2

The Roar of the Lion – Mark's Jesus

The lion's appearance

Symbolism and meaning

The opening of any ancient biography usually tried to say something about who the subject was and where he came from. Often the first words included the subject's name, and, perhaps, a brief comment about his family, ancestry or home town. Unlike modern biography, however, there was no need to cover the birth, all the early life, and education in great detail. Often, the narrative moved swiftly through several decades to the subject's arrival on the public scene.

Mark's opening is uncompromising and direct: `The beginning of the gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mk. 1.1). Who is this person and where does he come from? We are not told - just the subject's name, as in many ancient Lives. Mark may give us some information in the titles for Jesus: `Christ' is the Greek translation of the Hebrew `Messiah', someone who `has been anointed'. While Paul's letters use `Christ' as almost a surname for Jesus (as here), elsewhere Mark uses it as a title, `the Christ' (e.g. 8.29; 14.61; 15.32). Furthermore, the phrase `the Son of God' is missing in some ancient manuscripts; modern editors disagree whether it was in Mark's original. So, we begin simply with the name of Jesus: there are no birth stories, no mention of Bethlehem, and no genealogy or Davidic ancestry. Mark does not have time for these preliminaries. Jesus just arrives

fully grown, of indeterminate age, from Nazareth to be baptized by John in the Jordan (1.9). One is reminded of Aslan, the great lion in The Chronicles of Narnia of C. S. Lewis, who suddenly appears from over the sea without warning but exactly when he is needed: `Aslan was among them though no one had seen him coming.' (C. S. Lewis, The Horse and His Boy, Puffin/Penguin, 1965, p.182).

Thus we come to the lion symbol for St Mark. Since the Fathers usually link the symbols to the opening of each gospel, the lion is a symbol of John the Baptist, the `voice crying in the wilderness'. Others suggest that the lion, as king of the beasts, represents Jesus' royal power in Mark. While the lion is often seen as kingly in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, this is not the main image in the Bible. The earthy wisdom of Proverbs compares the roar of a lion to a king's anger (19.12; 20.2), and even to a wicked ruler (28.15; see also Zeph. 3.3). More commonly, the lion is seen as a predator suddenly appearing out of the forest to attack flocks (1 Sam. 17.34-37) or human beings (1 Kings 13.24-26); the Psalmist uses lions as symbols of his enemies (Pss. 17.12; 22.13).When the prophets liken God to a lion, it is as a symbol of judgement and destruction, rather than royalty (Jer. 49.19; 50.44; Hosea 13.7-8), and a cause of lamentation (Lam. 3.10). The lion is thus an uncomfortable image in the Bible and not the most obvious choice for `Gentle Jesus, meek and mild'! However, let us see what happens if we read Mark's story with the image of Jesus as a lion before us. After all, we are often told that `Aslan is not a tame lion' - even if, surprisingly, that exact phrase never occurs in C. S. Lewis' books!

The bounding lion

Mark's style, structure and narrative technique

Whenever Aslan does appear in the Narnia stories, he dashes from place to place as he is needed in great leaps and bounds: `he rushes on and on, never missing his footing, never hesitating' (The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Puffin/Penguin, 1959, p. 150). So too in Mark's first chapter. The opening stories concern John the Baptist's ministry and preaching (1.4-8) and the baptism of Jesus (1.9-11), both substantially briefer than Matthew or Luke's account. Then we have a brief mention of temptation (1.12-13) with no narrative - although there is the interesting note, unique to Mark, that Jesus was `with the wild beasts'! Then, lion-like, Jesus bounds off into his work - proclaiming the kingdom of God and repentance (1.14-15), forming a group of disciples (1.16-20) and engaging in a teaching and healing ministry, the man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue (1.21-28), Peter's mother-in-law (1.29-31), many others who are sick or possessed (1.32-34), going round the towns and synagogues of Galilee (1.35-39) and healing a leper (1.40-45). The sheer pace of it all is unrelenting. This material occupies several chapters in Matthew and Luke, but here Jesus rushes around just like a bounding lion. It all happens `and immediately', `at once' or `straight away', which are all translations of kai euthus, which occurs 11 times in chapter 1 alone (vv. 10, 12, 18, 20, 21, 23, 28, 29, 30, 42, 43), and is linked with `make his paths straight' (eutheias, 1.3). No wonder he had to get up very early to pray in v. 35! This pace continues, with euthus occurring over 40 times in Mark, about as often as the rest of the New Testament put together.

Pace and vividness are also imparted by Mark's predilection for the use of the `historic present', dropping into the vivid present tense when narrating a story in past time. It is like the way older people often tell a story from a long time ago, `before the war', yet use the present tense: `So I says to her . . .' It makes it more real somehow, and brings the past into our present. After the past narrative of John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism in 1.4-11, the Greek

of v. 12 changes into the present for `immediately the Spirit drives him out into the wilderness' before returning to past verbs for the rest of that story; similarly, `they entered' Peter's house where his mother-in-law `was lying' in bed, but `immediately they tell him about her' (1.30). Occasionally this can help bring any story suddenly alive, but Mark does it 151 times in his gospel, which perhaps is a trifle excessive! This is why many English versions do not translate these as present tenses, remaining in past time. Unfortunately this means that we miss Mark's vividness and pace: no one knows where the lion comes from, or where he is going as he leaps on.

This sense of urgency can also be seen in Mark's use of time. While Luke carefully anchors his account in Roman and Jewish civil and religious dates (Lk. 3.1-2) and John implies a ministry of a couple of years (with three Passovers in Jn. 2.13; 6.4; 12.1/13.1), for Mark the time is always now and things are urgent. Apart from the forty days in the wilderness (1.13), his account could be fitted into one month, including the gap of `six days' in 9.2. Mark tends to describe a busy day in some detail, with episode following episode `immediately', followed by vague and general summaries indicating a lapse of time for similar teaching or healing: for example, `he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons' (1.39) presumably does not mean that Jesus did this all on the same day!

The majority of the `immediately's' occur during the first half of the gospel, which helps to build up this impression of a fast-moving ministry. Mark's gospel is structured around Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah, marking the turning point at 8.27-30. There are paragraphs acting as a kind of `hinge' linking the major sections (like 1.14-15 after the beginning or 8.22-26 at the mid-point). The gospel was designed to be read out loud, rather than for detailed written analysis, and these links prepare the listener for the change of gear. It is like a symphony's initial flurry of violins scurrying around in chapter 1 with this pace continuing through the first movement set in Galilee for Jesus' ministry of healing and exorcism, proclaiming the kingdom and achieving some success up to 8.26. Then things change to a more leisurely pace for the middle section as Jesus' identity and destiny become clearer en route to Jerusalem under the

lengthening shadow of the Cross, 8.27-10.52. The third movement balances the first by picking up the pace again to describe only one week, the last days set in Jerusalem, with no exorcisms or healing and the kingdom theme changing into the Cross and Passion. It is as though the lion rushes around at first, pauses to regain his strength and then moves purposefully ahead to the kill - and we shall follow this pattern below.

