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Worthy is the Lamb: Pastoral Symbols of Salvation in Christian Art and Music

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**Worthy is the Lamb:
Pastoral Symbols of Salvation in Christian Art and Music**

By

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Final project
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

This paper examines the role of the lamb and the Good Shepherd as Christian symbols of atonement in art and music. Christians adopted the lamb as a religious symbol from ancient cultures and from Jewish sacrificial traditions. It reflects their understanding of how redemption is achieved. The author demonstrates that the lamb, as well as the Good Shepherd, became emblems commonly used by visual artists and composers to represent theories of atonement which were generally accepted during their own times, as well as those which had enjoyed popularity in the past. Significant works explored here which employ the lamb and Good Shepherd as iconic figures include early Christian funerary art, the *Agnus Dei* of the mass, the Easter Sequence, Hubert and Jan Van Eyck's Ghent altarpiece, Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece, George Friderich Handel's oratorio, *Messiah*, and many Christian hymns. Some of these artistic works are shown to represent more than one idea about atonement.

*Worthy is the lamb that was slain
and hath redeemed us to God by his blood,
to receive power, and riches, and wisdom and strength,
and honor, and glory, and blessing.¹
~ Revelation 5:12-13*

Chapter I: Introduction

These words were set by Georg Friderich Handel for the final chorus of his oratorio, *Messiah* (first performed in 1742) and express the belief that human redemption was accomplished through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. The poetry and drama of these well-known words have inspired more than religious doctrine. They have formed the basis for many works of Christian art, from the earliest days of the church to the present. Even before it became acceptable to portray the body of Christ upon the cross, the lamb served as a satisfactory substitute in visual art. The symbol was also liberally represented in early Christian music, especially in the hymns which quoted or were inspired by scripture. Moreover, the symbol has not decreased in significance or popularity over the centuries, but has continued to provide Christians with a powerful emblem of the atonement, which they have used to comfort, teach, inspire, and reassure themselves and other believers.

Handel's librettist, Charles Jennens, knew the power of the lamb as a Christian icon when he selected the scriptures which formed the text of *Messiah*. The lamb (or sheep) appears in all three parts of the oratorio, portraying Jesus as shepherd, savior, and apocalyptic judge. The symbol is recognizably Christian, and provides a rich metaphor for the

¹ All quotes from *Messiah* in this paper are from the words of the Novello Edition, edited by Watkins Shaw.

Christian beliefs about redemption, but it was not created by the followers of Jesus. Its presence as a religious symbol predates Christianity by many centuries. In fact, it was not even a creation of the Jews, from whom much Christian symbolism was borrowed. Rams were hallowed among the Egyptians in pre-dynastic times, and sacrificial offerings of lambs, sheep, and rams were common in Mesopotamia in the Bronze Age.

In order to understand the significance of the lamb as a Christian icon, it is necessary to trace its evolution from appearances in the religions of ancient civilizations to the Old Testament descriptions of its place in the Jewish sacrificial tradition, and from thence to the emergence of the symbol in Christianity as a central emblem of the Messiah. This latter manifestation of the lamb will be informed by New Testament references to the figure. We will attempt to interpret the meaning of the lamb to the Christians (and non-Christians) who employed it as an artistic device. What did it symbolize about their understanding of atonement or judgment? What is its significance in the eucharistic rite? How can Jesus be both sheep and shepherd? The answers to these questions will provide insight into the centrality of the image and help us to understand its endurance and poignancy.

Against this historical backdrop we will examine artistic representations of the lamb, both visually and musically. The lamb appeared very early in the visual art of the first Christian communities. Sarcophagi and catacomb paintings provide some of the first representations of Jesus as Lamb of God or as the Good Shepherd. In the fifteenth century, one of the richest examples of lamb iconography is found in the Ghent

Altarpiece painted by Hubert and Jan Van Eyck. Mathias Grünewald's Isenheim

Altarpiece from the sixteenth century also contributes a significant portrayal of the Lamb of God in connection with the crucifixion. These works will be analyzed in terms of the lamb's meaning for both artists and viewers.

Long before Jennens selected the scripture passages which formed the text of *Messiah*, the lamb was present in the music of the church. It was found in the liturgical language of the mass, the Easter sequence, and in hymns. It has continued to appear in much church music, becoming an especially popular image in the hymns of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. These manifestations of the image, as well as those in the non-liturgical setting of Handel's *Messiah*, will provide the basis for our discussion of the connotations of the lamb in sacred music. These works will contribute to our perception of the lamb as paschal victim, eucharistic sacrament, and millennial figure.

By observing and comparing the various representations of the lamb in visual art and music, we can expect to gain an understanding of how the lamb came to stand for Christ and Christ's atoning work, as well as for humankind.

Chapter II: The Shepherd and Sheep of Ancient Cultures

The idea that God was a shepherd was not a new one for Christians, or even for the Jews, from whom much early Christian iconography was inherited. Ancient cultures in Egypt and Mesopotamia revered both shepherds and the members of their flock. The Egyptian prophet, Ipu, speaking of the god he believed to be the one “director of the universe,” said, at the end of the sixth dynasty (c.2250 BCE), “It used to be said that he was every man’s shepherd, that there was no evil in his heart, that however insignificant his flock he would spend the whole day in caring for them....” (Clark 68).² Here we see an ancient reference to a deity as the shepherd, and to his people as the sheep under his care, a symbol which would resonate for many centuries. The “mes” (divine laws) of the Sumerians in Bronze Age Mesopotamia included some which equated “shepherdship” with kingship (Hawkes 186). It seems that ancient peoples attached power to the concept of the shepherd, an idea which appears in the theology of subsequent religions as well.

In addition to the shepherd, however, ancient cultures attached significance to the sheep. A number of gods in Egypt, as well as some in the Greek pantheon, were known as ram-gods. Moreover, some Egyptians embalmed rams as early as the first Dynasty (c.3000 BCE), an indication of some type of religious use. Why was the god associated with a ram? Rams were seen as powerful creatures and were known to battle fiercely by butting heads with other rams. The strength of the animal, as well as its appearance (with spiral or coiled horns) provided a fitting image for the strength and fierceness of certain gods.

² R. T. Rundle Clark argues that Ipu discounted minor deities, and refers to the one god who is in control of the universe and is the progenitor of all humans; he calls him simply, “he.” Clark believes this reveals the underlying monotheism of the Egyptian mind (69).

Jean Yoyotte describes two types of sheep which were religious symbols in ancient Egypt. The old type—*ovis longipes paleoaegyptiaca*—was a sheep with twisted horns which stood out horizontally from the head (fig. 1). It had a long tail and thick mane. This type of sheep disappeared in the second millennium BCE. The new type of sheep—*ovis platyra aegyptiaca*—which appeared around the twelfth Dynasty, was smaller and had a short tail. The males' horns curled around their ears (261). In spite of the less imposing appearance of the new sheep, both types of sheep were associated with deities, especially powerful creator-gods. Representing major gods as the ram reflected fear and respect for these powerful creatures. Egyptian gods which were symbolized by rams included the most revered deities of the pantheon. The Ram of Mendes and Khnum, the supreme ram-headed god who created men on his potter's wheel, were exclusively represented by the older type of sheep. Yoyotte believes that the horns symbolized terror radiating from a supernatural source (262), an indication of the awe and fear inspired by these gods.

Egyptians still associated their gods with rams, even after the older type of sheep had disappeared. The new type of sheep was linked with the ram-headed god, Amun, a minor local god of Thebes who became the high god in Egypt's Middle Kingdom (c.2050 BCE). He was depicted with a ram's head of the *ovis platyra aegyptiaca* type, and the famous long avenue to his temple in Luxor (ancient Thebes) is lined with ram-headed sphinxes (fig. 2). He was the god of the air and of fertility, but his rise to the position of Egypt's high god was attributable primarily to his defeat of the Hyksos. It was necessary

to represent him as a powerful creature, just as he had become the most powerful and prestigious god in Egypt. The ram's head as a hieroglyph stood for power and prestige (again, from the habit of rams to butt heads in battles for dominance) (fig. 3).

In addition to their association with the great ram-gods, rams and lambs held significance as symbols of fertility and renewal. The Greeks established the ram as the first sign of the zodiac in the sixth century BCE. It is assigned to the months of March and April, which mark the beginning of spring. This is the season for the birth of lambs, giving them an association with new life and rebirth, just as the earth was returning to life after winter's "death." Fertility was attributed to the statue of the ram in the Egyptian temple at Mendes.

In Sumeria, sheep were the primary sacrificial animals among the many which were sacrificed daily. Each city-state had its own primary god(s) which was venerated daily through a sacrificial offering. Jacquetta Hawkes claims that these offerings were of "very substantial economic significance" (194). At the town of Puzrishdagan near the holy city of Nippur, a huge depot was operated to receive and dispose of animals intended for sacrifice. Careful records were kept, showing the massive number of animals involved in this system. The most important animals for sacrifice were rams and bulls, but young animals—bullocks and lambs—were offered too (Hawkes 193-4). Other cultures around the Mediterranean, including the Jews, shared these sacrificial traditions as religious practice, developing complex rules for which animals to sacrifice, how often, and for what purposes.

The Greeks took the idea of the ram-god from the Egyptians and fashioned images of Zeus as a human torso with ram's horns, likening him to Amun, (Charbonneau-Lassay 68). In the story of Phrixus and Helle, a ram with a golden fleece is sent by Zeus to save the brother and sister from death. In thanksgiving for rescue, Phrixus sacrificed the ram to Zeus and hung the golden fleece on a tree. The gods set the ram in the sky as the zodiacal symbol for the spring months, which mark the victory of life over death each year. The fleece became the symbol for a pledge of good fortune and abundance, and is the same fleece which Jason and the Argonauts later took by killing the dragon which guarded it. This Greek myth incorporates a supernatural ram who saves people in need, is killed by them as a sacrifice, and lives in the sky. Each of these features of the ram (or sheep) can be found in the religious myths of other cultures.

In addition to adopting ram-inspired deities, the Greeks participated in the sacrificial rituals of the Egyptians and Mediterranean civilizations. For example, one of the rites of the Dionysian mysteries included the throwing of a lamb into Lake Lerna, where Dionysos had dived in search of his mother in the underworld. The sacrifice of the lamb was to appease Pylaochos, warder of the gates of hell. This is an example of sacrifice as an offering of thanksgiving, or to gain favor. Sacrificial rituals were never practiced without a reason.

While rams could represent deities, strength, and fertility, they were also offered as sacrifice, along with sheep and lambs. These seemingly contradictory symbol systems—

the one honoring life and rebirth, the other requiring the death of the very emblem of life—appear again and again in the cultures of Persia, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and westward. Christians would later develop a complex system of doctrines which would synthesize these ideas about life, sacrifice, and rebirth.

Chapter III: The Jewish Sacrificial Tradition

We have seen strong evidence of the religious associations of rams, sheep, and lambs from the earliest civilizations. From these pagan traditions, the Hebrew people inherited the rituals of sacrifice, in particular the sacrifice of pure, unblemished lambs, a tradition which would be transformed by Christianity into one of its most powerful symbols. The Old Testament is full of instructions for and descriptions of sacrificial rituals involving sheep, from the simple instructions of Exodus 29:38 to sacrifice two sheep each day, to the description in I Chronicles 29:21 of the sacrifice of 1,000 oxen, 1,000 rams, and 1,000 lambs at the dedication of the temple. Leviticus 4 and 5 describe offerings of animals, including sheep, in a long and complicated ritual whose purpose is to atone for sin. The symbolic uses of sheep helped to shape the Jews' understanding of their relationship to God and represented an attempt to influence God's actions toward the people of Israel, as individuals and as the chosen people.

The most famous ram in the Old Testament is the one found by Abraham caught by its horns in a thicket when he was about to sacrifice his son, Isaac. This ram became the substitute for Isaac when the angel stopped Abraham from offering him as a sacrifice. This story remains an important myth of the Jewish faith and represents God's faithfulness to Abraham and his descendants. It is recalled by the shofar, a ram's horn still blown in Jewish rituals, especially at Rosh Hashanah. The story of this substitute sacrifice was later interpreted by Christians as a prefiguring of Christ, who was crucified (sacrificed) in the place of humans.

It is evident that animal sacrifice was already a common practice before Abraham and Isaac made their journey to the mountain to obey God's command. Indeed, Isaac asked Abraham about the lack of a lamb along the way. Alexander Cruden, in his concordance first published in 1737, argued that all known races and peoples practiced two types of sacrifice: an offering of firstfruits or incense to show dependence on God, and a burnt offering to appease an angry God (556). Isaac was to be a burnt offering, intended to gain the favor of God. In fact, it did exactly that, as God tells Abraham, "Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore" (Gen. 22:16-17 NRSV).

Another foreshadowing of the atoning sacrifice of Christ can be seen in the blood of the Passover lambs. This was smeared on the doorposts of the people of Israel on the eve of their release from Egyptian captivity. It served to identify the homes of the Israelites to the Angel of Death, who passed over Egypt, killing the firstborn sons of any households not marked with the blood. The sacrifice of the lambs, leading to Israel's escape from captivity, is commemorated yearly by Jews in the Passover Seder.

The symbol of the Lord as shepherd is also present in the Old Testament, implying that his followers are sheep. The often-quoted Psalm 23 uses pastoral metaphors to describe the relationship between God and his people. Several references to God's people as sheep are found in the "Servant Songs" of the prophet Isaiah ("All we like sheep have gone astray," and "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his

arms”). Isaiah speaks also of the suffering servant as a sacrificial lamb (“he was like a lamb that is led to the slaughter”). These passages show that the sheep metaphor has two important meanings: the shepherd as guiding and caring figure and the sheep as a sacrifice which earns favor with God.

During Jesus’s life, the primary site for Jewish sacrifice was the temple at Jerusalem. The daily ritual is described by Bernhard Lang in *Sacred Games*: for public worship a one-year old lamb was sacrificed each morning and afternoon. The blood of the animal was sprinkled on the altar and the fat parts were burned. Individuals might also offer an animal for sacrifice, seeking benefits for themselves or their families (213). Lang argues that formulaic words were spoken at these events (“This is *N.*’s body,” and “This is *N.*’s blood,” (*N.* being the name of the sacrificer) which later became the words of institution for the eucharist (“This is *my* body,” and “This is *my* blood”). Bloody temple sacrifices ended for the Jews with the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. The symbolism remained, however, as we shall see when we discuss the Christian eucharist.

