

# Maze and amazement in Mark's Gospel

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ALTHOUGH THE TWO LINKED WORDS 'mazes' and 'amazement', which furnish the title for this edition of *The Way*, conjure up for the modern mind very separate ideas, images or concepts – the first 'a system of twisting and turning paths leading to a central point', the second a state of 'great surprise', 'disbelief' or 'wonder'<sup>1</sup> – both expressions are etymologically connected. In Middle English, the 'maze' was a 'delirium', and hence by extension a 'delusion', a 'disappointment', a 'trick' or a 'deception'.<sup>2</sup> 'Mazement' or 'amazement' connoted originally the 'loss of one's wits' and up until the eighteenth century implied a state of 'mental stupefaction', 'frenzy', 'bewilderment' or 'consternation'. To be in a 'maze', therefore, was to be in 'a state of bewilderment, uncertainty, perplexity'.<sup>3</sup> The first recorded use of its now more current alternative, a state of 'overwhelming wonder', was in 1602.<sup>4</sup> The earliest recorded use, on the other hand, of the word 'maze' to mean '[a] labyrinth, a confusing network of winding and turning passages'<sup>5</sup> dates to the fourteenth century, and the notion of the perplexity, bewilderment and confusion induced by such an arrangement of paths was obviously related to its original meaning.

Mazes have always held a fascination for humankind. To some, they are a metaphor for life itself, paralleling the human journey from venturesome entrance to safe exit, and along the way, the attempt to grasp the underlying plan, to attain the centre and to avoid the false turnings. The most famous maze of all, for instance, was the labyrinth of Knossos, built by Daedalus for King Minos of Crete, and inhabited by the Minotaur, slain by Theseus. Then there is the most memorable maze in literature. In his *Three men in a boat (to say nothing of the dog)*, Jerome K. Jerome recounts the tale of Harris' visit to the Hampton Court maze. With map in hand, with his country cousin in tow, and with a misplaced confidence in the simplicity of the enterprise, he aims 'to walk round for ten minutes, and then go and get some lunch'. Buoyed by his optimism, a crowd of (eventually) some twenty people 'who had given up all hopes of ever getting in or out, or of ever

seeing their home and friends again, plucked up courage at the sight of Harris and joined the procession, blessing him'. Blessing soon turns to curses, however, when Harris' over-confidence, especially in his map-reading ability, is exposed. Encountering, for the second time, the half of a penny bun dropped by a woman with a baby, and finding the centre (by accident) when leading his now rebellious and disconsolate retinue back to the entrance, Harris begins to realize that 'to a certain extent, he had become unpopular'. After repeated revisits to the centre, the crowd, now 'in such a confused whirl that they were incapable of grasping anything', call out for the keeper. A young man with a ladder appears, shouts out directions to them, and when these fail, attempts personally but unsuccessfully to guide them out. The party is eventually rescued when one of the old keepers comes back from his dinner. 'Harris said he thought it was a very fine maze, so far as he was a judge; and we agreed that we would try to get George to go into it, on our way back.'<sup>6</sup>

'Mazes' and 'amazement' are two related ideas, images or concepts, that can also be appropriately applied to the Gospel of Mark. Like Harris, I myself, in common with other Markan scholars, was once of the opinion that the Gospel of Mark was simple, and that one could, in a manner of speaking, 'walk round [it] for ten minutes, and then go and get some lunch'. After almost thirty years devoted to its study, I have still not exited and continue to find myself puzzled, perplexed and intrigued by it – if not to say 'amazed'. There is a sense in which the Gospel itself is a maze. It presents the reader with a confusing network of winding and turning passages. It throws up puzzles at almost every turn and twist in its deceptively simple narrative. It offers contradictions and non-sequiturs as well as unresolved (and apparently unresolvable) plot elements. It generates fierce debate with regard to its overall plan and structure, with chiasmic arrangement (a series of interlocking units organized in a concentric structure) being a leading contender these days.<sup>7</sup>