However, the pace of the opening chapter must not blind us to Mark's narrative artistry. Like a good storyteller, he grabs our attention through these fast-moving cameos - but subtly introduces many of his important themes, like a composer sketching out the major motifs for his symphony. We begin with Jesus' baptism in 1.9-11. The next time baptism appears, Jesus uses it as a metaphor for his death, asking James and John if they can `be baptized with the baptism that I am to be baptized with' (10.38-39). Furthermore, in Mark's account the heavens are `torn apart' (schizo in Greek, giving us schism), unlike the milder `opened' (anoigo) in Matthew (3.16) and Luke (3.21); the only other time Mark uses this word is when the curtain of the Temple is `torn apart' at Jesus' death in 15.38. Significantly, the tearing of the heavens is followed by a voice from heaven saying that Jesus is `my beloved Son' (1.11); the tearing of the Temple veil leads into the declaration by the centurion, `Truly, this man was the Son of God' (15.39). Despite its brevity and pace, the opening scene is linked to the final scene fifteen chapters later: like a pair of bookends, the baptism and the crucifixion mark the `beginning of the good news of Jesus' (1.1), and his end. Jesus appears suddenly, from nowhere, to be baptized - and he is baptized in order to die.

If Mark's overture suggests that the cross will be the major thread, it also tries out secondary themes. Jesus' identity is declared by the voice from heaven; as the Son of God, he engages in preaching, teaching and healing for the rest of this chapter - and these will be his main activities as the story progresses. However, he also encounters conflict at both the supernatural level in the wilderness (1.12-13), and from human beings, who are amazed and question his authority (1.27). He calls disciples (1.16-20), yet forbids both demons and humans to declare his identity (1.34, 44). These are all motifs which will recur regularly as events unfold.

Finally, we need to consider Mark's style and narrative techniques as he builds up his portrait of Jesus. Mark used to be criticized for his poor Greek and bad style; more recently, commentators have noted the way in which his manner of writing reflects the directness of his account. It is unlikely that Greek was his first language: usually, Greek prose narrative flows along with each section connected carefully together. Mark links no fewer than eighty-eight sections of his gospel with the simple word `and'; the technical literary term for this is parataxis. A further nineteen sections have no link at all, and this is called asyndeton, `unlinked'. While both of these stylistic features betray Semitic influence, suggesting that Mark is thinking in Aramaic, none the less they move the story quickly on and build up the pace. Mark's style is brief and terse, preferring concrete action to abstract discourse; it is colloquial, designed for easy listening rather than for the close attention required by a written text. As in much spoken material, Mark frequently combines related nouns and verbs (pleonasm) to get the point across: see for example the repetition of teach-taught-teaching in 1.21-22 or 4.1-2 - no one can fail to recognize Jesus as teacher. The lion does not deliver polished oratory: he roars - and the message is clear!

One narrative technique worth noting is the so-called Markan `sandwich' where one story provides the `filling' between two pieces of `bread'. Thus, the accusation that Jesus is empowered by Satan (3.22-30) is sandwiched between the unbelief of his own family (3.20-21 and 31-35). Similarly, Jesus' cursing and the subsequent barrenness of the fig tree surround his clearing out of the Temple, implying that it too is cursed and barren (11.12-20); the woman's loving response in anointing Jesus is contrasted with the plotting taking place around it (14.1-11). In each case, the story on the inside illuminates the surrounding narrative, by way of commentary, comparison or contrast. Other sandwiches include 5.21-43, 6.6-30 and 14.54-72.

In the sandwich the third element repeats the first, giving a 1-2-1 formation. Elsewhere, Mark forms groups of three, developing the intensity or development, 1-2-3, in case the listener missed the point the first time. Thus, we have three boat scenes with the disciples (4.35-41; 6.45-52; 8.14-21) where Luke only has the first one, and Matthew leaves out the boat in the third one; either the later evangelists do not share Mark's enthusiasm for

three, or Mark is making a point about how slowly the disciples catch on! The three Passion predictions become progressively more detailed (8.31; 9.31; 10.32-34). The three commands to `keep awake and watch' in 13.33-37 are matched by the tired disciples' three sleeps in Gethsemane (14.37, 40, 41). In the Passion, Peter denies Jesus three times, building in vehemence in 14.66-72; Pilate asks the crowd three questions in 15.9, 12, and 14; and there are three time references at three-hourly intervals when Jesus is on the Cross, the third (15.25), sixth (15.33) and ninth hours (15.34). This threefold pattern is not coincidence; it is all part of Mark's careful building up of the pace and sequence of his story of Jesus.

So, through all these features - the opening rush, the frequent use of `and immediately', the compression of time and use of present tenses, the careful structure, the simple style with its sandwiches and threefold patterns - Mark conveys a clear impression of Jesus' pace, and the urgency of his task. No bounding lion ever moved so quickly, and, like Aslan, none may delay him:

> `Lucy said crossly, "Wait a minute." "Daughter of Eve," said Aslan in a graver voice, "others also are at the point of death." ... and for the next half an hour they were busy.' (C. S. Lewis, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Puffin/Penguin, 1959, p. 163).

The beast of conflict

Opposition and ministry, Mark 1—8

One thing is clear about lions in every age and culture: they are powerful fighters with a keen sense of territory. After the opening flurry of chapter 1, Jesus starts to roam far and wide around the northern territories by the sea of Galilee: Capernaum (1.21; 2.1); Galilee itself (1.39); the Greek territory of the Gerasenes and the Decapolis (5.1, 20; 7.31); Nazareth (6.1); Gennesaret (6.53); Tyre and Sidon (7.24, 31); Dal- manutha (8.10); Bethsaida (8.22); Caesarea Philippi (8.27), Galilee and Capernaum again (9.30, 33), before eventually heading south for Judea and the road to Jerusalem (10.1, 32). There are about forty scene changes while he roams up and down the land: mountains and deserts, grainfields and pasture-land, the river and the sea, boats and synagogues, publicly outdoors and within private houses. Thus, we can add a sense of space to the pace already noted: not only does the lion bound around with urgency because the time is short, but also he covers huge tracts of land, crossing and recrossing ground, seeking out those who need him, and roaring his message.

This major section from 1.16 to 8.26 is taken up with accounts of Jesus' ministry through his teaching and his miracles. Both activities immediately raise the question of his authority: he teaches as one with authority (1.22), while the obedience of unclean spirits to his authority amazes the crowd (1.27). However, right at the start his teaching and miracles lead to a conflict of authority with the religious leaders (2.10).