Like their predecessors in Mesopotamia, the Jews practiced complex rituals of sacrifice. At the same time, they referred to their God as a shepherd, a belief also inherited from earlier cultures. These interpretations of the sheep and shepherd would be passed on to the religion that branched off from it, namely, Christianity.

Chapter IV: The Lamb and the Good Shepherd in Early Christian Art

In the syncretistic imagery of religious art, Mediterranean cultures strongly resembled one another. The images and what they represented were borrowed by one civilization from another, with new meanings appended, but without old ones being completely superseded. Christianity was a syncretistic religion in terms of its imagery, adopting the religious symbols of other traditions, but it remained unique in the way that it meditated, through images, upon God's relationship to humankind. While early Christian art might not appear, on the surface, to be distinctly different from what came before it, the symbols represented a divergent way of thinking about God—one that took into account an individual's relationship and reconciliation to God. The lamb and the Good Shepherd were images which had appeared in pre-Christian religious art, but Christians used them to demonstrate central beliefs regarding their new religion. We will focus on these two symbols as metaphors for the scriptural "truths" which Christians espoused.

One might expect that the religious art of the early Christians would come from the art of the Jews, since the two religions shared a common heritage. This did not happen, however, as the law of Moses had rejected representations of all living beings and so the Jews had declined to characterize their faith with visual images (Grabar 23). Only at the beginning of the third century when the Jewish faith was authorized in the Roman Empire, perhaps to make their presence known, did Jews begin to employ symbolic figures. Likewise Christians, prior to the third century, had worshipped without cult images, perhaps in part because of the great risk of being identified and persecuted.

When the two cults began to turn to art to symbolize their faith, both Jews and Christians took their inspiration from the art of other religions or from secular art (Grabar xliii).

The art of the Greco-Roman world, which depicted the idyllic life with idealized, pastoral images, provided the context for the new Christian art. The Hellenistic culture of the Mediterranean also celebrated pagan myths, incorporating mythological images into the tranquil, rural settings of art and providing viewers with a sense of history. Moreover, the art reflected the Roman Empire's spirit of compromise—creating something new out of the potential conflict between the conquering Empire and the provinces (Elsner 141). This resulted in a syncretism which allowed a merging of gods, their attributes, and their feats. Assigning the attribute of one god (or goddess) to another allowed deities to assume the function, form, or name of the first god.

Christian art, emerging at the beginning of the third century, reflected many of these features of Hellenistic culture, including pastoral settings, mythological figures, and syncretism. Sheep and shepherds in bucolic scenes abounded in Christian art, but this did not represent a change for the viewer. Classical art had represented such figures for centuries. Mythological figures very similar to those found in pagan art now appeared in Christian art, but with new layers of meaning. Old Testament stories replaced the myths of Mt. Olympus, but, as mythological scenes had done, still provided a link to the historical past. Many of the Old Testament heroes looked remarkably like classical figures. Jonah, for example, was conflated with the Greek figure of Endymion, the mythological figure who was loved by Selene and granted the gift of eternal sleep—thus,

eternal life. (This allowed Christians to use the figure of Jonah, in the pose of sleeping Endymion, for a symbol of resurrection and eternal life.) This type of syncretism was common and we will look at some specific examples below.

The common depiction of Jesus as a youthful shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulder (fig. 4a) is derived from the Greek statue of Hermes Criophoros, the ram bearer (fig. 4b). A figure bearing a lamb, such as this one, stood for a caring and protective nature. André Grabar says that in Roman art it was a symbol of philanthropy (*humanitas*) (11). Even the Egyptians, in ancient times, had referred to at least some of their gods as shepherds. To the Jews, the children of Israel were God's flock, led to their feeding places by their shepherds, i.e., political leaders (Chevalier 585). Christians felt free to adopt such a symbol for their caring and protective God because of what it already represented for Greeks, Romans, and Jews. Moreover, Jesus had referred to himself as a shepherd when he told Peter (in John 21:15-19) to "feed my lambs" and "feed my sheep." Here he was instructing Peter to care for his flock, i.e., his followers who would become the church (O'Day 861). Christians propagated the metaphor by incorporating the Good Shepherd into the art of the Christian catacombs and sarcophagi dating from the third century. Christianity was still an outlawed religion at this time, so the idea of a God who provides for and protects his flock (who was being martyred) was highly desirable. This made the use of the Good Shepherd figure a "safe" image for Christians; it allowed their Savior to be camouflaged, hiding their beliefs about him from pagans (Williamson 1).

The Good Shepherd is the central figure in cubiculum C of the catacomb of the Via Latina (c. 320) (fig. 5). There we see a shepherd depicted as a child and flanked by scenes of Jonah (a reference to one of the stories of the Christians' past—their version of a mythological hero). Jonah represents Christ as a typological figure (spending three days in the belly of the whale being equivalent to Christ spending three days in the tomb). Other figures in the catacomb in the cubiculum are those of Adam and Eve with the serpent, a peacock, and a praying figure (orant). Jas Elsner believes the entire scheme to be “an abbreviated narrative symbolic of the whole Christian dispensation . . . elegantly displayed” (156). The deceased, represented by the orant, can hope to become one of Christ's sheep, as seen in the vault. The Good Shepherd as funerary art is a common symbol, not only because of the hope that it represents for the deceased, but for the viewer as well. The Greeks had seen the Good Shepherd as the symbol of protection and safety; Christians agreed but appended the belief in eternal life. The decoration of these tombs with symbols of Christ, the shepherd, reassured Christians who visited them that they would have life after death, and in so doing, be reunited with the deceased.

The Good Shepherd and Jonah are examples of syncretistic imagery in Christian art; another is the classical figure of the philosopher as a symbol of Jesus, an image that appears as early as the Good Shepherd. He is a bearded figure, nude, or clothed in an exomis tunic, and usually seated, reading a book (Grabar 12). A sarcophagus at Santa Maria Antiqua from about 270 CE includes not only the philosopher as a symbol of Jesus, the “true philosopher,” but also the Good Shepherd and the reclining Jonah in the pose of Endymion (fig. 6). The grouping of these images allows them to be seen, not as

the Greeks had seen them, as isolated representations of truth and philanthropy, but as symbols of Christ. Jonah had long been identified as a type for Christ, so by the juxtaposition of these figures, the Good Shepherd could be seen as more than the caring figure of Greek interpretation; he is the savior figure of the New Testament.

Another visual metaphor for Christ, one that had its source in the New Testament, is that of the lamb as sacrificial figure. The gospel of John quotes Jesus as saying, “I am the good shepherd . . . I lay down my life for the sheep” (10:11 & 15 NRSV). Although he is still the shepherd, he is also the victim. This is a remarkable expansion of roles, as Christ is now seen as both shepherd and sacrificial animal.

Animal sacrifice cannot be accomplished without blood, and the blood of Christ is an important feature of the beliefs about redemption. A reference to the blood of Christ as a means of salvation is found in I Peter 1:19: “You know that you were ransomed . . . not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish” (NRSV). The Jews believed that the blood of an unblemished lamb would atone for their sin and Peter likens that sacrifice to the one made by Jesus on the cross. The purity of the lamb became an important part of Christ’s role as sacrificial figure as he was an innocent victim. Christians represented this type of lamb lying down—the “suffering earthly victim”—rather than standing as the “triumphant heavenly one” (Charbonneau-Lassay 74). A cemetery stone in the crypt of Lucina (catacombs of St. Callixtus), depicts the lamb lying beside an anchor, a hieroglyph for the cross (fig. 7). The lamb lying beside the cross and the lamb crowned

with the cross both appear in catacomb paintings soon after it became acceptable to portray the cross at all in Christian art (after the fourth century).

A sixth century cross of Justin II depicts a lamb standing upright at the intersection of the crossbeams holding the banner of victory (fig. 8). This symbol for Christ is notable because it is an erect, living figure, not a suffering, slain victim and is consistent with early Christians' belief that Christ was a victorious figure, having overcome death. It is apparent that the symbol of the lamb in the place of Christ was not an isolated one, as the Council of Trullo, in 692, decreed that Christ's body, not that of the lamb was to be portrayed, even in paintings:

Now in order that perfection be represented before the eyes of all people, even in paintings, we ordain that from now on Christ our God, the Lamb who took upon Himself the sins of the world, be set up, even in images according to his human character, instead of the ancient Lamb. Through this figure we realize the height of the humiliation of God the Word and are led to remember His life in the flesh, His suffering, and His saving death, and the redemption ensuing from it for the world (Harl 1).

The lamb on the cross or lying beside it alludes to Christ's sacrifice, but avoids showing the blood and pain which might be associated with a human body on the cross. The Council's decree seems to call for a truer portrayal of what a crucifixion might look like. The humiliation suffered by Christ could only be appreciated by the depiction of God, in human form, suffering the ignominious death of a condemned man. Lambs were, perhaps, too subtle a symbol for some.

Because of the sacrificial rituals which had been practiced for centuries by the ancient peoples of the Mediterranean area, it is not surprising to find Christ represented as a lamb. Lambs' blood had been splashed against the temple altars and the fat parts burned in Jewish rituals for centuries. The similarity between this ritual and the crucifixion of Christ, which involved the shedding of blood and the corruption of the body, made the visual symbol of the lamb a particularly apt metaphor for Jesus's sacrifice. Just as those who offered lambs as sacrifices, whether publicly or privately, expected something in return, Christians expected redemption through the sacrifice of the lamb, Jesus Christ. Actual animal sacrifices at the temple had ended with the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, but for Christians, such sacrifices were no longer necessary anyway. They believed that Christ's sacrifice had effected their salvation for all time.

The paradox of the early Christian symbols for Jesus is that he is depicted as both the god and the sacrificial victim. The shepherd image is equivalent to the god who cares and provides for his flock. Moreover, sacrificial ritual dictated that if animal sacrifices were made, they were made *to* the god, not *by* the god. Christians, however, made Jesus both the god and the victim. In a sense, he sacrifices to himself. This is related to the theories of atonement which were the accepted doctrine of the patristic period. Christians believed that Jesus, through his resurrection, had defeated Satan and the powers of sin and death. At the same time, his descent to hell was necessary to ransom the sinners there. This meant Jesus had to become the victim, but that he also served as the sacrificer in order to effect salvation for his followers.

In spite of the common elements of Christian and pagan art, Jas Elsner believes that Christian iconography expressed theological beliefs and understandings in a way that pagan symbols had never done. Ancient mythology rarely pondered the nature of the gods because the myths were not based on scripture. The god's image was simply equated with the god himself (206). By contrast, Christians communicated, through images, their ideas about the truth of their myths, and the salvation which was wrought by their savior, Jesus Christ (210-211). The symbol of the lamb and that of the Good Shepherd stood for more than simple identification to early Christians. They served as vehicles for communicating the Christian understanding of God's nature and that of his incarnation, Jesus Christ, as well as the belief that Jesus' death was a sacrifice which resulted in the salvation of sinners.

Chapter V: *Agnus Dei*

One of the best known sources of Christ's identification as the lamb comes from John the Baptist when he says of Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29 KJV). Not only has this text led to many visual analogies, the text itself has become that of the *Agnus Dei*, the portion of the mass which is spoken or sung at the breaking of the bread (the fraction) in the eucharist. The entire hymn is sung thus:

O Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world:
Have mercy on us.
(sung three times)

The *Agnus Dei* was introduced into the mass by Pope Sergius (687-701), who derived it from an Eastern source (Jones, Wainwright, Arnold 234).³ W. Jardine Grisbrooke says that originally the sentence was repeated as many times as necessary for the breaking of the bread. When the fraction was shortened after the introduction of unleavened bread, three repetitions became standard (3). In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the fraction largely disappeared from the mass, and the hymn came to accompany the kiss of peace instead. This explains the revision of the text so that the final repetition now ends with "grant us peace." In the Anglican Church, the *Agnus Dei* disappeared from the prayer book in the sixteenth century, but was unofficially restored in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is now usually sung at the fraction or as a communion hymn.

The fact that congregants sing the *Agnus Dei* while observing the breaking of the bread reinforces the belief that Christ, as the lamb, was broken—or sacrificed—for humankind.

³ Grisbrooke notes that Sergius himself was Syrian by descent and many Syrian clergy had made their way to Rome after Syria had been overrun by Muslims. Moreover, the word "lamb" refers to both Christ and the consecrated bread in the Eastern liturgy (2-3).

The hymn is a prayer to the lamb asking for forgiveness, specifically forgiveness through the sacrament of the eucharist. Because the text is a three-fold repetition, it lends itself to a tri-partite musical structure. Composers have often used triple meter to emphasize the significance of the three parts, and have repeated the musical setting of the phrase three times, altering only the final “give us your peace.”

Josquin des Prés (1440-1521) wrote two masses based on the *L'homme armé* melody, *Super voces musicales* and *Sexti toni*, each of which has three settings of the *Agnus Dei*. In *Super voces musicales* he presents the second *Agnus* as a three part canon, thus emphasizing not only the three parts of the text, but also the repetition. To complicate matters, he sets the top part in triple meter against duple meter in the lower two parts, creating a feeling of tension. The third *Agnus* of the second mass, *Sexti toni*, states the melody directly and in retrograde simultaneously. The upper four of the six parts sing the tune in two paired canons, one beat apart. The result is a sound which Peter Phillips has compared to Philip Glass, the twentieth-century minimalist composer (4).

Why has Josquin chosen to set the *Agnus Dei* in such a complicated fashion? The fraction, which represents Christ's passion, is an appropriate place to speak, musically, of the pain and suffering of the Lamb of God. The tearing or breaking of the bread and the lamb is reflected in the music which is dissonant and unsettled. Moreover, the sacrificial character of the mass is emphasized by the repetition of the invocation, and in Josquin's case, by the three separate settings of the *Agnus Dei* in each mass.

