

**Lecture 9. The Messianic Secret**

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**1. The Secrecy Motif in Mark**

➤ One of the most striking features of Mark is its use of the motif of secrecy, repeatedly in the Gospel:

- (a) Silencing of demons
- (b) Silencing of those who are healed
- (c) Concealing the parables
- (d) Silencing of the disciples

1.24: "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" 25. "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!"

1.32: That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. 33. The whole town gathered at the door, 34. and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak *because they knew who he was*.

1.43: Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: 44. "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." 45. Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

3.11: Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." 12. But he gave them strict orders not to tell who he was.

4.10: When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. 11. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables <sup>12</sup>so that,  
" 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,  
and ever hearing but never understanding;  
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"

5.43: "He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat." (Raising of Jairus' Daughter).

7.36: Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. 37. People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

8.25: Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. 26. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't go into the village."

8.29-30: "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

10.48: Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

- What is the explanation for this phenomenon? Is it all one phenomenon?

## **2. Historical Jesus Explanation?**

- Many attempt to explain the motif in different ways in relation to the historical Jesus, i.e. they look for explanations that make sense of this as a repeated feature of the historical Jesus' life, e.g.:
- Perhaps Jesus was avoiding fame spreading unduly (especially the healing miracles).
- Silencing the demons results from common exorcism practice – tell the demons to be silent.
- Perhaps Jesus was taking care that his Messiahship was not misunderstood.
  - Jesus the suffering servant attempting to correct or replace notions of a political Messiah?
- Combinations of these factors have all been invoked at different times.

## **3. The Secrecy Motif as a Redactional Feature in Mark**

- Even if one or more of these factors are true, though, they do not explain the secrecy motif as a *redactional feature in Mark's Gospel*
  - Note the *spread* of the feature throughout Mark.
  - Notice its appearance in different kinds of material.
  - Notice its appearance at *key points* (especially 8.27–9.1, Peter's Confession,

etc.)

- Notice its occurrence in the *narrator's voice*.
  - Contrast the weaker presence of the motif in Matthew and Luke, and its absence from John.
- The secrecy motif is therefore an invitation to do redaction-criticism of Mark, and to ask why the evangelist used this motif.

#### **4. William Wrede**

- Wrede long preceded the advent of redaction criticism but in many ways anticipated it with a key book at the turn of the century:

William Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901)

- Not translated into English until 1971!
- Note the subtitle: *A Contribution toward understanding the Gospel of Mark*.
- Wrede's thesis: that the commands to secrecy were not historical, i.e. that they were not features of the ministry of the historical Jesus. They are, rather, elements in an *apologetic literary motif*, designed to wed together non-messianic traditions with the post-resurrection conviction that Jesus was the Messiah.

#### **Non-messianic traditions about Jesus + conviction that Jesus was the Messiah → Secrecy Motif = Creation of Mark's Gospel**

- Wrede's key text: 9.9: "As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen *until the Son of Man had risen from the dead*."
- Wrede thought that this showed how the Messianic Secret worked – the earliest Christians realized that Jesus was Messiah because of his resurrection, and then read this realization back into the story, explaining the lack of messianic traditions as due to a secrecy motif.
  - The thesis draws strength from the fact that some other early Christian texts do associate Jesus' messianic identity with the resurrection, specifically Romans 1.3, "declared with power to be Son of God by his resurrection from the dead".
- It is important to note that Wrede did not think that Mark himself had done the creative work – he had inherited it from the tradition. In this respect he only

anticipated redaction criticism, but did not go the whole way.

### 5. *What's Wrong with Wrede?*

- Many historical Jesus scholars now see it as plausible that Jesus made some kind of Messianic claim, or was perceived by his contemporaries as a Messianic pretender.
  - Note in particular Jesus' crucifixion as a brigand (*lēstēs*), which makes good sense on the assumption that he was perceived as a Messianic claimant.
  - There are many stories in Mark that depict Jesus engaging in Messianic or quasi-Messianic *activity*, e.g. entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11.1-10) and the incident in the Temple (Mark 11.15-19).
- How consistent is Mark? Is Wrede imposing uniformity on Mark where it does not exist, a problem that bedevilled later redaction critics?
  - e.g. 5.19-20 a major exception to the rule: Jesus commands the Gerasene Demoniac to share the gospel.

### 6. *What's Right with Wrede?*

- But Wrede got some important things right – his book is one of the greats – a pioneer:
  - First successful exercise in redaction criticism
  - Appreciates the importance of the Gospels as books of propaganda
  - Mark as a theological construct. This is a *Gospel* = “*God spell*” = good news = εὐαγγέλιον (*euangelion*), or propaganda, written to persuade that Jesus is the Christ
  - Exercise in historical-critical approach: suspicious of the text, not taking the events narrated at face value.
- Those who still read it primarily as a feature of the ministry of the historical Jesus are missing the point.
- The most successful explanations of the motif are those that treat it on the literary level
  - The supernatural element: the demons know; God knows (1.11; 9.7); the reader knows; the narrator tells us; the actors do not know – the cosmic drama that is Mark.

- The Gospel of *Christ crucified*, key early Christian conviction, e.g 1 Cor. 15.1-3: Part 1 (Mark 1-8) establishes Jesus as *Christ*; Part 2 (Mark 9-16) is about his *suffering*.
- Darkness of Mark's presentation necessary to the extraordinary tale of a Messiah crucified, a paradox, a contradiction, a *skandalon*.

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