Mark stresses Jesus as teacher in the repeated noun-verb combinations in 1.21-22 and 4.1-2, and in his little `summary' passages (e.g. 1.14; 1.39; 4.1; 6.6; 6.34). Jesus is regularly addressed as `Teacher' both by his disciples (4.38) and those who seek his help (5.35; 9.17). Mark preserves the use of the Jewish term `Rabbi' by Peter (9.5; 11.21) and by Judas at the moment of betrayal (14.45). Surprisingly, however, little actual teaching is recorded

here. We have really only four parables: the sower (4.1-20), the seed growing secretly (4.26-29 - occurring only in Mark), the mustard seed (4.30-32) and the tenants of the vineyard (12.1-12). On the other hand, the sheer mass of teaching material in Matthew and Luke - both parables and sections of direct teaching - is probably derived from their shared `Sayings' source, Q (see pages 11, 12 above). While Q seems to have had no narrative, Mark is the opposite - lots of narrative, but little teaching. Any direct teaching given by Jesus emerges in dialogue with the religious leaders in response to their questions (2.15-28, 3.23-30 and 7.1-23). There is no systematic account of Jesus' teaching in Mark, despite calling him `Teacher'. Mark's Jesus is a creature of action.

In contrast to his few parables, Mark contains seventeen miracles, which, allowing for his shorter length, is proportionally more than any other gospel. They include exorcisms (1.23-26; 5.1-20), healings (1.30-31, 40-44; 2.1-12; 3.1-5; 5.22-34, 35-43; 7.25-30, 32-37; 8.22-26), and power over nature itself (4.36-41; 6.35-44, 47-51; 8.1-9). The vast majority take place in this first half of the gospel, with only the exorcism of the epileptic boy (9.14-29), and the granting of sight to Bartimaeus (10.46-52) taking place after the turning point. In addition, the first half also includes summary statements about Jesus' regular ministry of healing and exorcism (1.32-34; 1.39; 3.10-12; 6.5; 6.55-56). Mark's terminology gives us a clue: unlike John or Luke, he never describes Jesus' acts as `signs' or `wonders'. Only the Pharisees and `this generation' seek signs (8.11-13); it is false Christs who perform signs and wonders to lead the elect astray (13.22). Instead, Mark prefers the term dunamis for Jesus' miracles (6.2, 5, 14), `mighty acts' of power - literally, dynamite! The lion is indeed an appropriate symbol for Mark's Jesus: these powerful acts are carried out by a powerful creature - but they lead him into conflict.

This is best exemplified in Mk. 3.19b-35. It begins with Jesus going `eis oikon' after choosing his disciples. This phrase can mean `into a house', but because his family soon appear, it probably means that `he went home'. The enthusiasm of the crowd even prevents Jesus from taking a meal break (v. 20), a contrast to the hostile reactions which follow. For now his family appear, to restrain him because they believe Jesus to be mad (v. 21). Then

the story is interrupted by the scribes accusing Jesus of being possessed by the devil, and Jesus' response, describing the cosmic conflict in graphic terms (vv. 22-30). Finally, his mother and brothers get a message to him through the crowd (vv. 31-32). Rather than going to see them, Jesus curtly dismisses their claim upon him: `whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother' (vv. 33-35).

This is a typical Markan `sandwich', the 1-2-1 formation discussed above. He is implying a link between the different reactions from the crowd, the family, and the scribes. Furthermore, Jesus' family oppose him just as much as the authorities - and they are all caught up in the cosmic conflict with Satan and risking blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (v. 29). Strong stuff, indeed! It is too strong for Matthew and Luke: they dismantle Mark's 1-2-1 formation and link the central section describing Jesus' argument with the scribes about Beelzebul with other material about seeking signs and unclean spirits (Matt. 12.22-45; Lk. 11.14-32, presumably from Q). Both Matthew and Luke completely omit from their gospels Mark's opening section about Jesus' family considering him mad (Mk. 3.20-21); since very few of Mark's verses are omitted by them both in this way, this indicates clearly how Matthew and Luke find this idea too hard to stomach. Matthew does have Mark's final section about Jesus rejecting the family's request at the end of his controversy section (Matt. 12.46-50), but Luke moves it to several chapters earlier, where it is unconnected with anything else (Lk. 8.19-21).

Matthew and Luke both begin their gospels with stories about Jesus' family and his birth; Mark does not - Jesus bounds on to the stage like a lion, fully grown. Matthew and Luke tone down the conflict between Jesus and his family; Mark deliberately links it to the other opposition to Jesus from the authorities and the cosmic battle with Satan. When the lion cub is fully grown, he has to leave his family, probably after a tussle or two, and go off to form his own pride.

Conflict is central to most good stories; it provides the power and tension to the narrative as the hero overcomes his difficulties to reach his goal or win his prize. The final resolution of the conflict usually forms the climax of the story. Mark's Jesus is a powerful figure who bounds on to the stage and

declares that the moment is NOW! As Jesus roams the length and breadth of the northern territories, Mark gradually charts the build up of his battle with all that opposes him, which will lead to the climax on a cross in Jerusalem. Unlike Matthew and Luke, he is not afraid to show the conflict beginning even within Jesus' own family. It spreads to his home town, where his former friends and neighbours' lack of faith means that Jesus `could do no powerful act there' (Mk. 6.1-6; compare Matthew's lighter, `Jesus did not do many mighty works there', Matt.13.58).

The conflict with the authorities began when they questioned Jesus' authority to forgive the paralytic (2.6-8). Mark then strings a number of conflict stories together about Jesus' choice of sinners as followers and his activity on the Sabbath, until he provokes the Pharisees and Herodians, not normally known for being allies, to conspire together against him (2.13-3.6). From then on we have various references to their hidden plots (3.6; 11.18; 12.12; 14.1-2) and their open arguments with Jesus (7.1-15; 8.11-15; 10.1-12; 11.27-33; 12.13-40).

However, the centrepiece of Mark's 1-2-1 formation of 3.19b-35 reveals that the true conflict is greater than family or human authorities: it is with the devil himself. It is hard to imagine a more graphic image of conflict than Jesus likening himself to a burglar entering a strong man's house to tie him up and plunder his property (3.27). The conflict with Satan begins in the desert, where, instead of Matthew and Luke's debates about Jesus' identity, Mark tersely states that he was `tested by Satan'; non-human elements are emphasized by the wild beasts and angels (1.13). This dimension rapidly confronts Jesus in the synagogue, where one unclean spirit speaks for them all, `What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?' (1.23-27). Jesus' power is shown as this spirit obeys him (1.27), and by various summaries of his exorcisms (1.32-34, 39; 3.11, 22). A legion of demons is cast out and drowned in the Gerasenes' pigs (5.1-20) and Jesus shares this conflict and his authority with his disciples (6.7, 13); sometimes the battle is so hard that only his power gained through prayer is successful (9.14-29). Jesus' power and the violence of the conflict are also demonstrated in his control over the storms of nature (4.35-41; 6.46-52).

Although Mark calls Jesus `Teacher', he gives little actual teaching. His Jesus is a powerful figure, working acts of dynamite, which bring him into conflict with his own family and town and with the religious leaders. He is indeed a beast of conflict, a lion roaming territory to establish his control over the real source of opposition, the devil himself, likened by Mark's traditional teacher, Peter, to a lion (1 Peter 5.8). Mark sets a lion to conquer a lion, and his Jesus is more powerful.