Another piece of liturgical music whose theme is the sacrificial lamb is the Easter sequence, *Victimae paschali*, written in the eleventh century by Wigbert (Wipo of Burgundy, d.1050?). A sequence is a proper text for the day which is sung between the epistle and the gospel. Susan Benofy says that this sequence for Easter day was derived from a trope, i.e., an addition to or insertion into a liturgical chant. The trope, in this case, became so extensive that it was retained as a separate hymn (4). The opening of the text reads as follows:

Christians, to the Paschal victim offer your thankful praises!
A lamb the sheep redeemeth: Christ, who only is sinless,
Reconcileth sinners to the Father.⁴

Christ is the spotless, unblemished lamb, which makes him worthy to redeem sinners. At the same time he is the Good Shepherd who gives up his life for his sheep. The timing is significant, because it was about this time that Christians began to interpret atonement as a process of “satisfaction.” Humans deserved punishment and death, but Jesus suffered those penalties in their place. Anselm of Canterbury (c.1033-1109) was instrumental in developing this particular model of atonement, which replaced earlier views of Christ as victor and king. According to Anselm, God receives satisfaction for humankind’s debt through the death of Jesus Christ. He does not simply forgive humans, because to do so would imply a relaxing of the law. The *Victimae paschali* reflects the idea that Christ is the lamb who offers this satisfaction to the Father. Just as lambs had been offered to God as a means of obtaining favor in Old Testament times, Christ becomes that lamb to obtain the favor of God towards his people.

⁴ The remainder of the text of the *Victimae paschali* is a dialogue between Mary and the angel at the empty tomb. This textual picture is an echo of the visual one which was typically used to represent the resurrection from about 400 (Grabar 124).

Christians found that “lamb” was a perfect term for expressing their beliefs about redemption. It represented an animal of sacrifice, just as Jesus had given himself as a sacrifice, while at the same time stood for purity and innocence, like the blameless victim of the crucifixion. Part of Anselm’s theory involved a belief that only Jesus was able to make satisfaction to God because he was sinless. As the *Agnus Dei* and the *Victimae paschali* had done musically, we will see that visual images expressed, in physical form, the idea that Jesus was the lamb of God and that he bartered for the souls of humankind.

Chapter VI: The Lamb of Revelation and The Ghent Altarpiece

The lamb as a symbol of atonement was a widespread image in both text and visual art from the days of the early church. Just as the pagan gods of mythology are recognized by specific attributes (such as the trident as an attribute of Poseidon), the lamb became an attribute of Jesus and helped to identify him as a sacrificial figure. From the Good Shepherd, the symbolism of the lamb evolved to a sheep surrounded by other sheep, to the lamb on the cross, and to the lamb shedding his blood into a chalice. The New Testament book of the Revelation of St. John provides some of the richest symbolic language representing Christ. The lamb is the central figure in the apocalypse and is the one found worthy to open the book of the seven seals. From this literature comes much inspiration for the visual imagery which proliferated in the Middle Ages and beyond.

In St. John's Revelation, the lamb is described as having seven horns and seven eyes, the horns representing Christ's kingly power and the eyes representing his omniscience and omnipresence (fig. 9). The gathered assembly (the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders) in John's vision sings a hymn to the Lamb:

You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered
and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;
you have made them to be a kingdom and priests
serving our God
and they will reign on earth.
(Rev. 5:9-10 NRSV)

The hymn celebrates the sacrifice of the lamb and forms the basis for a theory of atonement called the ransom theory. Appearing in the fourth century, the idea of ransom as a means of atonement was based on the writings of Origen (c.185-c. 254) and Irenaeus (c.120-c.203). The concept derives from Mark 10:45, stating that Jesus paid a ransom (with his life) in order to free humans from death. The theory holds that Satan held sinners in bondage until the ransom had been paid. Once Jesus had died on the cross, descended to hell, and then escaped through resurrection, Satan had to give up his prisoners.

This hymn is followed by another, in the same chapter of the Book of Revelation, sung by the four creatures and the elders, but joined by thousands of angels. These words, with which this paper opened, have become familiar in part because of their selection by Charles Jennens as part of the text of *Messiah*:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing! . . .
To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might
forever and ever! . . .
Amen!
(Rev. 5:13-14 NRSV)

Upon the opening of the seals, St. John is granted a further vision of martyrs in white robes under the altar (Rev. 6:9-11). Flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb is the river of the water of life (Rev. 22:1).

The rich visual imagery described by St. John is reproduced in a number of works of art which incorporate martyrs, virgins, saints and angels, as well as the lamb. One of the best known of these works is the vast and complex Ghent Altarpiece painted by Jan and Hubert Van Eyck, completed in 1432. In this work the lamb is the central figure of the interior of the altarpiece and the scheme of redemption the primary message. The iconography has invited reflection and interpretation on the part of many writers who have seen it as a commentary on the New Testament's apocalyptic and atonement literature.

The Ghent Altarpiece comprises a number of paintings assembled into a unified work created for the church of St. Bavo and completed in 1432.⁵ It was the work of two brothers, Hubert and Jan Van Eyck. It is unclear which sections of the work were completed by each artist, but historians believe that the work was completed by Jan after the death of Hubert. Changes in the original design have been detected through x-rays and infrared photography conducted when the work was restored in 1950-51 and subsequently. Some scholars feel that the iconographical scheme was the work of Hubert, as well as a portion of the painting, but it is generally agreed that the painting as we see it today largely bears the stamp of the younger brother, Jan. Jan was paid by Judocus Vydt, who was later elected Mayor of Ghent, for completing the work. Vydt's portrait, along with that of his wife, occupies a prominent position in the lower tier of the closed Altarpiece. In fact, the Altarpiece was created for the Vydt's burial chapel, a setting which is in harmony with the iconographical scheme. The painting was the

⁵ The thematic unity of the work is the subject of some debate. See Elizabeth Dhanens' book, Van Eyck: The Ghent Altarpiece, for a discussion of this issue. This paper will concentrate only on the aspects of the work which relate to the lamb and the redemption wrought by his sacrifice.

subject of a “clumsy” cleaning operation in the sixteenth century, which destroyed the predella, an overpainting by Lancelot Blondeel and Jan van Scorel in 1550, and several relocations, disassembly and reassembly.

The exterior of the Ghent Altarpiece (fig. 10a) depicts the Annunciation in the upper tier, surmounted by lunettes, which are occupied by the prophets, Zechariah and Micah, and the Erythrean and Cumean Sibyls. The lower tier contains the portraits of the donor and his wife, Isabel (or Elizabeth) Borluut, as well as the figures of John the Baptist (patron of Ghent and St. Bavo’s Church) and St. John the Evangelist. The interior of the altarpiece is also divided into two tiers (fig. 10b). The central panel of the lower tier is a scene of saints, virgins, martyrs, and angels approaching the altar upon which stands the lamb of the Book of Revelation. Below the altar is the fountain of life and above the scene, the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove. The wings of the lower tier display more figures approaching the altar, the two panels on the right containing the Holy Hermits and pilgrims, and those on the left containing the Warriors of Christ and the Righteous Judges.⁶ Christ as the Judge occupies the center of the upper tier, flanked by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist. The outermost panels of the wings of the upper tier contain figures of Adam and Eve, covering their nakedness after the fall. Above their heads in half-lunettes are scenes of Cain and Abel. The inner panels of the wings depict angels singing and playing musical instruments. This multifaceted work reflects complex theology; we will limit our discussion to the several appearances of the lamb in this work.

⁶ The panel of the Just Judges was stolen in 1934. It has never been recovered, but is now replaced by a copy.

The central panel of the Altarpiece, the *Adoration of the Lamb*, is usually thought to be a visual representation of the liturgy for All Saints' Day, depicting the company of the blessed approaching the throne of God and the lamb (fig. 10c). The Revelation of St. John describes the heavenly city in which the river of the water of life flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev. 22:1). The Van Eycks chose to represent this setting by placing the lamb in the center of the panel, standing on an altar below which stands a fountain which is inscribed with the words, "HIC EST FONDS AQUE VITE PROCEDENS DI SEDE DEI + AGNI" (This is the fountain of the water of life, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb). Although the central lamb is the focal point of the entire work, other lambs populate the work as well. We will look at each of them in turn, examining their iconographical significance and their contribution to the overarching theme of the Altarpiece.

The unblemished lamb in the *Adoration* stands in a heavenly paradise surrounded by the saints and martyrs who sing his praises as described in the Book of Revelation. They are in the midst of a luxuriant green meadow. The skies are blue and the scene is illuminated by the aureole containing the dove of the Holy Spirit. Palm trees and fruit-bearing trees surround the altar and a splendid city is seen in the distance. The angels kneel in adoration, while the other groups reverence the altar and the fountain of life.

The fact that the central lamb stands upon an altar marks it as a sacrificial animal. This is the place where the Hebrew people had laid and burned their offerings for many centuries. They followed the ancient law given to Moses regarding sacrifice and they did

so in order to receive the favor of God. The laws specified that unblemished lambs were the preferred sacrifice, a rubric which was not limited to the Jews; pagan religions favored spotless lambs as well.

The major difference between the sacrificial lamb of the Ghent Altarpiece and that of a traditional Jewish temple sacrifice is that the painting depicts a living lamb. It is standing upright, representing a living savior. The Christian beliefs about the resurrection are evident in this artistic choice, as well as the desire to illustrate the apocalyptic lamb described by St. John, who is a living creature also. The literal translation of St. John's lamb, however, is not carried out fully, as the creature appears to be a normal two-eyed lamb, not the one with seven eyes and seven horns described in the Book of Revelation. Christians worship a living savior and believe that they will see him in Paradise, which is the setting of the *Adoration of the Lamb*.

When the first Christians abandoned the tradition of sacrificing lambs in the temple, they replaced the custom with the sacrament of the eucharist. They adopted the practice initiated by Jesus at the Last Supper of sharing bread and wine. They believed Jesus to be present in the bread and wine, and by consuming the physical elements, became the beneficiaries of his sacrifice. The eucharistic symbolism of the Altarpiece is depicted both by the stream of blood flowing from the lamb's wound into a chalice and the wounded lamb itself. This symbol was not new to the Van Eycks, having been an emblem of the eucharist in Christian symbolism since at least the sixth century. The lamb and its blood become the bread and wine on the altar, sacrificed daily in the mass

which would have been celebrated on the altar beneath the painting. The lamb served as a visual reminder of the liturgy of the mass and illustrated the meaning of the eucharist by setting it amid the ranks of the faithful departed (those whose lives are celebrated on All Saints Day).

The eucharistic theme is present even when the Altarpiece is closed, as it normally would have been, except on feast days (Huizinga 297). Barbara Lane points out that the mystery of transubstantiation is reflected in the annunciation scenes of Catholic art and literature. This doctrine has its parallel in the moment when Christ was made flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary (41). The closed Altarpiece, with its annunciation scene, invites the worshipper to look forward to the act of receiving Christ's body and blood, but the understanding of how this transformation occurs is still a mystery. The mystery is partially illuminated when the viewer sees the lamb on the altar. Just as the Hebrew people had consumed the lamb on the eve of the Passover in Egypt, Christians consume the flesh of Jesus Christ at the altar.

It is evident, from the ranks of the blessed who kneel or approach the altar and the angels who sing and play music, that the lamb is a creature to be worshipped. The words of the apocalyptic hymn ("To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" ~ Rev. 5:13 NRSV) sung by the assembly of the blessed glorifies the lamb as well as "the one seated on the throne," i.e., God the Father. The location of the painting, above the altar where daily mass was celebrated, invites the worship not only of the painted figures of martyrs, saints, and virgins, but also

the daily worshippers who gather at the altar to share in his sacrifice through the eucharist.

For the citizens of Ghent, and for the donors, the lamb served as an illustration of their understanding of the atonement, which had been articulated in a number of ways since the founding of the church, and all of which could be summed up in the Altarpiece. The view of Christ as the victor in the struggle over sin and death, which had been the most common understanding of atonement in the patristic period, had slowly been replaced by theories which emphasized Christ's death and suffering. Anselm of Canterbury's "satisfaction theory," that is, the belief that Christ paid the debt for man's sin against God with his own life, was prevalent throughout the Middle Ages and lasted well into the Protestant era. The lamb in the Ghent Altarpiece is obviously the victim of suffering, as seen in his wound and flowing blood. Van Eyck not only depicts him as slain, but also marks him as an offering to God by placing him on the altar. This was an important distinction made by Anselm, who was careful to point out that the payment of Jesus Christ was to God, not Satan. The lamb's appearance on the altar is a departure from a literal illustration of Revelation, as the altar is not part of the scriptural scene. Van Eyck was expressing more than one idea with his lamb. He is the triumphant lamb worshipped and praised by throngs of saints and martyrs, but at the same time he offers himself as a sacrifice in order to provide salvation for those around him (both in the painting and at the altar in St. Bavo's Church).

By placing the lamb in the midst of a great company of martyrs, virgins, and saints, Van Eyck has emphasized the substitutionary nature of Christ's sacrifice. He offered his own death as a substitute for the punishment of humankind. This theory, known as the "penal substitution theory," evolved from the satisfaction theory of Anselm (Quinn 51), but differed by holding that the debt paid by Christ was for the punishment deserved by humans, rather than a debt of honor, as Anselm had argued. The penal substitution theory is further illustrated in the Altarpiece by the panels depicting Adam and Eve naked (but with fig leaves, therefore *after* the fall), as well as the murder of Abel by Cain. Eve holds the forbidden fruit, emphasizing the reconciliation of which humankind is in need and which is accomplished by the lamb's sacrifice. This reconciliation is what was hoped for by the donors; the lamb on the altar was part of their vision of salvation which they expected through their participation in the daily eucharist (Lane 143).

Another lamb in the Altarpiece, one hardly noticeable because of its position, size, and color, is found in the half-lunette above the head of Adam. A stone-like *grisaille* figure, it is a representation of the lamb offered by Abel as an acceptable sacrifice to God. Beside Abel, Cain is seen with his sheaf of wheat, the offering which was rejected by God, leading to the murder of Abel (depicted in the half-lunette above Eve's head). Here again, we see the sin of humankind which necessitated the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. Van Eyck, by choosing to incorporate the lamb offered by Abel, has underscored the acceptability of Christ's sacrifice to God: he accepted the sacrifice of the lamb by Abel and he accepts the sacrifice of Christ—the main theme of the central panel—for the sin of humankind.

