

## SECRECY

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As noted in the introduction, the term “messianic secret” has functioned essentially as a cipher among biblical scholars. It has been a cooking pot into which scholars have poured different combinations of a select variety of ingredients, and from which they have produced a variety of interesting entrees. Another way to say this is that the “messianic secret” is a technical term in Markan scholarship. The referent of this technical term varies among scholars, but to use this term means that one is working with some subset of a broad set of issues related to Markan concealment passages (see the introduction). Exactly what scholars mean when they discuss the secrecy motif differs from case to case.

In a very broad sense, secrecy is simply intentional concealment.<sup>1</sup> Sissela Bok expands upon this definition, writing that to keep a secret

from someone is “to block information about it or evidence of it from reaching that person and to do so intentionally: to prevent him from learning it, and thus from possessing it, making use of it, or revealing it. The word ‘secrecy’ refers to the resulting concealment.”<sup>2</sup> To some extent, then, we are on safe ground in saying that Jesus keeps secrets in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus does, at times, intentionally conceal some information from some people. When Jesus orders the witnesses to the raising of Jairus’s daughter that no one should know what he has done (5:43), or orders the disciples to tell no one that he is the Messiah (8:30), he is concealing information. If secrecy is intentional concealment, then Jesus is practicing secrecy.

Yet secrecy will mean different things in different cultural contexts. Our concern in this chapter will be secrecy within the context of the ancient Mediterranean world. Broadly speaking, this is the context of the Markan audience, and the understanding of secrecy within this specific context should help us to evaluate whether Mark’s audience would have understood Jesus’ actions in terms of secrecy. As Guy G. Stroumsa has put it, “Christianity was born and first grew in a world in which esotericism, religious as well as philosophical, was rife.”<sup>3</sup>

## THE LANGUAGE OF SECRECY

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### *The Language of Secrecy in the New Testament World*

There is a broad Greek vocabulary related to secrecy. Many terms become related to secrecy by the addition of the preposition *hypo* (sometimes rendered *hyp-* or *hyph-*), which has the basic meaning of “under,” rather like the prefix *sub-* in English. Hence, *histēmi* basically means “to set, place, or establish,” while *hyphistēmi* means “to post secretly or wait in ambush.” The word *ballō* means “to throw, put, or place,” while *hypoballō* can refer to secret payments or bribes. Similarly, though less frequently, sometimes words prefixed by the

preposition *para* connote secrecy, such as in the case of *parekdidōmi*, which means “give in marriage secretly,” and *pareiserpō*, which means “creep in secretly.”<sup>4</sup>

There are several other common terms for secrecy as well. The word group related to *kruptō*, which means “hide,” relates to secrecy. These words, which are extremely common, do not bear specifically religious overtones.<sup>5</sup> Yet they are at times used in specifically religious contexts or otherwise given religious meanings. Philo, for example, uses the term *apokruphios*, which is related to *kruptos*, to speak of divine revelations that are not to be uttered aloud, but treasured in silence.<sup>6</sup> We also find this term in *1 Clement* in a reference to David’s saying to God, “You have unveiled to me the veiled and hidden [*kruphia*] matters of your wisdom.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the Wisdom of Solomon speaks of hiding (*apokruptō*) the secrets of God’s wisdom (6:22). They are not, however, the more common words for secrecy when speaking of religious rites and practices.

The word *lathra* and related words are also used for secrecy. Words in this group often connote treachery, plotting, or intrigue, as in Josephus’s secret instructions (*lathra*) to a certain Crispus to make the soldier guarding Crispus drunk and then to escape.<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 13:7 (LXX) refers to a secret invitation to idolatry. There are also a number of instances in which this term is used in statements that nothing can be hidden from God, as in the letter of Aristeeas to Philocrates: “[E]very place is filled with His sovereignty, and . . . nothing done by men on earth secretly escapes his notice [*lanthanei*].”<sup>9</sup> Again, however, this is not a term that has specifically religious overtones.

