Are the traditional titles for the lion, "king of beasts" and "king of the jungle," undeserved? The largest land carnivore is not the lion but the polar bear. The lion is not even the largest cat, a distinction that that goes to the Amur tiger of Siberia. Those qualifications aside, the lion is indeed the most fearsome predator. The lion is the only social cat and the largest land carnivore capable of a coordinated attack by several individuals. A pride of lions can, on occasion, even bring down a full-grown African elephant.[1]

The term "king of the jungle" is unfortunate because the hunting strategy of lions is best suited to level terrain with expanses of tall grass, such as the African savanna. The multipronged attack that lions can mount in open country partly accounts for the size and aggressive temperament of the African elephant, which must defend itself against so formidable a threat, and for the nervousness of the zebra, which cannot be domesticated like the donkey and horse but reacts to predators more quickly than either.

Power and hunting prowess along with the image of the male lion, with its luxurious mane, explain the ancient association of the lion with kings. The animated movie, "The Lion King," released by Walt Disney Studios in 1994, illustrates the persistence of the lion's regal image.

In Old Testament times the range of the lion extended from southern Africa through the Middle East, northward into Europe and eastward across the Indian subcontinent. In the Bible the lion is a metaphor for strength and bravery in battle (2 Sam 1:23), threatening enemies (Ps 35:17), and even the implacability of divine judgment (Hos 13:7). As we would expect, the Bible also associates the lion with kings (Prov 19:12; 20:2; 30:29-31). More specifically, the patriarch Jacob calls his fourth son Judah a lion when predicting that Judah's descendants will possess the token of monarchy, the royal scepter, until the final Messianic triumph:

> Judah is a lion's whelp.
> From the prey, my son, you have gone up!
> He stooped down, he couched as a lion,
> And as with an old lion who shall rouse him?
> The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
> Nor a lawgiver from between his feet,
> Until Shiloh comes, and to him will be
> The obedience of the people.
> Binding his foal to the vine,
> And his ass's colt to the choice vine,
> He washed his garments in wine,
> And his clothes in the blood of grapes. Gen 49:10-11

The first king of Israel, Saul, came from the tribe of Benjamin, but when Saul died in battle his surviving son, Ishbosheth, proved too weak to take his father's place and eventually was murdered. David, a powerful military commander, first became king over his own tribe of Judah, ruling from the regional capital of Hebron in southern Israel. According to the books of Samuel, David was later accepted as king by all Israel and moved his capital northward to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, though dominated by Judahites, lay along Judah's border with the adjoining territory of Benjamin, which formed a buffer between Judah and the most powerful tribe in northern Israel, Ephraim. Moving the seat of power to a more central city was politically astute, signaling David's intention to govern both parts of Israel evenhandedly.

1 In 2006 the BBC program Planet Earth showed unnerving video footage of several lions leaping onto the sides of an elephant and eventually killing it.

During four centuries or so in which Israel comprised first a single nation and then northern and southern kingdoms, the only lasting dynasty was the house of David. David's descendants ruled in Jerusalem until the Babylonian invasion in 589 BCE. By contrast, assassination and usurpation kept the throne of northern Israel, in Samaria, from remaining within one family for long.

The relative durability of the Davidic dynasty made the symbol of royalty, the lion, appropriate to the tribe and nation of Judah. The lion image is prominent in a poetic story from Ezekiel about the final three decades of Judah's monarchy:

> Moreover take up a lamentation
> For the princes of Israel,
> And say,
> What is your mother? A lioness.
> She lay down among lions,
> She nourished her cubs among young lions,
> And she brought up one of her cubs.
> It became a young lion
> And it learned to catch the prey;
> It devoured men.
> The nations also heard of him;
> He was taken in their pit
> And they brought him with chains to the land of Egypt.
> Now when she saw that she had waited,
> Her hope was lost.
> Then she took another of her cubs,
> And made him a young lion.
> And he went up and down among the lions.
> He became a young lion
> And learned to catch the prey;
> He devoured men.
> And he knew their desolate palaces,
> And he laid waste their cities.
> And the land was laid waste, and its fullness,
> By the noise of his roaring.
> Then the nations set against him
> On every side from the provinces,
> And spread their net over him.
> He was taken in their pit
> And they put him in bondage in chains,
> And brought him to the king of Babylon.
> They brought him into bonds,
> That his voice should no more be heard
> Upon the mountains of Israel.
>
> Your mother is like a vine in your blood,
> Planted by the waters.
> She was fruitful and full of branches
> By reason of many waters.
> And she had strong rods for the scepters
> Of those who bare rule . . .
> But she was plucked up in fury . . .
> Her strong rods were broken and withered;
> The fire consumed them. Eze 19:1-12

The first lion cub mentioned is Jehoahaz, who became king of Judah upon the death of his father Josiah around 609 BCE. Jehoahaz was deposed and taken to Egypt by Pharaoh Neco, who installed another of Josiah's sons, Jehoiakim, on Judah's throne instead (2 Kgs 23:31-36). The second captured lion probably represents Zedekiah, the last of Judah's ancient kings, who was taken to Babylon when Jerusalem was razed in 586 (2 Kgs 25:7). Like Genesis 49, Ezekiel 19 follows the parable of Judah's leonine kings with a reference to royal scepters and the "vine" of mother Israel.

The historical allusions in the Ezekiel passage leave no doubt that the royal family of Judah is in view even though the introduction speaks about the "princes of Israel." Many other verses in Ezekiel make the distinction between the two kingdoms, an example being 9:9: "'The iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great . . .'" (cf. 25:3; 27:17; 37:16-19). The name "Israel" applied to the northern tribes had been in effect an abbreviation for "the-part-of Israel-other-than-Judah." The devastation of the north and the compromised status of its remnant, the Samaritans, caused the term to revert to the one part of the nation still intact. Judah (or, Judea) would come to be used most often as a geographical reference while "Israel" denoted the covenant people whose worship centered on Jerusalem. To the extent that northern Israelite refugees had sought refuge in Judah during the Assyrian onslaught, a small component of the northern tribes was even preserved among the Jewish population (cf. Luke 2:36).

Our excursion into the history of ancient Israel has revealed that the symbol of the lion is associated with Judah and its kings. In turn, Judah is not only the source of the terms "Jew" and "Judaism" but the fountainhead of Jewish identity. If we can verify that Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospels then perhaps we have discovered an objective connection between it and the symbol of the lion. Even more importantly, such a connection might offer a precedent for assigning other symbols of the tetramorph.