When the Altarpiece is closed, we find a lamb in the arms of John the Baptist, another *grisaille* statue-like figure, in the lower tier. John points to the lamb in his familiar pose associated with the words, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29 RSV), spoken when John identified Jesus at his baptism. This lamb forms part of an overarching motif of prophecy or looking forward, as in the liturgical season of Advent. The entire closed Altarpiece looks toward something yet to come, from the prophecies of Zechariah and Micah in the lunettes to the annunciation by the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary in the upper tier. Even John the Baptist’s corresponding figure, that of John the Evangelist, looks ahead to the final victory as described in the Book of Revelation.⁷ The lamb carried by John the Baptist, besides serving as his attribute, is merely the forerunner of the sacrificial lamb which one finds upon opening the panels of the Altarpiece. John asks the disciples to “behold the lamb,” but only when we see the lamb on the altar do we mentally finish the sentence, “who takes away the sin of the world.”

A series of lambs may also be found in the floor tiles at the feet of the angels who are singing and playing instruments in the upper tier of the opened Altarpiece. For all other floors in the Altarpiece, Van Eyck has chosen plain, unadorned floor tiles. Why does he choose to ornament the floor beneath the angels? It would not have been unusual to have found the lamb rendered on floor tiles in Van Eyck’s time. The symbol had become so common that it was found frequently in church ornamentation. Here, however, he sets it

⁷ Modern scholars no longer believe John the Evangelist (the gospel writer) to be the same John who is the author of Revelation, but during Van Eyck’s time, the two were generally thought to be the same.

apart by placing it under the angels where it serves a musical purpose. The hymn of the angels in St. John's Revelation is sung to the lamb and honors him as being worthy to redeem "saints from every tribe and language and people and nation." The floor here is an echo of that hymnic theme: the lamb who was slain is worthy to ransom all those saints in the scene below.

Finally, we see among the virgins to the right of the lamb on the altar in the central panel, St. Agnes, identified by the lamb she carries as a symbol of her purity. Biblically, the lamb was associated with purity and for this reason was one of the sacrifices demanded by God of the people of Israel. Legend has it that Agnes was martyred after refusing to sacrifice to pagan gods and submit to marriage. She had vowed to consecrate herself to Christ. She was reportedly thrown into a brothel, but miraculously remained untouched by men. In the *Adoration of the Lamb* panel, the virgins carry palms to mark them as martyrs, but interestingly, St. Agnes' palm seems to spring from the very head of the lamb she carries. Although she herself is a martyr, so is her lamb. She stands closest of all the virgins to the altar and one of the rays emanating from the dove, representing the Holy Spirit, strikes her head. Whether Van Eyck intended to set her apart from the other virgins is unclear, but by marking her with a ray, one can imagine that he saw the connection between this young martyr whose name in Latin, *Agnus*, means "lamb"⁸ and the Lamb of God whose sacrifice is the theme of the Altarpiece.

The iconography of the Ghent Altarpiece is highly complex and according to Elizabeth Dhanens is drawn from the Bible, works of the Church Fathers, and of classical antiquity

⁸ Her name means "chaste" in Greek.

(89). One must also remember that earlier works of art illustrated the great liturgy of All Saints Day, which had been in existence since 835. All of these, plus the Van Eycks' own understanding of the plan of redemption must have contributed to the design of the work. Many volumes have been written on the symbolism of the Altarpiece and taken together the iconography represents a sophisticated understanding of atonement. No symbol in the vast work, however, carries more significance than that of the lamb, whether the central lamb on the altar, glorified and adored by ranks of angels and saints, or the lambs of Abel, John the Baptist, and St. Agnes, whose own lives and actions point to that of the Lamb of God.

Chapter VII The Lamb of God in the Isenheim Altarpiece

Just as John the Baptist played a significant role in the Ghent Altarpiece, another prominent John the Baptist appears in an altarpiece created less than a century later by Matthias Grünewald. The Isenheim Altarpiece, like Van Eyck's, depicts John the Baptist pointing (figuratively and literally) to the salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ through his sacrifice. He is accompanied by a lamb, his attribute, wounded and shedding blood into a chalice, although it carries the banner of victory. An examination of Grünewald's John the Baptist and lamb will illuminate his understanding of the whole scheme of salvation and allow us to see the lamb as a key in the articulation of atonement theology.

The Isenheim Altarpiece was painted between 1512 and 1515 for the church of an Antonite monastery and hospital at Isenheim. It would have been viewed daily by the monks of the order, but it is known that the patients of the hospital were also brought before the work (Mellinkoff 3), although the frequency of such visits is not known. According to Franziska Sarwey, tradition has it that the sick were often cured after being brought to view the Altarpiece (Richter 57). Many of these patients suffered with a terrible disfiguring disease known as St. Anthony's fire. Their bodies were covered with lesions, which appeared similar to the wounds of Jesus as portrayed by Grünewald. The Altarpiece may have provided them with hope for healing, just as Christ overcame his wounds (and death) through the resurrection, another important scene of the Altarpiece.⁹

⁹ St. Anthony, the patron of the order, was also credited with being able to cure this disease.

A complex polyptych, the Altarpiece may be viewed with several stages of open and closed wings; these depict scenes from the life of Christ, as well as images of saints. The crucifixion is the subject of the Altarpiece in its closed position. Fixed side wings surrounding this scene depict St. Antony and St. Sebastian. When the wings are opened, we see the scene of the Annunciation, the Nativity, and the Resurrection. The predella, which can be seen with the Altarpiece in its first and second stages, contains the entombment of Christ. A third stage depicts scenes from the life of St. Antony surrounding a carved shrine of St. Antony over a carved predella. We will concentrate here on the crucifixion scene which can be viewed with the Altarpiece in its completely closed position.¹⁰

The crucifixion of Christ is represented by Grünewald in a strikingly realistic and gruesome manner (fig. 11a). The body of Christ is covered with the wounds of his ordeal, which are already festering, and blood gushes from his speared side. His nailed hands are twisted in agony, and his head sags to his right in resignation. The scale of Christ's body removes him from the company of ordinary humans. Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as Mary Magdalene and the apostle John, grieve beside the cross in an incredible scene of sorrow. The figures on the Lord's left, however, those of John the Baptist and the lamb, though seemingly part of the scene, are represented in unemotional poses which separate them from the suffering portrayed by the others (fig. 11b).

Gottfried Richter calls these two "spirit-figures," raising the scene to the level of a

¹⁰ The Altarpiece is currently disassembled in the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar. The three views of the Altarpiece are displayed in a stationary presentation in order to preserve the large wooden panels (Mellinkoff 3).

spiritual event (21). They are present to provide additional layers of meanings to the scene apart from the mere death of a condemned man.

It was John the Baptist who proclaimed the arrival of Jesus as the Messiah, saying “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29 RSV). Here he points to Jesus as if to echo that statement, but instead we see his words, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30 NRSV). He indicates that in spite of the tragic scene before him, Jesus is triumphant: something has been *accomplished* by this death. The lamb stands at John’s feet, mirroring his gesture, as if in explanation of that enigma.

Did the second half of John’s statement refer to himself or to humankind in general? He stands in this scene incongruously, since his execution by beheading had taken place before the crucifixion of Christ. He had decreased in stature, suffering an ignoble death, but then so had Christ, and every human being. How does John, therefore, account for the increase of which he speaks? The lamb is the key to the mystery. Jesus did not simply die; he was a sacrifice, as the lamb is a sacrificial creature. He dies, but through his death, others are redeemed. In this way, Grünewald gives visual substance to the satisfaction theory of atonement. Christ pays the debt for sinful man, as symbolized by the lamb beside the cross. But the lamb provides double symbolism because of the blood flowing from its wound, mirroring the blood flowing from Jesus’ side. The blood is caught in a chalice beneath the lamb, recalling the eucharist, itself a symbol of Jesus’s sacrifice. The flesh and blood of the lamb are the eucharistic elements which give life to believers, especially to those believers who were afflicted and being cared for in the

Antonite hospital. Without the lamb we see merely a scene of tragedy; with the lamb we see the increase of which John the Baptist speaks.

John the Baptist played a key role in the beginning of Jesus' ministry, baptizing him in the Jordan River and proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. He was seen by many as the reincarnation of Elijah, who did not suffer a physical death, and whose return had been promised in Old Testament (Mal. 4:5-6) at the time of the final judgment.

Isaiah's prophecy, "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'" (Is. 40:3), was fulfilled, in the view of John the Baptist's own followers, as well as those of Jesus, by the appearance of this prophet who dressed as Elijah did and spoke of one greater than he who was to follow.

John the Baptist is seen both as a fulfillment of prophecy (the return of Elijah) and as a prophet in his own right (proclaiming that the kingdom of God is coming). Likewise, in the Isenheim Altarpiece, John represents both prophecy and the fulfillment of it. His words, "He must increase but I must decrease" explain to his followers what must happen in order for the kingdom of God to be fulfilled, and his presence and gesture at the crucifixion scene announce that this is exactly what has happened. But again, the lamb stands by to attest that the kingdom of God did not end with the crucifixion. It simply marked the sacrifice which was necessary for believers to share in the kingdom.

The lamb also carries a staff with a cross-piece, which is a symbol of victory. We do not see the living Christ on the cross which was symbolic of the *Christus Victor* theology, but we are reminded that he will return to life by the victorious, living lamb. In the Book of

Revelation the lamb sits on the throne in the New Jerusalem, where he reigns with God the Father (Rev. 22:1). The apostle Paul writes, “Death has been swallowed up in victory” and God “gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I. Cor. 15:54-57 NRSV). The lamb carrying the staff of victory is the symbol of life’s triumph over death.

We will touch only briefly on another of the panels in this great Altarpiece. When the altar is opened, the center panel reveals (on the right half) a garden scene with the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus in front of a broad landscape (fig. 11c). A close inspection of the hillside behind the baby’s head reveals the scene of shepherds keeping watch over their sheep. Descending from the cloud overhead are the angels bringing the message of the nativity to the shepherds. It is interesting to note that the sheep grazing on the hillside are directly above the head of the infant Jesus, and in fact, brush against his nimbus. They would be hardly noticeable if one were not examining closely the head of the baby, but their placement imparts an additional meaning to the scene. By their close association with the baby, they mark a foreshadowing of the fate that awaits him. He will become as they are, a creature of sacrifice. This is underscored by the other aspects of the painting that look toward the crucifixion, namely the fact that, as noted by Gottfried Richter, the swaddling clothes in which the baby is wrapped are the ragged loincloth from the crucifixion scene (38), and the predella, which is visible with the Altarpiece in its first two stages, is a depiction of the entombment (28). When viewing the nativity scene, one is already confronted with the death that will be the subject of the outer panels of the Altarpiece.

Grünewald incorporates a lamb into the Altarpiece's outer panel and sheep into its inner panel in order to provide meaning for Jesus's life and death. The paintings would be complete without these animals, but Grünewald's statement about atonement would be lacking. Without them we would have a beautiful mother and child and a gruesome crucifixion, but with them we see the meaning behind both the birth and the death.

Chapter VIII: The Lamb in Handel's *Messiah*

Although Christian art might be able to represent certain ideas about atonement, the songs of the church could do this much more directly by citing biblical texts and by juxtaposing selected verses of scripture. The great Christian thinkers used scripture to validate their theological and doctrinal positions, and poets and musicians did the same. Because both church fathers and artists drew upon the same scriptures, we find all of the central ideas about atonement represented in church music.

This is certainly true of Georg Friderich Handel's oratorio, *Messiah*, whose text was drawn entirely from the bible by the librettist, Charles Jennens. Incorporating the scriptures which had been used by Irenaeus, Origen, Anselm, Abelard, Aquinas, and others, the oratorio speaks of redemption in a number of different ways, all of which had enjoyed popularity at various times in the church's history, and many of which had been replaced by new ideas. The metaphor of the lamb or the shepherd is employed repeatedly to illustrate these various understandings of atonement. In spite of the diversity of interpretations which can be seen in the individual movements, Jennens succeeds in presenting a unified outline of the scheme of humankind's salvation. From the Good Shepherd to the apocalyptic lamb, we will examine each of the movements which refer to the lamb or the shepherd, observing how the pastoral figure contributes to an understanding of redemption by the Messiah. We will also look at how Handel uses musical language to underscore each interpretation of Christ and his saving work.

The alto-soprano¹¹ aria, “He Shall Feed His Flock,” provides the familiar Good Shepherd image for Christ:

He shall feed his flock like a shepherd:
 And he shall gather the lambs with his arm,
 And carry them in his bosom,
 And gently lead those that are with young.

Come unto him, all ye that labour,
 That are heavy laden,
 And he will give you rest.
 Take his yoke upon you,
 And learn of him;
 For he is meek and lowly of heart:
 And ye shall find rest unto your souls.

The first part of this aria, from Isaiah 40:11, suggests that God’s people are sheep and he is the caregiver who feeds them and provides safety. They are gathered, carried, and led by the shepherd. The pastoral image is reinforced by the gentle, rocking motion of 12/8 meter. Legato phrases, a slow tempo, and step-wise melodic movement contribute to the comforting nature of the aria and provide the listener with a supportive musical interpretation of the text.

The second half of the aria, from Matthew 11:28-29, invites “all ye that labor” to come to him and find rest. The shepherd metaphor is missing from this passage, but it is obvious, through the grouping of the two passages, that Jennens saw a connection between Isaiah and Matthew. The promise in Matthew is for rest, not unlike the care and safety promised by the shepherd. In both passages, a reward is promised to God’s people, and only in Matthew is something asked in return—to take the yoke. The yoke is usually

¹¹ Handel provided two versions of the aria, one for alto and soprano, sequentially, and one for soprano only.

thought to be a metaphor for obedience to the Jewish law (Aune 1878). By obedience to the law, the people of Israel expected protection from God, a condition which Isaiah would likely have equated with shepherding. Jennens, however, by including it in this work, saw it as a prophecy of Jesus Christ's relationship with his followers.

