. The Church Fathers tended to understand Christ's redemptive work as anchored in the incarnation. Most famously, however, Gregory of Nyssa wrote about 'the hook', as in catching a fish, as a metaphor for the trick played by Christ on the cross to overcome the work of Satan.⁸ Anselm, in the eleventh century found the notion of payment to the devil to be unsatisfactory, especially since he understood it as under-playing the obedience of Christ in his death, the fundamental aspect in his mind, of his redemptive work. Largely on this basis, Anselm then developed the penal substitutionary theory. His views have tended to dominate the Western theological scene until the twentieth century. Aulen then re-presented the ransom theory in a more respectable theological light, namely, to view it in a more biblical and balanced way (especially regarding the views of the Church Fathers) in terms of the overcoming of evil forces in the world.⁹

⁶The third (major) theory of the unique demonstration of love on the cross, which has its roots in Peter Abelard's thought, will not be discussed here.

⁷Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor: A Historical Study of the Three Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (London: SPCK, 1953).

⁸'The Great Catechism' in P. Schaff (ed.), *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers. V. Gregory of Nyssa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 493.

⁹For a treatment of who or what the ransom is paid to in classical (ransom) theory, see Aulen, *Christus Victor*, pp. 167-69: according to the Church Fathers, as well as the tradition of tricking the Devil, God's judgment is met with Christ's self-giving love (as a focus of ransom). And for a further consideration of the history of redemption theory, see Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), ch. 13.

In *The Day the Revolution Began*, N.T. Wright brings fresh expression to this position particularly by returning to New Testament and early church perspectives. In terms of the relationship between the two theories, he upholds the emphasis of Christ overcoming the powers of evil as well as providing a critique of the penal aspect of substitutionary atonement theory. It is to his presentation of these matters that we now turn.

Reluctant to rely on the historical limitations of language in atonement theory, Wright notes the sweep of Israel's thinking about redemption, as it is also played out in the New Testament and the early church. He uses the term 'rescue operation' to speak of God's plan of redemption:

The hope of Israel expressed variously in the Torah, the prophets and Psalms, was not for a rescue operation that would snatch Israel or humans or the faithful from the world, but for a rescue operation that would be for the world, an operation through which redeemed humanity would play once more the role for which they were designed, to participate in the hope for a renewed world in which justice and mercy will reign forever.¹⁰

Deliverance as Prior

Primarily for Wright, 'the rescue operation', which is for the whole world, is located in the victory of Christ over evil, as manifested 'in the revolution at six in the evening on the first Good Friday'.¹¹ Furthermore, the Passover is important for Paul in relation to the death of Christ: Philippians 2 and Colossians demonstrate the victory over the powers of evil.¹² Wright sees the new Passover as dealing with sins wherein Passover and Day of Atonement meet and merge.¹³

How can we give an account of what the powers of evil are? Wright describes their existence on a biblical basis as non-divine forces with powers that they were not supposed to have; they are 'recognised as dark, more nebulous powers that drive ordinary people to do horrible things'.¹⁴ Their existence requires an overcoming at their root along with the addressing of human culpability with forgiveness.¹⁵

Turning to the forgiveness of sins on the cross, Wright uses colourful language to address the narrow view of redemption that has held sway in some Christian circles in the past and continues to in the present: 'The death of Jesus must not be shrunk to the small-scale of the usual formula of we sinned, God punished Jesus; we're alright again.'¹⁶

Like other contemporary writers he urges a serious review of a punishing God to take place, namely, that Jesus bears the punishment that is our due and hence frees

¹⁰Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p. 146.

¹¹Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p. 69.

¹²See Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, pp. 247-60, for what Paul more specifically refers to in each of these letters.

¹³Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p. 348.

¹⁴Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, pp. 102-103.

