

Reinterpreting the Participle δ αἴρων in John 1:29. A Proposal for “who carries”

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ABSTRACT: In John 1:29, John the Baptist, upon seeing Jesus, exclaims: ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου. Most prominent English translations render the Greek participle ὁ αἴρων in John 1:29 as “who takes away.” However, the authors of this article present evidence that John 1:29 contains an intertextual reference to the figure of the Servant of YHWH from Isa 53:7. In light of this, the proper interpretation of the participle ὁ αἴρων is better understood as “who takes up and bears.” Therefore, the proposed translation of John the Baptist’s words in John 1:29 is: “Behold, the Lamb of God who carries the sin of the world.”

KEYWORDS: Lamb of God, Jesus, John the Baptist, Gospel of John, Isaiah, the Suffering Servant

1. “Who takes away” or “who takes up and bears”?

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, we read about an encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus, who comes to be baptized. Upon seeing him, the former cries out: ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου (John 1:29).¹ All major English translations render the Greek αἴρω in the discussed verse as “to take away,” emphasizing the dimensional aspect of the action. This interpretation underscores that the role and meaning of Jesus’ sacrifice is to remove sin.² Meanwhile, in some translations into other languages, Jesus is described rather as one who “carries” or “bears” the sin.³ This rendering appears to concentrate on the nature of the act mentioned in the text instead of merely describing its final effect. According to *LSJ*, the verb αἴρω can denote *taking away/removing*, but it can

1 The Greek text here and below is according to NA²⁸.

2 E.g. NRSV: “...who takes away the sin of the world;” NKJV: “...who takes away the sin of the world;” NLT: “...who takes away the sin of the world.”

3 E.g. Luther: “trägt;” RST: “берет на Себя;” EIB: “bierze na siebie.”

also refer to the actions of *taking up* and *bearing/carrying* (“*take up and bear*, as a burden”).⁴ Both of these meanings are present in John.⁵ It follows, then, that the problem cannot be resolved solely on philological grounds.⁶ Even though in certain contexts these two meanings may be treated as synonymous, they do differ significantly when it comes to the semantic components emphasized in the definition. The question arises: is the Johannine Jesus described as the one who “takes away” the sin or as the one who “takes up and bears” it? The purpose of this article is to provide an unequivocal answer to this question.

2. Criteria of the Lamb’s Identification

The characterization of Jesus as ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ (John 1:29) is reiterated in John the Baptist’s second statement, which the text places on the morrow of the first encounter: ἰδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ (John 1:36). Why a lamb, and what does this metaphor point to? One may ask along with Origen: τί δήποτε ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἰωάννου ὁ σωτὴρ ἀμνὸς λέγεται;⁷ The comparison to a lamb is directly linked to two features of Jesus, the neutralization of sin: ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου (John 1:29) and his paradoxical origin: οὗτός ἐστιν ὑπὲρ οὗ ἐγὼ εἶπον· ὁπίσω μου ἔρχεται ἀνὴρ ὃς ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν (John 1:30). We may expect that this comparison, “die erste Christuserkenntnis,”⁸ encapsulates, to some extent, Jesus’ fate and identity as described in the Gospel.⁹ The above constitute criteria of identification, which we shall use to answer Origen’s question. Below, we will examine texts that might have served as the origin of John’s metaphor.¹⁰

4 LSJ, *s.v.* “ἀείρω.”

5 The first meaning of “taking away/removing” is most common in John and is present in: 2:16; 11:39–41; 15:2; 17:15; 19:15; 19:31, 38; 20:1, 13, 15. It also appears with a nuance of taking away something *from somebody* in 10:18; 11:48; 16:22. The meaning of taking up and bearing is visible in 5:12 (ἄρον τὸν κράβαττόν σου). Furthermore, in 8:59 the verb denotes the act of picking up without connotations of bearing. Apart from that, *airo* is used one time in a metaphorical sense of keeping in suspense (ἕως πότε τὴν ψυχὴν ἡμῶν αἴρεις, 10:24).

6 Unless we consider the appearance of the combination of the verb αἴρω with ἁμαρτήματα in 1 Sam 15:25 LXX: νῦν ἄρον δὴ τὸ ἁμαρτήματά μου as an argument in favour of the first translation. Obviously, since Saul is addressing these words to Samuel, the context does not allow this expression to be translated as “take my sin upon yourself.” This parallel is noted by K. Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium. I. Kapitel 1–10* (ThKNT 4; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2004) 83. The author also mentions a possible connection to the scapegoat carrying sins in a description of the Yom Kippur ritual in Lev 16:21sq. Here, however, the one carrying the sin is explicitly a goat, rather than lamb.

