

[Jn 1:29-34](#)

Gospel

Jerome Biblical Commentary

**29.** The second day of the “new creation story” sees the positive side of the Baptist’s testimony, corresponding to his disclaimers of the first day. The partly artificial character of the chronology as it appears in v. 31f. makes it clear that various events have taken place since v. 19ff. *the lamb of God*: In view of its situation in Jn, it is possible that in this figure the Evangelist sees a reference to the Passover lamb (see comments on 19:14, 36) This was a usual interpretation of the Lat Fathers. More probably, however, he has in mind the Servant of the Lord of Is 53:7-12, where the Servant is compared to a lamb (*amnos* in the LXX, the same word used in Jn) and is said to bear the iniquity of many. *who takes away the world’s sin*: This phrase would seem to favor the latter rather than the former figure; the Passover lamb, though it protected the people of Israel from destruction, had no connection with sin. Note also that in 12:38 Jn sums up Jesus’ public life in the words of Is 53:1, which introduce this Servant theme. The Gk Fathers tended to interpret the text thus. However, the Evangelist may have in mind more than one OT figure, as he often does. What is more difficult is to determine the meaning the expression would have had for the Baptist, since it is most unlikely that he had an understanding of the Lord’s mission comparable to that of the Evangelist (see comment on 1:21; cf. R. E. Brown, *CBQ* 22 [1960] 292-98). Boismard believes that the Baptist referred to the Servant of the Lord, but in the representation of Is 42:1ff. rather than of 53:7ff., that is, as one who would usher in an age of righteousness for the people of God, thus banishing the world’s sin (cf. 1 Jn 3:5, 8; the Syn baptismal scene in Mk 1:9-11 contains an allusion to Is 42:1). “Lamb of God” is Jn’s rendering, but the Baptist would have used the Aram *aly ’ d ’ l h* , which can mean either “servant of God” or “lamb of God” (cf. W. Zimmerli and J. Jeremias, *The Servant of God* [SBT 20; London, 1957] 82f). Following another train of thought, Dodd believes that “lamb of God” was an apocalyptic title for the Messiah (cf. Andrew’s reaction in v. 41); the militant-yet-slain lamb of Ap 5:6ff. is, in turn, a combination of this figure with that of the lamb of sacrifice (*Interpretation*, 231f., 236-38).**30. he existed before me**: The same impf. tense is used as in the prologue for the Eternal Word; there is hardly any doubt that the Evangelist intends here another affirmation of the pre-existence of Jesus, who was almost unobtrusively introduced in v. 29. Was

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Lat Latin

LXX Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT)

Gk Greek

OT Old Testament

CBQ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*

Syn Synoptic Gospels or Synoptic writers

SBT Studies in Biblical Theology (London and Naperville, Ill.)

the Baptist also aware of this great truth when he uttered these words? Again it may be doubted: This is Johannine irony (→ 29 above). If the Baptist did not consider himself the new Elijah (see comment on v. 21 above), he may, for a time at least, have thought of Jesus in this capacity; the words “the man that is coming,” used here by the Baptist, are echoed by Jesus in Mt 11:15 virtually as a title for Elijah (cf. Mal 3:1). If the Baptist thought of the Messiah as being Elijah returned, it is easy to see how he could speak of him as one having existed prior to himself.

**53 31.** The Baptist had not known that Jesus was the Messiah, even though the express purpose of his baptizing had been to prepare men for the Messiah’s coming (v. 27).**32.** It was only when he baptized Jesus that the Baptist recognized him as the Messiah. John here presupposes the Syn story of Jesus’ baptism (Mk 1:9-11 par.) without actually mentioning the baptism itself; in Jn (as in Mt 3:17) it is stressed that the theophany at the baptism was an objective event and not merely a private experience of Jesus. From Acts 19:1-4 we can be fairly certain that the Baptist did not have the Christian revelation of the Holy Spirit as a distinct person in the godhead. He would have understood the Spirit of God in the OT sense, as signifying God’s vital power, and in this sense would have recognized that the Spirit “came to rest on him” (cf. Is 11:2). John and the readers of his Gospel know of course that the Spirit of God is a distinct divine agent, a teaching that is much stressed in the second half of the Gospel.**33.** This recognition by the Baptist was the result of a divine intimation. The OT prophets had foretold an outpouring of the Spirit in the Messianic age (Jl 2:28f.; Is 32:15; Ez 39:29; Zech 12:10). The NT recognizes the fulfillment of this prophecy in Pentecost and Christian baptism (Acts 2:16-18; 10:45; Rom 5:5; Gal 4:6; Eph 4:7f.; Jn 7:39; 20:22), events that did not occur until after the death and resurrection of Christ. *baptism with the Holy Spirit:* For John and the Christian reader of the Gospel, this means the outpouring of the Spirit as it was known to occur, which includes Christian baptism; but the Baptist would have thought in the more general terms of OT prophecy. Because the Baptist here contrasts his baptism with that of Jesus, and in view of the sacramental teaching that John brings out in the following passages, we have two probable reasons for his failure to state literally that Jesus was baptized by John. Such a statement would have interfered with the equation that John wants his readers to keep in mind: Baptism of John the Baptist = OT expectation; Baptism of Jesus = NT fulfillment in the Holy Spirit.**34.** *this is God’s chosen one:* Most mss. read “This is God’s Son,” which is probably a harmonization with the Syn account of the voice from heaven at the baptism of Jesus. “Chosen one” (*eklektos*) is an allusion to Is 42:1 (cf. Lk 9:35), recognizing in Jesus the Servant of the Lord (cf. J. A. Fitzmyer, *CBQ* 27 [1965] 349).