¹⁵For more on this issue, see Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

¹⁶Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p. 348.

us from the consequences.¹⁷ Again there is strong language coming from Wright: ‘Punishment due to satisfying God’s wrath must be replaced by God’s rescuing love which won the victory over the forces of darkness, as the early church taught, summoning believers to imitate the self-giving love of Jesus.’¹⁸

At the same time, while reviewing the overly narrow perception of the place of punishment in the atonement, we must see the value of the language of Christ as substitute. That Christ is our substitute in the representative sense (as that which is to be adhered to in substitutionary theory) fits well with the ransom approach in which God takes the initiative through the redemptive act of the Christ event, as the Johannine approach of love, obedience and glorification demonstrates.

Substitution has a purpose. Wright reminds his readers of a simple truth: ‘The purpose of forgiving sin . . . is to enable people to become fully functioning, fully image-bearing human beings within God’s world.’¹⁹ We can add to this basic point, that this personal freedom is for the participating in the overcoming of the evil forces in the world, already inaugurated by Christ’s cross. This is another way to see the combination of both atonement theories.

Gathering up the discussion at this point, Wright holds forth the primary importance of ‘God’s rescue operation’ over the powers of evil. Relating this back to the Baptist’s cry, ‘Look, the Lamb of God’, as he sees the Lord approaching him, we can therefore see the proclamation of the overcoming of evil as holding a prior meaning before the assurance of the taking away of sins. It was at the festival of the Passover (and not Yom Kippur) that Jesus chooses to go to Jerusalem and die, bringing his sacrifice to the world.²⁰ Jesus goes to the root of the world’s brokenness, there to redeem. The ransom theory is therefore primary. And the substitutionary theory (in the manner mentioned here), is then highlighted, as it is brought into combination with the ransom theory.

Taking the discussion of the relationship between the two theories further, the theme of *exodus* and the pervasive nature of Christian forgiveness, come into play.

On the one hand, Jesus’ victorious death will bring into effect the deliverance of the new People of God until he comes again – the new *exodus* to witness to the New Life Christ has wrought. The word *exodus* has not often been used in referring to the deliverance in the New Covenant, but it is legitimate, as we can note in some modern collects and prayers, for example, in *Common Worship* – the collect for the Feast of the Transfiguration: ‘. . . Jesus Christ was wonderfully transfigured . . . and spoke of the *exodus* he would accomplish at Jerusalem . . .’²¹

On the other hand, the forgiveness rendered on the cross is for all time, ‘once and for all’ (as explained in the Letter to Hebrews).²² Jesus is our substitute who expiates all sin, cleanses the conscience and establishes peace with God with a sacrifice that is

¹⁷Hendrikus Berkhof, for example, in *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), p. 317: ‘In Isaiah 53.5 punishment is used incidentally. The NT does not make use of it although Rom. 8.3 and Gal. 3.13 come close to it. Jesus identifies himself with the estrangement from God. But the juridical interpretation of the concept of punishment, as found in the West since Anslem, is foreign to the NT.’

¹⁸Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p. 38.

¹⁹Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p. 155.

²⁰See Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, pp. 178–80 for more on this point.

²¹*Services and Prayers for the Church of England Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing), p. 511.

²²Textual examples are Heb. 10.10 and 10.12.

eternal.²³ Yet, to reiterate, the ransom view with its emphasis on deliverance from evil holds the primary thrust for the People of God, with the new Passover – from death to life, from slavery for freedom.

Modern Cultural Themes

Regarding connections in modern culture to atonement theory, three areas will be noted: world violence, liberation theological thought and depth psychology. These are chosen since particular theologians writing on the atonement draw attention to them (two of these theologians have already been quoted: Wright and McGrath). Noting these major aspects of life today will assist in gaining a deeper understanding of how the eucharistic community and, in particular, the Agnus Dei, can be a prayerful vehicle for participating in Christ's redemptive work, as these forces are at hand in the contemporary world.

