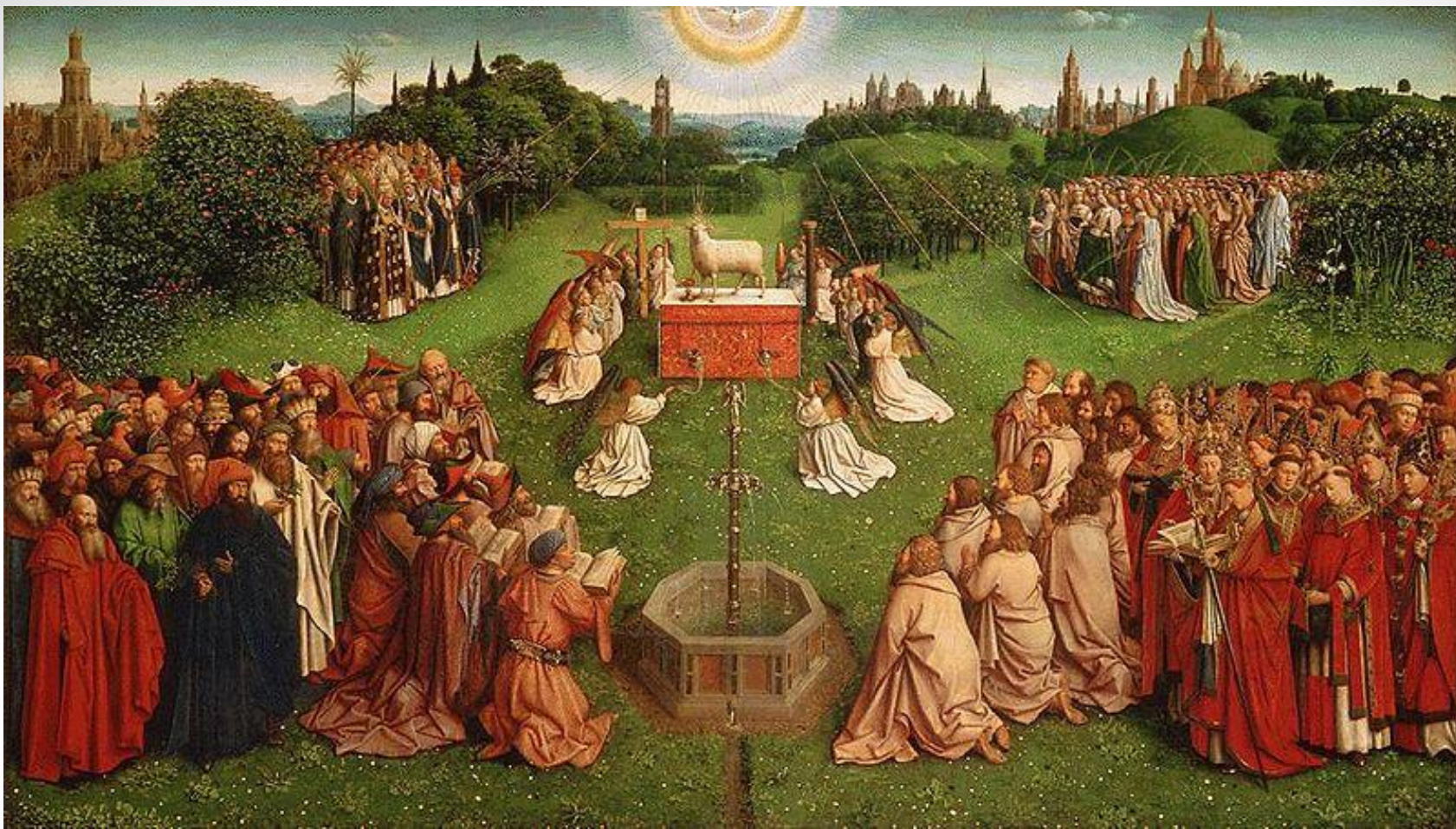




ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ and
soteriology in the Gospel of John

ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ occurs twice in John:

Jhn 1:29: Τῇ ἐπαύριον βλέπει τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐρχόμενον πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ λέγει, "Ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου.