The entrance to the Markan maze is provided in chapter one by the so-called prologue, a section which commentators variously extend to either verses 8, 11, 13 or 15. At this entrance, the reader, like Harris, proceeds confidently into the story, and is immediately presented with the promise of a messenger 'in the wilderness' who will 'prepare the way', and 'make his paths straight' (1:2–3). With these sonorous phrases, the very image of the maze is invoked. The 'way' motif is carried throughout the text, especially in the central section (cf 8:27; 9:33, 34; 10:17, 32, 46, 52).<sup>8</sup> The reader then follows the main characters on a journey or path with many and varied vicissitudes. The

starting-point of the journey is Galilee (1:14), the end-point Jerusalem (10:1, 17, 32; 11:1 ff) and after that we are directed back to Galilee (16:7). As in Jerome K. Jerome's story, the principal character picks up a motley collection of followers on his journey: e.g. blind Bartimaeus who follows him 'on the way' (10:52), or the ministering woman (14:3–9, here *sans* baby!), or the enigmatic young man who makes an abrupt and unexplained debut into the narrative in 14:51 and exits naked in 14:52 in no less dramatic a fashion! The crowd follow him with enthusiasm but turn nasty in the end when he fails to meet their expectations of salvation.

At times the Markan journey is confusing for a reader expecting 'straight paths', as, for example, in 6:45 where the disciples are instructed to go before Jesus to Bethsaida but curiously end up, not many verses later, at Gennesaret (6:53). Confusion is further compounded if the reader were, like Harris, to consult a map of the route supposedly taken by Jesus in 7:31 ('Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, through the region of the Decapolis'), an itinerary so convoluted as to be well nigh impossible to follow! The narrative path is also beset at intervals with a series of stories-within-the-story (the parables) whose meaning the disciples (and hence the readers) are invited to discern for themselves, and hence make the appropriate change of direction:

To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables (or riddles) so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should *turn again* and be forgiven. (4:11–12)

### *At the centre of the Markan maze*

As already mentioned, there is a centre (if not a centaur, or even a minotaur!) within this Gospel (8.27–10.52) – the so-called, now widely recognized, 'central' or 'discipleship section' – but even here, where the reader might expect a safe refuge, the Gospel throws up yet more enigmas. Indications as to the meaning of the narrative appear to be given in 8:14–21 (the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod), but this passage too leads to a dead end. Where Harris' crowd have 'the half of a penny bun' to give them some orienteering clues, Mark's disciples have a whole loaf with them in the boat (8:14), albeit a symbolic one. This

loaf is a remnant perhaps of the earlier feeding miracle(s) of 6:34–44 and 8:1–10 to which the Markan Jesus directs their attention:

‘When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?’ They said to him, ‘Twelve’. ‘And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?’ And they said to him, ‘Seven’. And he said to them, ‘Do you not yet understand?’

Map references, then, are offered, and clues extended, but what the reader is meant precisely to understand by these numbers has defeated exegetes for centuries.

The solution appears to lie in the mysterious identity of Jesus, a theme which runs through the Gospel from prologue to epilogue, from entrance to exit.<sup>9</sup> Surrounded by an aura of secrecy, the Markan Jesus issues commands to silence in respect of his healing action and identity (cf. e.g. 1:44; 3:11–12; 5:43; 8:30; 9:9), gives private instruction to his disciples (cf. e.g. 4:11–12, 33–34; 7:17–23; 9:9–13), issues parabolic teaching meant to confuse (cf. 4:11–12), attempts to conceal himself (cf. e.g. 7:24; 9:30) and refuses to give a sign to establish his credentials (cf. 8:11–13). At what is regarded as the very centre-point of the Markan maze (the so-called ‘confession at Caesarea’, 8:27–33), the question of Jesus’ identity is raised (8:27–29), ostensibly answered by Peter (‘You are the Christ’, 8:29) and then (to the consternation of the reader) apparently repudiated (‘Get behind me, Satan’, 8:30–33). The Messianic confession which appears to be a flash of insight into Jesus’ true identity is relativized in favour of other and different christological titles and estimates (cf. e.g. Son of Man, 8:31, or Son of God, 9:7). Like Harris in the Hampton Court maze, the Markan Jesus boldly and confidently marches ahead of his bemused retinue towards his envisioned exit (cf. 10:32, 52), inspiring in his followers a mixture of admiration and offence, popularity and opposition, fear and amazement. ‘Going before’ them on the way (cf. also 14:28; 16:7), he acts in the same way as the leader, pioneer or pathfinder (*archegos*) of the Epistle to the Hebrews (cf. Heb 2:10; 4:14; 6:20; 12:2), whose own version of the maze is a heavenly sanctuary (10:19–20), the centre-point of which is an ‘inner shrine’ which Jesus enters ‘through the curtain’ (6:19–20), having ‘passed through the heavens’ (4:14).<sup>10</sup>