Wright articulates the place of violence in our times: 'Confusion and concern about violence in modern culture seems to be a kind of signature tune for the 20th century, in which truly appalling acts became defining moments for global culture. Today's global population is more aware of violence, its scale and its nature than any previous generation.'²⁴

In relation to the prevalence of negative forces such as appalling acts of violence, Wright refers to 'the shadowy powers' that have usurped God's rule in the world. In Jesus' death 'God transformed the world by offering a uniquely powerful example'.²⁵ Noting this point leads to awareness that the work of Christ on the cross, with the ministry of 'the forgiveness of sins', is in solidarity with those to whom violence is perpetrated. As an example of the powers of evil, situations of violence stand as that which 'God's loving purpose frees us from the power of the "present evil age" so that now through the work of the rescued rescuers, redeemed human beings are called to bring redeeming life into the world'.²⁶

Secondarily, liberation theologians have brought attention to the liberative nature of Christ's life and work. A lesser-known paper, written by the South Africa theologian, Simon Mainela,²⁷ describes sin as an organic aspect of human life and not simply personal. Leaning on the theology of Ireneaus, the atonement is a victory over objective evil powers – Christ's victory reigns over the enslaving forces in order to create a new situation in which humankind is free. The author sees a clear preference for the ransom theory over the substitutionary in the context of the oppressed of the world. With this theological perspective, bourgeois social conditions that never expose daemonic power of exploitation, become non-permissible.

²³*The Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) comments on these features within the Letter to the Heb. 5.2: regarding sin – 'The OT provides no atoning sacrifice for deliberate, defiant sins, but only unwitting offenses . . .' (p. 320); 5.7-8: 'Eternal salvation (comes about) not as temporary deliverance as the Levitical law provided' (pp. 320-21); 9.9-10: regarding the conscience – 'Levitical sacrifices cannot cleanse the inner guilt that results from sin' (p. 324).

²⁴Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p. 40.

²⁵Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, pp. 46-47.

²⁶Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p. 364.

²⁷S. Mainela, 'The Atonement in the Context of Liberation Theology', *International Review of Mission* 75.299 (1986), pp. 261-69.

Consequently, the transforming power of Christ's work in socio-political conditions cannot be overlooked; otherwise our theology remains an abstraction.

Here is a call for a stronger world theology in which the Anglican Communion has further opportunity as a global church to progress having active, prayerful concern for the world's oppressed. Moreover, a sense of solidarity with the oppressed in our liturgical worship is called for, as it maintains its centredness in Christ's redemptive work.

Thirdly, in the area of depth psychology, Freud's view on guilt has gained traction in Western culture. The topic of guilt has played a significant role in Anselmian substitutionary atonement theory, as that which Christ frees us from as our substitute. In Freud's view, however, the origin of guilt is in childhood experiences rather than being some form of objective condition. 'Guilt is simply a psychosocial projection, whose origins lie not in the holiness of God but in the muddleheadedness of human nature.'²⁸ The consequence of this view is to direct the sense of guilt to Christ's rescuing, redemptive freedom, while lived, culpable guilt requires repentance and forgiveness. Instead of any objective sense of guilt, the condition is to be relieved through psychological awareness and help, rather than having to be spiritually accounted for and regarded as punishable.

In the worshipping community the implication here is to be a vehicle of healing for persons rather than presenting a wrong-headed message that exploits a sense of guilt.

Each of these three areas possess a relevance for the meaning of the Agnus Dei, to be explored below.

The Eucharist: Geared to Mission

A fundamental aspect of liturgical revision in many parts of the Anglican Communion since the 1960s has been to see the Eucharist in terms of the gathering and sending out of the people of God. Implied in this overall sense is that the Eucharist spiritually energizes, through sacramental participation corporately, the worshippers in their vocation of service and mission in the world.