RSV: The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

Jhn 1:36: ... καὶ ἐμβλέψας τῷ Ἰησοῦ περιπατοῦντι λέγει, "Ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ.

RSV: ... and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!"

“Lamb” in Turkmen can be translated as:

guzy = a small lamb, less than a year old, mostly up to six months

tokly = a Turkmen technical term for a lamb of approximately one year – used frequently in the OT (Exo, Lev etc)

janly = a more general term for “sacrificial animal”

guzy



tokly or janly



The **1994 NT** in Turkmen uses “guzy” in Jhn 1:29 and 1:36.

In the **revision** this was changed into “janly”. Some readers had interpreted “guzy” as a small, cuddly animal and “Lamb of God” as “the one loved by God”.

Because the team thought that John talked about a **sacrifice**, the text was changed to “janly”: Jesus was God’s sacrifice (“tokly” was considered to be a too technical term).

The secondary literature on these verses indeed often interprets “lamb” in Jhn 1:29 and 1:36 as some kind of **sacrifice**: either as the Passover lamb, or in terms of the binding of Isaac in Gen 22, the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement as in Lev 16, the daily *tamid* offering in the Tabernacle), or Isa 53:7.

It is almost always taken for granted that the words ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου refer to **atonement** or **expiation**.

My question is: does John really use ἁμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ in the sense of “sacrifice” and is atonement in view here?

Methodology

1)

It is important to distinguish between the traditions the New Testament authors used and developed to express Jesus' salvific role (each in his own way) on the one hand, and ideas that have emerged in later, post-biblical theology on the other.

2)

We need to avoid the trap of looking at single lexemes, isolating them from their context and filling them with theological content even before we have considered the context.

Methodology

3)

We will look at the evidence in the most logical order: from the Greek of John, back to the Greek of other NT authors, back to the Greek-speaking Jewish world (e.g. LXX), and then either back to the Hebrew OT or to non-Jewish Greek sources.

Related terms in the Gospel of John

πρόβατον (“sheep”) in

Jhn 2:14-15: καὶ εὗρεν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τοὺς πωλοῦντας βόας καὶ πρόβατα καὶ περιστεράς ... καὶ ποιήσας φραγέλλιον ἐκ σχοινίων πάντας ἐξέβαλεν ἐκ τοῦ ἱεροῦ τὰ τε πρόβατα καὶ τοὺς βόας, ...

RSV: (14) In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, ... (15) And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables.

Related terms in the Gospel of John

πρόβατον (“sheep”) in

Jhn 10 (*passim*: chapter on the Good Shepherd)

Jhn 21:16-17: Ποίμαινε τὰ πρόβατά μου ... Βόσκει τὰ πρόβατά μου.

RSV: (16) A second time he said to him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “*Tend my sheep.*” (17) He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “*Feed my sheep.*”

Related terms in the Gospel of John

ἀρνίον only once in:

Jhn 21:15: Βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου.

RSV: When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “*Feed my lambs.*”

Conclusion: the related terms in John do not refer to Jesus.

Related terms in the rest of the New Testament

Act 8:32 (= Isa 53:7): Ὡς πρόβατον ἐπὶ σφαγὴν ἤχθη / καὶ ὡς **ἀμνὸς** ἐναντίον τοῦ κείραντος αὐτὸν ἄφωνος, / οὕτως οὐκ ἀνοίγει τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ ...

RSV: Now the passage of the scripture which he was reading was this: “As a *sheep* led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearers is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. ...”

Related terms in the rest of the New Testament

The quotation in Acts 8:32 follows *verbatim* the LXX translation. Isa 53:7 refers to the total submission and endurance of the “suffering servant” (whose identity is still under discussion among exegetes).

Acts mentions the divine necessity of Jesus’ suffering repeatedly, often in double formulas that mention both suffering and resurrection, e.g. Act 17:3 “it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead.” In Act 8:32 the quotation of Isa 53:7 can be read as a reference to Jesus’ death or suffering.

