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# The Messianic Secret and the Resurrection

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## I

Our study is chiefly confined to certain passages in St. Mark's Gospel which deal with the injunctions to secrecy in Christ's ministry, in the light of the theory of the 'Messianic Secret' put forth by the noted German scholar, W. Wrede, on the basis of these Markan passages. Wrede notes that in Mark there is a constant effort made to show that Christ Jesus was avoiding public claim of His Messiahship until the resurrection. In Wrede's view this arises out of the dogmatic convictions of the evangelist, to show that the resurrection vindicated the Messiahship of Christ which remained hidden during His lifetime. Indications for this in St. Mark's Gospel which Wrede pointed out are as follows:

1. The way in which the demons are represented by Mark as making Him known as the Messiah.

2. The instances in which Christ sternly enjoins secrecy with regard to the demoniacs (Mark 1:25, 34; 3:12, etc.), with regard to the healing of the sick (Mark 1:43-45; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26, etc.), and the caution to the disciples (Mark 8:30; 9:9). The Lord's desire to conceal His whereabouts (Mark 7:24; 9:30) and even the passage where the crowd silences the blind man (Mark 10:48) are also added.

3. The instances where it is shown that Christ is withdrawing from the crowd to give a kind of esoteric teaching to His disciples (Mark 4:10-13, 33-34; 7:7-23; 9:28-29, etc.). The teaching given only in private to the disciples (Mark 9:30-31, 33 f.; 8:3 f.) is also included here.

The above passages relating to the Messianic Secret in St. Mark can be safely divided into four different groups:

1. The silencing of the demons.
2. The command to keep certain miracles secret.
3. The instructions to the disciples not to reveal Him.
4. The attempts of Jesus to travel incognito.

We can group these into two broad sections:

1. Those imposed with a Messianic motive (groups 1 and 3

—the silencing of the demons and the instructions to the disciples not to reveal Him).

2. Those imposed to avoid the unruly crowd, i.e. with a non-Messianic motive (groups 2 and 4—the command to keep certain miracles secret and the attempts of Jesus to travel incognito).

We do not now look into the reasons for considering the second section as non-Messianic. The unwieldy crowds were a constant trouble to Christ's ministry (e.g. Mark 3). The spreading of the news of the healings only added more trouble from the crowds (e.g. Mark 1:40–45). The two incognito journeys, falling at the time of the retirement from active ministry from Galilee, were taken by Christ to give special teaching to His disciples and therefore He avoided the crowds. Our present consideration, however, is with those passages which are of Messianic importance and we shall consider therefore only the first section—the silencing of the demons and the instructions to the disciples not to reveal Him.

## II

We shall have to ask two questions at the outset in the context of our study. These will be pointers for the present discussion. The first question is, 'What was it that Christ was hiding from the public in His ministry?' i.e. was it the identity of the Messiah, expressed in the question, 'Who is the Messiah?', or is it His rôle: 'What is the Messiah?' The second question is, 'Was He hiding His Messiahship until the resurrection?', i.e. was His Messiahship revealed only at His resurrection or earlier than that? Now keeping these questions in mind, we shall consider the two impositions to secrecy by Christ—the silencing of the demons (Mark 1:25; 1:34; 3:12) and the instructions to the disciples not to reveal Him (Mark 8:29; 9:9).

1. *The silencing of the demons.* In his important article on this subject T. W. Manson argued that the true Messianic Secret in St. Mark's Gospel was concerned with the rôle or activity of the Messiah. 'The Messianic Secret which undoubtedly exists in the Gospels', he writes, 'is not concerned with the identity of the Messiah but with the nature of His task . . . While all others were asking, "Who is the Messiah?", He asked, "What is the Messiah?"'<sup>1</sup>

We must, however, consider whether the question of the *identity* of the Messiah can be wholly disregarded. We do not need to discuss the reality or unreality of the existence of the evil spirits. Neither do we need to dwell on the fact whether Christ accepted their existence, or is just using exorcism in the context of the period in which He lived. All we have to consider here is the fact that the demoniacs began to shout aloud when they met Christ. In their talk or their cry of terror or their confession at

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<sup>1</sup> 'Realized Eschatology and the Messianic Secret', in *Studies in the Gospels*, ed. D. E. Nineham, 1955.