The modern Australian rite presents a clear sense of this perspective in its second order²⁹: with headings that begin with 'The Gathering of the People of God' and end with 'The Sending Out of the People of God'.³⁰

N.T. Wright stresses the role of God's people as the royal priesthood in a somewhat figurative manner: 'The royal priesthood is the company of rescued humans who being part of earth, worship the God of heaven and are thereby equipped with the breath of heaven in their renewed lungs, to work for his kingdom on earth.'³¹ Liturgically speaking, as a priestly community, some forms of the Eucharistic Prayer in modern rites give expression to the presence in our midst of the One who has brought freedom from the powers of evil – in order to renew us.³²

²⁸McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p. 330.

²⁹The Anglican Church of Australia, *A Prayer Book for Australia* (APBA) (Mulgrave: Broughton Publishing, 1995), pp. 119-44.

³⁰The Sending Out is reinforced in APBA in the words of an alternative Post-Communion Prayer: '... send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory' (p. 144).

³¹Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p. 363.

³²As examples, see APBA, 2nd order, p. 131; The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), Holy Eucharist II, p. 368.

For Wright, the identity of God's people as the royal priesthood comes about through the forgiveness of sins and freedom brought about by Christ's 'rescue operation'. He calls this 'the platform' for work that is both confident and humble due to the initial victory given us.³³

There is, however, an element that needs to be included, for our purposes here, in this description of what takes place for the worshipping people of God. The spiritual energizing that is involved in eucharistic worship (within the perspective of gathering and sending out) actually holds a centredness in terms of *participation* of the people in the work of Christ. Our shared encounter with Christ in Word and Sacrament brings about renewal and equipping for service and mission.

To explain this point, a contemporary commentary on Mark's Gospel, written by the Jesuit New Testament scholar, Brendan Byrne, in reference to the Last Supper, notes that the disciples *share* in the broken bread/body and wine/blood of Jesus in a particular manner:

Eating the bread that is his broken body and drinking the cup that is his blood poured out forges a union with Jesus . . . It is a union that not only confers benefits on those who partake but also *catches them up* [my italics] in an ethical sense in the rhythm of his self-giving life. They will become not only passive beneficiaries but active participants in the mission of the One who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mk 10.45)³⁴

In our partaking of communion we become active participants in Christ's mission, in the overcoming of the forces of evil, personal, social and political ('the principalities and powers'³⁵). The meaning here is in tune with the ransom theory – we are *caught up* in Christ's redemptive work among us and for the world. It is in this way, therefore, that eucharistic worship provides the spiritual energizing for God's people. As we shall see in the next section, the Agnus Dei plays a significant role in this participation.

Furthermore, our being caught up in Christ in the eucharistic action involves a significant role for intercession in the liturgical form. In our union with Christ, prayer for the world and its suffering becomes a natural consequence of being caught up in him and his sacrifice.

These considerations lead us now into a more direct focus on the Agnus Dei.

The Agnus Dei: Yesterday and Today

Coming from a Syrian Orthodox background to the Roman Church early in the eighth century, Pope Sergius I introduced the Agnus Dei. The Lamb imagery of the chant was not foreign to the Western liturgy at that time. The *Gloria in*

³³Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p. 364.

³⁴Brendan Byrne, *Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), p. 222. See also on this theme, M. Thurian, 'The Eucharistic Memorial, Sacrifice of Praise and Supplication', in M. Thurian (ed.), *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), pp. 90-103.

³⁵See Rom. 8.38, Eph. 1.21, Col. 1.16 as examples of the NT use of this phrase.