### *Exiting the Markan maze*

In the Markan maze, Jesus' exit (and the reader's) is more problematic. Though given (like Harris' crowd) futile directions from a young man (the naked young man of 14:51–52 now reclothed?), and told that 'he goes before you to Galilee' (16:7), the women who receive the message at the end 'went out', we are told, 'and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid' (16:8). Harris' crowd may have been rescued in the end by the return of one of the old keepers, but the Markan disciples are not granted Jesus' promised appearance – the text of Mark is now generally agreed to end at 16:8 – and Mark's readers are left thereby in a situation of uncertain closure. Mark's maze ends in amazement.

### *The amazement motif in Mark*

If Mark's Gospel is a maze, then the associated amazement motif, which provides such a surprising climax to the Gospel, is one of its major recurrent features, as Markan scholarship is belatedly coming to realize. The word 'amazement', whose definition we explored at the beginning, can denote a state of mind characterized by either consternation or wonder. Like the word 'awe' it embraces negative and positive elements, both fear and astonishment, both repulsion and attraction. Like R. Otto's definition of the 'numinous' as a *mysterium* that is both *tremendum et fascinans*, 'amazement' has both centrifugal and centripetal elements, just as within the maze the impulse is to move from the centre or to be drawn towards it. Fear and amazement responses are common in Mark. The most recent full treatment of the subject (preceded by a thesis and an article) is T. R. Dwyer's *The motif of wonder in the Gospel of Mark*,<sup>11</sup> although there are also some earlier partial treatments of the theme.<sup>12</sup> Following G. Theissen, Dwyer employs the term 'wonder' itself to embrace 'all the narrative elements which express astonishment, fear, terror and amazement'.<sup>13</sup>

### *The motif observed*

New Testament Greek uses four main verbs and their cognates to express the idea of 'amazement', viz.

- *thaumazo* (vb., 'to wonder, marvel or be amazed'), *ekthaumazo* (vb., the intensive form, 'to be greatly amazed') and *thaumastos* (adj., 'marvellous');

- *existemi* (vb., lit. 'to stand out [of oneself]' and hence 'to be overcome with amazement' or 'to be out of one's wits or senses', 'to be beside oneself', 'to be mad'; cf. the obsolete sense of 'amazement' above) and *ekstasis* (n., 'amazement'; lit. 'a standing out', a condition in which the mind is transported out of itself through fear or surprise or into a trance-like state; cf. our English word 'ecstasy');
- *ekplessomai* (vb., lit. 'to be struck out' [of one's mind], 'to be astonished');
- *thambeomai* (vb., 'to be amazed'), *ekthambeomai* (vb., the intensive form, 'to be greatly amazed' or 'distressed') and *thambos* (n., 'amazement' or 'astonishment').

Since 'fear' or 'anxiety' is also a component within the amazement response, Greek also uses *phobeomai* (vb., 'to be afraid', 'to fear', 'to be overcome with fear'), *phobos* (n., 'fear', 'terror', 'awe') and *ekphobos* (adj., 'exceedingly afraid') to express this emotion.