Related terms in the rest of the New Testament

1Pe 1:19: (18) ... οὐ φθαρτοῖς, ἀργυρίῳ ἢ χρυσίῳ, ἐλυτρώθητε ἐκ τῆς ματαίας ὑμῶν ἀναστροφῆς πατροπαραδότου 19 ἀλλὰ τιμίῳ αἵματι ὡς **ἀμνοῦ ἀμώμου καὶ ἀσπίλου** Χριστοῦ, ...

RSV (18) You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, (19) but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

Cf the expression used in the LXX: ἀμνὸς ἐνιαυσίος ἀμώμος (e.g. Exo 29:38)

RSV “Now this is what you shall offer upon the altar: two lambs a year old day by day continually.

Related terms in the rest of the New Testament

1Pe 1:19: ἀμνὸς ἀμώμος καὶ ἄσπιλος

Cf the expression used in the LXX ἀμνὸς ἐνιαυσίος ἀμώμος (e.g. Exo 29:38, RSV “Now this is what you shall offer upon the altar: two lambs a year old day by day continually.)

Christ's blood is compared with (*not* identified with) the blood of a perfect lamb OT offering: ἐλυτρώθητε ... τιμίῳ αἵματι ὥς ἀμνοῦ ἀμώμου καὶ ἀσπίλου Χριστοῦ.

For the interpretation of Jhn 1:29,36 neither the immediate context the Jhn, nor the other occurrences in the NT are helpful.

Various interpretative solutions for Jhn 1:29,36 have been given:

- 1) the lamb as mentioned in Isa 53 (cf Act 8:32)
- 2) the lamb as the Passover lamb
- 3) the lamb as referring to an OT sacrifice – a variety of options belong to this category
- 4) the lamb as the Apocalyptic lamb

1) “Lamb of God” as the Apocalyptic lamb

e.g. Rev 6:16: “They called out to the mountains and to the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the eyes of the one who sits on the throne and from the anger of the Lamb!” (TEV)
“the lamb of God” is apocalyptic leader, Messiah as in Revelation

- 1) Revelation uses τὸ ἀρνίον and not ἀμνός
- 2) “Lamb” is the most important Christological title for Christ in Revelation, whereas ἀμνός occurs only twice in John
- 3) combination with the genitive τοῦ θεοῦ does not occur in Rev (there is no ἀρνίον τοῦ θεοῦ)

2) “lamb” as OT sacrifice (LXX terminology)

- a) Lev 16: Day of Atonement: animals involved:
μόσχος, κριός and 2 χίμαροι
The “carrying away of sins”: in Lev 16 expressed
with λαμβάνω and ἐφ’ ἑαυτῷ (in Jhn with αἴρω)
- b) Gen 22: “binding of Isaac”: πρόβατον / κριός, no
removal of sins
- c) sin/purification offering (תִּשְׁתֵּי in Lev 4:32):
πρόβατον

In neither of these instances the term ἀμνός is used.

2) “lamb” as OT sacrifice (LXX terminology)

When ἀμνός is used as in

- d) the daily offering (תָּמִיד in Exo 29:38-39, Num 28:3), which is ἀμνός in LXX,

there is no removal of sins (as one would expect if it is assumed the text refers to the death of Christ)

3) “lamb” as the Passover lamb

Fits in with other details in the Gospel of John (e.g. only in John Jesus is killed at the moment of the slaughtering of the passover lambs)

But:

- 1) in both Jewish and Christian Greek sources, the Passover lamb is never called an ἀμνός but always πάσχα (or πρόβατον)
- 2) the Passover lamb is not a sacrifice but eaten as a family meal
- 3) the Passover lamb does not remove sins

4) “lamb” of Isaiah 53:7

Ὡς πρόβατον ἐπὶ σφαγὴν ἤχθη
καὶ ὡς ἀμνὸς ἐναντίον τοῦ κείραντος αὐτὸν
ἄφωνος,
οὕτως οὐκ ἀνοίγει τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ.

Isa 53 is full of textual and interpretational problems. However, it is clear that the chapter speaks about the violent suffering and death of the “Servant” (whether this servant stands for the Messiah of Israel, Israel itself, Deutero-Isaiah etc etc).

