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"THE LAMB OF GOD" IN PRE-CHRISTIAN TEXTS

*"Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son
of the Eternal Father." (1 Nephi 11:21)*

One of Nephi's favorite titles for Jesus Christ was "the Lamb of God." Forty-four references to "the Lamb" appear in Nephi's vision in 1 Nephi 11-14 alone. Aside from the Latter-day Saint understanding of a similar reference in Moses 7:47 and perhaps Isaiah 53:7, what evidence supports the Old World origins of this terminology?

In a 1979 article, recently selected as one of the most illuminating studies on the background of the New Testament, J. C. O'Neill contends that the phrase *Lamb of God* was not a Christian invention, as some scholars have supposed, but was rooted in earlier Jewish language and imagery.¹ His main evidence comes from the *Testament of Joseph*, a Jewish text probably from the second century B.C.

O'Neill reasons, for example, that no Christian editor would have added the references to the Lamb of God to the Jewish *Testament of Joseph* 19, because doing so would presuppose two Messiahs (the lion and the lamb figures), a non-Christian tradition that would detract from Christ's preeminence in the work of salvation.

The ancient roots of *Testament of Joseph* 19 are further evident when that text is compared with the visions in 1 Nephi and related passages in the Book of Mormon:

1. The author of *Testament of Joseph* 19 learned of the coming Lamb in a dream. Lehi saw in a dream the same vision that Nephi saw, a vision featuring the Lamb of God (see 1 Nephi 11:1, 20–21, 24, 27–36).

2. *Testament of Joseph* 19 describes the scattering of the twelve tribes (compare 1 Nephi 10:12–13; 11:35–12:1).

3. Nephi and the author of *Testament of Joseph* 19 behold a virgin, mother of the Lamb (see 1 Nephi 11:13–21).

4. The “robe of fine linen” in *Testament of Joseph* 19 recalls the virgin’s description in 1 Nephi 11:15 as “beautiful and fair” and the white robe in 1 Nephi 8:5 and 14:19.

5. The beautiful mother gives birth to a “spotless lamb” in *Testament of Joseph* 19 and to “the Son of God” in 1 Nephi 11:18.

6. In *Testament of Joseph* 19 the Lion (Judah?) was found on the Lamb’s left hand and proved ineffective, leaving the Lamb to destroy the beast alone (compare 1 Nephi 11:31, 33; 14:13, 15).

7. Both texts prophesy that evil will be destroyed in the last days (see 1 Nephi 11:36; 13:37; 14:14–17).

8. In *Testament of Joseph* 19 the faithful rejoice and are exhorted by their father to keep the commandments of God, common themes in the Book of Mormon (see 1 Nephi 8:38; 2 Nephi 1:16; 2:30).

9. In *Testament of Joseph* 19 Joseph’s posterity is to honor Judah and Levi, the Jews in Jerusalem (compare 1 Nephi 14:8; 2 Nephi 3:12; 29:4–6).

10. Both texts recognize that salvation through the Lamb will come “by grace” (2 Nephi 25:23), saving Gentiles and Israelites (see 1 Nephi 13:42–14:2) by taking away the “sin of the world” (*Testament of Joseph* 19; compare 1 Nephi 11:33).

When John the Baptist announced Christ’s approach with the words “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), he was no doubt

using a distinctive messianic title already familiar to the Jews of his day. Although modern Christian readers may consider Nephi's use of the phrase *Lamb of God* centuries before the Christian era to be anachronistic, the parallels between the Book of Mormon and *Testament of Joseph* 19 confirm O'Neill's position on the pre-Christian antiquity of the phrase. Thus John was not the first to use it in reference to Christ; and John and Nephi, as well as Isaiah, may have been drawing on earlier common sources.

Research by John W. Welch, originally published as a FARMS Update in Insights (August 1998): 2.

NOTE

1. See J. C. O'Neill, "The Lamb of God in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 2 (1979): 2-30. Reprinted in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *New Testament Backgrounds* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), part of a series that collects the best articles from the first fifty issues (1978-93) of the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*.