Another term used to indicate secrecy is *arrētos*, which has among its meanings “unspoken,” “that cannot be spoken,” “not to be spoken,” and “unutterable.”<sup>10</sup> Forms of this word commonly describe the religious experience of the ineffable and inexplicable, experience that cannot be adequately captured in words. Plutarch uses this term to refer to mystic rites and ceremonies that are concealed from the eyes and ears of the multitude.<sup>11</sup> In the *Life of Apollonius*, this term is used for the rings and staffs of Indian sages, which are reportedly able to do anything and are “honored as secrets.”<sup>12</sup> This term can also have profane usages, however, such as we see in Sirach 13:22: the rich person can say things that he should not (*aporrēta*), but he is nevertheless justified by others.

Within Greek religion, the primary term used for the keeping of secrets was *mystērion*. There were profane uses of this term, such as when Josephus describes Antipater's life as a "mystery of iniquity" because of the secrecy of his friends.<sup>13</sup> Yet the specifically religious uses of this term were quite common. This word could refer to religious rites available to a closed circle of initiates, including the initiation process itself. It could also refer to the secrets revealed in those rites, even when those secrets were inexpressible, along the lines of *arrētos*. One would find such rites in a variety of contexts, the most famous of which is the sanctuary of Eleusis. A "mystery" could also refer simply to a profound religious experience, or a religious truth that is beyond explanation. According to Ignatius, the virginity of Mary, her giving birth, and the death of the Lord are "mysteries."<sup>14</sup> In the *Epistle to Diognetus*, we read of Jesus, "Even though he was not understood by unbelievers, he told these things to his disciples, who after being considered faithful by him came to know the mysteries of the Father."<sup>15</sup> In the LXX, this term only appears in later works: Tobit, Judith, The Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Daniel, and 2 Maccabees.<sup>16</sup> It can refer both to secular and religious secrets. It can, for example, refer to the secret of a king (Tob 12:7), a secret plan (Jdt 2:2), the secrets of a friend (Sir 22:22; 27:16, 17, 21), or secret wartime information (2 Macc 13:21). Yet it can also refer to the "secret purposes of God" (Wis 2:22), the nature of wisdom (Wis 6:22), or to secrets that only God can reveal (Dan 2:18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 47). We also find this term used for idolatrous rites (Wis 14:15, 23).

There are also a number of terms that can, but do not necessarily, express secrecy. In such cases, secrecy may be a secondary or derivative meaning. For example, *stegō* can mean "conceal or keep hidden," but refers primarily to tightly covering something to keep fluid in or out. *Keuthō* refers to the covering of an object, but also can refer to the keeping of secrets, much as we would speak of something as "veiled" in English. *Phōrios* primarily means "stolen," but it can also mean "secret" or "clandestine." *Anangeltos* means "unannounced," and therefore can connote the concealing of information. *Malē* means "armpit," but it can also refer to something done in an underhanded way. *Sigaō* and *siōpaō* both refer to keeping silence, and it is an easy move from silence to secrecy. *Skotos*, which means "dark," can relate to deeds that are concealed from other people.<sup>17</sup>

*The Language of Secrecy in Mark*

Interestingly, this rich vocabulary for secrecy rarely shows up in the Gospel of Mark. None of the words for secrecy created by prefixing *hypo-* or *para-* appears in Mark. The only possible exception to this is the use of *parerchomai*, “to pass by,” in 6:48, but as we will see, “to pass by” in this context refers not to hiding, but revelation. No form of *arrētos* appears in Mark. The words *kruptos* and *apokruphos* each appear once in Mark (both in 4:22), but words related to *kruptō* are otherwise absent from the Gospel.<sup>18</sup> *Lanthanō* occurs in 7:24 to convey Jesus’ wish that no one know he had entered a house. No other words from this word group appear in the Gospel. *Mystērion*, a word that appears rather often in the Pauline corpus, occurs only once in Mark (4:11).