The image of the shepherd as a caring figure who will provide rest and safety is compatible with the idea that Jesus serves as an example of how one should live his or her life. This idea represents one facet of a group of theories known as exemplar theories. Such theories argue that Christ's example of love and obedience is an inspiration to individuals to repent, to live as Christ did, and to love others more fully. Philip Quinn proposes that those who do not believe in the divinity of Christ are partial to these theories because they allow one to see Christ as simply an extraordinary human being (52). The scripture quoted in this aria does not require a belief in redemption or salvation, although the rest and safety promised can be seen as a reward of eternal life, and therefore loosely associated with the idea of atonement. Peter Abelard (1079-1142) is closely identified with exemplar theories, asserting that Jesus's laying down of his life for others was the supreme example of love. By following this example, humans could obtain forgiveness and reconciliation (Marenbom 2).

The second reference to Christ as the lamb occurs at the beginning of Part II of *Messiah*. Here we find John the Baptist's words, "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29 RSV). These words were spoken by the Baptist when Jesus came to him to be baptized in the Jordan River. They traditionally mark the beginning of

Jesus's ministry, and are placed in this position in *Messiah* for the same purpose: Part II outlines Jesus's work on earth, his passion, death, and resurrection. A few verses later (vv. 35-36), John uses these words again, this time to identify Jesus to his potential disciples. In both passages, however, the intent is the same: to recognize Jesus as a saving figure.

Handel sets this text in a powerful way by scoring it for full chorus and by using a slow tempo and over-dotted rhythms. The imitative parts are generally sung *forte*, although Handel did not indicate a dynamic marking for this movement. The octave leap at the entrance of each voice contributes to the feeling of proclamation and the entire opening phrase for each voice part is not unlike a fanfare, i.e., an announcement of something or someone of importance. The minor key, however, contrasts with the salutary setting, providing a sense of foreboding: this figure is not simply an important person, but a tragic hero who will ultimately die. Lambs are sacrificial creatures, and by announcing Jesus as the Lamb of God, his death is already a foregone conclusion.

That Jesus will "take away the sin of the world" is linked with his position as the Lamb of God. He can only remove sin because of his sacrificial nature, but the precise way in which this happens is not specified in this passage. So how did Jennens interpret this passage in the overall scheme of redemption which *Messiah* sets forth? By including this passage which marks the beginning of Jesus's ministry, he is emphasizing the importance of Jesus's life as well as his death. The gospel writer places these words of John the Baptist in the present tense, not the future tense. Jesus *is* taking away the sin of the

world—now, through his work among humankind. This is a subtle point, but one which was considered by Irenaeus (c.130 – c.200) who expressed one of the earliest ideas about atonement. He described the atonement as the doctrine of “recapitulation.” Based on St. Paul’s view that sin entered the world through Adam, it sees Christ as the new Adam who recapitulates the entire human race. At each stage of his human life, he reversed, through his divine nature, the effects of Adam’s sin. According to Irenaeus’s theory, when Adam disobeyed God he brought sin into the world, but Christ’s life of obedience “recapitulated” the disobedience and annulled it. Christ’s entire life is the process of victorious conflict, culminating in his death. Jennens, whether intentionally or not, incorporates this idea of atonement into *Messiah* by choosing John’s words, and by placing them in this context. During Handel’s time, the generally accepted theological understanding of atonement was not the one expressed by Irenaeus; therefore, it is doubtful that this theory was on the mind of Jennens. He most likely included them as a part of his general understanding of Christ’s sacrificial nature, which was compatible with the Anselmian view of atonement widely held since the eleventh century (cf. p. 25, 34).

Isaiah’s long “suffering servant” song in chapters 52 and 53 is quoted extensively in *Messiah*. Part II contains five movements drawn from this passage, including the chorus, “All we like sheep have gone astray.” This chorus returns to the shepherd image by referring to humans as errant sheep, requiring, one assumes, a shepherd to lead them:

All we like sheep have gone astray;
 We have turned ev’ryone to his own way;
 And the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The verse from which this chorus is drawn (Isaiah 53:6) does not specifically mention the shepherd, but the servant song as a whole alludes to a Messianic figure, at least as it is used here by Jennens. By considering the entire passage, it is possible to infer that this figure represents the shepherd who is needed by the wandering sheep. The final phrase of the chorus, in which Isaiah announces that “the iniquity of us all” has been “laid on him” by the Lord is significant in that it brings to mind the ritual of the scapegoat practiced by the Hebrew people. In this tradition, once each year the sins of the people were symbolically laid upon the head of a goat, who was then turned out into the wilderness to figuratively take away the sin of the people. This ritual was observed on the Day of Atonement, known to us as Yom Kippur. The goat is not actually mentioned here, but the idea of the sins of the people being transferred to another evokes the atonement ritual.

Handel alters his treatment of the text dramatically when he reaches this reference to the transfer of sin. From an allegro opening with lengthy sixteenth-note melismatic passages and imitative parts, highly descriptive of the wandering sheep, he suddenly introduces an adagio tempo, longer note values, and homophonic parts. The tone turns serious when the words speak of the removal of sin. Handel, it seems, wished to underscore the significance of Christ taking upon himself the sins of all.

The final reference to the lamb in *Messiah* comes in Part III when we hear the dramatic and triumphant chorus, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain.” Here is the apocalyptic

lamb so eloquently described in St. John's Revelation, as being the one worthy to open the book of the seven seals (Rev. 5:9). The text is part of a series of hymns sung by angels, elders, and many heavenly creatures, whom the writer describes as "myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice" (Rev. 5:11-12 NRSV):

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,
And hath redeemed us to God by his blood,
To receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength,
And honour, and glory, and blessing. (Rev. 5:12)

Just as the Book of Revelation provides the final words of the New Testament, Jennens chose this passage for the final chorus of the oratorio, the culmination of all the prophecies, narratives, and hymns which make up the work. The lamb, i.e., Jesus, after all his earthly work, death, resurrection, and ascension described in earlier movements, is now seated on a throne and presiding over the heavenly beings. The Book of Revelation refers to Christ as the lamb twenty-eight times, highlighting his sacrificial role (Aune 2316). This chorus, in particular, emphasizes that role by not only naming him Lamb, but also speaking of his death and his redeeming work. These acts are designated as those which make him worthy to receive the many named rewards: power, riches, wisdom, strength, etc. Redemption is effected through his blood, an idea consistent with satisfaction and penal substitution models of atonement. He sheds his blood as a substitute for the blood of his followers. The Book of Revelation is full of references to punishment which is or will be meted out to sinners. The lamb, however, has redeemed "us," referring to those who sing the hymn, i.e., saints, elders, angels, and the four

evangelists.¹² These beings, in turn, sing a hymn of praise to the one who has saved them from the punishment reserved for sinners.

Handel's setting is a triumphant one, accompanied by trumpets and sung with a full chorus in homophonic style. In this majestic chorus, he gives us the idea of the "myriads and myriads and thousands of thousands" who sing the hymn. The length of the list of blessings due to the lamb is emphasized by the repetitious rhythm, which is eighth note – eighth note, for each item in the list. Ending with the quarter note – quarter note word, "blessing," Handel begins anew with a powerful fugue for the next "blessing" which begins the hymn sung by "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them" (Rev. 5:13 NRSV):

Blessing and honour, glory, and pow'r be unto him
That sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb
Forever and ever. Amen. (from Rev. 5:13-14)

The praises are offered "unto him that sitteth upon the throne" and "unto the Lamb." This is a recognition of the lamb as the second person of the Trinity and raises him to an exalted status by equating his praises to those offered to God. The "Amen," from verse fourteen, serves not only as a concurrence with the acclamations of these verses, but also as the conclusion of the oratorio. The entire scheme of redemption proclaimed in *Messiah's* text is pronounced true in a majestic fugue, symbolic of the many voices who join in praising the lamb. Jennens' selection of this text for the final movement, and Handel's fugal setting of the "Amen" represent humanity's response to the powerful words and works of redemption presented in the oratorio.

¹² The evangelists (gospel writers) are referred to as the four living creatures.

The passages in this work which refer to the lamb illuminate not only Jennens' own understanding of atonement, but also ideas which had been accepted much earlier in the history of the church. Some, like the *Christus Victor* theory and the recapitulation theory, had fallen out of favor or been replaced by other theories, such as the satisfaction theory or penal substitution theory, but because they drew on the scriptures for their authority, the quotation of those scriptures recalls the previous theologies. Perhaps this is one reason why *Messiah* has continued to enjoy popularity among Christians for two and a half centuries. It conveys a number of different ideas about salvation, offering many listeners something with which to identify.

Chapter IX: The Lamb in Christian Hymns

Hymns have been sung in the church from its earliest days. Colossians 3:16 tells us that Christians sang “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” Until the Protestant era, most music for church congregations drew upon scripture for texts, with an emphasis on metrical versions of the psalms and other selections of scripture serving liturgical purposes, such as canticles for the monastic hours. Only in the last three hundred years have non-scriptural hymns in English become common. Hymns which are recognizable to a modern congregation are largely from this era.

As non-scriptural hymns entered the repertoire of the church, they reflected much of what was already commonplace in visual art. Like the great Altarpieces of Jan Van Eyck and Matthias Grünewald, the lamb was a favorite image in hymnody, drawing upon scriptural references to the lamb (like Van Eyck’s depiction of specific scenes from the Book of Revelation) as well as poetic metaphors which use the lamb as a symbol of redemptive sacrifice and the Good Shepherd as a symbol of a caring, protective God.

Hymns have greatly influenced the belief systems of Christians. What Christians know about theology is often learned from hymns. John Mason Neale (1818-1866) complained that hymns had nearly replaced the Bible, leading to the dictum in orthodox and reformed churches that hymn writers return to the scriptures for their texts. R. W. Dale, when introducing a new hymnal to his congregation in the nineteenth century, said, “Let me write the hymns and I care not who writes the theology” (Adey 1). Hymn writers used the vehicle for asserting their own theological views, and for this reason, we find many

different ideas being offered about the lamb, often during the same era and sometimes within the same hymn. What follows is an examination of some of the most common interpretations of the lamb in hymnody. Because so many different views of the lamb and the shepherd are present concurrently, they will not be considered chronologically. We will instead look at the major themes of the lamb found in hymns, with an emphasis on the hymns of the late seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries.

One of the oldest, but most popular ideas which appears in hymns throughout the history of congregational singing is the *Christus Victor* theory, the belief that Jesus conquered Satan, sin, and death by his crucifixion and resurrection. Matthew Bridges (1800-94) provided a stirring hymn which celebrates this understanding of Jesus's role in history, in eternity, and in the salvation of humans' souls:

Crown him with many crowns,
The Lamb upon his throne;
Hark, how the heavenly anthem drowns
All music but its own:
Awake, my soul, and sing
Of him who died for thee,
And hail him as thy matchless King
Through all eternity. (Nutter 99)

The Lamb is the king who wears a crown, but also the one who “died for thee,” giving worshippers the eternal life necessary to hail him “through all eternity.” We see references to Revelation with the Lamb upon a throne, but the words, “died for thee” depart from the usual scene of saints and martyrs praising the lamb. Those words recall the sacrificial nature of the lamb, and add another layer of meaning to the crowned figure. They refer to Christ's sacrifice as a benefit for the individual (“for thee”), who is

personally drawn into the hymn by the addressing of the soul: “Awake *my* soul and sing.” The hymn is usually sung to the tune, *Diademata*, specifically written for this text by Sir George Job Elvey (1816-93). The march-like tune underscores the *Christus Victor* text, giving a stately feel to the regal language and avoiding emotion or sentimentality of any kind.

Bridges’ hymn is one of many which draws upon the Book of Revelation for its inspiration. As in Handel’s “Worthy is the Lamb,” numerous hymns celebrate the lamb who is worshipped by a great company of heavenly beings. The verses of Revelation 5:11-13 appear again and again, rearranged into metrical settings by which hymn writers were bound. Isaac Watts (1674-1748), considered by many to be the first important writer of hymns in English, paraphrased the passage, albeit in language which has lost some of its majesty and awe through its versification:

Come, let us join our cheerful songs
With angels round the throne;
Ten thousand thousand are their tongues,
But all their joys are one.

“Worthy the Lamb that died,” they cry,
“To be exalted thus!”
“Worthy the Lamb!” our lips reply,
“For he was slain for us.”

Jesus is worthy to receive
Honour and power divine;
And blessings more than we can give
Be, Lord, for ever thine.

Let all creation join in one
To bless the sacred name
Of him that sits upon the throne,
And to adore the Lamb. (Hymns 221)

This is the same scriptural passage which provided inspiration for the Ghent Altarpiece, with the lamb in the center of adoring throngs of saints and martyrs. It serves as a fitting text for a hymn of praise which will be sung by worshippers in a liturgy, giving them the opportunity to add their own voices to those of the saints. At the same time, they can assert their own redemption by claiming his death and its benefits for themselves: “For he was slain for us.”¹³ Just as the worshippers at the Ghent altar took part in the sacrifice of Christ (through the eucharist) beneath the painting depicting the sacrificial lamb, so the worshippers who sing this hymn add their voices (“Come let *us* join *our* cheerful songs) to those described in the text from Revelation (“with angels round the throne”).

The tune associated with Watts’s hymn, *Nativity*, by H. Lahee (1826-1912), in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* is, unfortunately, a trite composition which contributes nothing to the image of saints surrounding the throne of the lamb with songs of praise, as described in the Book of Revelation. In the same way that Watts’s verse removes some of the awe of the scene, Lahee’s music diminishes the praise of the angels, beasts and elders through its repetition and predictable phrases.

Watts makes use of Revelation’s fifth chapter once again at the conclusion of another hymn, “Nature with open volume stands,” but here we also see an example of the concentration on the wounds of Christ, his suffering, and death, a characteristic of the

¹³ Watts uses the scriptural name of “lamb” in this hymn, but then in verse three, reverts to the name “Jesus.” Where Revelation says that the lamb is worthy to receive power and wealth, etc., Watts bestows these blessings on Jesus. He sees the two as one and the same. Few would argue the validity of this interpretation, but the writer of Revelation did not call one by the other’s name.

piety and theology of the Medieval church, which lasted well into the Protestant era

(Aulen 113):

Nature with open volume stands
To spread her Maker's praise abroad
And every labour of his hands
Shows something worthy of a God.