the sight of Christ Jesus, the name of Christ is involved—'The Holy One of God', 'The Son of God', etc. The rebuke of Christ to silence shows that either He did not allow the demoniac to chatter about what He alone wished to utter, or He wanted secrecy when His name was mentioned. The latter seems to be true. He silenced them because they revealed His true identity. This reason is given in explicit terms in Mark 1:34: 'He suffered not the devils to speak, because they knew Him.' (Some versions even add, 'Because they knew Him to be Christ'). Here the injunction to silence suggests a Messianic Secret because the question, 'Who Jesus is', is involved in what the demoniacs cried out before Christ. One may ask, 'How does the demoniac know who Christ is?' If the demoniac is just a mental derelict in the modern sense, as some maintain, then we face the problem as to how the insane man knew the real identity of Christ. It is impossible. It takes more than the sick person to confess who Jesus is. Also, if the utterance is just a rambling talk from a mentally sick man, then we have to ask why Christ wants to silence the man. If the silencing is on the basis of uttering His true identity—Messianic Secret—as Mark attests (1:34), naturally we have to accept the idea of demon possession. If not, the command to silence by Christ is meaningless. If we accept that it is a spirit, whether good or evil, naturally we concede the idea that the spirits know more than human beings. This is what Wrede thinks that Mark is trying to impress upon the readers. Then, are these stories of demon exorcisms unhistorical, created by Mark or someone else, in which case only Wrede's theory of the Messianic Secret holds ground? For clearer light we may now turn to the second list—of impositions to secrecy on the disciples.

2. *The instructions to the disciples not to reveal Him: the Caesarea Philippi experience and the Transfiguration Mount experience* (Mark 8:29; 9:9). Christ commands His disciples in both these cases not to tell anything of what they have experienced about Him until the resurrection. In fact the latter (Mark 9:9) is the key verse of Wrede's theory. As in the case of the healing of the demoniacs, with reference to the disciples, there seems to be the Messianic secrecy involved. In the first case, Peter confessed that Jesus is the Son of God. In the second case, the inner circle of the disciples saw the true glory of Christ and at the same time heard the heavenly voice proclaim His divine sonship.

The prohibitions given to the disciples at Caesarea Philippi followed immediately after Peter's confession. Peter confessed who Jesus was—the Son of God. Hence, when Christ asked them to keep it secret, it was undoubtedly with reference to the question, 'Who is Jesus?' It is a secret revealed to Peter by God the Father alone. No human being can reveal this true identity of Christ. Only the Father can reveal it in the Son. Thus this secret, 'Who Jesus is', has to be kept hidden from those who are not disciples. Or we can say that the public did not know who Jesus was. If they, too, knew Him who He was, they 'might have

become' His disciples. On the other hand it is meaningless for Christ to ask the disciples not to reveal Him, if all knew who He was, both disciples and non-disciples.

One thing we see with the public that they were not indifferent to the question of who Jesus was. The very fact that a lot of speculation was made about Jesus shows that they were quite concerned about the question, 'Who Jesus is'. This is seen in the report of the disciples to Christ at Caesarea Philippi about what the people were thinking about Him (Mark 8:28).

In this context we cannot accept Manson's view that the question, 'What is the Messiah?', alone constitutes the real Messianic Secret. That is, 'Who is the Messiah?' or 'Who Jesus is' (as put forth by Wrede) is not the real Messianic Secret. If we accept Manson's view, then we have to leave the general crowd out of the picture, for we see that for the crowds, 'Who is the Messiah' or 'Who Jesus is' is the real secret. They never understood who Jesus was, or that He was the Messiah. They only knew Him as one of the prophets—either an old prophet (John the Baptist risen again, Elias returned to earth, Jeremias) or a new prophet from Nazareth (Matt. 21:10). That is what the disciples reported to Christ at Caesarea Philippi of what the crowds were thinking about Him (Mark 8:28) and that is what Herod heard from the people when he enquired of them, though he was suspicious that John the Baptist, whom he beheaded, had come back to life (Mark 6:14-16). Even at the Royal Entry the crowd, which hailed Him on the way, referred to Him in the city only as 'a prophet' (Matt. 21:10).

The command to silence at Caesarea Philippi cannot refer to the question, 'What is the Messiah?', for that was a secret even to the disciples. The disciples knew who the Messiah was (Peter's confession—Mark 8:29), but they did not know the answer to the question, 'What is the Messiah?' So, how could they be asked to keep secret what they did not know? The disciples did not know what the Messiah was because of their Jewish background and their conception of the Messiah and His rôle. For this reason, Christ when He spoke of His coming passion, in those three formal passion sayings recorded in Mark (Mark 8:30; 9:30; 10:33), was not understood by the disciples. On the first occasion, Peter openly rebuked Christ (Mark 8:30); on the second, they discussed their positions in the kingdom of God (Mark 9:33-35); and on the third, the sons of Zebedee made an ambitious request for positions in Christ's kingdom (Mark 10:35-45). Suffering and death included by Christ in the rôle of the Messiah based upon the rôle of the Suffering Servant were not visualized by the disciples. Their views are grounded on the rôle of the 'Son of Man' depicted in the prophecy of Daniel (7th and 10th chapters) and the Book of Enoch. To answer the question, 'What is the Messiah?', in terms of the fusion of the rôles of the Suffering Servant and the Son of Man was foreign to the idea of the disciples. They did not know what the Messiah was in terms of Christ's interpretation. So there

is no doubt about the fact that the charge to secrecy by Christ to the disciples does not deal with the question, 'What is the Messiah?'