The word *siōpaō*, which means “be silent,” appears five times in Mark’s Gospel (3:4; 4:39; 9:34; 10:48; 14:61). The use of this term in 9:34 could be seen as the disciples wishing to keep a secret from Jesus, but none of these instances refer to Jesus’ keeping a secret. In fact, only once is Jesus the subject of this verb (14:61), and in the next verse Jesus admits to being “the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One.” Once in the Gospel Jesus tells a demon to be silent (1:25), but the word here is *phimaō*, which means “be muzzled,” as one who silences a barking dog. If the evangelist wished to convey secrecy in this passage, he chose an unusual word to do so. This word also shows up in 4:39, in Jesus’ rebuke of the sea during a storm. Clearly, secrecy is not in mind in this case.

Other terms mentioned above—*stegō*, *keuthō*, *phōrios*, *anangeltos*, *malē*, and *sigāō*, never appear in Mark. *Skotos* occurs once (15:33), but not in relationship to secrecy (darkness came over the land). In sum, the vocabulary of secrecy is exceedingly rare in Mark. In fact, with regard to the vocabulary surveyed above, there are only four instances in the sixteen chapters of the Gospel in which the language of secrecy is present (4:11, twice in 4:22; and 7:24), and three of these instances occur within eleven verses of one another.

## THE FUNCTIONS OF SECRECY

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### *The Functions of Secrecy in the New Testament World*

One can, of course, refer to secrecy without using this kind of specific vocabulary. For example, one might say something like, “I went there without his knowing,” or “She kept this information to herself.” Alternatively, we sometimes use phrases that connote secrecy, such as when we say that a certain fact was kept “out of sight” or that a correspondence is “for your eyes only.” Context, then, can be crucial to identifying secrets. Greek-speaking people of the ancient Mediterranean world also used context to express secrecy. For example, in Luke 22:6, Judas looks for an opportunity to betray Jesus “away from the crowd.” In this case, secrecy is simply implied by the context.

Thus, in thinking through secrecy in Mark’s Gospel, we must address both vocabulary and context. With regard to the latter, the sociologist Georg Simmel offers a helpful starting point. He discusses secrecy primarily as a protective measure. “[T]he purpose of secrecy,” he writes, “is, above all, *protection*.”<sup>19</sup> Though Simmel’s interpretation does not deal specifically with ancient Mediterranean cultures, it is especially appropriate for this discussion. Scholarship on secrecy in the ancient Mediterranean world has pointed to its protective, exclusionary, or defensive functions. In some ways, the protective functions of secrecy are obvious. Knowledge of an individual or group can, in certain contexts, serve as a tool for defamation. One may therefore keep secrets as a way of maintaining one’s public reputation. The Roman satirist Juvenal, for example, discusses slaves who slander their masters as retribution for beatings. The wealthy master may therefore attempt to practice secrecy in order to avoid the gossip of slaves (though Juvenal notes that this will always be unsuccessful).<sup>20</sup> Seneca notes that it is best to control one’s anger, since other vices than anger “may be concealed and cherished in secret,” but anger will show through.<sup>21</sup> Secrecy may also help one to avoid prosecution or persecution. If one is engaged in illicit practices, such as the practice of illegal magical acts, it is prudent to do so in secret to avoid prosecution.<sup>22</sup> The

common admonition in the Greek magical papyri to maintain secrecy probably resulted in part from suppression, either by Roman authorities or Christian communities.<sup>23</sup>

The necessity of protective secrecy was exacerbated in the ancient Mediterranean context by the “high-context” nature of the culture. A high-context culture is one in which people are deeply involved in the everyday activities of those around them and in which information is widely shared.<sup>24</sup> Plutarch, for example, assumes that it is quite common for one’s enemies to be able to pry into one’s affairs, and he holds that one must live circumspectly in order to avoid the assaults of one’s enemies.<sup>25</sup> The ancient novel *Leucippe and Clitophon* also provides commentary on the high-context culture: “Rumor and Slander are two evil sisters. Slander is sharper than a knife, stronger than fire, more plausible than the sirens; Rumor is more fluid than water, speedier than the wind, quicker than wings.”<sup>26</sup> Within the high-context setting, secrecy would be an important and necessary means of protection.