Excelsis (well established by then) contains the phrase, ‘Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world’. It seems that he adapted the chant to the Roman setting with the understanding that in the East the lamb imagery of the Eucharist is rather different (notably, the eucharistic bread is regarded as the Lamb). The antecedent to the chant ‘is probably to be found in the East, in the liturgy of St James, (c. 400 CE) where at the fraction the priest exclaims: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, slaughtered *for the life and salvation of the world*”.’³⁶

For ensuing centuries in the West the stanzas of the *Agnus Dei* were repeated continuously until the (leaven) bread was all broken for the purposes of distributing communion. When unleavened bread was introduced in the eleventh century the chant adopted a strict threefold form of repetition, with the third stanza changing its ending to ‘grant us peace’.³⁷

Deep scriptural roots are connected to the Lamb imagery in the Eucharist. Both Massey Shepherd and Austin Farrer³⁸ have argued that the Eucharist as a paschal liturgy undergirds the theology of the Book of Revelation and its central place of the Lamb in the drama of salvation depicted in John the prophet’s vision.

Whether or not this is the case, considering the overarching themes in the Book of Revelation, the vision of John strengthens the view that we are caught up in Christ’s redemptive work doxologically, including in the reciting of the *Agnus Dei*. Christ is the One who stands among the seven churches. He becomes the Lamb who confronts the destructive forces of this world by his non-violent power of sacrificial love. Believers are called by him to be ‘a kingdom and priests’: these are the servants of the Lamb who will give their life in his service. It is in the Eucharist that we doxologically become involved in this vision, and are enabled to be witnesses in our own lives as servants of the Lamb. ‘Happy are those who are called to his supper.’³⁹

When it comes to the Reformation period, the 1549 liturgy incorporated the *Agnus Dei* as a communion anthem rather than it being associated directly with the breaking of the bread. It was then omitted in the following 1552, 1559, 1604 and 1662 rites. However, ‘its use was restored (unofficially) in many Anglican churches in the 19th and 20th centuries, and, in various translation and paraphrases, it has been incorporated into many 20th century revisions of the eucharistic liturgy, either with a *confractorium* or as a communion anthem.’⁴⁰ (The former is being argued for in this paper.)

A further point to be clarified is what should eucharistic participants be attending to in praying during the *Agnus Dei*. The Roman Catholic scholar, Josef Jungmann,⁴¹ has

³⁶Cited in K. Stevenson, *Eucharist and Offering* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1986), p. 277. The italics is mine since the significance of this phrase is taken up below.

³⁷Regarding these points, see Stephen Valleskey, ‘Theology of the Ordinary’, a conference paper, 21–24 July 2002, available at: <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/4447/ValleskeyOrdinary.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (accessed 3 November 2021).

³⁸See M Shepherd, *The Pascal Liturgy and the Apocalypse* (Ecumenical Studies in Worship, 6; London: Lutterworth Press, 1960); A Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St John’s Apocalypse* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1963).

³⁹For a fuller account of this integrative approach to Revelation, see my *The Apocalyptic Heart: The Book of Revelation in an Unjust World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

⁴⁰K. Stevenson, ‘*Agnus Dei*’, in J.G. Davies (ed.), *A New Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (London: SCM Press, 1986), pp. 2–3.

⁴¹Cited in K. Stephenson, *Eucharist and Offering* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1986), p. 277; J. Jungmann, *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer* (London: Chapman, 1965), p. 259, n. 2.

argued that it is the place and opportunity for the adoration of Christ in the Sacrament. Instead, Stevenson (an Anglican) sees the meaning here as christological – that the breaking of the bread (during the Agnus Dei) functions as ‘an analogy with the Lamb being slain’.⁴²

To describe the liturgical action here as ‘analogical’ requires a deepening in terms of being caught up in Christ’s redemptive purpose: participation in his sacrificial life of service and mission in the world, and, as we shall see, to include intercession.⁴³

The Agnus Dei therefore conveys Christ’s body as broken, alerting us to both his deliverance from the powers of evil as the Lamb of God and his taking away of the sins of the world. Here a *yearning* for the world’s peace and redemption can be acutely present, being caught up in his redemptive mission in the world.

