

7.28

## The “Messianic Secret” in Mark’s Gospel

### *Elements of the “Secrecy Theme”*

- Jesus silences the demons who know him (1:34; 3:11–12).
- Jesus tells people who are healed not to tell anyone about him (1:44–45; 7:35–37).
- Jesus speaks in parables so that people won’t understand what he says (4:11–12).
- Jesus’s own disciples do not understand who he is (4:41).

### *William Wrede’s Explanation*

Mark uses the secrecy motif as a way to present information about Jesus that was not historically accurate. Mark is reporting things about Jesus for which there is no historical substantiation, and he gets away with this by claiming that these things were secrets.

Mark’s Gospel represents a position between two poles in early Christianity:

#### A. Earliest Tradition (Acts 2:36; Rom. 1:4; Phil. 2:6–11)

Jesus becomes the Christ and the Son of God at his resurrection. No one thought of him as Christ or Son of God during his life on earth (nor did he think of himself in those terms).

## B. Later Tradition (Gospel of John)

Jesus openly presents himself as Christ and as Son of God throughout his earthly life and ministry.

Mark is somewhere in between:

Jesus is indeed the Christ and the Son of God throughout his earthly ministry, but he tries to keep this secret.

Mark wants to portray the earthly Jesus as the Christ and Son of God, but memories of his actual life as a nonmessianic, nondivine figure are too fresh. Thus Mark invents the notion that the true character of Jesus's life and ministry was a secret.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Paul Achtemeier's Explanation***

The secrecy motif is used to downplay those aspects of Jesus's identity or biography that Mark does not find particularly helpful.

Mark considers the titles "Christ" and "Son of God" to be inadequate for Jesus.

*Christ.* This title could be construed as referring to a political revolutionary (the same would be true of "Son of David" and "King of the Jews").

*Son of God.* This title could be construed as referring to a Greek *theios anēr* ("divine man") like Prometheus or Hercules.

Therefore, Mark “corrects” these titles by having Jesus refer to himself as the “Son of Man.”

Peter, who denies Jesus and proves unfaithful, calls him “Christ” (8:29). Demons and a pagan centurion call him “Son of God” (1:24; 3:11; 5:7; 15:39). But Jesus always calls himself “Son of Man.”

Instead of suggesting that Mark wants to portray Jesus as Christ and Son of God in a manner contrary to established tradition (cf. Wrede above), this theory suggests that Mark wants to correct the established tradition that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God.<sup>2</sup>

Problems with this explanation: Mark himself also calls Jesus “Christ” as well as “Son of God” (1:1). And God calls Jesus “Son” (1:11; 9:7). Furthermore, the title “Son of Man” is itself ambiguous. Jesus seems to use it publicly precisely because it does not reveal who he is. In short, Jesus’s use of “Son of Man” for himself may be yet another aspect of the secrecy theme.

### ***Jack Dean Kingsbury’s Explanation***

The secrecy motif is a literary device. The proper question to ask is “What effect was the secrecy theme intended to have on readers of Mark’s narrative?”

One significant factor is that the readers are in on the secret. The readers are told that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God in the first verse of this Gospel, and as the story develops, the readers will realize that they know something that characters in the story do not.

The significant question for the reader is not, “Who is Jesus?,” but rather, “How will people come to know what I know about Jesus? What will reveal him to people?”

As the story progresses, the reader recognizes that Jesus’s teaching and miracles do not reveal his messianic, divine nature to people (1:27; 2:7; 4:41; 6:2–3). But when Jesus dies on the cross, then, for the first time, a human (a gentile!) recognizes him as the true Son of God (15:39).

Thus, according to this explanation, the secrecy motif is a literary device that allows Mark to tell his story in an engaging way, and more important, in a way that underscores a crucial point: the cross is the ultimate revelation of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God.<sup>3</sup>

1. See William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J. C. G. Greig (1901; repr. London: Clarke, 1971).

2. See Paul J. Achtemeier, *Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

3. See Jack Dean Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).