Secrecy can also protect information that allows a group to establish social boundaries. Luther H. Martin offers an understanding of secrecy in Hellenistic religious communities that highlights this function of secrecy.<sup>27</sup> He argues that Hellenistic associations—clubs and *collegia*—provide examples in which we see the use of secrecy for purposes of boundary maintenance. These clubs and *collegia* were voluntary and private associations, all of which should be considered “religious.”<sup>28</sup> He construes Hellenistic associations broadly, then, as religious communities. Martin also construes these associations as “fictive kin groups,” groups that in certain ways take over the functions of the natural family, such as in responsibility for funerary obligations.<sup>29</sup> These associations therefore required considerable loyalty by members, who generally occupied the same social class as one another and sometimes became members through inheritance. These characteristics not only inhered among, say, associations of people who practiced the same trade, but for the mystery cults as well. Martin notes that the mystery cults were very much like other voluntary associations in a number of ways.<sup>30</sup>

Martin identifies secrecy as having an essential place in the lives of the members of these associations. Based upon the sociological work of Simmel, Martin argues that these associations represented

a “second world” that functioned alongside of the first world, and that this second world was facilitated by means of a secret.<sup>31</sup> Another way of putting this is that members of these groups developed beliefs, relationships, and practices that were specific to the association, that outsiders did not share, and that were in certain ways markedly different from everyday life. As noted above, the primary term used for the keeping of secrets in Greek religion was *mystērion*, and publicizing the mysteries was a serious offense. The problem in revealing the mysteries, however, in Martin’s words, “seems not to do with disclosures of concealed information, of mystery contents, which, in most cases, were either trivial or public all along.”<sup>32</sup> Rather, by revealing the mysteries, one undermined the ritual performances, embodied particularly in funerary and initiatory rites, that marked the group members off from the rest of society. Martin notes, “The ‘doing’ of secrecy, in other words, is not primarily a concealing of some knowledge, but rather embodies the ritual procedures necessary for the formation and maintenance of social boundaries.”<sup>33</sup> The rituals in which initiates received the mysteries separated insiders from outsiders. To paraphrase Simmel, one possessed more strongly what was excluded from outsiders.<sup>34</sup> By violating the exclusivity of the mysteries, one threatened the very existence of the group. What was important, then, was not so much the content of the mystery, but that it *was* a mystery, and that it was revealed only within particular ritual contexts. To violate the mystery was to violate the sacredness of the ritual and the group. Simmel, in fact, comments, “The striking feature in the treatment of ritual is not only the rigor of its observance but, above all, the anxiousness with which it is guarded as a secret. Its disclosure appears to be as detrimental as that of the purposes and actions, or perhaps of the very existence, of the society.”<sup>35</sup>

This notion of secrecy creating boundaries and strengthening group cohesion may account for the exclusive nature of the Eucharist in the *Didache* (see 9:5; 10:6). The unholy are excluded from participation in the Eucharist, since their admittance would violate the nature of this gathering of the baptized and thereby profane the rite.<sup>36</sup> In a similar vein, Apollonius prays, “O Asclepius, the philosophy you teach is secret and congenial to yourself, in that you suffer not the wicked to come hither, not even if they pour into your lap all the wealth of India and Sardis.”<sup>37</sup> Likewise, the *Gospel of Thomas* begins with reference



to the “secret sayings” that Jesus spoke, and which Didymos Judas Thomas recorded. The first verse of this work states, “And [Jesus] said, ‘Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.’”<sup>38</sup> There is, then, a select group that will discover the proper interpretation of these secret sayings, and will therefore experience salvation. Everyone else—those who cannot properly interpret the sayings—will receive death, rather than the life available to those in the know. They are not part of the in-group.