### Haydock’s Catholic Commentary

**Ver. 29.** *Behold the Lamb of God.* John the Baptist let the Jews know who Jesus was, by divers testimonies. 1st, By telling them he was the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin, or sins of the world, who was come to be their Redeemer, and to free mankind from the slavery of sin; 2ndly,

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par. Parallel pasage(s) in the Synoptic Gospels

NT New Testament

mss. Manuscripts

that he was *greater* than he, *and before him*, though *born after him*; 3rdly, that God had revealed to him that Jesus was to *baptize in the Holy Ghost*; 4thly, that he saw the *Spirit descending upon him* from heaven, and *remaining upon him*; 5thly, that he was *the Son of God*, ver. 34. (Witham) --- *Who taketh away*. It was only a being like Christ, in whose person the divine and human natures were united, that could effectually take away the sins of the world. As man, he was enabled to suffer; and as God, his sufferings obtained a value equal to the infinite atonement required. (Haydock)

### **Daily Bible Study Series (non-Catholic)**

HERE we come to the second day of this momentous week in the life of Jesus. By this time his baptism and his temptations were past and he was about to set his hand to the work which he came into the world to do. Once again the Fourth Gospel shows us John paying spontaneous tribute to Jesus. He calls him by that tremendous title which has become woven into the very language of devotion—*The Lamb of God*. What was in John's mind when he used that title? There are at least four pictures which may well contribute something to it.

(i) It may well have been that John was thinking of the Passover Lamb. The Passover Feast was not very far away (John 2:13). The old story of the Passover was that it was the blood of the slain lamb which protected the houses of the Israelites on the night when they left Egypt (Exodus 12:11–13). On that night when the Angel of Death walked abroad and slew the first-born of the Egyptians, the Israelites were to smear their doorposts with the blood of the slain lamb, and the angel, seeing it, would pass over that house. The blood of the lamb delivered them from destruction. It has been suggested that even as John the Baptist saw Jesus, there passed by flocks of lambs, being driven up to Jerusalem from the country districts to serve as sacrifices for the Passover Feast. The blood of the Passover Lamb delivered the Israelites in Egypt from death; and it may be that John was saying: "There is the one true sacrifice who can deliver you from death." Paul too thought of Jesus as the Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7). There is a deliverance that only Jesus Christ can win for us.

(ii) John was the son of a priest. He would know all the ritual of the Temple and its sacrifices. Every morning and every evening a lamb was sacrificed in the Temple for the sins of the people (Exodus 29:38–42). So long as the Temple stood this daily sacrifice was made. Even when the people were starving in war and in siege they never omitted to offer the lamb until in A.D. 70 the Temple was destroyed. It may be that John is saying: "In the Temple a lamb is offered every night and every morning for the sins of the people; but in this Jesus is the only sacrifice which can deliver men from sin."

(iii) There are two great pictures of the lamb in the prophets. Jeremiah writes: "But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter" (Jeremiah 11:19). And Isaiah has the great picture of the one who was brought "like a lamb to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7). Both these great prophets had the vision of one who by his sufferings and his sacrifice, meekly and lovingly borne, would redeem his people. Maybe John is saying: "Your prophets dreamed of the one who was to love and suffer and die for the people; that one is come." It is certainly true that in later times the picture of Isaiah 53 became to the church one of the most precious forecasts of Jesus in all the Old Testament. It may be that John the Baptist was the first to see it so.

(iv) There is a fourth picture which would be very familiar to the Jews, although very strange to us. Between the Old and New Testaments there were the days of the great struggles of the Maccabees. In those days the lamb, and especially the horned lamb, was the symbol of a great conqueror. Judas Maccabaeus is so described, as are Samuel and David and Solomon. The lamb—strange as it may sound to us—stood for the conquering champion of God. It may well be that this is no picture of gentle and helpless weakness, but rather a picture of conquering majesty and power. Jesus was the champion of God who fought with sin and mastered it in single contest.

There is sheer wonder in this phrase, the Lamb of God. It haunted the writer of the Revelation. Twenty-nine times he used it. It becomes one of the most precious titles of Christ. In one word it sums up the love, the sacrifice, the suffering and the triumph of Christ.