7 Origenes, *Comm. Jo.* 6.51.264.

8 Cf. H. Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium. I. Kommentar zu Kapitel 1, 1–9, 50* (HThKNT 3; Freiburg – Basel – Wien: Herder 2001) 67.

9 “The seer reveals the mystery of the person’s mission” (R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII. Introduction, Translation and Notes* [AB 29; New Haven, CT – London: Yale University Press 1966] 58).

10 Scholars have considered some less probable explanations, such as 1) the Yom Kippur scapegoat; 2) the apocalyptic lamb motif in the Enochic literature; 3) the general idea of a sacrificial lamb from the Hebrew Bible; 4) the lamb that was provided by God to be offered instead of Isaac in Gen 22:5; 5) the gentle lamb of Jer 11. See W. Loader, *Jesus in John’s Gospel. Structure and Issues in Johannine Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI:

3. Paschal Lamb

Since ancient times, interpreters have proposed that it is the Paschal lamb to which John's comparison refers. This view is visible among Church Fathers¹¹ and has been repeated in modern scholarship.¹² It is true that the Johannine depiction of Jesus does picture him as a Paschal lamb¹³ and that this identification is also visible in other New Testament writings.¹⁴ However, in the Tanach, the Paschal lamb does not have an expiatory role and as such does not neutralize sin in any way.¹⁵ The Paschal lamb is also nowhere described as having a paradoxical origin. Consequently, the Paschal lamb does not seem appropriate as the first interpretative choice nor does it offer a solution regarding the specific meaning of the verb αἴρω.

4. Lamb and the Servant of YHWH

In search of John's lamb, the obvious direction is the Deutero-Isaiah, who introduces a well-known figure of the Servant of YHWH mentioned in four separate songs.¹⁶ Of interest to us is the Fourth Song (Isa 52:13–53:12). Along with the interpretation presented above, since the first centuries of Christianity, various authors have associated John's wording with a picture of a "lamb being led to the slaughter," a description appearing in Isa 53:7: ὡς πρόβατον ἐπὶ σφαγῆν ἤχθη καὶ ὡς ἀμνὸς ἐναντίον τοῦ κείροντος αὐτὸν ἄφωτος οὕτως οὐκ ἀνοίγει τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ.¹⁷ This was also the conviction of many Johannine scholars.¹⁸ However, the hitherto scholarly considerations on the reference in John 1:29 to Isa 53:7 and the Fourth Song lacked systematic organization and logical structure, ultimately making

Eerdmans 2017) 156–157; S.E. Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus. In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2015) 207–208.

11 E.g. Origenes, *Comm. Jo.* 28.25.237; Didymus, *Fr. Ps.* 533.

12 E.g. "Probably John's primary reference is the Paschal lamb" (C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John. An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2 ed. [London: Westminster John Knox 1978] 176); cf. J. Zumstein, *Das Johannesevangelium* (KEK 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2016) 98–99; Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 61–63.

13 E.g. John 19:33, 36.

14 E.g. 1 Cor 5:7; 1 Peter 1:18–19.

15 "In Judaism the lamb sacrificed at Passover does not take away sins" (Barrett, *The Gospel*, 176). Some claim, however, that all sacrifices prescribed in the Pentateuch are expiatory in one way or another, see L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1971) 144–145.

16 Isa 42:1–9; 49:1–9; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12.

17 E.g. Clemens Alexandrinus, fr. 27 (GCS 17, 216); Theodorus Mopsuestenus, *Commentarii in Joannem (e catenis)*, fr. 13; Eusebius, *Comm. Isa.* 2.42.

18 E.g. J. Beutler, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2017) 59; Zumstein, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 99; R. Schwandt, "Seht das Lamm Gottes, das hinwegnimmt die Sünde der Welt" (Joh 1,29). Zur Frage einer Sühnetheologie im Johannesevangelium," *TTZ* 119 (2010) 202–203; Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 60–63; C.H. Williams, "Isaiah in John's Gospel," *Isaiah in the New Testament* (eds. S. Moyses – M.J.J. Menken) (NTSI; London – New York: Clark 2005) 104–105.

them inconclusive.¹⁹ Nevertheless, this is the right interpretative track. Below, we will outline arguments in a manner that conclusively suggests that the author of the Fourth Gospel, attributing those words to John, had Isa 53:7 in mind.