Thus, if we take the people into our consideration, as we ought to (for whom the secret is, 'Who is Jesus?'), Manson loses his case. Just as Wrede (who holds that the secret is, 'Who is the Messiah?') loses his case if we take the disciples into consideration, for the question of the Messiah's identity is not a secret to them. What Manson says is true if we take only the disciples into consideration, just as Wrede's theory is true if we take only the people into consideration. Either view is unsatisfactory, for we have to take into consideration all those involved, both the disciples and the people.

### III

The next question to consider is whether all the injunctions to secrecy fix the period for the unveiling at the resurrection. We can certainly answer 'no'. Christ did not affix at the end of each prohibition the explicit words, 'until the resurrection'. This is found only in the one case of the incident on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:9), though it is implied in some other cases. According to Wrede, the resurrection was meant to unveil the Messianic Secret. In other words, before the resurrection Christ's Messiahship was kept secret, though revealed to His disciples. But we find quite a few scholars who maintain that the Messiahship of Christ was made public at the time of the Royal Entry. Saddler<sup>2</sup> says that He who withheld public claim before, from now on openly calls for it. Gibson<sup>3</sup> holds that Christ made public claim here (viz. at the Royal Entry) so as to reserve His future claim for kingship.

The Royal Entry has great significance for our study of the Messianic Secret theory with regard to the resurrection as the period set for revelation of His Messiahship. If we accept the praises of the public at the Royal Entry as Messianic, then it means that the public knew who Jesus was. The fact that Christ never objected to their praises and, on the other hand, that He rebuked those who did object, might be taken to show that Christ made His Messiahship public even before the resurrection. In that case, Wrede's theory loses its case, for to him the chief pillar of the structure of his theory is the concealment of the Messiahship by Christ until the resurrection. Not only, however, would Wrede's theory collapse on this premise, but we also find Christ Himself in virtual contradiction of what He imposed on His disciples explicitly on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:9). That is why McNeile<sup>4</sup> strongly contends against any public assertion of His

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<sup>2</sup> M. F. Saddler, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, p. 307.

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Gibson, in *The Expositor's Bible* (ed. W. R. Nicoll), Vol. IV, p. 771.

<sup>4</sup> A. H. McNeile, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (1915), p. 297.

Messiahship at the time of the Royal Entry. He says that there is no instance that the prohibition was ever lifted from the time that it was imposed. The only possible way out of this conflict is to show that only the disciples of Christ praised Him as the Messiah and the multitudes, though they chorused the same phrases, yet they did so without realizing the Messianic significance of those phrases. The report of these people after they entered the city adds weight to the latter view—'This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee' (Matt. 21 :10). By the above proposition we hold that the crowds never knew Him as the Messiah till His resurrection. Only the disciples knew Him. In other words, that if we accept the public claim of Christ's Messiahship at the Royal Entry it invalidates automatically Wrede's Messianic Secret theory, which was timed to the resurrection. This is not so if the Royal Entry makes no public claim for His Messiahship.

In the second place, according to Wrede, the resurrection is the only clue by which we are given to understand Christ's Messiahship. That is, apart from the resurrection of Christ we have no indication of Christ's Messiahship. In one sense Wrede is right and in another he is wrong. Let us suppose that Christ Jesus after having died never rose again to life. The situation would be the same as that of the disciples who did not believe when the first report of His resurrection was brought by the women who first went to the tomb of Jesus. Those early disciples would have returned to their professions like Peter going to fish again, taking along not only his brother and the fellow-fishermen, the two sons of Zebedee, but also the two doubters, Nathanael and Thomas (John 1 :45, 46). There would have been no Christianity at all. Of course, as Albert Schweitzer distinguishes the practical following of Jesus from the convictions about Him, so there would have arisen a set of followers even from the dead Christ, as in the case of other religions which are based on the teachings of great teachers who have died and gone. Thus Christianity as the principles of Jesus would have existed till now. In other words, the death of Christ in itself ends all hope of any foundation for the present type of Christianity which we have today. The resurrection alone gave the early disciples an assurance that He is Christ indeed and they then set about preaching the Gospel. Even if we grant the fact that some knew His Messiahship in His lifetime, yet we have to note that they would have known His Messiahship only partially, for the chief work of the Messiah is to win victory over sin and death. The cross signified victory over sin and the resurrection over death. Thus only at the resurrection was His Messiahship fully vindicated.

