

MESSIANIC SETCRET IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

1:34, 44 Why the Secret?

Each of the Gospels is designed to proclaim who Jesus is, to present him to the world, so that people will commit themselves to him and become disciples. But within the Gospels, especially in Mark, is the curious phenomenon of Jesus' commanding people not to tell others who he is. If he wishes people to believe, why does he not allow the open confessions of those who really know him? In the case of demonized people, is this not one time that demons were telling the truth? Could this mean that Jesus had doubts about who he was? This is the problem of the so-called messianic secret in Mark.

In responding to such an issue we must look at the evidence. Jesus commands silence on three types of occasions. The first involves demons, who "knew who he was." The second involves people who have been healed, who may not understand who he is, but who do have a story to tell about what he has done. "See that you don't tell this to anyone," Jesus says to a leper he heals (Mk 1:44; compare Mk 5:43). The third occasion involves the disciples after they confess him as "the Christ" (Mk 8:30; 9:9). What is the purpose of all this secrecy? Each of these situations has a somewhat different explanation. We will discuss them in reverse order.

The disciples, whose confession Peter boldly states in Mark 8:29, had come to recognize Jesus over a period of time. They had followed him around, heard his teaching, observed his miracles and gone out to do the same at his command. Their faith had grown during that time. More important, Jesus had been able to define for them how he saw his own mission. Even though their understanding was far from perfect (the predictions of the cross still mystified them), their obedience made it relatively safe for them to think of him as "the Christ," or "the Messiah" ("Christ" is Greek for "Messiah"; both terms mean simply "the anointed one").

Unfortunately, Judaism did not have the same clarity about the Messiah and his mission. Some groups among the Jews were not looking for any Messiah. The golden age had come with the Maccabean victories in 164 B.C. As long as the temple functioned, deliverance was not needed. Others (for example, the people who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls) believed in two Messiahs. One would be a descendant of David who would rule as king, while the other would be a descendant of Aaron who would purify temple worship as high priest. For both groups Scripture and the experience of Hasmonean priest-kings from 164 to 163 B.C. had proved that the roles of ruler and priest could not be combined. Still others were looking for a warrior-king who would deliver them from the Romans. In fact several people presented themselves as candidates for the office (Acts 5:36–37 has only a partial listing), and one, Simeon Ben Kosiba, would lead the Jews to a final defeat in A.D. 135.

Therefore the title "Christ," or "Messiah," was a dangerous one. It would immediately excite people's preconceived imaginations about what that figure was supposed to do. It would mark him out to the Romans as a rebel leader. And it would close people off to Jesus' own self-definition of his role. Because of this Jesus always referred to himself as the "Son of Man." In Ezekiel this phrase means "human being." In Palestinian Aramaic it could simply be a modest way of saying "I" (similar to Paul's modesty in 2 Cor 12:2–3). But it also appears in Daniel 7:13 for a being who receives power and authority from God. Therefore the phrase had three possible meanings, and only context could determine which was intended. Because of this ambiguity, people had to listen to Jesus to see how he used the term rather than attach to it their own preconceived meanings. This is precisely what Jesus wanted and needed until he had accomplished all he had to do. So he told his disciples not to say anything until he had "risen from the dead"; he did not need their semiunderstanding assistance in explaining who he is.

The people Jesus heals are another matter. Here the issue is in part modesty, for Jesus is not looking for a following as a wonder-worker, nor does he wish to "blow his own horn." This must be the case in Mark 5:43, for many individuals knew that the child had died, and they would recognize the miracle as soon as they saw her up and around the house. But Jesus was not looking for a string of requests to come to funerals! So he "gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this." This same motif can be seen in the "nonsecrecy" of the previous incident. Jesus tells the delivered Gerasene man to "tell [your family] how much the Lord has done for you" (Mk 5:19). While the man then tells "how much Jesus had done for him," Jesus had drawn the attention to God rather than to himself.

A second concern in keeping the healed quiet is the problem of publicity. In the case of the Gerasenes Jesus was leaving the area, so publicity would be no problem. But the healed leper he tells to keep quiet (Mk 1:44) caused real problems when "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” (Mk 1:45).¹ This popularity was bad in two ways. As we see in Mark 6:31, it made life difficult. The situation appeared so crazy to his relatives that they wanted to take him into protective custody (Mk 3:20–21)! In fact, it even made ministry difficult, for frequently crowds became a hindrance in people’s attempts to get to Jesus (Mk 2:2–4). Furthermore the popularity attracted the attention of the authorities, which could be dangerous (Mk 6:14). So this problem reinforced Jesus’ own humble modesty about his healing activities.

Finally, we turn to the demonized. The demons did indeed know who Jesus was. In fact, they knew who Jesus was far better than even his disciples did, for only they use the title “Son of God” until the very end of the Gospel (Mk 15:39). We are never told what their motives are for crying out; it could simply be a spontaneous astonished wail upon meeting their match, or it may have had a more sinister purpose. Jesus always silenced them, whatever their motives. While he also never says why he did so, we can see from the text that he would have had several reasons for wishing to keep them silent. First, “the teachers of the law” associated him with Beelzebub, “the prince of demons” (Mk 3:22). Any tendency to show that he accepted the demonic would have given extra evidence to these opponents.

Second, to accept the testimony of demons about himself would give a precedent to his followers to accept (or even seek) testimony of demons about other things. This would threaten to make Jesus’ movement an occult movement. Here is also a parallel to the temptation narratives in Matthew and Luke: Jesus will not receive the kingdoms of this world from the devil (Mt 4:9–10), and neither will he receive help in his mission from the devil’s agents.

Third, and most important, Jesus’ whole mission was a call to faith based on evidence, not on authoritative testimony. Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God and acts according to kingdom values. Those who take the risk of faith and commit themselves become disciples and learn more, but others receive teaching only in obscure parables (Mk 4:11–12, 33–34). When John the Baptist requests more information, Jesus simply tells the messengers to report the events that they saw (Mt 11:4–6; Lk 7:21–23). Only in the account of his trial before the Sanhedrin does Jesus make a direct statement about himself. Therefore the demons were short-circuiting Jesus’ whole methodology. His command to them was a sharp “Shut up!” His invitation to the crowd at their expulsion was “See and believe that the kingdom of God has come.”¹

¹B. Malina, *The New Testament World* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), p. 122, argues that this was because the healed man’s report included the fact that Jesus had touched him and thereby had himself become unclean. Jesus is thus forced to stay outside villages, where unclean people were to stay. While this is a possible interpretation, the fact that the text of Mark 1:45 stresses that many gathered to him and implies that he went back to Capernaum as soon as the crowd dissipated makes this a less likely interpretation.

¹Kaiser, Walter C.: *Hard Sayings of the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997, c1996, S. 406