4.1. Isaiah as John's Intertext

In John, Isaiah is the only Old Testament prophetic author mentioned by name, and it is stated that Isaiah "saw Jesus' glory and spoke about Him" (John 12:41). Explicit quotations from Isaiah, in John 1:23 and 12:37–41, inclusively frame the beginning and end of John's narrative about Jesus' public ministry (John 1:19–12:50). Based on this evidence, as well as numerous other allusions and references to Isaiah,²⁰ we can reiterate Catrin H. Williams' assertion that "Isaiah occupies a prominent, if not the highest, position among the scriptural texts that have contributed to the shaping of John's gospel"²¹ as well as "several expressions, themes and motifs point to the profound influence of Isaiah, especially Deutero-Isaiah, on John's narratives and discourses."²² Therefore, the idea that there is a reference to Isaiah in John 1:29 is by no means improbable.

4.2. Neutralization of Sin by the Servant of YHWH and His Mysterious Genealogy

In the Fourth Song, the Servant of YHWH is consistently described as one who neutralizes the sin: οὗτος τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν φέρει καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν ὀδυνᾶται (Isa 53:4); τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν αὐτὸς ἀνοίσει (Isa 53:11); αὐτὸς ἁμαρτίας πολλῶν ἀνήνεγκεν καὶ διὰ τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν παρεδόθη (Isa 53:12). This is feature is exceptional in the Tanach since it is animal sacrifices and not individuals that atone for sin.²³ Moreover, the Servant is described as having a paradoxical genealogy: τὴν γενεὰν αὐτοῦ τίς διηγῆσεται; (Isa 53:8).

4.3. Parallels Between Johannine Jesus and the Servant of YHWH

There are objective similarities between the fate of the Servant of YHWH and the fate of Johannine Jesus. The Servant suffers, gets dishonoured, tortured and killed. Subsequently, he is revived by God. Paradoxically, his suffering is simultaneously viewed as a revelation of glory and, as a consequence, he gets exalted and lifted up. This depiction is arguably unique in the Tanach, as no other text explicitly associates suffering and even death with glory. Furthermore, the Servant's comparison to the "lamb that is led to the slaughter" parallels John's description of Jesus as the Lamb of God and aligns with the general narrative of the Fourth Gospel, which portrays Jesus as an innocent man led to death.

19 "This is possible. But there is nothing in the context that points to it" (Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 144); cf. "Eine eindeutige traditionsgeschichtliche Herkunft des ersten positiven christologischen Titels im JohEv ist nicht auszumachen" (D. Rusam, "Das 'Lamm Gottes' [Joh 1,29.36] und die Deutung des Todes Jesu im Johannesevangelium," *BZ* 49 [2005] 68).

20 In John, according to NA²⁸ *Loci citati vel allegati*, we find allusions to 36 different passages from Isaiah.

21 Williams, "Isaiah," 101.

22 Williams, "Isaiah," 101.

23 See A.W. Day, *Lifted Up and Glorified. Isaiah's Servant Language in the Gospel of John* (Diss. The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Louisville, KY 2016) 140.

4.4. Jesus as the Servant of YHWH in John 12:37–38

The character of the Servant of YHWH fulfils the required criteria. There is, however, another reference which serves to support this argument. In John 12:37–38 we read: οὐκ ἐπίστευον εἰς αὐτόν, ἵνα ὁ λόγος Ἡσαΐου τοῦ προφήτου πληρωθῇ ὃν εἶπεν· κύριε, τίς ἐπίστευσεν τῇ ἀκοῇ ἡμῶν; καὶ ὁ βραχίων κυρίου τίνι ἀπεκαλύφθη; this is an obvious quote from the Fourth Song: κύριε, τίς ἐπίστευσεν τῇ ἀκοῇ ἡμῶν; καὶ ὁ βραχίων κυρίου τίνι ἀπεκαλύφθη; (Isa 53:1). Therefore, the author of the Gospel explicitly connects Jesus with the figure of the Servant of YHWH from the Fourth Song.²⁴

4.5. Identification of Jesus with ἀμνός from Isa 53:7 in Acts 8:32

In Acts 8, during Philip's interaction with the Ethiopian eunuch, Jesus is not only identified as the Lamb from Isaiah but also explicitly connected to the broader context of the Fourth Song of the Servant of YHWH. Let us quote this passage in full (where the emphasized text represents a quotation from Isa 53:7–8):

