

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Mary's Little Lamb at Christmas

Much of American culture still accepts the manger at Christmas. We still see manger scenes in church, on front lawns and on Christmas cards. But in our increasingly secular, commercial, and sexually liberated society, we keep the horizontal message of the manger but often eliminate the vertical message entirely. We like the shepherds and their lambs, but are uncomfortable with God, miracles and the incarnation. In short, the biblical worldview about Christmas is rapidly losing market share to a more secular, materialistic one that is horizontally comfortable but vertically challenged.

So, just for a moment, let's think biblically about the manger, about the shepherds' lambs, and about the Lamb born that morning. Because the shepherds in the hills around Bethlehem obeyed the angelic directive (Luke 2:12), Jesus was no doubt born among lambs, which figuratively represented the virtues of gentleness, innocence and dependence. But the biblical imagery surrounding the lamb goes far beyond these virtues. The lamb was also central to Jewish worship. Every day two lambs were offered on the Temple altar in Jerusalem for the sins of the nation. The lamb was also central to the Passover, which symbolized both God's protection and the redemption of His people from slavery in Egypt. And it was central to Isaiah's Suffering Servant (53:7), a Lamb who would die for His people. The biblical image of the lamb was thus both a reminder of redemption and of freedom to the Jewish people.

In the New Testament, when John the Baptist declared of Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), the lamb imagery took on even more significance. Indeed, the New Testament further applies this redemptive theme to Jesus when Peter refers to Him as "a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:19) and when Paul identifies Him as "our Passover Lamb" (1 Corinthians 5:7). However, of the 32 times "lamb" appears in the New Testament, 27 are in the book of Revelation, where "Lamb" is the primary name applied to Jesus. Here Jesus is the sovereign ruler, seated on the throne as the victorious warrior-lamb who deserves praise, worship and adoration. Hence Handel, in his majestic oratorio, "Messiah," put Revelation 5:11-12 to music: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise." Jesus Christ, as the Lamb of God, not only provides redemption for sinful humanity; He also establishes God's Kingdom on earth.

For historic, biblical Christianity, then, the birth of Mary's Little Lamb on Christmas morning marked a colossal watershed in human history. Rome ruled the Mediterranean world during a time of unprecedented peace and prosperity. As they read Virgil and Ovid, Rome's citizens knew their Caesar through his statues that dotted the Empire. But that arrogant, powerful

empire exists today only in ruins—important only to archeologists and historians. But the Lamb of God, born in that backwater town of Bethlehem, is today embraced by nearly 2 billion people as their Lord and Savior—and He still offers hope and reconciliation to a fallen, broken world. Because her Lamb was both fully human and fully God, He can sympathize, identify and empathize with those who suffer. Because her Lamb became the victim of monstrous evil at His crucifixion, He will one day vanquish evil from this planet when He returns. This is the biblical narrative of Mary's Lamb, who was also the Lamb of God. For that reason, Christians associate her Lamb with vicarious suffering and victorious power. Jesus is the Lamb who changed the world!