That amazement (or wonder) is a major theme or motif within the Gospel of Mark is obvious when one considers how frequently it occurs, the emphasis given to it, its usage in significant contexts and its relevance to other important and related themes and motifs in the Gospel, such as faith and unbelief. The relevant passages are: 1:22, 27; 2:12; 3:21; 4:41; 5:15, 20, 33, 42; 6:2, 6a, 20, 50, 51; 7:37; 9:6, 15, 32; 10:24, 26, 32; 11:18, 32; 12:11, 12, 17; 14:33; 15:5, 44; 16:5, 6, 8. In these passages, Mark uses all of the five Greek verbs or their cognates outlined above (with the exception of *thambos*) to describe:

- the reaction of the crowd to Jesus' teaching (1:22 *ekplessomai* [astonishment], 27 *thambeomai* [amazement]; 6:2 *ekplessomai* [astonishment]; 11:18 *ekplessomai* [astonishment]), or to his miracles (2:12 *existemi* [amazement]; 5:15 *phobeomai* [fear], 20 *thaumazo* [marvelling], 42 *existemi* and *ekstasis* [amazement]; 7:37 *ekplessomai* [astonishment]), or to his very presence (9:15 *ekthambeomai* [amazement]);
- the reaction of the disciples to Jesus' teaching (9:32 *phobeomai* [fear]; 10:24 *thambeomai* [amazement], 26 *ekplessomai* [astonishment]), or to his miracles or displays of power (4:41 *phobeomai* and *phobos* [fear]; 6:50 *phobeomai* [terror], 51 *existemi* [astonishment]), or to his very presence (10:32 *thambeomai* and *phobeomai* [amazement and fear]);
- the reaction of Jesus' enemies to his teaching (11:18 *phobeomai* [fear]; 12:17 *ekthaumazo* [amazement]).

Emotions of fear and/or astonishment are also predicated of other characters in the story, for example:

- of the haemorrhaging woman who is the subject of one of Jesus' miracles (5:33 *phobeomai* [fear]);
- of the women followers in relation to the young man, his message and the empty tomb (16:5 *ekthambeomai* [amazement], 6 *ekthambeomai* [amazement], 8 *ekstasis* and *phobeomai* [astonishment and fear]);
- of Herod in relation to John the Baptist (6:20 *phobeomai* [fear]);
- of Pilate in response to Jesus' presence (or silence), or in respect of Jesus' presumed death (15:5 *thaumazo* [wonder], 44 *thaumazo* [wonder]);
- of the chief priests, elders and scribes in relation to the crowd (in view of their estimate of John the Baptist and Jesus) (12:12 *phobeomai* [fear]);
- of the Old Testament psalmist (or his audience) with respect to the scriptural allusion linking Jesus with the rejected 'stone' (Ps 118:22–23 and Mk 12:11 *thaumastos* [marvelling]);
- of Jesus himself (3:21 *existemi* [mental derangement]; 6:6a *thaumazo* [marvelling]; 14:33 *ekthambeomai* [mental distress]).

### *The motif explained*

If amazement, therefore, can be considered an important motif in the Gospel of Mark, what then does it signify? Clearly, in the majority of cases, it is used to describe a typical response to (or state of mind induced by) Jesus' miracles, teaching and presence on the part of a variety of characters in Mark's story (crowd, disciples, enemies, haemorrhaging woman, Pilate). What background of thought provides the best interpretative framework with which to understand the majority of these passages? Is the amazement motif to be considered in a positive or in a negative light (is it a faith response, for example, or the product of unbelief)? Is the theme integral to the stories Mark has incorporated into his text, or is the evangelist responsible for introducing it? These are some of the puzzles thrown up by the Gospel, and ones on which various scholars have ventured opinions.

One approach, that taken by Dwyer, has been to survey the literature of the ancient world (the Greco-Roman sources, the Old Testament and early Jewish literature, the early Christian literature) with a view to determining how the motif of wonder operates there, and hence to see if such a study throws light on its use in Mark. Where the Greco-Roman sources are concerned, he observes, '[w]onder sometimes occurs at surprising statements of individuals, but most often occurs in reference to signs, portents, dreams or divine interventions'.<sup>14</sup> With respect to the

Old Testament and early Jewish literature, the motif is frequently found in messianic and propagandistic texts, and has an eschatological orientation. Wonder is elicited at a demonstration of God's revelation, or is connected with his saving deeds in the exodus or at the end-time.<sup>15</sup> In early Christian literature (the canonical, gnostic and apocryphal sources), wonder is depicted as both positive and negative. Each of these may have implications for the use of the motif in Mark, although Dwyer himself opts for the background supplied by the Old Testament and early Jewish literature.