The lion and his pride

The role of the disciples

A lion must have his pride - and a rabbi, his disciples. However, are Jesus' disciples his `pride and joy'? On the one hand, they are the people Jesus calls to share his roamings and his battles; on the other hand, their attention seems frequently to wander off, and Jesus has a constant battle to make them understand. So what are we to make of Mark's picture of Jesus' closest friends and followers?

The disciples are called `immediately' and they obey and follow him (1.16-20), as does Levi (2.14). During the first half of the gospel, they witness all the relentless activity of Jesus, rushing around with him, listening to his teaching and sharing his conflicts. Jesus chooses `those whom he wanted ... to be with him', as his named apostles, to do all that he does - to preach and teach, exorcize and heal (3.13-15). At first, they do this with him; then, like any good teacher, he sends them out to practise on their own (6.7-13), followed by a `report back' (6.30-3 1). Mark is keen on three-fold patterns in his narrative, and here we have the three classic steps of discipleship: to be called, to be chosen and to be sent out.

This is all positive. After the misunderstanding of Jesus' family and the conflict with the authorities, here are some people who respond positively to Jesus, relieving the gloom and opposition. As 4.11-12 makes clear, things are hidden to those outside, but the disciples are given the `secret of the kingdom of God' - the musterion, `mystery'. Unfortunately, during the next few chapters, things become a bit of a mystery to the poor disciples. It begins with Jesus' question `do you not understand?' (4.13) - and the frustration in his voice grows: `they did not understand' (6.52); `do you also fail to understand?' (7.18); `do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?' (8.17-18). Even after Peter's flash of divine inspiration

recognizing Jesus as Messiah (8.29), he quickly slips back into misunderstanding Jesus' prediction of his Passion and has to be rebuked, `Get behind me, Satan!' (8.33); elsewhere in Mark, it is demons and violent winds which are `rebuked' by Jesus (1.25; 4.39; 9.25). A week later, at the transfiguration, Peter babbles inane suggestions out of terror (9.5-6), and when they come down the mountain, they find that the other disciples have failed to help the epileptic demoniac (9.18, 28). Meanwhile, James and John think the whole point of discipleship is to get the best seats in heaven - not realizing that Jesus' throne is to be a cross (10.35-45).

After the three-fold pattern of being called, chosen and sent out, now the disciples fail in threes as well. Their apparent lack of faith and understanding is repeatedly lamented by Jesus in the three boat scenes (4.40-41; 6.50-52; 8.14-21). They cannot comprehend the three Passion predictions, despite the increasing detail (8.32-33; 9.32; 10.32-41). Eventually, they fall asleep in Gethsemane three times (14.37, 40, 41) and are involved in three final actions - betrayal by Judas, denial by Peter and abandonment of Jesus by them all (14.43-6, 50, 66-72). No one can accuse Mark of not making the point clear! Once again, it is too clear for Matthew and Luke; as with their versions of Mark's account of Jesus' family, so here also they tone down the disciples' failure. Luke omits Peter's misunderstanding and Jesus' rebuke (Lk. 9.18-22), while Matthew changes the exorcist's `rebuked' into the milder `he said to Peter' (Matt. 16.23)! As for James and John asking for the seats of honour, Luke leaves it out completely, while Matthew has their mother make the request (Matt. 20.20-22). Matthew and Luke are not alone in suggesting that Mark has been harsh on the poor disciples. Some modern commentators suggest that the disciples get such a bad press in Mark that there must be a deliberate attack or polemic here against them; it is suggested that perhaps they represent some group of leaders opposed to Mark's community.

However, this does not explain all the positive material about the disciples being called, chosen and sent out, and having the secret of the kingdom revealed to them (4.11-12). Despite their increasing obtuseness, Jesus continues to explain `everything in private to his disciples' (4.34); he gives them the little direct teaching Mark contains about clean food and unclean

thoughts (7.17-23), the meaning of discipleship as self-denial (8.34-38; 9.30-50; 10.23-31, 35-45), the power of prayer (11.20-25), and the End-times (13). Despite his subsequent misunderstanding, it is still Peter who makes the Messianic confession (8.29); it is Peter, and James and John, despite their desire for self-advancement, whom Jesus invites to witness the transfiguration (9.2-8), and watch with him in the garden (14.33).

The fact is that, unlike the opponents of Jesus who are seeking to trap him, the disciples in Mark do want to understand and they do want to follow; it is as though it all gets too much too fast for them. If the lion has to roar at them for their slowness, it may also be because he is rushing on ahead to face the climax of his struggle. There is something in Mark's account which invites the reader's sympathy for their terror on the mountain (9.6) and their exhaustion in the garden: `the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak' (14.38). Yes, they deserted him and fled - but he said they would (14.50 and 27). Yes, Peter denied him - after he had `followed at a distance' when the others had fled (14.54); his rash love for Jesus prompted his promise to follow (14.29), and that same rashness led him into the high priest's courtyard where his nerve finally failed. Despite all the failures, the disciples' story is left open at the end of Mark. Unlike the other gospels, there is no resurrection appearance to bring them restoration - just Jesus' promise to `go before you to Galilee' (14.28), confirmed by the man in white (16.7).

Thus, in its openness, the disciples' story becomes our story. Will they go to Galilee? Will we? If we are using biography as a key to understanding the gospels, it makes more sense to see the disciples' incomprehension in Mark as telling us more about his portrait of Jesus than about the disciples: he is someone whom people find hard to understand and tough to follow - so perhaps the audience can take comfort if they too sometimes find discipleship difficult. The lion roars and rushes on ahead. At the very end of the Narnia stories, Aslan leads them all in a headlong chase into his country: "`Come farther in! Come farther up!" he shouted over his shoulder. But who could keep up with him at that pace?' (C. S. Lewis, The Last Battle, Puffin/Penguin, 1964, p. 144). Mark's account suggests that disciples of every age struggle to follow the lion; but he promises to meet us in Galilee where he first called and chose us to be his pride - and joy?

What kind of animal is this creature?

Identity and interlude, Mark 8—10

So, everybody misunderstands Jesus during the first half of this gospel - his family (3.21-35), the crowds (4.10-12), the Gerasenes (5.17), his own home town (6.1-6), the religious leaders (7.6; 8.11-12) and even the poor disciples (8.17-18). However, this is hardly surprising: Jesus bounds on to the stage from nowhere and, once he has arrived, he does not make things very clear. The parables are such favourite stories to us today that the `meanings' are clear; but to the first listeners, they would have seemed like riddles. Wandering teachers in the East, then and now, use riddles to force the hearer to think new thoughts in new ways - and Jesus was an expert riddler, that `they may indeed listen, but not understand' (4.12). He was a master of irony - `Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' (3.4) - and paradox - `Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it' (8.45). Thus, Mark's Jesus strikes amazement, fear, and awe into people (e.g. 1.22; 2.12; 5.15; 6.2; 7.37), an inscrutable and enigmatic figure. If the text is transparent to the reader, it is because Mark wants us to understand what he is saying; within his text, the evangelist portrays Jesus baffling opponents and disciples, family and crowds, alike.