But in the grace that rescued man
His brightest form of glory shines;
Here, on the cross 'tis fairest drawn
In precious blood and crimson lines. . .

Oh, the sweet wonders of that cross
Where God the Saviour loved and died!
Her noblest life my spirit draws
From his dear wounds and bleeding side.

I would for ever speak his Name
In sounds to mortal ears unknown,
With angels join to praise the Lamb,
And worship at his Father's throne! (Watson 133)

The reference to the Lamb appears only at the end of this hymn of praise offered for the rescue of man. The purpose of the hymn is to point out that God's greatest achievement was in his grace that saved humans. Specifically this grace involves the cross, and Watts uses graphic language to speak of the death suffered there by "God the Saviour." In spite of the "dear wounds and bleeding side" and the "precious blood and crimson lines," Watts appends a triumphal verse, reminding the worshipper that the lamb is ultimately the victor and we must join in his eternal praise. The wounds and blood are given meaning by the scene which Watts paints of the lamb being worshipped by angels. He is now worshipped at his Father's throne, but he is still the lamb—the creature whose death obtains a gift from God.

This hymn illustrates Watts's occasional departure from the predisposition toward a descriptive language of suffering, and his inclination to provide an image of a triumphant Savior. This was in accord with the thinking of Martin Luther, who had re-asserted the *Christus Victor* theory, that is, that God himself acted to save humankind, defeating the powers of sin, death, and the devil. Luther emphasized the importance of the incarnation, stating that Christ as man could not possibly make an atoning offering to God. Only God in Christ could defeat the devil (Aulen 124). As fellow protestants, perhaps Luther and Watts shared similar views.

Luther's hymn, "Out of the depths, I cry to thee" makes reference to several aspects of his protestant views:

Out of the depths I cry to thee,
 Lord God! O hear my prayer!
 Incline a gracious ear to me,
 And bid me not despair:
 If thou rememberest each misdeed,
 If each should have its rightful meed,
 Lord, who shall stand before thee?

'Tis through thy love alone we gain
 The pardon of our sin;
 The strictest life is but in vain,
 Our works can nothing win;
 That none should boast himself of aught,
 But own in fear thy grace hath wrought
 What in him seemeth righteous.

Though great our sins and sore our wounds,
 And deep and dark our fall,
 His helping mercy hath no bounds,
 His love surpasseth all:
 Our trusty loving Shepherd, he
 Who shall at last set Israel free
 From all their sin and sorrow. (Watson 69-70)

As this hymn was written shortly after Luther's appearance at the Diet of Worms (in 1521), it is significant that he carefully inserts, in verse two, the words, "our works can nothing win," the foundation of his theology. Watson points out that Luther gives this paraphrase of Psalm 130 "a particularly Protestant interpretation," by stressing the love of God as the quality that brings forgiveness of sin and freedom from sorrow (70). In the opening words, "out of the depths, I cry to thee," Luther may have been making a vague reference to the Harrowing of Hell, an important part of the *Christus Victor* understanding of atonement. Part of this theory holds that Christ descended to hell to defeat Satan and to free the imprisoned souls there. Luther alludes to this idea at the outset by crying out from "the depths"—a euphemism for hell, but the final verse refers to the shepherd who grants pardon through his love. This "trusty loving Shepherd" seems to be at odds with the militaristic figure who fights against Satan, and much more attuned to the God whose "helping mercy hath no bounds." Luther assigns the Good Shepherd role to God, not simply as a guiding, caring figure, but as the savior who removes Israel's sin.

Just as Jesus was commonly referred to as the shepherd, many hymns simply use the lamb as another name for Jesus without reference to his saving work. The hymn, "See amid the winter's snow," by Edward Caswall (1814-78), calls Jesus the "tender Lamb" but avoids speaking of the significance of that appellation.

See amid the winter's snow,
 Born for us on earth below,
 See the tender Lamb appears,
 Promised from eternal years,

*Hail thou ever blessed morn!
 Hail redemption's happy dawn!
 Sing through all Jerusalem:
 Christ is born in Bethlehem!* (Watson 293)

Only the refrain brings the idea of salvation into the text by adding “Hail, thou ever blessed morn! Hail, redemption’s happy dawn!” The birth of Jesus is hailed as the redeeming event, and the adjective, “tender,” emphasizes his infancy.

The prayer in verse six is addressed to the child and describes him as “meek and mild,” requesting that he “teach us to resemble [him], in [his] sweet humility.”

Teach, O teach us, holy Child,
 By thy face so meek and mild,
 Teach us to resemble thee,
 In thy sweet humility (294).

This hymn focuses on the lamb as symbol of purity and innocence, rather than on the death that will inevitably come. It should be noted that the tender lamb is the one “promised from eternal years.” Watson believes there is a connection to Isaiah’s prophecy, “speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem,” in the refrain, “Sing through all Jerusalem: Christ is born in Bethlehem!” (293).

The tune, *Oxford*, by John Goss (1800-80), is a masterful replication of the contrasting text of verse and refrain sections. A gentle, step-wise melody with a limited range for the verse gives way to a bell-like “Hail” in the refrain. The two acclamations, one to the

“blessed morn” and the other to “redemption’s happy dawn” are identical, stressing both the blessing of the birth and what it will eventually achieve.

In a similar fashion, another hymn, “Hark! A Thrilling Voice is Sounding,” translated by Caswall, but written by a pupil of St. Ambrose (340-97), hails the lamb as the fulfillment of prophecy and calls him by that name at his birth. Death is not part of the equation.

Lo, the Lamb, so long expected,
Comes with pardon down from heaven;
Let us haste, with tears of sorrow,
One and all to be forgiven. (Hymns 47)

The lamb brings pardon and it appears that nothing other than tears of sorrow are required to receive forgiveness. The lamb is merely a name for the one who brings pardon, not a description of sacrifice and atonement.

Like Caswall, Philip Doddridge (1702-51) used the lamb as a symbol of purity and innocence in his hymn, “See Israel’s gentle shepherd stand,” except that here the lambs are the children who came to Jesus:

See Israel’s gentle shepherd stand
With all-engaging charms;
Hark how he calls the tender lambs,
And folds them in his arms!

Permit them to approach, he cries,
Nor scorn their humble name;
For ‘twas to bless such souls as these
The Lord of Angels came. (Watson 158)

These words recall the story of the disciples attempting to turn the children away, but Jesus welcoming them. Doddridge paints this scene as shepherd caring for his lambs, specifically the shepherd of Israel, invoking the ancient symbolism of a shepherd as a king or leader who protects his people.

Charles Wesley (1707-88) also took up the theme of children as innocent creatures, but in his hymn, “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild” he emphasizes the similarity between Jesus’s gentle nature and the simplicity of children:

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
 Look upon a little child,
 Pity my simplicity,
 Suffer me to come to thee . . .

Lamb of God, I look to thee;
 Thou shalt my example be:
 Thou art gentle, meek, and mild;
 Thou wast once a little child . . .

Loving Jesu, gentle Lamb,
 In thy gracious hands I am:
 Make me, Saviour, what thou art;
 Live thyself within my heart. (Watson 180)

The Lamb of God is Jesus, but this is a far cry from the sacrificial creature who takes away the sin of the world. He is gentle, meek, and mild, and serves as an example to children, who wish to be pitied and guided. This sentimental language does not reflect the usual adult interpretation of the lamb as a creature who suffers death as a substitute for sinful humans. Sir John Stainer’s tune for this hymn, *Simplicity*, would be easily accessible to children, with its narrow range and repetitious phrases. It is a hymn for

children, describing Christ's child-like attributes, and set to a tune which reflects the gentle nature of the lamb.

As a striking contrast to the tender lamb, who welcomes children because of his gentle nature, the lamb of Revelation 7, which serves as inspiration for many evangelical hymns, provides the blood that cleanses sinners. The idea that the saved have been washed in the blood of the lamb is a common theme, especially in the eighteenth century. Many such hymns contain no direct reference to the lamb, but anyone who is washed and made clean in blood must be linked with those who have come through the "great ordeal," which, according to Revelation 3 and 7, is a period of tribulation necessary before the eschatological triumph of God (Aune 2314). Revelation 7:14 says that these martyrs have "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." "Rock of Ages" by Augustus M. Toplady (1740-78), in its original version (later rewritten, probably by Thomas Cotterill in 1815) (Nutter 150), refers to the necessity of washing by the Saviour:

Nothing in my Hand I bring;
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for Dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for Grace;
Foul, I to the Fountain fly:
Wash me, Saviour, or I die! (Nutter 151)

The lamb is not specifically mentioned in this hymn, but his blood is the implied source of cleansing. The symbolism is made clearer in a hymn from the Scottish Church, "How bright these glorious spirits shine," based on a 1707 version by Isaac Watts. It is another paraphrase of Revelation 7:13-17 and is widely used for All Saints' Day. For this reason,

it “crossed the Border” into the Church of England’s *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861) and remains a popular hymn in the Anglican Church (Watson 234). The second and third verses depict the same scene as the Ghent Altarpiece:

Lo! These are they from sufferings great,
Who came to realms of light,
And in the blood of Christ have washed
Those robes which shine so bright. . .

The Lamb which dwells amidst the throne
Shall o’er them still preside;
Feed them with nourishment divine
And all their footsteps guide. (Watson 233)

Watson points out that the blood imagery of verse two was offensive to Percy Dearmer (1867-1936), a hymn translator, who altered it to this more fastidious wording:

And by the grace of Christ have won
Those robes that shine so bright. (Watson 234)

In an otherwise faithful paraphrase of Revelation 7, one wonders how the robes came to be so bright, if not washed in the blood.

Some of the most vivid language describing the blood and wounds of Jesus were penned by Moravian writers. Not only was the lamb worshipped by the thousands of thousands of Revelation 5, but his “bloody sign” is a cause for celebration:

Lo! He cometh, countless trumpets
Blow before his bloody sign!
‘Midst ten thousand saints and angels,
See the Crucified shine,
Allelujah!
Welcome, welcome bleeding Lamb! (Watson 198)

This hymn by John Cennick (1718-55), a follower of John Wesley and George Whitefield, who later became a Moravian minister, was carefully rewritten by Charles Wesley, removing the gory language and replacing the Lamb with God:

Lo! He comes with clouds descending,
Once for favoured sinners slain;
Thousand thousand Saints attending
Swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluia!
God appears, on earth to reign. (Watson 198)

Both hymns are used as Advent hymns, looking forward to the coming of Christ at Christmas, as well as the second coming, but Cennick's version looks toward the crucifixion as the redeeming event, while Wesley celebrates the nativity. The reference to the Lamb seems to have been necessary for Cennick to express his views about salvation. "Welcome, bleeding lamb" provides a dramatic contrast to "God appears." For either version, the tune, *Helmsley*, provides an appropriate majestic setting for the words which describe Christ's coming "with clouds descending" and with "thousand thousand saints" in attendance. These saints are those described in Revelation 5, who worship the lamb. Ironically, however, the lamb's identity has been removed in Wesley's version of the hymn.

That the blood of the lamb obtains benefits for the believer, is an idea expressed in one of the best known hymns in the United States. "Just As I Am" by Charlotte Elliott (1789-1871) has been used for many years by the Billy Graham Crusades and is notable for its

emphasis on healing and cleansing. The author also claims the blood of Jesus for her own benefit:

Just as I am, without one plea
 But that thy blood was shed for me,
 And that thou bidst me come to thee,
 O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am, and waiting not
 To rid my soul of one dark blot,
 To thee whose blood can cleanse each spot,
 O Lamb of God, I come! . . .

Just as I am—thou wilt receive,
 Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
 Because thy promise I believe,
 O Lamb of God, I come! (Nutter 145)

One could read in the first verse that Jesus's blood was offered in place of her own, or that Jesus paid a debt to God or even to Satan. It is a general statement about Jesus's sacrifice and atonement which can be interpreted by the individual worshipper. The text fits neatly into several different theories of atonement. It contains references to the blood which can cleanse from Revelation 7 as we have seen above, as well as an understanding that believers will be received by the lamb merely because of their belief. However one views the efficacy of atonement expressed here, it is an emotional poem which is highlighted by the tune used in the United States, *Woodworth*, by William Bradbury (1816-68). Each verse ends with "I come!" on a falling third, reminiscent of a sigh (Watson 271).

The lamb appears in hundreds of hymns, from the earliest Latin ones to the gospel hymns of the twentieth century, and even to the contemporary Christian worship music which

draws so heavily on popular culture. Why is this figure so prevalent in music for congregational singing? The answer lies in the variety of meanings for the lamb: the pure and innocent baby sheep, which provides the “gentle, meek, and mild” adjectives; the animal which was sacrificed daily by the Jews in the temple, whose place was taken by the messianic figure of Jesus Christ; the creature whose blood was shed in order to make the robes of Christians white; and the triumphant lamb of the Book of Revelation, who receives the unending praise of saints, martyrs, virgins, and “myriads of myriads” of worshippers.

Each of these expressions of the lamb or shepherd represents a belief or hope about salvation for the individual. Congregations (or church leaders) often choose hymns for what they say about central doctrines, and the variety of interpretations seen in the hymns which we have examined demonstrate that Christians accept numerous theories of atonement. Hymns have remained a mainstay of Christian worship from the first liturgies of the early church to the present day. The continuing appearance of the lamb or shepherd figure in hymns is an indication of the perceived truth of the metaphor.

Chapter X: Conclusion

The lamb is part of a group of pastoral symbols which includes sheep, rams, and the shepherd. This family of signs has been an element of religious culture and theology from ancient civilizations to the present time. The shepherd as god, who cares for his flock and keeps them safe from harm, was a symbol employed by ancient Egyptians as early as the third millennium BCE. Jews equated shepherding with kingship, understanding God's care of the chosen people to be equivalent to a shepherd protecting his flock. Biblical references to the Lord as shepherd are plentiful; perhaps the most recognizable is that of Psalm 23, which contains the famous phrase, "The Lord is my shepherd." The Good Shepherd image was perpetuated by the Greeks, not necessarily as a symbol of a god, but as an illustration of care-giving, or philanthropy.