Attempts to come to grips with the motif in Mark have elicited various explanations. Some would claim that it is a conventional motif in miracle stories, and that it derives from the tradition taken over by Mark. It accords with the style of miracle stories in the ancient world in which the impression created by the miracle (or miracle-worker, or even his teaching) needs to be reported, if it is to be legitimated. It is, in other words, a *novelistic* trait (from *Novelle* or miracle story in German). In purely story-telling terms, it serves to dramatize the event, or render it significant, by emphasizing the effect it had on those who witnessed it, or by registering the reaction of those who gave it their acclamation.<sup>16</sup>

While this solution harmonizes well with a number of the instances of the amazement motif cited above, it nevertheless fails to account for the special emphasis accorded to the theme by the evangelist, nor does it give due weight to the other interpretative backgrounds suggested by scholars such as Dwyer. The majority of the 'wonder' passages in Mark, Dwyer claims, are redactional, that is, they do not belong to the tradition taken over by Mark, but are intrusions on the part of the evangelist into it. Furthermore, if one allows the Old Testament and the early Jewish literature to provide our interpretative background, then wonder or amazement in Mark should be from an *eschatological* perspective. Wonder is used by Mark, in other words, as a sign of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God, a major theme in the Gospel, and the amazement motif is an appropriate way to register the appearance of God's rule in the miracles, teaching and person of Jesus.

Some would go even further. Wonder and dread are typical components of revelatory experience, of human reaction to acts of God in history, to theophanies. Since the 'amazed' response to Jesus in Mark is characterized by both attraction and repulsion, by both astonishment and fear, then there is something of the numinous associated with it. According to Bertram, '[e]xpressions of fear and astonishment . . . serve to emphasize the revelatory content and christological significance of many incidents in the Synoptic Gospels',<sup>17</sup> and Mark is no



exception. The use of such language is a sign, therefore, that the evangelist intends his readers to see Jesus in a divine light. The amazement motif serves a *christological* purpose, in other words, or even a *theophanic* one.

Fear and amazement, however, are attributed, as we have seen, to the Jewish crowd, to Jesus' enemies and to Jesus' disciples in the Gospel. These three groups (including the disciples!) can arguably be viewed as lying outside the circle of faith, as far as Mark was concerned. If 'fear' is to be interpreted in a negative light, and as an emotion, in Mark's view, to be avoided – one notes how often in the Gospel the Markan Jesus exhorts his disciples not to be afraid – then should 'amazement' not be understood in the same way? Fear and amazement responses are related to expressions of faith and unbelief in the Gospel of Mark.<sup>18</sup> Some would argue, therefore, that faith is seen by Mark as the appropriate response of the believer to the person, teaching and activity of Jesus, while fear and amazement remains that of the unbeliever, or the one yet to be convinced.<sup>19</sup>

### Conclusion

All four such explanations can be offered in respect of the Markan ending, and the Gospel's climactic attribution of both fear and amazement to the women at the tomb (16:8). Is their reaction to be interpreted in purely literary terms, as a *novellistic* feature dramatically and effectively signalling the miracle of the resurrection? Is it to be viewed in an *eschatological* light, as the wonder induced by God's intervention in raising Jesus from the dead? Does their response have *christological* or even *theophanic* implications, their terror and astonishment conveying numinous awe at the implied divinity of Jesus? Or does their fear and amazement signal the incomprehension and unbelief which characterizes the disciples of Jesus elsewhere in the Gospel (e.g. 6:52; 8:17, 21) and which now leads them to disobey the young man's instructions? Does the motif, in other words, have a *polemical* edge? Readers and scholars of Mark disagree among themselves in respect of all these options. The amazement motif ends in a maze.

Mazes attract yet intimidate us. Hence their endless fascination. When lost within a maze, one can, like Harris and his party, consult a map, call for a keeper, enlist the aid of a ladder, or otherwise attempt to gain a bird's-eye view. As a scholar who has applied the ladder of higher criticism to the Markan maze for thirty years, this intriguing text continues to baffle and confound. With Harris, however, I can concur, 'It is a very fine maze, so far as I am a judge.'

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## NOTES

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