So, who is he? He is announced as `Jesus Christ, the Son of God' at the start and this is confirmed by the voice at his baptism (1.1, 11), but only we hear these comments. The wandering rabbi with his band of disciples was a familiar sight in first-century Palestine. There is evidence in the text that many saw him as an apocalyptic or eschatological prophet, announcing the End like so many others of his day (6.14-16; 8.28). None the less, the question of his identity is repeatedly asked: who, or what have we here? (1.27; 4.41; 6.3). Jesus' Messianic identity has been known to us, the audience, since the outset; but when some in the story recognize him, this enigmatic character binds them to secrecy. Jesus silences the demons he

confronts (e.g. 1.25, 34; 3.12) and the people he heals (1.44; 5.43; 7.36). Curiously, in Mark, it is the lion who puts muzzles on people! Yet, the more he tells them to be quiet, the more it is made known.

Mark raises further questions by the titles he uses for Jesus. Jesus is declared `Son of God' by the author (if we accept this reading in 1.1), by the voice from heaven (1.11; 9.7), and by demons (3.11; 5.7) - but by no human being while he is still alive. Instead, despite his secrecy, Jesus is quite happy, openly in the presence of scribes, Pharisees, and disciples alike, to call himself the `Son of Man' (2.10, 28; 8.31, 38; 9.12, 31; 10.33, 45; 13.26; 14.21, 41). Now much scholarly ink has been spilt over the meaning of this phrase recently - but let it suffice to say that in Jesus' own language, Aramaic, it was a roundabout way for people to refer to themselves, as in `one has to earn one's keep, doesn't one?' So, this slightly curious, enigmatic turn of phrase fits Mark's portrayal of a riddling Jesus teasing his audience well - especially if they recall the equally enigmatic reference to `someone like a son of man' coming on the clouds of heaven in Daniel 7.13.

The pivot of Mark's narrative comes in chapter 8. Up to this point, Jesus has been portrayed as a powerful healerexorcist in conflict with practically everyone except his own disciples, and even they are confused. Now the veil is about to be lifted. First, we have a little `hinge' paragraph in which a blind man is healed - but for once, not `immediately': after the first touch from Jesus, he can see, but it is all rather blurred, men look like trees, and he needs a second dose (8.22-26). Significantly, Matthew and Luke both omit this story, probably because Jesus does not get it right first time. However, perhaps Mark is giving us an image of what is about to happen. Jesus asks his disciples about his identity. After various popular hypotheses are given, he presses the point: `And you [in the plural], who do you say I am?', and Peter declares, `You are the Christ' (8.29). The secret is out! The muzzle is off - but only for a moment, for he then `sternly ordered' (the word is used for muzzling demons in 1.25 and 3.12) them to keep it quiet. Instead, he explains `quite openly' with no secrecy, that his Messiahship will involve suffering, rejection and death. For Peter, however, it is like the blind man: a sudden flash of insight, and now this talk of suffering has blurred it all again. So he protests, and receives not so much a second touch, but more of a cuff

around the ear from the lion as Jesus `rebukes' him with the charge of being inspired by Satan (note the exorcist's word again, omitted by Luke and toned down by Matthew).

From here, Mark's structure leads to the Cross, with Jesus' three prophecies of his suffering and death (8.31-32; 9.31-32; 10.33-34) and his teaching about self-denying discipleship for the sake of the kingdom (8.34-38; 9.42-50; 10.23-31, 35-45). The lion is about to become a victim, yet the other side of his identity is not lost. Peter's confession is confirmed by witnessing the transfiguration and the voice declaring Jesus' divine Sonship (9.2-8); and when they return from the mountain-top experience to the harsh reality of the cosmic conflict, Jesus is still powerful enough to triumph where the disciples failed (9.14-29).

So what are we to make of this powerful Son of God/Christ figure winning all his battles on the one hand, and the enigmatic, self-deprecating Son of Man en route to a painfully ignominious death? Has Mark become as confused as he makes the disciples out to be? One recent scholarly view has interpreted Mark's depiction of Jesus as a `reverse aretalogy'. On this basis, Jesus is at first seen as a miracle-wonder-worker, according to the conventions of `aretalogy', which is a kind of biography of a so-called `divine man', theios aner. Mark is trying to show that this is a wrong understanding, providing a corrective Christology with his increasingly dark stress on suffering, leading to the Cross.

While it is true to say that Mark does have a strong theology of suffering, there are problems with this view. First, it is far from certain that there was a single concept of a divine man, or indeed of aretalogy itself, around at this time. Second, it is odd that God's own estimate of Jesus' identity as his Son given through the heavenly voice at his baptism and confirmed at the transfiguration (1.11; 9.7), is somehow `wrong' or in need of correction. Instead of seeing a conflict between the Son of God Christology and the Son of Man Christology, it can be argued that the two are not correctives, but complements to each other, mixing the inward and the outward, the divine and the human, the vindication and the humiliation. Jesus never rejects Peter's acclamation of him as Christ; he just redefines what `Christ' means -

that he should suffer and die. The Cross has overshadowed everything since the start; now it is moving into the foreground. Right at the heart of the gospel, both Jesus' identity and destiny are made manifest - and for those who follow, the path of discipleship will be inevitably cruciform.

This is confirmed by the increasingly detailed prophecies through this middle movement of Mark's symphony (to use our earlier image), and by the way these chapters act as a bridge section geographically. While Jesus roams over the northern territories in the first eight chapters, this material happens on a southward journey. The lion of the north is heading to his lair. Caesarea Philippi, the site of Peter's confession (8.27) is in the extreme north, towards the source of the Jordan. Gradually, we have moved south `on through Galilee' (9.30), and down into Judea (10.1) on the way to Jerusalem (10.32). On this very road Jesus gives his most explicit prediction of his Passion (10.33-34), and prophesies that the ambitious James and John can share his baptism by martyrdom; Christian greatness is seen in service, even as `the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many' (10.35-45).

Finally, another `hinge' passage occurs, like the one which began this section (8.22-26), concerning the healing of a blind man (10.46-52). Mark is making a point by this deliberate repetition, placing this incident carefully as Jesus sets out for the final stage from Jericho to walk up the road to Jerusalem (v. 46). A blind beggar, Bartimaeus, hearing that it is `Jesus of Nazareth', ignores the home town label and calls out a Messianic appeal, `Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me' (v. 47). For the first time, Jesus does not respond with a command for secrecy; it is the crowd who tell Bartimaeus to be quiet (v. 48). Jesus accepts both the acclamation and the beggar, granting his request. This time there is no blurring or second touch: the key word is back, `and immediately (euthus) he regained his sight and followed him en to hodo' (v. 52). This is another example of Mark's riddling: it could just mean `along the road' - and for those still blind, this is the obvious translation. However, the gospel began with the call to `prepare the way' (hodos) and make it `straight' (euthus, 1.2-3).The sower sowed some seed `along the way' (4.4, 15); lest the multitude faint `on the way' (8.3); the disciples were questioned about his identity `on the way' (8.27), and they

disputed about greatness `on the way' (9.33), `the way' which leads to Jerusalem (10.32). Now the middle slow movement is over: Jesus' identity is no secret, the blind see, and follow Jesus `on the way, straightaway' (10.52) - euthus and hodos are reunited, and the pace is hotting up. The lion is off again, heading for his lair, and the reader, with eyes open, had better keep up!