John says that he did not know Jesus. Now John was a relation of Jesus (Luke 1:36), and he must have been acquainted with him. What John is saying is not that he did not know *who* Jesus was, but that he did not know *what* Jesus was. It had suddenly been revealed to him that Jesus was none other than the Son of God.

Once again John makes clear what his only function was. It was to point men to Christ. He was nothing and Christ was everything. He claimed no greatness and no place for himself; he was only the man who, as it were, drew back the curtain and left Jesus occupying the lonely centre of the stage.

## THE COMING OF THE SPIRIT

John 1:32, 34

So John bore his witness. "With my own eyes," he said, "I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven, as it might have been a dove, and the Spirit remained upon him. And I did not know him. But it was he who sent me to baptize with water who said to me: 'The one on whom you see the Spirit coming down and remaining is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I saw it happen; and my witness stands that this is the Son of God."

SOMETHING had happened at the baptism of Jesus which had convinced John beyond all doubt that Jesus was the Son of God. As the fathers of the church saw centuries ago, it was something which only the eye of the mind and soul could see. But John saw it and was convinced.

In Palestine the dove was a sacred bird. It was not hunted and it was not eaten. Philo noticed the number of doves at Ascalon, because it was not permitted to catch and kill them, and they were tame. In Genesis 1:2 we read of the creative Spirit of God moving upon the face of the waters. The Rabbis used to say that the Spirit of God moved and fluttered like a dove over the ancient chaos breathing order and beauty into it. The picture of the dove was one which the Jews knew and loved.

It was at his baptism that the Spirit came down upon Jesus with power. We must remember that at this time the *Christian* doctrine of the Spirit had not yet come into being. We have to wait for the last chapters of John's gospel and for Pentecost for that to emerge. When John the Baptist

spoke of the Spirit coming upon Jesus, he must have been thinking in *Jewish* terms. What then was the Jewish idea of the Spirit?

The Jewish word for Spirit is *ruach*, the word which means *wind*. To the Jew there were always three basic ideas of the Spirit. The Spirit was *power*, power like a mighty rushing wind; the Spirit was *life*, the very dynamic of the existence of man; the Spirit was *God*; the power and the life of the Spirit were beyond mere human achievement and attainment; the coming of the Spirit into a man's life was the coming of God. Above all it was the Spirit who controlled and inspired the prophets. "I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (Micah 3:8). God speaks to Isaiah of "My Spirit which is upon you and my words which I have put in your mouth" (Isaiah 59:21). "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings" (Isaiah 61:1). "A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you. ... I will put my Spirit within you" (Ezekiel 36:26, 27). We may say that the Spirit of God did three things for the man on whom he came. First, he brought to men the truth of God. Second, he gave men the power to recognize that truth when they saw it. Third, he gave them the ability and the courage to preach that truth to men. To the Jew the Spirit was God coming into a man's life.

At his baptism the Spirit came upon Jesus in a different way from that in which he ever came on any other person. Most men have what might be called spasmodic experiences of the Spirit. They have their moments of dazzling illumination, of extraordinary power, of superhuman courage. But these moments come and go. Twice (verses 32, 33) John goes out of his way to point out that the Spirit *remained* on Jesus. Here was no momentary inspiration. In Jesus the Spirit took up his permanent abode. That is still another way of saying that the mind and the power of God were uniquely in Jesus.

Here we can learn a great deal of what the word *baptism* means. The Greek verb *baptizein* means *to dip* or *to submerge*. It can be used of clothes being *dipped* in dye; it can be used of a ship *submerged* beneath the waves; it can be used of a person who is so drunk that he is *soaked* in drink. When John says that Jesus will baptize men with the Holy Spirit, he means that Jesus can bring God's Spirit to us in such a way that we are saturated and our life and being are flooded with that Spirit.

Now what did this baptism mean for John? His own baptism meant two things. (i) It meant *cleansing*. It meant that a man was being washed from the impurities that clung to him. (ii) It meant *dedication*. It meant that he went out to a new and a different and a better life. But Jesus's baptism was a *baptism of the Spirit*. If we remember the Jewish conception of the Spirit we can say that when the Spirit takes possession of a man certain things happen.

(i) His life is *illuminated*. There comes to him the knowledge of God and God's will. He knows what God's purpose is, what life means, where duty lies. Some of God's wisdom and light has come into him.

(ii) His life is *strengthened*. Knowledge without power is a haunting and frustrating thing. But the Spirit gives us not only knowledge to know the right, but also strength and power to do it. The Spirit gives us a triumphant adequacy to cope with life.

(iii) His life is *purified*. Christ's baptism with the Spirit was to be a baptism of *fire* (Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16). The dross of evil things, the alloy of the lower things, the base admixture is burned away until a man is clean and pure.

Often our prayers for the Spirit are a kind of theological and liturgical formality; but when we know that for which we are praying, these prayers become a desperate cry from the heart.