The use of this symbol in Greek classical art became the source of many Good Shepherd images found in statuary and painting in early Christian art. Christians used the language of pastoral images which was prevalent in Mediterranean cultures to express what they read in the New Testament, where Christ referred to himself as shepherd, saying, "I am the good shepherd . . . I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10: 11 & 15 NRSV). This is very likely the role which Christians had in mind when they chose the Good Shepherd symbol for their funerary art. Those who died, or those who visited the tombs, could hope to be part of Christ's flock in heaven.

The symbol of God as the shepherd has continued to be a powerful icon in the Christian faith to the present day. Apart from the biblical readings which reinforce the metaphor,

the hymns which are commonly sung as part of Christian worship regularly remind worshippers that their god is a caring and protective shepherd. Though they “like sheep have gone astray” as we hear in Handel’s *Messiah*, they can trust that the shepherd, i.e., God, will bring them back to the fold.

Ancient cultures not only revered the shepherd as a representation of their kings and gods; they also venerated the ram as symbol of a powerful deity. The ram was known to be a strong creature with a fierce appearance, especially the ancient *ovis longipes paleoaegyptiaca* variety, whose horizontal, twisted horns seemed to represent supernatural power. Egyptians worshipped the ram-headed god, Amun, as an all-powerful creator-god and Greeks depicted their supreme god, Zeus, with ram’s horns. In addition to strength, the ram symbolized fertility and new life, as shown by its appearance as the first sign of the zodiac, aligned with the beginning of spring.

The ram as symbol of new life became conflated with that of the lamb, which was born in the spring and whose white coat gave it the additional attribute of purity and innocence. Both rams and lambs were sacrificial creatures, offered up to the gods by the Mesopotamians, and subsequently by the Hebrew people. In the earliest writings of the Old Testament, we find the story of the “first sacrifice,” that of Abel in the Book of Genesis, who brought an acceptable sacrifice of a lamb (while his brother’s, the firstfruits of the harvest, was rejected). The Bible contains long passages of instructions for sacrificing animals, the lamb being one of the most important sacrifices because of its association with the Passover. Jews established a ritual of temple sacrifices which

included daily offerings of lambs for the benefit of Israel. For Christians, the lamb became a symbol for Jesus because his death was understood to be a sacrifice to benefit those who believed in him.

The lamb as symbol of Christ has endured as one of the most powerful ways of portraying what was meant by his death. From early Christian representations of the lamb on the cross to the eucharistic symbolism of the lamb shedding its blood into a chalice, as in the Ghent and Isenheim Altarpieces, artists have used this creature to signify particular understandings of atonement. The lamb surrounded by throngs of saints, martyrs, and virgins, as depicted in the Ghent Altarpiece and in the sacred music of the church, was not only a representation of the biblical scene from the Book of Revelation, but was also a means of demonstrating the idea that Jesus's death was offered as a substitute for the death of his followers.

The body and blood of the lamb also have a eucharistic symbolism which began at the Last Supper shared by Jesus and his disciples.¹⁴ Jesus instituted a new type of sacrifice at the supper, which for Christians, soon replaced the bloody temple sacrifices. Artistic and musical depictions of a sacrificed lamb recall Jesus's own body and blood which in turn are ritualistically recalled by the bread and wine of the eucharist. The Ghent and Isenheim Altarpieces, as well as the numerous hymns which speak of the blood of the lamb, evoke the eucharistic sacrifice.

¹⁴ It is not clear whether Jesus's last meal with his disciples was a Passover meal or some other ritualistic meal shared on the eve of the Passover, but, according to the gospels, it certainly occurred during the Passover "season." Dom Gregory Dix believes it to be a *chaburah* meal—a gathering of a specific body of friends to share a meal on the eve of a feast day (50)

Many Christian hymns quote scriptures which refer to the lamb, each of which has something to say about how Christians are redeemed by Jesus, the lamb. Christ is the gentle shepherd, meek and mild, who provides an example of humility, and he is the creature whose blood makes believers clean. He is also the triumphant figure of the Book of Revelation, reigning in heaven together with God the Father and standing in the midst of adoring saints.

The discomfort associated with references to the wounds of Christ, and his blood and suffering, seen in both art and music, may be partially allayed by attaching the references to the lamb, rather than to Jesus's physical body. This is evident in the early Christian depictions of the lamb on the cross in the place of Jesus, but was waning in the Middle Ages, when we have the gruesome crucifixion scene of the Isenheim Altarpiece. Even then, however, the lamb continues to play an important role in expressing the meaning of the death. By its association with John the Baptist and the eucharist, we are given to understand that the lamb of God "takes away the sin of the world."

Apart from the expression of ideas about salvation, some hymns offer up the lamb as a model of how Christians should live their lives, while others use the term merely as a name for Jesus. Even then, however, the term evokes a certain role for Christ—one of sacrifice which bestows benefits upon Christians, among these, eternal life.

The paradox of Christ as the Good Shepherd and also the sacrificial lamb is that he serves as both the god and the victim. These related pastoral symbols represent both his human and divine natures. He saves humans by his godly nature—his care and protection—but he also offers himself as the sacrificial victim who makes a payment to either Satan, as ransom, or God the Father, as a substitution for sinful humans. This seeming contradiction in the understanding of Christ's role has remained a common subject in the art and music of the church throughout its history. Both art forms portray Jesus in the dual roles of God and man. He is the Good Shepherd, the image inherited from classical art, and perpetuated, not only through scripture, but also through the media of Christian art and music. At the same time, he is the lamb, offered for humankind and recalled in the art which represents the eucharist, as well as in hymns and other sacred music which speak of his atoning sacrifice.

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Fig. 1: *Ovis longipes paleoaegyptiaca*
Temple of Harsaphes

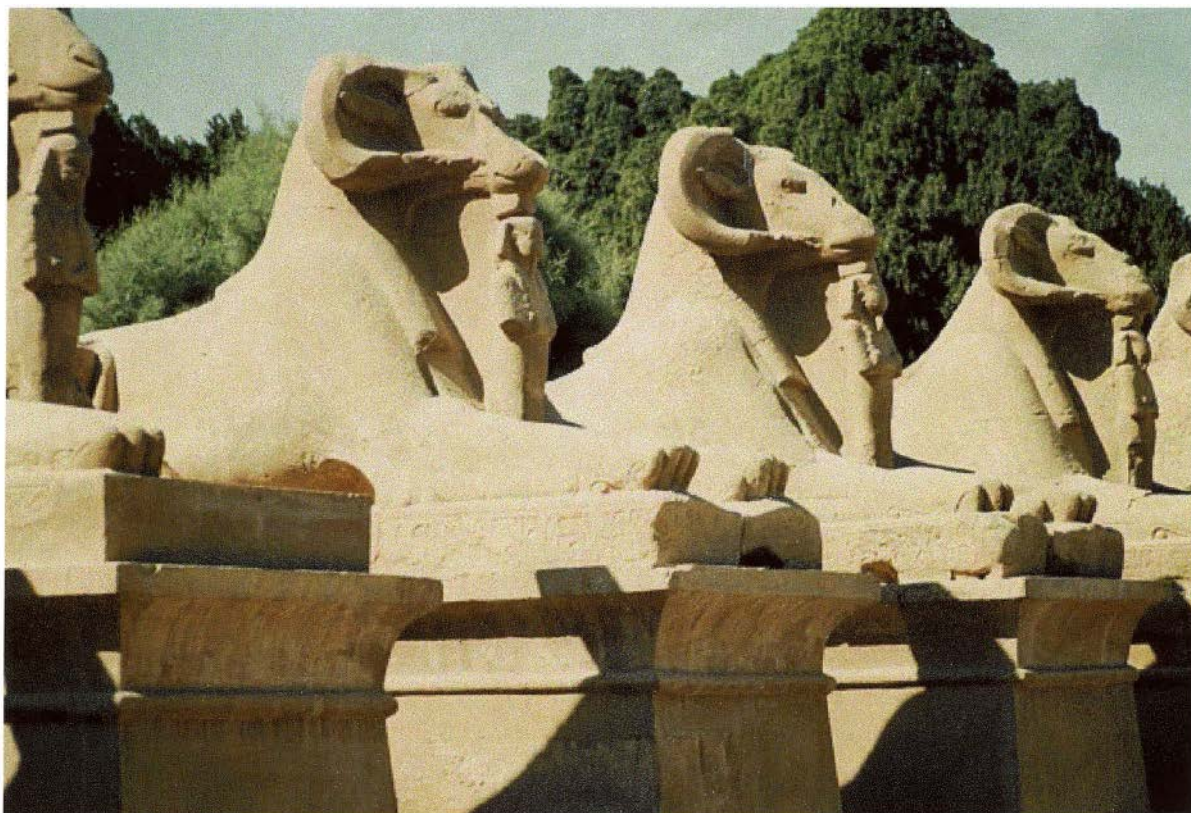


Fig. 2: Avenue of the Ram-Headed Sphinxes at Temple of Amun
Eighteenth Dynasty (Thutmose III), 1479-1425 BCE, Luxor



Fig. 3: The Egyptian Hieroglyph of the Ram's Head



Fig. 4a: Good Shepherd
Late 3rd century, Roman, marble, 1 m. high
Rome. Museo Pio Cristiano



Fig. 4b: Hermes Criophoros, Detail
c. 550-500 BCE, Arcadia, Bronze, .094 m
Berlin: Antikemuseen



Fig. 5: Catacomb, Fresco-painted vault and walls of the Arcolosium of cubiculum C, Via Latina, c. 320 CE, Rome
 Photo Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, Rome
 Reproduced in Elsner, p. 156

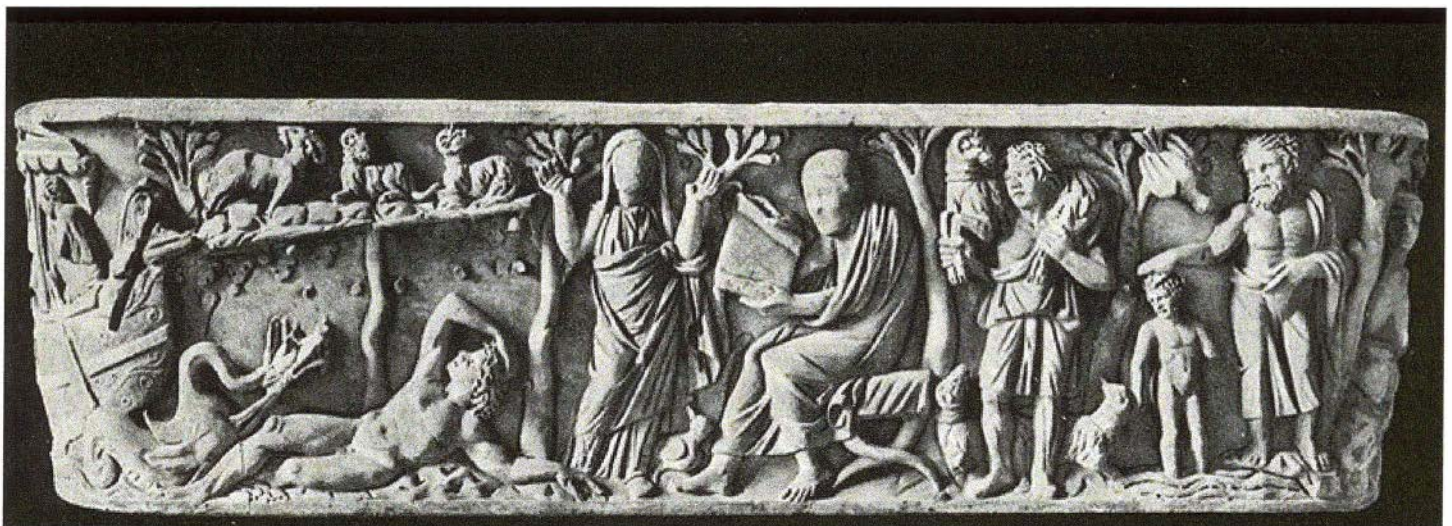


Fig. 6: Sarcophagus, with Jonah, the True Philosopher, and Good Shepherd, c. 270CE
 Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome..



Fig. 7: Cemetery Stone from the Crypt of Lucina
Catacomb of Callixtus



Fig. 8: Silver Cross of Justin II, Gold-plated
565-578, Vatican Museum (Linear Rendition)



Fig. 9:

Detail – The Vision of the Lamb in the Midst of the Four Living Creatures, Illuminated Manuscript, Dyson Perrins Apocalypse, c. 1255-1260, English
Tempera colors, gold leaf, and colored washes on parchment
The Getty Museum, Los Angeles