Jerusalem – the lion's lair or robbers' den?

The Temple, Mark 11—13

Mark's gospel is like a symphony in three movements: we rushed through the first half in a flurry of activity, power and conflict, healings and exorcisms (1-8.26); the second movement was an interlude at a slower pace, giving time to consider Jesus' identity, and moving geographically towards Jerusalem. Now we enter the final movement, and both time and space come into play. After his total lack of interest in dates and times so far, Mark carefully orders this final week, day by day:

Holy Week in Mark

Sunday	11.1–11	The entry into Jerusalem and the Temple; departure in the evening (v. 11).
Monday	11.12–19	The fig tree *en route* to Jerusalem; incident in the Temple; departure in the evening (v. 19).
Tuesday	11.20—13.37	The fig tree *en route* to Jerusalem again; discussions in and about the Temple.
Wednesday	14.1–11	Two days before the Passover; the anointing and Judas.
Thursday	14.12–72	One day before the Passover; the Last Supper and arrest.
Friday	15.1–47	The crucifixion and burial of Jesus.
Saturday		The sabbath rest (15.42; 16.1).
Sunday	16.1–8	What happened next.

After the vagueness earlier in Mark's gospel, this attention to time and space is striking; the chronological focus even details hour by hour on Friday (15.1, 25, 33, 34, 42), while spatial awareness concentrates around the Temple (11.11, 15-16, 27; 12.35; 13.1, 3). While Jesus taught daily in the Temple (14.49) there is a growing anti-Temple theme, leading to the accusation that Jesus prophesied its destruction (14.58). As well as these changes of time and space, the content of this final section differs from the rest of the gospel: the healings and exorcisms disappear, the conflict gathers momentum and the teaching moves from the kingdom and discipleship to

questions of authority and suffering. The lion comes to his lair - but finds it is a robbers' den; the king of beasts comes to his throne - but is rejected.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is another example of Mark's ironic riddling. The excuse for the disciples to take the colt - `The master needs it' - implies that the owner has sent them to fetch it; the crowd shout the welcome to pilgrims who come `in the name of the Lord' to a festival in Jerusalem (Ps. 118.26); after Jesus has looked around like any pilgrim (or tourist), he leaves (11.11). Unlike Matthew and Luke, who make this entry the prelude to the `cleansing' of the Temple, Mark has the two events on two separate days. It all seems rather low-key on the surface. However, the word for `the master', ho kurios (v. 3), also means `the Lord' (v. 9); a king has the right to commandeer transport, and, according to the Mishnah (Mishnah, Tractate Sanhedrin, 2.5), a king's horse should be ridden by no one else, as is true of this colt (v. 2); and third, an extra cry is added to the usual pilgrim's welcome: `blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David' (v. 10). Jesus began his walk to Jerusalem with the accolade of the blind man `Son of David'; now, finally, people `prepare the way of the Lord' (1.3) with their cloaks and branches (11.7-8). For those prepared to look closer into Mark's riddle, the irony is made plain; the king comes to claim his kingdom - truly the act of a lion.

Another of Mark's 1-2-1 `sandwich' formations follows: on Monday morning on the way into Jerusalem, Jesus tries to find fruit on a fig tree, although it is not the season for figs - and, rather unreasonably, curses it for being barren (11.12-14); then he clears the money-changers and merchants out of the Temple, and goes home himself (11.15-19); third, the fig tree is discovered to have withered as they come to the Temple the next morning, which causes Jesus to teach about prayer (11.20-25). As before with the 1-2-1 connection of Jesus' family with the Beelzebul controversy, so here also Matthew and Luke do not share Mark's enthusiasm for sandwiches: Luke omits the fig tree altogether at this point (Lk. 19.28-48), preferring to have a parable earlier about someone wanting to destroy a fig tree with no fruit (Lk. 13.6-9), while Matthew places the whole incident the day after the Temple cleansing, so the tree withers immediately it is cursed (Matt. 21.18-19).

The sandwiching of these stories is thus Mark's way of making an illustration clear. The connection is obvious, and it explains Jesus' apparently unreasonable cursing of a fig tree for not producing fruit out of season. The fig tree is still common in Palestine and Syria, and the years it takes to grow and develop made it, and the vines which often grow with it, a natural symbol for prosperity and peace (see 1 Kings 4.25; Micah 4.4). Both plants were frequently used by the prophets as symbols for Israel's fruitfulness in loyal times (Hosea 9.10) and barrenness when unfaithful: `When I wanted to gather them, says the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree' (Jer. 8.13; see also Hos. 9.16; Micah 7.1). So, in Mark's sandwich, the cursing of the fig tree is not pique from a hungry Jesus, but a dramatic illustration of the story in the middle: just as the fig tree is cursed for not bearing fruit, so the Temple is cursed for not being `a house of prayer for all the nations' (11.17). Regardless of the season, the fig tree and the Temple, and all Israel, should have recognized the coming King - and burst into fruit. The other symbol comes in the parable of the tenants of the vineyard producing no fruit (12.1-12), while Jesus later uses the blooming fig tree to symbolize preparing for the master's unexpected coming, regardless of season (13.28-36).

So, Mark's narrative sandwich technique explains not just the `bread' of the fig tree story, but also the `filling' - the demonstration in theTemple (11.15-18).The precise nature and historical consequences of such an act are debated among scholars; it is unlikely that one person could have cleared the Temple courts without being cut down by the Jewish Temple police or the Roman garrison next door. However, the symbolic intention of Jesus' act is clarified, not just by the fig tree symbol, but also by his quotation of a similar protest by Jeremiah in the earlier Temple, prior to its destruction (Jer. 7.1-15). Jesus translates the symbol into direct teaching about the coming destruction of the Temple in the eschatological discourse (13.1-2). Finally, we note the extra layer around the fig tree and the Temple, giving a `double-decker' sandwich: this section is preceded by the entry which raises the question of Jesus' identity and authority (11.1-11), and it is followed by controversy with the Jewish leaders, again about identity and authority (11.27-33). Thus, the whole of chapter 11 is a 0-1-2-1-0 formation, stressing

the urgency of the coming crisis about Jesus' identity and authority to raise the themes for the next two chapters.

