

The Messianic Secret

http://people.smu.edu/dwatson/messianic_secret_001.htm

In 1901, William Wrede wrote a work called *Das Messiasgeheimnis in Den Evangelien*. The English title of this work is *The Messianic Secret*.

In this work he addressed the instances in the Gospel of Mark in which the pre-Easter Jesus attempts to conceal his messiahship (e.g., commands to keep silent after miracles, silencing of demons, commands that the disciples not make known Jesus' identity, the "parable theory" of 4.1-12). Wrede concluded that these instances do reflect not historical events, but are theological retrojections created in light of the resurrection.

According to Wrede, Mk conceives of Jesus' messiahship as being secret during his lifetime and being revealed in the resurrection. Wrede did not regard the messianic secret as historical; rather, he thought that it came from Mk's community. As Christianity developed, the idea that Jesus was the Messiah developed along with it.

Wrede claimed that the oldest view of Jesus' messiahship was that he became the Messiah after his death. However, because messianic significance was later attached to the events of his life, a conflict of ideas arose: either Jesus was or he was not the Messiah before the resurrection. In the Markan community, this tension was resolved by the adoption of the idea that although Jesus was the Messiah during his life, he kept his messianic identity a secret so that it could be revealed after the resurrection.

Since Wrede's work, a great deal of scholarship has focused on the "messianic secret." Broadly speaking, we can identify several aspects of Mk's gospel that have been connected with secrecy:

1) The miracle secret

This involves Jesus' commands that people not tell about healings that he has performed (1.40-45; 5.21-24, 35-43; 7.31-37; 8.22-26). Although these commands are sometimes disobeyed, in two instances (5.21-24, 35-43; 8.22-26) we have no reason to believe that those who are admonished to keep silence fail to do so.

2) The silencing of demons

Throughout the gospel, unclean spirits have supernatural knowledge of Jesus' identity; Jesus, however, never allows these spirits to proclaim his identity publicly (e.g., 1.23-28; 1.34; 3.11). We are not told of the demons ever disobeying Jesus' commands that they be silent.

3) Commands that the disciples remain silent.

Both Peter's confession (8.29) and the transfiguration (9.2-8) result in commands to the disciples that they not tell what they have learned about Jesus' identity (see 8.30 and 9.9). Like the silence commands directed toward demons, these commands are also kept.

4) Jesus' withdrawal from the public sphere.

Mark recounts that, at certain points, Jesus desires to withdraw from the crowds to privacy (6.31; 7.24; 9.30). In both 6.33 and 7.24, we are told that Jesus is unsuccessful in his attempt to escape the public view.

5) The parable theory

The term "parable theory" is frequently used by scholars who discuss Mk. 4.10-12. This passage has commanded a great deal of scholarly attention, although many consider it to constitute a separate motif from Jesus' attempts to hide his identity. Much of the difficulty with this passage stems from Mark's statement in 4.12 that, "to those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive....'" This statement is often taken to indicate that the parables are told for the very purpose of

inducing a lack of understanding and preventing the repentance that would lead to forgiveness.

6) The disciples' failure to understand

It is well recognized that the disciples are depicted by Mark in a very poor light. Throughout the gospel, they fail to understand Jesus and they increasingly become outsiders until finally, at the end of the gospel, they make clear their connection with the rocky soil by abandoning Jesus.

While the elements that make up the secrecy motif are debated among scholars, most agree that the miracle secret, the silencing of demons, and the commands that the disciples keep quiet about Jesus' identity should be thought of as part of this motif.

Why is Jesus secretive in Mark's gospel?

There has never been an entirely satisfactory answer to this question. Some scholars think that Mk is recounting the actions of the historical Jesus. Others think that the Jesus of Mk's gospel is trying to avoid being known because he wants to delay his crucifixion, or because he wants to avoid political notions of messiahship. Still others think that Jesus is only waiting for the right time to reveal his identity because he wishes his messiahship to be seen only in the context of his passion and death.

Non-secrecy in Mark's gospel

Attempts to explain the secrecy motif are complicated by the fact that Jesus is not consistently secretive. He often performs healings and exorcisms in public. Sometimes he heals entire multitudes, or heals in front of hostile authorities. He also makes public claims with regard to his own authority, and he refers to himself as the "Son of Man," a cryptic title with apocalyptic overtones.

Although Mk doesn't tell us why he presents Jesus as secretive in some instances and not in others, it seems that, somehow, Mk is trying to communicate something about Jesus' messiahship. Jesus is not a messiah who seeks renown for himself; he does not seek his own glorification. Although he is not afraid to claim his authority and he is capable of healing great multitudes in a single session, Jesus does not teach self-aggrandizement, but humility and servitude.

Sources:

- Wrede, William. *The Messianic Secret*. Trans. J. C. G. Greig. Cambridge and London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd, 1971.
- Blevins, James L. *The Messianic Secret in Markan Research, 1901-1976*. Washington, D. C.: University Press of America, 1981.