

Animals of the Bible (3) The Lion



In Old Testament times, lions were to be found throughout the Middle East, and they feature in a number of Bible stories. Samson killed one with his bare hands, and later found a swarm of bees had made their home inside its carcass (Judges, chapter 14). He told the Philistines a riddle about it, “Out of the strong came forth sweetness”, which Abram Lyle adopted in 1883 as a trade mark for his Golden Syrup, along with the picture of the dead lion and the bees which still appears on Lyle’s Golden Syrup tins and bottles today.

David defended his sheep from lions (1 Samuel 17, verses 34 – 37), and Daniel spent a night in a pit with several of them (Daniel chapter 6). Lions were still present in the Holy Land in New Testament times, but much rarer. They were not completely eradicated there until the time of the Crusades, and some survived in Iraq and Iran until the early 1900s. All these lions belonged to a distinct Asiatic sub-species, which is now only found wild in the Gir Forest reserve in Gujarat, India. Some are also kept in captive collections, including at Chester Zoo.

In the Revelation to St John, chapter 5, Christ is called “The lion of Judah” (verse 5). This title goes back to Jacob’s final blessing of his sons, in Genesis chapter 49, where he declares “Judah is like a lion” (verse 9). In John’s vision, however, Christ, though announced as a lion, appears as a lamb bearing the marks of slaughter. We are presented with the great mystery of the Incarnation, the “meekness and majesty”, as Graham Kendrick puts it, of “the man who is God” (Singing the Faith 362).

C. S. Lewis used the lion imagery from Revelation in his Narnia stories. In “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe” Aslan the lion is killed by his enemies, but comes back to life and puts an end to Narnia’s long winter. We can rejoice that the power of God has been revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who in apparent weakness conquered the powers of darkness, and death itself, for ever.

A prayer:

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which you have won for us,
for all the pains and insults which you have borne for us.
O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
may we know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. AMEN

(Richard of Chichester, 1197 – 1253)

Image: Tate & Lyle Golden Syrup tin (photo Pete Wildman)