Mark 11

vv. 1–11	Entry – who is this?	0
vv. 12–14	Fig tree is cursed	1
vv. 15–19	Temple incident	2
vv. 20–25	Fig tree withered	1
vv. 27–33	Dispute – who is this?	0

In 2.1-3.6, Mark linked together `controversy stories' between Jesus and various Jewish authorities, leading to the Pharisees and Herodians joining forces to plot against him (3.6). Now we have another string of controversy stories (11.27-12.44) as the same unlikely alliance tests Jesus (12.13), but now they are joined by the scribes, chief priests and elders (11.27, stirred into action by his Temple demonstration?), and the Sadducees (12.18). One common link is Jesus' authority, directly raised in 11.28, hinted at - perhaps sarcastically - in 12.14, and referred to by Jesus himself in 12.35-37. However, the theme of bearing fruit also runs from chapter 11 through these stories: like the fig tree and the Temple, the tenants in the vineyard also refuse to give their fruit to God (12.1-12). Jesus the Riddler's clever answer to the riddle about taxes neatly challenges his questioners to `render to God the things that are God's' (12.13-17). One scribe does get things right, agreeing with Jesus that rendering the fruit of love to God and one's neighbour is more important than anything, including the Temple system of sacrifice (Mk. 12.32-34, omitted in Matthew and Luke' accounts, Matt. 22.34-40; Lk. 10.25-28). Finally, after a brief attack by Jesus on the Jewish authorities (12.35-40, which is vastly expanded in Matthew and Luke), this theme comes to a climax with the story of the widow who, unlike all the others, does bear fruit and gives her all to God (12.41-44).

Not bearing fruit brought rejection and destruction for the fig tree and for the tenants. In chapter 13, Jesus leaves the Temple and sits down opposite on the Mount of Olives to prophesy the rejection and destruction not just of the

barren Temple, but of Jerusalem and even the world. The spatial language of `leaving' and `opposing' the Temple (13.1, 3) cannot be accidental. Those who turn their back on a lion tend to be eaten!

Unlike the rest of the gospel, the so-called `Markan Apocalypse' of chapter 13 is a continuous sequence of direct teaching, apparently delivered to a few disciples, but actually aimed at the early church suffering persecution and tribulation. This material, different from the rest of the gospel, was probably collected together at an early stage in the early church; however, Mark was still happy to include it in his gospel here. Its strong theme of suffering may have been appropriate for Mark's audience, especially if they had suffered in the persecutions of Nero at Rome, or were experiencing the horrors of the Jewish War of AD 66-70, leading to the destruction of the Temple.

Mark has obviously reworked it with his typical three somes: there are the three calls to be aware and alert (13.5, 9, 23); three signs of the End (vv. 14, 24, 28), and three calls to be awake (vv. 34, 35, 37). References to the `desolating sacrilege', and learning from the fig tree (13.12, 28) take us back to the sandwich in 11.12-24. The warnings that discipleship will involve suffering (13.9-11) pick up the teaching of the gospel's middle section about taking up the cross (8.34-38; 10.35-45), while the splitting of families (13.12-13) reminds us of Jesus' difficulties with his own family (3.20-35) and his response to Peter (10.28-31). Through it all, the theme of conflict is overriding, from wars and natural disasters (13.7-8) to trials, and the destruction of Jerusalem (13.9-11, 14-16), eventually reaching cosmic proportions (13.24-25). The description of suffering `for my sake' (13.9, 13) and the warning not to confuse the false Christs (13.21-22) with the unexpected arrival of the Son of Man (13.26-36) suggest that the readers will continue the same conflict which Jesus experienced throughout this gospel. So, despite its apparent self-containment, this chapter brings together all the main strands of the gospel so far.

The lion has come to his lair and has been rejected; now he faces the final conflict - and we expect him to respond with a roar and conquer. In fact, he is about to die; but this chapter is placed here to assure us that, whatever

sufferings he or his followers must suffer, on the cosmic level there is another story still being played out where he is king.

In at the kill

The Passion, Mark 14—15

At last we come to the ending - the Markan Passion, a dark scene to which the whole gospel has been leading. Jesus has made his way to Jerusalem, and this geographical concentration has brought the conflict into focus: a lion's story should always end with a kill, but the narrative has warned us that it is the lion who will die. Mark's gospel has been often called a `Passion narrative with a long introduction'; equally, the carefully linked sequence of the Passion was thought to be the only narrative to have come to Mark from his sources. However, attention to Mark's literary skill as an author questions these assumptions. To see 80 per cent of a work as mere introduction is rather an overstatement; equally, however the Passion material came to Mark, the same mind has carefully narrated it to form a fitting climax to his story. The gospel is a life of Jesus - and ancient biography usually gave detailed attention to the subject's death as a way of summing up his life. To go back to the image of our symphony, now all the themes - power and conflict, discipleship and misunderstanding, identity and authority, kingship and suffering - come together to build the final climax.

The lion symbol brings clear images of kingship to us, yet we have seen a tension between the exalted language of Christ and Son of God (from the voice and from demons) and Jesus' preference for Son of Man and suffering language. The appearance of Jesus before the Sanhedrin brings it all together. In another Markan sandwich, Peter is `warming himself at the fire' (14.54 and 67) either side of Jesus' interrogation (14.55-65). A contrast may be implied between the warmth of the fire for Peter and the coldness of the questions to Jesus - but there is an explicit disjunction between the denial by Peter (14.66-72), who had previously confessed Jesus, and affirmation by Jesus of an identity he had previously tried to keep secret. In 14.62 all three titles come together: the High Priest asks Jesus directly, `Are you Christ' (picking up 1.1 and 8.29), `the Son of the Blessed One?' (implying the title

`Son of God' used by the demons and the voice in 1.11 and 9.7; as only a human being, the High Priest still avoids the direct form). Jesus responds with a direct `I am' (echoing the divine name of Exodus 3.14), but then returns to Son of Man, not for riddling humble selfaffirmation, but for the glorious figure of Daniel 7.13. The High Priest's reaction of tearing his clothes emphasizes how stupendous a claim has been made.

The kingly language is full of typical Markan irony throughout this section. It begins with the cries of the crowd (11.10), and it continues with Jesus being anointed by a woman (14.3-9), usually a sign of the crowning of a king (1 Sam. 10.1; 16.13), but which Jesus interprets as anointing for burial (14.8). It comes like a regular refrain through chapter 15: Pilate asks Jesus if he is `King of the Jews', and describes him as this to the crowd (15.9, 12); Jesus is mocked as king by soldiers (15.16-20) and by the scribes and priests (15.32); over his head the execution charge proclaims, `The King of the Jews' (15.26). Mark makes full play of the irony that Jesus is mocked as king, yet that very mockery proclaims his true identity.

