22. Chorus

Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world. *(John 1:29, slightly modified)*

Moses and Aaron stand before the pharaoh and announce that in the middle of the coming night every firstborn in the land of Egypt will die.

A prophet in exile ponders the mystery of suffering, and sings a song of an innocent one who suffers on behalf of others.

An apocalyptic seer has a vision of the End, with Good at long last victorious over the domain of Evil.

And John the Baptist stands at the water's edge, sees Jesus approaching, and declares of him, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

It is appropriate that Part II of *Messiah* begin with John the Baptist, just as did Part I, with the voice crying in the wilderness. We are about to hear of the Messiah's victory, which will entail his death. To bring the Baptist into the picture here seems out of order; he belongs at the beginning of the story. But the librettist takes the liberty of bringing him in a second time. In Part I the Baptist announced the coming of the glory of the Lord in the person of the Messiah; the announcement was taken from the picture of the Baptist in the Synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Here the Baptist appears in his Johannine presentation, to announce the saving advent of one who takes away the sin of the world. The words look backward to the Jesus who lifts the burden from the weary and heavy laden, and forward to the passion of the Messiah in the coming sections.

It is John's gospel alone that tells us of this hailing of the Messiah by the Baptist, and it is only in the literature under the name of John that we find the image of Jesus as the Lamb of God. It is a rich motif, with several different roots.

One of these sources is in the tradition of the Passover, the annual Jewish festival celebrating the release of the Hebrews from their bondage in Egypt, an event which may well have taken place

in the thirteenth pre-Christian century. In the story in Exodus, Moses and Aaron, his brother and spokesman, present the Egyptian monarch with God's demand that the Israelites be freed. The king refuses, and God strikes Egypt with a plague. This sequence occurs nine times. Each time, after the plague, the pharaoh agrees to freedom for the Hebrews, and then changes his mind. At the end of this series of events, God prepares the final visitation. During the night all the firstborn of Egypt will die. There is not much time; the Hebrews must prepare for a quick departure, and prepare to protect themselves from the death that will scour the countryside that night. A quick meal must be prepared, and it will feature a lamb, specially selected and slaughtered for the occasion. Blood from the animal must be smeared on the doorways of the Hebrew dwellings. Only then will they escape the impending plague.

The event is remembered each spring in Judaism, and its observance had long been known in the time of Jesus. John's gospel interprets Jesus in terms of the Passover lamb. In the other three gospels, the last supper which Jesus eats with his disciple is a Passover meal. In John's gospel it is not. John makes a point that Jesus was on the cross at the time the Passover lambs were slain in preparation for the meal that evening (John 19:14). Though John is the only gospel so to picture Jesus' death, the idea was familiar in early Christianity. Paul declares, "Our paschal (passover) lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed" (I Corinthians 5:7). I Peter 1:19 speaks of our being ransomed from sin by "the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without spot or blemish," such as the Passover lamb was supposed to be. Technically speaking, the Passover lamb was not a sacrifice, since it was not offered on behalf of sin, but by New Testament times the observance had been brought into the whole sacrificial system, with the priesthood officiating at the slaughter. Here, then, is one facet of the picture. Jesus, the good shepherd, is here pictured as a lamb to be sacrificed — not put forward by the people, but by God himself, on our behalf. He is the Lamb of God.

Another strand of thought is in the exilic Isaiah, the prophet with whose words the oratorio opened. In Isaiah 53 there is a long

poem picturing a person innocent of misdeed who suffers on behalf of others. The librettist clearly has this passage in mind, for the text of the next four sections of the work will be drawn from it. In that chapter the prophet compares the sufferer to a lamb: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7). We will have more to say about this passage in the next section.

Yet another motif is woven into the image of the Lamb of God. The precedent for this theme is outside the Scripture, but not outside the traditions with which the scriptural writers were familiar. In the several centuries before Christ, particularly in the second century, there arose among the Jews a genre of literature known as apocalyptic. Like prophecy, it was visionary and concerned itself with the future. But unlike prophecy, it was never oral; it was a written literature from the beginning. Like prophecy, it dealt with the issue of sin and evil, but unlike prophecy, it saw no hope of altering the human situation within the context of history. It saw evil as reaching climactic heights, but expressed the confident hope that God would intervene to override evil in a victory to establish good forever. This faith was expressed in an elaborate symbolism, often bizarre to our minds, involving fantastically constructed animals, significant colors, and numbers that concealed meaning. In the Old Testament the last seven chapters of the book of Daniel are apocalyptic writing. In the New Testament the book of Revelation is the supreme example. These books are so unlike anything else in the Bible that to most modern readers they are unique. But they are not. A great deal of this kind of literature was produced by eschatologically minded Jews in antiquity, and the Christian movement soon took over the genre and used it for its own purposes. A surprising amount of this writing has survived, and it is often quite useful in the interpretation of apocalyptic within the Bible.

A book called the Testament of Joseph, part of a longer work called the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, contains a picture of a lamb who is victorious over a horde of wild animals (19:8). Another reference seems to occur in I Enoch 90:38 (there are problems with