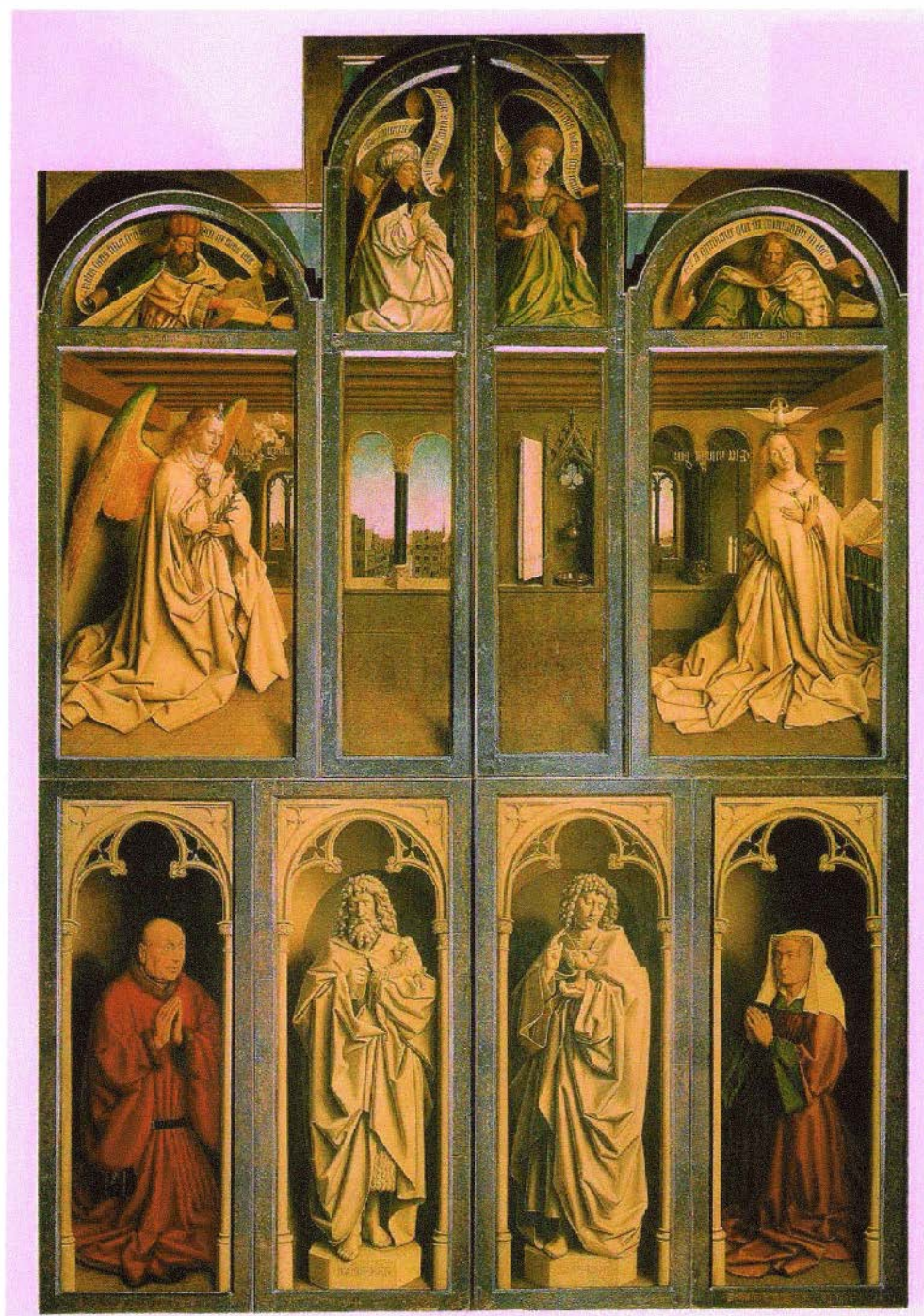


Fig. 10a: The Ghent Altarpiece, Wings Closed
 1432, Oil on Panel
 Cathedral of St Bavo, Ghent

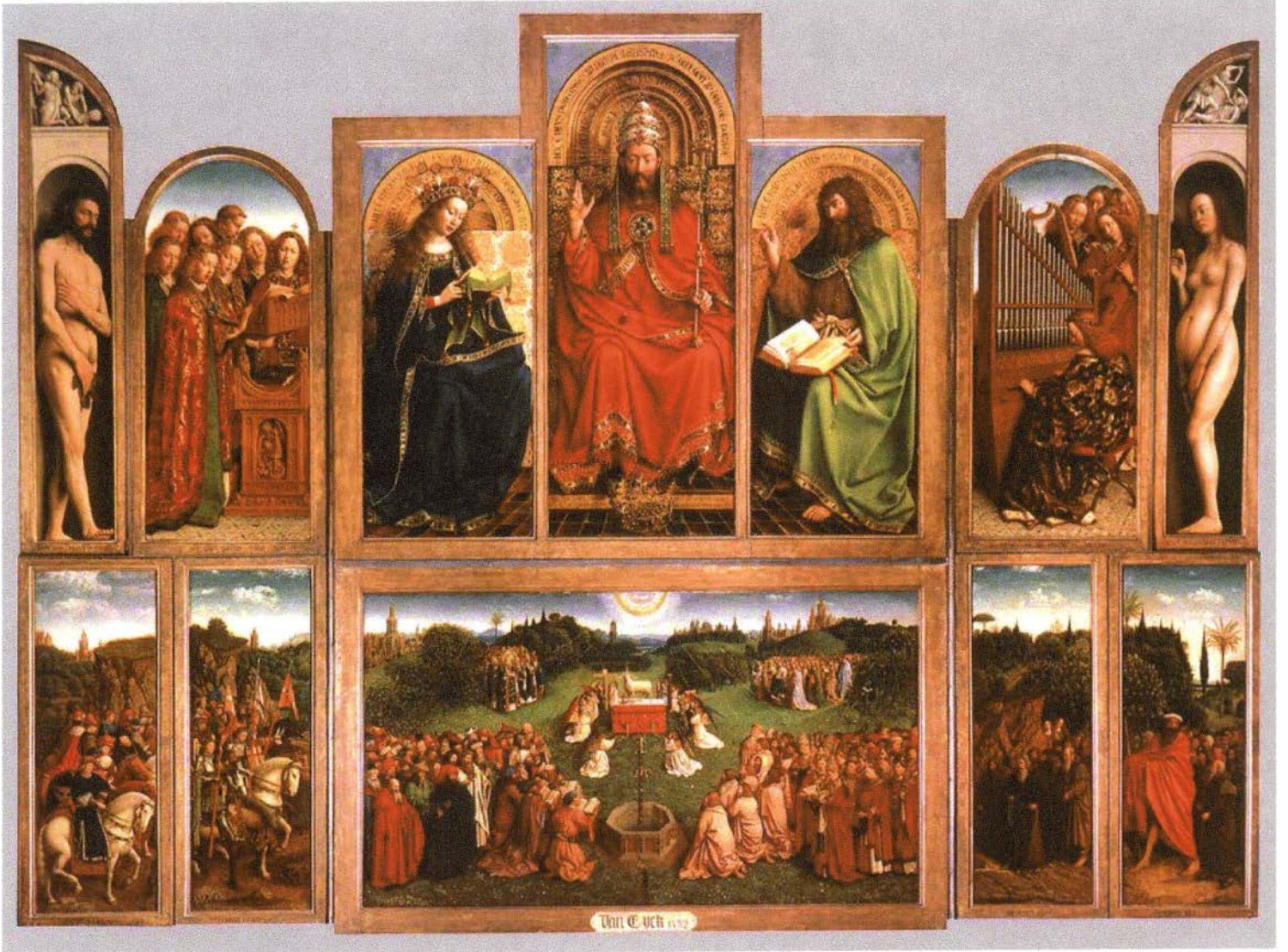


Fig. 10b: The Ghent Altarpiece
Wings Opened

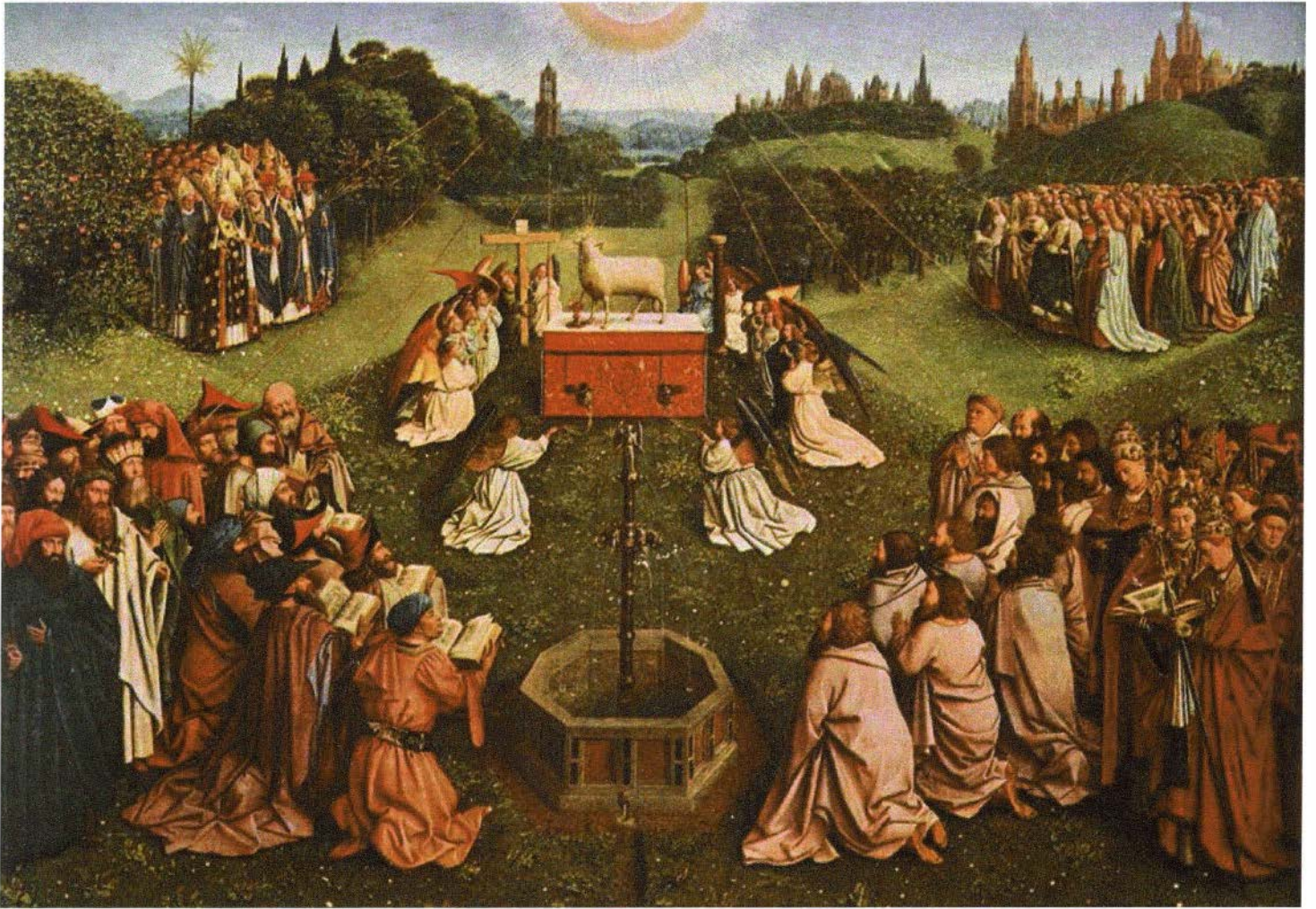


Fig. 10c: The Ghent Altarpiece
Detail, *Adoration of the Lamb*

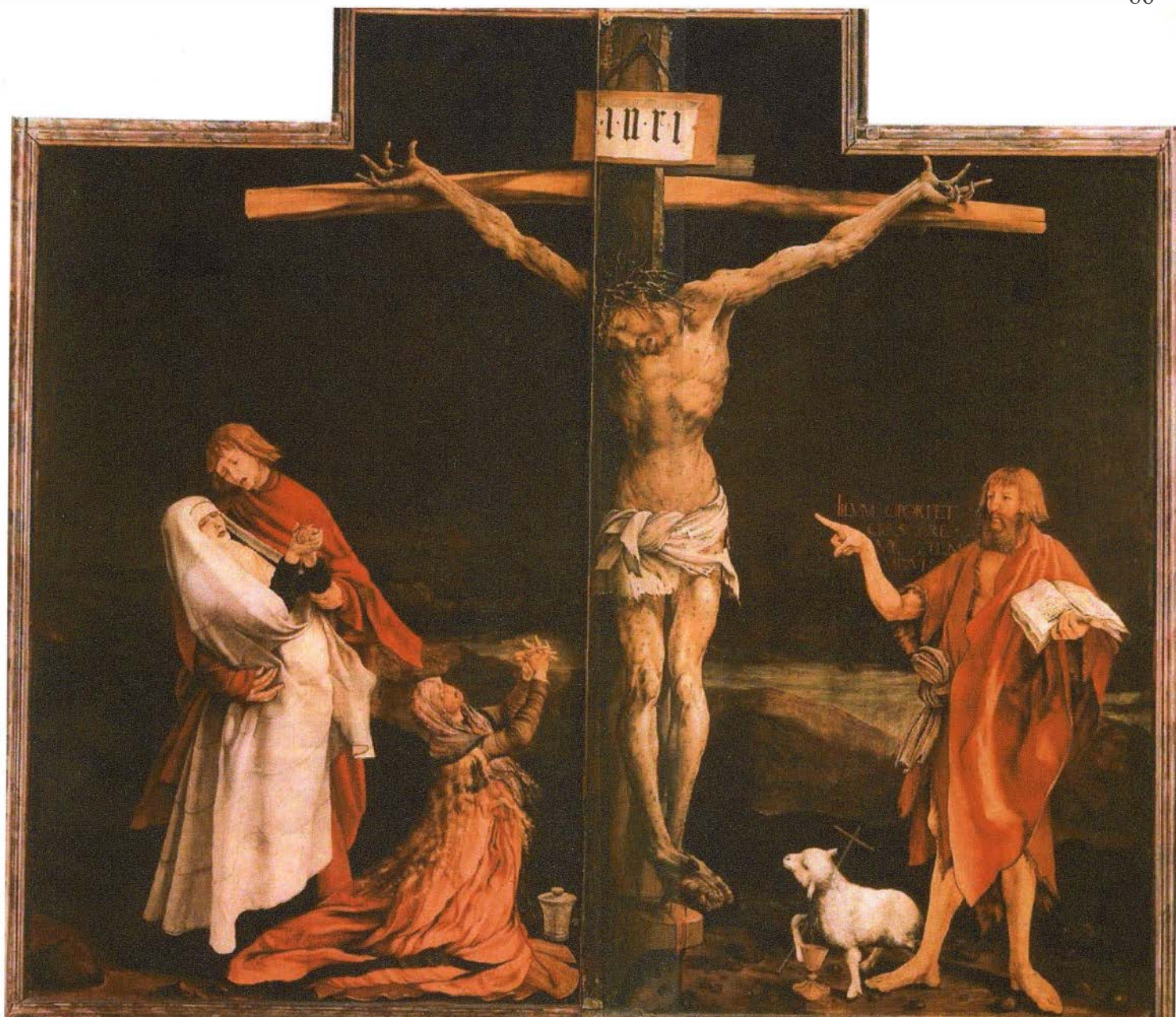


Fig. 11a: The Isenheim Altarpiece, Wings Closed - The Crucifixion
1512-1515, Oil on Panel
Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar, France



Fig. 11b: The Isenheim Altarpiece
Detail – The Crucifixion



Fig. 11c: The Isenheim Altarpiece
Detail – the Nativity