On the other hand we have to note that the Messiahship was acknowledged by the disciples even before the resurrection. Or we can say that even without the resurrection, the disciples believed His Messiahship. This includes both the words and work of Christ throughout His lifetime. That is why, when He

died, the disciples expressed a disappointed wish, a wish indicating that they had truly believed that He was the Messiah but His death had shattered it. The two walking to Emmaus afford a good illustration. These two told the 'stranger' about 'Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word . . . we trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel' (Luke 24: 19, 21). From this we understand that the disciples were confirmed in their belief that Jesus was the Messiah by His life, but His death shattered all their hopes. That is to say, the disciples did not doubt His Messiahship in His lifetime as witnessed by His word and deed; only this belief did not include suffering and death. This is due to their Jewish background and ideas of Messiahship based on Daniel and Enoch, for these books deal with the glory of the Messiah but not His suffering and death. Thus the death of Christ does not indicate their 'disbelief' but a 'shattering' of their former belief in the Messiahship of Christ Jesus. So the resurrection is a recuperating of their former belief, or we can say that the resurrection is the 'recovery' from the shock of Christ's death of their firm belief in Christ's Messiahship. Thus apart from the resurrection Christ's Messiahship was revealed to the disciples. He was living before them as the Messiah. Rawlinson's question put to Wrede in this context is quite revealing. He asks, 'Why, for example, upon Wrede's showing, should the vision of the Risen Lord, assuming it to be true that the disciples eventually saw Him in very deed alive from the dead, lead them of itself to the remarkable conclusion that He was the Messiah? Why should they infer from it more than simply the fact that He was alive?'<sup>5</sup> All this is shown to prove that the resurrection is not an isolated event in the ministry of Christ, nor by itself could it prove His Messiahship. As Weiss has forcefully contended, the resurrection could only be interpreted as the vindication of the Messiahship already ascribed to Jesus during His lifetime.

#### IV.

*Conclusion.* We have to note that the Messianic Secret cannot be separated into the two questions, 'Who is the Messiah?' and 'What is the Messiah?' For the grand secret is involved with both the 'who' and the 'what' of the Messiahship, both the person of Christ and His rôle as the Messiah. This conclusion is arrived at in terms of the total context of all people who were faced with the question, 'Who is He?', when they met Christ.

The prohibitions truly give us a clue to the fact that Christ's Messiahship was carried secretly in His earthly life. But this does not mean that the Messianic Secret needs to be explained solely by the prohibitions extant in Mark. Some prohibitions do not deal with the Messianic Secret at all—two of the four groups of evidence (the healing miracles and the incognito journeys) seem

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<sup>5</sup> A. E. J. Rawlinson, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (1925), p. 260.

to deal with non-Messianic aspects of the story; on the other hand, the other two groups (silencing the demons and instructions to the disciples) seem to deal with the Messianic Secret. Manson's remark is quite helpful, 'No voice from heaven has declared that all the injunctions to secrecy in Mark spring from the same motive.'<sup>6</sup> H. J. Cadbury's paper, 'Mixed Motives in the Gospels',<sup>7</sup> explores the possibility of other motives. The Messianic Secret is Christ's wise counsel and purpose so decreed to effect man's salvation. It is not, as Wrede considered, a dogmatic conviction of the Church to turn the defeated life and ministry of Jesus, a preacher of righteousness, into a triumphant Messiah, as vindicated in His resurrection. It is rather that the letting out of the Messianic Secret will lead to the destruction of His programme prematurely by encountering the opposition of the Jews and the Roman Government. In conclusion we may say that surely there is a Messianic Secret in Mark's Gospel and Wrede needs to be credited for bringing this to light, though we need not accept the views he expressed in terms of his basic theory of the development of the Gospel tradition.

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<sup>6</sup> A. E. J. Rawlinson, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (1925), p. 212.

<sup>7</sup> H. J. Cadbury, 'Mixed Motives in the Gospels', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 95 (1951), pp. 117-124.

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## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Catholic Enquiry Centre,  
1978 Convent Street,  
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DEAR SIR,

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(Signed) E. FRANCIS,  
Director