προσδραμών δὲ ὁ Φίλιππος ἤκουσεν αὐτοῦ ἀναγινώσκοντος Ἡσαΐαν τὸν προφήτην καὶ εἶπεν· ἀρὰ γε γινώσκεις ἃ ἀναγινώσκεις; ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· πῶς γὰρ ἂν δυναίμην ἔάν μὴ τις ὀδηγήσει με; παρεκάλεισέν τε τὸν Φίλιππον ἀναβάντα καθίσει σὺν αὐτῷ. ἡ δὲ περιοχὴ τῆς γραφῆς ἣν ἀνεγίνωσκεν ἦν αὕτη· ὡς πρόβατον ἐπὶ σφαγὴν ἤχθη καὶ ὡς ἀμνός ἐναντίον τοῦ κείραντος αὐτὸν ἀφῶνος, οὕτως οὐκ ἀνοίγει τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ. Ἐν τῇ ταπεινώσει [αὐτοῦ] ἡ κρίσις αὐτοῦ ἤρθη· τὴν γενεὰν αὐτοῦ τίς διηγῆσεται; ὅτι αἴρεται ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς ἡ ζῶη αὐτοῦ. ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ εὐνοῦχος τῷ Φίλιππῳ εἶπεν· δέομαί σου, περὶ τίνος ὁ προφήτης λέγει τοῦτο; περὶ ἐαυτοῦ ἢ περὶ ἑτέρου τινός; ἀνοίξας δὲ ὁ Φίλιππος τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ τῆς γραφῆς ταύτης εὐηγγελισατο αὐτῷ τὸν Ἰησοῦν. (Acts 8:30–35)

We observe, therefore, that the association of Jesus with the figure of the Servant of YHWH, which centred on the comparison to the Isaian lamb led to slaughter, was a motif known among first-century followers of Jesus.²⁵

5. Jesus as Isaiah's Lamb

The evidence provided above strongly suggests that John the Baptist's identification of Jesus as ὁ ἀμνός τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου should primarily be understood as a reference to the Fourth Song of the Servant of YHWH. The identification of Jesus with Isaiah's lamb by no means excludes a simultaneous secondary reference to the Paschal lamb.

24 For further references to the Isaian Servant in John, see C.A. Evans, "Isaiah 53 in the Letters of Peter, Paul, Hebrews, and John," *The Gospel According to Isaiah 53. Encountering the Suffering Servant in Jewish and Christian Theology* (eds. D.L. Bock – M. Glaser) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel 2012) 160–167.

25 See also 1 Pet 2:22–24. Craig S. Keener raises the possibility that these texts "hark back to Jesus' self-definition as presented in Mark 10:45 and 14:24" where "an allusion to Is 53 is present, albeit not in its LXX form." As he points out, traditions reflected in these texts would have been widely accepted by the time of the Fourth Gospel (C.S. Keener, *The Gospel of John* [Peabody, MA: Baker Academic 2003] I, 453).

Such a two-dimensional symbolism is attested in John, who, for instance, pictures the cross as a sign of both exaltation and humiliation (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32).²⁶

6. Conclusion: ὁ αἴρων in John 1:29 as “who carries”

Having established that John’s metaphor should be understood mainly as an intertextual reference to the Fourth Song of the Servant of YHWH, we can now come back to the main issue of this article – the meaning of the verb αἴρω in John 1:29. As Raymond E. Brown aptly stated: “If the Lamb is the Servant, then John’s phrase is patterned after the Servant of Yahweh.”²⁷ The Servant is described as: οὗτος τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν φέρει καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν ὀδυνάται (Isa 53:4); τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν αὐτὸς ἀνοίσει (Isa 53:11); αὐτὸς ἁμαρτίας πολλῶν ἀνήνεγκεν καὶ διὰ τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν παρεδόθη (Isa 53:12). It is evident that the way in which the Servant of YHWH neutralizes the sin is by “taking it upon himself.” Thus, if we have to choose between two meanings of the verb αἴρω, we should opt for the meaning “to carry,” and the phrase ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου (John 1:29) should be translated not by “who takes away the sin of the world” but “who carries the sin of the world.” This conclusion may be particularly important for those interested in the liturgy of the Holy Mass.

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²⁶ “A polyvalent symbol pointing not only to elements of the Paschal lamb in his death but also to his role as a servant who goes to his death as a lamb led to slaughter” (R.E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah. From Gethsemane to the Grave. I. A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1998] 416). Cf. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 451 – who likewise points out the Fourth Gospel’s “penchant for *double entendres*.”

²⁷ Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 55.

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