

Messianic Secret

The basic problem is that in St Mark's Gospel, each time there is a hint that Jesus is the Messiah, or does a miracle which might point to his Messiahship, he commands his disciples, those healed, and the demons, to keep this a secret. This phenomenon is known as the Messianic Secret.

Commands to silence: 1:34, 44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26, 30; 9:9

Instruction of the disciples alone: 7:17f; 9:30f, 33; 10:10

Veiled meaning of parables: 4:10ff, 34

NB the demons do not keep this command: 1:24; 3:11; nor do the sick: 10:47; and Jesus himself breaks the secret: 2:19; 9:2ff; 11:1ff, 27f; 14:62.

One possible explanation suggested is that Mark is trying to reconcile two facts: first, that Jesus is the Messiah; and second, that this is not generally known during Jesus's lifetime: witness the rejection of him by so many, and more importantly the lack of understanding in his own disciples. This stupidity, it would be argued, must have been divinely ordained.

Mark does sometimes make a distinction between the Twelve and those outside – for example when discussing the parables. However it is not always the case that the Twelve (to whom the secret is shown) understand, and those outside (from whom it is hidden) do not. The identity of those to whom the secret is in fact given by God provides some surprises. NB perhaps the deaf and blind who come to Jesus for healing are symbolic of misunderstanding.

We should notice that the relation of Jesus and his disciples to the secret changes at 8:26; this is the point at which Jesus discloses the necessity of his suffering and crucifixion. Before this point Jesus does not speak about his passion, and the disciples do not understand who he is; after this point Jesus does speak about his passion but the disciples misunderstand. Perhaps it is only Mary Magdalene, who anoints Jesus with oil before his passion, who really understands Jesus' destiny of suffering.

It is possible that the secrecy comes from our Lord himself, perhaps because he was afraid that his message might be misunderstood in a nationalistic or political sense, or that he might be stopped by the authorities before he had done enough to get his message across. It does seem that he was misunderstood from a political point of view, and that he did have a political message.

It was William Wrede, at the end of the 19th century, who first wrote about this. He argued that in fact Jesus did not reveal his Messiahship during his life, and it was not claimed for him until the resurrection, which would mean that Mark's account of Peter's confession that Caesarea Philippi was not historical. Mark's story of the secrecy would explain how it was that Jesus' contemporaries knew nothing about claims to be Messiah. Wrede's theories were strongly criticised, but nevertheless exerted a large influence on subsequent scholars who began to study the Gospels by looking at smaller units – periscopes - and to notice that many of these had standard features. For example in the story of a miracle, one might hear how severe the illness was, how difficult it was to heal (so several or many people had tried to effect a cure), the healing by Jesus, the amazement and wonder of the crowd, and (in Mark's Gospel) Jesus' command to keep it a secret. This is called form criticism. It has also been applied to other sorts of narrative, for example, to fairy stories.

Another implication of the form criticism way of thinking is the understanding that St Mark and the other Gospel writers are not simply retelling the story as they heard it, but have particular theological agendas. St John's Gospel of course makes this explicit. After form criticism came redaction criticism, which looked at the ways in which the different evangelists retold the same material – and how the telling of the stories was influenced not only by their original setting, but also by the particular situations for which the evangelists were writing their Gospels. Later still has come narrative criticism which tries to see each Gospel as a whole, and its impact as a whole on readers at different times.