4) “lamb” of Isaiah 53:7

Isa 53:7 is perhaps the best explanation of the occurrence of ἀμνός in Jhn 1:29,36. But note that:

- a) In Isa 53:7 ἀμνός does not refer to a *sacrifice* but is used to indicate the Servant's non-resistance. If Jhn 1:29,36 alludes to Isa 53:7, then in Jhn too the emphasis is more likely on Jesus' submission and obedience to God rather than on his death, let alone on his death as an atoning event.

4) “lamb” of Isaiah 53:7

- b) *If* in Jhn 1:29,36 the idea of Jesus’ atoning suffering and death is present at all, it cannot have been brought on by the word “lamb” (or “sheep”) in Isa 53:7 alone. The interpretation of Jesus’ death either in terms of Isa 53 or of sacrificial language are demonstrably secondary developments to an already existing, early-Christian tradition of the atoning death of the Jesus.

Origins of the idea of Jesus' atoning death

The traditional early-Christian, pre-Pauline expressions to describe the atoning effect of Jesus' death:

διδόναι / παραδιδόναι with ἑαυτόν or τὴν ψυχὴν
or: ἀποθνήσκειν

plus

ὑπὲρ or περὶ

plus

genitive of person / genitive of ἁμαρτίαι

I.e. “surrender” and “dying formula”. E.g. Rom 4:25, 8:32, Gal 1:4, 2:20, Eph 5:2, 5:25, Mrk 10:45 etc

Origins of the idea of Jesus' atoning death

The early Christian formula's most likely go back to

- the Hellenistic-Jewish tradition of the martyr (e.g. 1Ma 2:50, 6:44, 2Ma 7:37, Josephus, *Bell* 2:201, *Ant* 2:159)

which in its turn goes back to

- the Greek pagan world (e.g. Euripides, *Phoenissae* 998, Plutarch, *De gloria Atheniensium* 7 ...)

1Ma 2:50: ζηλώσατε τῷ νόμῳ καὶ δότε τὰς
ψυχὰς ὑμῶν ὑπὲρ διαθήκης πατέρων ἡμῶν

1Ma 6:44: καὶ ἔδωκεν ἑαυτὸν τοῦ σῶσαι τὸν
λαὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ περιποιῆσαι ἑαυτῷ ὄνομα
αἰώνιον

2Ma 7:37: ἐγὼ δέ, καθάπερ οἱ ἀδελφοί, καὶ
σῶμα καὶ ψυχὴν προδίδωμι περὶ τῶν πατρίων
νόμων

Jos, Bel.Jud. 2:201: ... ὑπὲρ τοσούτων ἐτοίμως
ἐπιδώσω τὴν ἑμαυτου ψυχὴν

Jos, Ant.Jud. 2:159: προύπεσον δακρύνοντες καὶ
παραδιδόντες ἑαυτους ὑπὲρ τῆς Βενιαμὶν
ψυχῆς ἀπολουμένους

Euripides, *Phoenissae* 998: εἶμι καὶ σώσω πόλιν
ψυχὴν τε δώσω τῇσδ' ὑπερθανεῖν χθονός

Plutarchus, *De Gloria Atheniensium* 7: ὑπὲρ
πατρίδος καὶ τάφων καὶ ἱερῶν ἐπιδιδόντες
ἑαυτοῦς τοῖς καλλίστοις καὶ λαμπροτάτοις
ἀγῶσιν

Origins of the idea of Jesus' atoning death

The martyr dies for the benefit of others, bringing atonement for those who belong to him (his family, city, or people, etc)

Influence of *sacrificial* terminology (e.g. Heb, 1Pe 1:19) or of *Isa 53* (e.g. Rom 4:25, Mat 8:17, 1Pe 2:21-22) is secondary.

Atoning death in the Gospel of John?

Some refer to Jhn 3:16

Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε
τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ
πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ' ἔχῃ ζωὴν
αἰώνιον.

The question is how the verb ἔδωκεν should be interpreted. There is no ὑπέρ or περί followed by either a genitive of person or a genitive of ἁμαρτίαι. The verb does not seem to have the meaning as in a surrender formula.