This interpretation can establish a powerful meaning for us today, one that may require a lot of consideration. We have seen that the particular forms of violence in our world, the plight of the poor, articulated by liberation theology, and the psychology of guilt that requires reinterpreting, suggest a prayerfulness during the Eucharist, and in a particular way in the Agnus Dei, to include solidarity with the suffering world – with its cry for redemption from evil and sin, with eucharistic participants maintaining an inner confidence of being situated on ‘the platform’ of the Lord’s initial victory (Wright) to be involved in his mission in the world.

As a consequence of this perspective, intercession holds a vital place in the liturgical form. As it is placed normally in the first part of modern Anglican rites, the spirit of intercession is then carried forward into the eucharistic prayer and communion. The importance of liturgical intercession undergirds the sense of prayerfulness for a broken world that is appropriately a dimension of the Agnus Dei.

Indeed, it can be further considered that our eating and drinking at communion may be viewed as inclusive of prayer for the redemption of the whole world. Intercessory prayerfulness in the communion rite is an aspect of eucharistic life that is strong within the Eastern Orthodox tradition.⁴⁴ The fact that the Agnus Dei has Eastern roots and that intercession holds a strong and central place in Eastern liturgical forms, enhances the viewpoint that intercession permeates the spirit of the Agnus Dei. This view is sustained in that its antecedent in the liturgy of St James (see above) includes the words, ‘for the life and salvation of the world’⁴⁵ – to indicate an intercessory component to the chant. It is in this way, then, that solidarity for the world’s suffering, expressed in the Agnus Dei, also includes an intercessory aspect for the world.

Finally in this section, the wording of the Agnus Dei requires a moment of attention. With the second part of each stanza – the first two ending with ‘have mercy

⁴²Stephenson, *Eucharist and Offering*, p. 277.

⁴³With regard to the Agnus Dei in classical musical settings, the music historian Harvey Sachs remarks that the Agnus Dei in Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* carries a sense of pain. While Sachs comments that such pain was experienced by the composer, this sensitive rendition also can represent the pain of Christ bearing the pain of the world; see H. Sachs, *The Ninth Symphony: Beethoven and the World of 1824* (New York: Random House, 2010), p. 56.

⁴⁴See Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (New York: St Vladimir’s Press, 1973), p. 45. Litanies of intercession occur in a few places in the Orthodox rites and notably in the lengthy Commemoration, ‘Remember, O Lord . . .’ immediately before communion.

⁴⁵This phrase has its scriptural root in Jn 6.51.

upon us' and the third with 'grant us (your) peace'⁴⁶ – these words indeed hold a devotional sense of personal and congregational preparation for communion. However, at the same time, there is carried forward here within the eucharistic order, the flow of our participation in Christ, to be in his prayer and mission for the actualization of redemption of the world, 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world'.

Conclusion

Why, it may be asked, have the perspectives in this paper not been presented before in Anglican circles? The answer can be given in terms of the development of atonement theology and of liturgical revision in recent times. Theologically, we have seen the recovery of Christ's deliverance from the powers of evil on Calvary as holding a central place in understanding the atonement, assisted by modern scriptural interpretation. In terms of liturgical revision, a focus of mission has been brought to bear, as well as Christ's liberation from evil (exodus), given expression in eucharistic orders. In this context, then, the interpretation of John the Baptist's exclamation in John 1 can be seen to contain a double meaning regarding deliverance and forgiveness, with special emphasis given to the former.

These developments have therefore given opportunity for further considerations, by implication, in regard to what is taking place in the eucharistic order and, in particular, in the Agnus Dei: its meaning can be unpacked in terms of the atonement, as it is enacted liturgically with the breaking of the bread. Thereby, it becomes an occasion for eucharistic participants, as well as being a moment of devotion to the Crucified, to be caught up in the redeeming, self-giving love of the Lamb of God and his mission for the suffering world.

⁴⁶The 'your' has been inserted in Anglican versions; the original (from the Latin) maintained in the Roman Catholic Church, has the simple form, 'grant us peace'.