Recent anthropological work in New Testament studies also emphasizes secrecy’s function in group definition and the establishment and maintenance of boundaries. Both are means of preserving honor. Scholars who work in the field of social-scientific criticism of the New Testament have understood Jesus’ secrecy in terms of the cultural values of honor and shame, which were of singular importance in the first-century Mediterranean world. More specifically, these scholars argue that the culture in which Jesus lived was a “limited good” society, meaning that “any person’s gain must come through loss by others. . . . Hence, if someone gains success, goods, honor or anything valued by a group, then others correspondingly perceive themselves losing worth, prestige and the like.”<sup>39</sup> Honor, then, was a limited good, and those who “pursue the socially accepted paths to prestige and fame . . . become vulnerable to envy.”<sup>40</sup> Concealment, or secrecy, was used as a defensive mechanism for avoiding challenges that could potentially result in the loss of honor.

Bruce Malina notes the tendency of relationships in the ancient Mediterranean world, especially between people who are not blood relatives, to be *agonistic*. In other words, these relationships were characterized by conflict, competition, and rivalry. To a great extent, these agonistic relationships were brought on by the limited-good understanding that people held of the world around them. Self-disclosure, then, was risky, because it could result in envy, gossip, or some other form of hostility. One certainly would not want to appear to be grasping at honor or acting with the clear intention of enhancing one’s reputation, since this would result in immediate backlash from other people. Malina asserts that the “much-discussed ‘messianic secret’ motif so prominent in Mark (1:25, 34, 44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:24, 36; 8:30; 9:9, 30; 14:61; 15:32) can be seen in this light.”<sup>41</sup> He argues that Jesus, who was born a person of low status (an artisan), could not

have claimed any type of extraordinary honor for himself without being seen as grasping and attempting to rise above his station. Jesus, then, concealed his great deeds and true status in order to ward off envy. Moreover, grasping at honor was perceived as a dishonorable act. There were certain “rules of engagement” that one followed in honor maintenance and acquisition, and Jesus did not violate these. Therefore, because of his concealment, the reader sees Jesus as all the more honorable.

John Pilch refers to secrecy that would ward off envy as “defensive secrecy.”<sup>42</sup> While there were other functions of secrecy in the ancient Mediterranean world, “defensive secrecy” is the type that scholars using this anthropological approach tend to utilize in order to explain the traditions in Mark that relate Jesus’ concealing behavior.<sup>43</sup> Like Malina, Pilch considers Mark’s secrecy passages as authentic traditions recounting Jesus’ behavior. He explains Jesus’ defensive secrecy as part of a strategy that was commonly deployed in the ancient Mediterranean world. Secrecy divided insiders from outsiders and made it difficult for outsiders to gain information about one’s actions and what was going on among one’s in-group. It also allowed one to maintain one’s social status and honor by keeping out possible challenges to honor. Were Jesus to have made open claims about himself and performed mighty deeds without the veil of secrecy, he would have invited envy and hostility from others. Jesus’ secrecy, then, safeguarded his honor and enhanced his reputation.<sup>44</sup> Jesus also maintained secrecy so that he could move about freely (though this effort was frustrated), and so that he could “conceal shameful and potentially damaging information from those whose admiration for him would be shaken, e.g., his shameful fate.”<sup>45</sup>

Regarding the “publicity” motif, which involves instances in which the secret was “leaked,” Pilch focuses on Judas’s role as a “secret leaker.” He writes, “There are at least two ways to make a secret known: to ‘leak’ it to others; or to reveal it. Judas has already been presented above as a secret-leaker in his betrayal of Jesus.” Judas, then, is the one who leaked the secret, and God is the one who will reveal all things: “In the long run, God will uncover all secrets, and everyone will know everything. In the life of Jesus, the bottom line then is that at some time, the right time, everything hidden will be made known, every secret will be revealed by God himself. But for now, in Jesus’ present

moment, secrecy is necessary in order that life may go on.”<sup>46</sup> Pilch, however, offers no substantial analysis of Jesus’ open performance of miracles. Nor does he deal sufficiently with passages such as 5:19, in which Jesus himself seems anything but secretive in his behavior.