Kings are usually in control, and the lion has been actively rushing around - but now things are different. The Greek verb paradidomi, to `hand over' to someone else, is used by Jesus of himself in the second and third Passion predictions (9.31; 10.33), and for the fate of his disciples in the three apocalyptic warnings (13.9, 11, 12). Now it is used about Jesus no less than ten times (14.10, 11, 18, 21, 41, 42, 44; 15.1, 10, 15). Thus, Jesus has become increasingly passive; others are in control now as they `hand him on' from one to another - from Judas to the Jewish leaders to Pilate, and then to the soldiers to be crucified. Typically, Mark heightens the tension by opening up three opportunities for the lion to jump free: in Gethsemane (14.35-36), in Pilate's attempt to release him (15.9), and the mockers ironically pointing out his ability to save himself and come down from the cross (15.30). However, it is all to no avail; he is completely in their power now. Even the bystanders are aggressive, and he is reviled by everyone - the passers-by, the chief priests and scribes, and both of those crucified with him (15.29-32). Ironically, this lack of control asserts the final sovereignty of God as Jesus' opponents actually fulfil his task through the very attempt to stop him by mockery and crucifixion. As the active lion is now passive, so too his roar is

silenced and muzzled: Mark allows Jesus to speak only the requisite three times - to accept his identity from the High Priest and from Pilate (14.62; 15.2), and the final cry of desolation to God (15.34). The rest of the time, he stresses that Jesus was silent (14.61; 15.5). Once again, we are reminded of Aslan as the lion who suffers, whose mane is shaved and jaws are muzzled to be mocked as only a big pussy and who is then killed at the Stone Table (The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Puffin/ Penguin, 1959, pp. 139-40).

The whole scene of the crucifixion itself is one of unrelieved darkness (both metaphorical and physical, 15.33), suffering, abandonment and desolation. Jesus has been gradually abandoned and rejected by everyone; the crowning desolation comes with the only word in Mark spoken from the cross: `My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?', the opening words of Psalm 22. The mocking of Jesus (15.29, 31) also alludes to this Psalm, `All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads' (Ps. 22.6-7). In a recapitulation of the baptism, schizo reappears - but only the veil of the Temple is split this time; the heavens remain closed and the voice of 1.11 and 9.7 is silent now. The ultimate irony is that Jesus' words, as so often before, are again and finally misunderstood: `Listen, he is calling for Elijah' (15.35). So they wait - but no one comes; even this last hope of rescue is dashed and Jesus dies alone, forsaken and rejected (15.37). Here, then, the various threads are brought together: the bounding lion is tied up, the enigmatic prophet is still misunderstood, the disciples' little faith has deserted them, the conflict is lost, and the Son of Man dies as he prophesied. Yet at this moment, the first human being recognizes that he is the Son of God - but it is not a disciple, nor a religious leader, nor even one of his own people, but the Roman centurion (15.39). It is a typical biographical motif to sum up the subject's life with a one-line, epigrammatic epitaph; the secret which no one saw while he was alive is now manifest - but it is too late. All that remains is to give him burial in a stranger's tomb (15.40-47).

To most people in the ancient world, the attempt to see meaning in the death of a crucified criminal would have been pointless. Crucifixion was completely forbidden for Roman citizens, and only used for slaves and aliens; to anyone educated in the Greek philosophical tradition of divine detachment from the world, it would have been utter foolishness to seek

theological profit from this death, while to a Jew anyone hanged on a tree was cursed (Deut. 21.22-23; see also 1 Cor. 1.23). It is, therefore, Mark's sublime theological achievement to bring his narrative to a climax at the cross with such a dark picture. Here must be the answer to all the puzzles and riddles of this gospel. The enigmatic figure, so often misunderstood by family and disciples, and opposed by religious and political authorities, shows his power and identity in his final conflict by suffering the ultimate degradation and even abandonment by God himself. So, it must also be for Mark's audience; throughout the gospel, especially in the middle section on discipleship and in the apocalyptic warnings of chapter 13, there have been hints that this is the fate of the church. Those who believe that following the way of the crucified one is a bed of roses have forgotten about thorns, says Mark. Yes, Jesus is the Son of God, powerful and mighty in his cosmic struggle, and that is not to be forgotten; but there was no last-minute miraculous escape for him - and those who follow should expect no less.

‘Rose like a lion’?

The Resurrection, Mark 16.1–8

When we come to Mark's account of the resurrection, we find things are no better: the early church Fathers can talk of Jesus rising triumphant like a lion - but that image cannot be based on Mk. 16.1-8. Like so much of his gospel, Mark's ending is full of enigma, fear, and awe. Instead of tying things up with a nice, happy ending, this story just leaves us with more questions. Where has Jesus gone? Why do the women, who witnessed the stone being put into place on Friday evening (15.46-47), only think about the difficulties of moving it away once they are actually on the way to the tomb (16.3)? Who, or what, is the young man in white (16.5)? After all Jesus' commands for secrecy and silence in this gospel, now, when the women are finally instructed to tell others, why do they keep it secret out of fear (16.7-8)? Thus, the gospel which has been full of secrecy and hiddenness concludes with an empty tomb and an absent Jesus.

The promise in 16.7, that the disciples will see Jesus in Galilee, picks up Jesus' own prophecy at the Last Supper of their desertion, and his promise to go before them to Galilee (14.27-28). Here one of Mark's main narrative lines terminates, but does not conclude. The sympathetic reader wants to know what happened to the poor disciples: does it all come right in a joyful reunion at the end? We will have to look to other evangelists for that. In keeping with Mark's picture of discipleship throughout the gospel, this question is left open; for Mark's story of Jesus becomes the story of his followers, and their story becomes the story of the readers. Whether they will follow or desert, believe or misunderstand, see him in Galilee or remain staring blindly into an empty tomb, depends upon us.

This all assumes, of course, that the gospel ends at 16.8. Certainly, it stops here: the two alternative endings of 8b and 9-20 are missing in the ancient manuscripts, are of a different style, and are based on the later gospels. They

may have been composed to fill the `gap' left when the original ending was lost - but perhaps there never was an `ending'. In literary terms, the `closure' of a narrative can draw the threads together, balance the beginning - or leave things deliberately open; it could be argued that 16.1-8 does all three of these. If Aslan is not a tame lion, Mark is not a comforting book. We have used the image of the lion for Jesus rather than the author - but perhaps there is something of the lion in Mark, too, always jumping around, but full of power and waiting to strike. In the Book of Kells, as well as the lion on the front page of Mark, there is a smaller lion crawling up the edge of the opening illuminated letter of the text itself in 1.1 (see Figure 4); in its mouth is a bearded human figure which it is apparently about to devour. Is the lion Jesus about to consume the evangelist Mark? Or is the lion the evangelist, getting his jaws around the helpless figure of the reader? We do not know, but perhaps the gospel should carry a health warning!

Whether the original stopped here, or around here, Mark's narrative as we have it now ends as abruptly as it began. There was no introduction or background to Jesus' arrival, and none for his departure. No one knew where he came from; no one knows where he has gone; and not many understood him when he was here - an enigmatic figure whose power was realized in suffering and whose kingship was proclaimed in death. To conclude with our central image of Mark's Christology, the lion bounds on, roars, and bounds off again, calling us to see him, in Galilee, somewhere.