Atoning death in the Gospel of John?

John does of course mention the cross, but he does not primarily understand it as the place of Jesus' suffering and death or as the place where salvation was brought about, but rather as the place of Jesus' glorification. Undoubtedly there are also traces of the older, traditional soteriology visible in John (in 11:50-51 and 18:14 he does make use of a traditional "dying formula") and the plot of the narrative focuses on the crucifixion, but the overall emphasis in John's *soteriology* is not on Jesus' death.

Cf. e.g. 3:14, 8:28, 12:33, 34.

Atoning death in the Gospel of John?

The expression τιθέναι τὴν ψυχὴν ὑπὲρ (Jhn 10:11ff) means “to risk one’s life for” (*Freundschaftethik*), rather than “to give one’s life for” – the act of “risking one’s life for” does not necessarily lead to death

Jhn 10:11ff

TEV: “I am the good shepherd, who *is willing to die* for the sheep”

GCL: “Ein guter Hirt *ist bereit, für seine Schafe zu sterben*”

FCL “Le bon berger *est prêt à donner sa vie pour ses brebis*”

TLA “El buen pastor *está dispuesto a morir por sus ovejas.*”

Atoning death in the Gospel of John?

Jhn 1:29 Ἰδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου

What does ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου mean?

- It does not come from Lev 16:10 (λήμψεται ὁ χίμαρος ἐφ' ἑαυτῷ τὰς ἀδικίας αὐτῶν) and not Lev 53:4 (οὗτος τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν φέρει)
- verb αἴρειν in the Gospel means “to take away, remove” (cf 2:16, 10:18, 11:39, 15:2, 16:22 etc) rather than to “taken on himself” or “carry”

Atoning death in the Gospel of John?

Note that Jhn 1:29 uses ἁμαρτία in singular, contrary to Lev (ἀδικίαι) and Isa (ἁμαρτίαι). Singular ἁμαρτία does not refer to a multitude of past *sins* but to **the one particular sin of not believing in Jesus** (cf Jhn 15:22, 16:9 NLT: “The world’s sin is that it refuses to believe in me.” – with ὅτι recitativum)

A translation should, when possible, keep the word in singular, *not* as TLA Jhn 1:29:

“Entonces le dijo a toda la gente: «¡Aquí viene el Cordero de Dios que quita el pecado de la gente del mundo! Por medio de él, Dios les perdonará a ustedes ***todos sus pecados.***”

Taking away (present tense) the sin from the world is not the same as having died (past tense) for past sins. John's soteriology does not have the Pauline stress on Jesus' death as saving event, but focuses on the "yes" or "no" to Jesus in the believer's encounter with him and on the necessity of acknowledging him as the unique representative of the Father. Considering the wider context of the first chapter and the Gospel as a whole, the phrase ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου must mean that Jesus has come into the world to take away (present tense) the world's sin. It refers to his appearance, his presence, his message, *not* to his death.

Cf e.g. 3:15, 3:36, 5:24, 5:29-30, 6:40, 6:47, 10:10, 12:28

Conclusions

- 1) Background of Jhn 1:29, 36: Isa 53:7 but with an emphasis on obedience and submission, and not on suffering and death
- 2) Image of “lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” does not have sacrificial meaning (does not refer to Jesus’ death)
- 3) Origins of the early-Christian idea of the atoning effect of Jesus’ suffering and dying do not lie in the Hebrew Old Testament but in Hellenistic-Jewish concept of the martyr: influence of sacrificial imagery and Isa 53 are secondary

Conclusions

- 4) Johannine soteriology is different from Pauline soteriology and does not emphasize the salvific effect of Jesus' death: rather, John emphasizes the importance of accepting Jesus as the one sent by the Father
- 5) Translation proposals: τιθέναι τὴν ψυχὴν ὑπὲρ = to risk one's life for; if ἁμαρτία occurs in the singular form, one should preferably keep it singular because of its particular Johannine content

P.S. In the Turkmen translation the final rendering of ἀμνός is *guzy* = “lamb” and not *janly* (“sacrificial animal”).