Other scholars, however, have noted that, in Mark, Jesus does not normally engage in defensive secrecy to ward off envy. In fact, Jerome Neyrey and Richard Rohrbaugh conclude that, “except for Jesus’ refusal of the compliment in Mark 10:17, he does *not* appear to have engaged in any of the classical strategies of avoiding envy.”<sup>47</sup> They do not offer an explanation of the concealment passages in Mark’s Gospel, but they do point to an important issue: whether or not the Jesus of history engaged in “defensive secrecy,” the concealment traditions that Mark recounts may have a very different meaning in their narrative context than in the context of the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Sometimes, however, secrecy had an additional function: to denote the inexpressibility of a truth. This function does not exclude the protective, exclusive, or defensive functions of secrecy. Rather, these functions could work in concert with secrecy as the establishment of social boundaries and a means for establishing group solidarity. Groups might enjoin secrecy upon their members so that the inexpressible and sacred truths of the group, communicated in ritualistic formularies, were not profaned by common usage in which the truth contained within the rituals would be lost. In such cases, ancient writers commonly used various forms of *arrētos*, which, as noted above, has among its meanings “unspoken,” “that cannot be spoken,” “not to be spoken,” and “unutterable.”<sup>48</sup> To quote Walter Burkert,

Is it not true that the mysteries were “unspeakable,” *arrhēta*, not just in the sense of artificial secrecy utilized to arouse curiosity, but in the sense that what was central and decisive was not accessible to verbalization? There is an “unspeakable *sympatheia*” of the souls with the rituals, Proclus states, and much older is the well-known pronouncement of Aristotle that those undergoing mysteries (*teloumenoi*) should not “learn” (*mathein*) but should “be affected,” “suffer,” or “experience” (*pathein*).<sup>49</sup>

Likewise, among groups commonly referred to as “gnostic,” it was commonly the case that certain mysteries were not to be communicated

to the wider public. Michael A. Williams argues that normally this did not have to do with the fact that there were particular truths that outsiders simply should not know, but that these truths were ineffable, incommunicable, or at least difficult to communicate.<sup>50</sup> Within the circles in which mysteries were revealed, however, the sense of social exclusiveness inhered, since the number of people within the circle was necessarily limited.

*Functions of Secrecy and the Gospel of Mark*

None of these functions of secrecy, however, sufficiently accounts for Jesus' concealment of his deeds and identity in Mark's Gospel. To begin with, let us consider Martin's assertion that secrecy in Greco-Roman religion normally occurred in ritualistic contexts. There is no clear ritualistic context for any of the passages associated with the messianic secret in Mark's Gospel. Admittedly, there are passages in which Jesus appears to act in ways that resemble magical practices of his day. For example, his utterance of Aramaic words in 5:41 and 7:34 could, in modest ways, be likened to the use of archaic terminology in magical acts. Likewise, in the healing of a deaf man he puts his fingers into the deaf man's ears, spits, and touches the deaf man's tongue (7:33), and in the healing of a blind man, he places spittle upon the blind man's eyes (8:23). It is important to note, however, that the intention here is not to conceal information about the specifics of the healing process. Jesus does not specifically enjoin secrecy about the words or actions he uses to heal. Rather, he seems to wish to suppress the spread of word about the healing itself. Moreover, in the only other healing story in which Jesus commands silence, the healing of the leper in 1:40–45, there are no Aramaic terms or actions such as the use of spittle. These passages bear little resemblance to secrecy enjoined within the context of rituals associated with ancient mystery cults.

Likewise, Jesus' exorcisms lack ritualistic elements, and instead emphasize his personal authority over demons. Jesus may command that the demon be silent (1:25, 34; 3:12) and come out of the possessed person (1:25; 5:8; 9:25), though he does not always do so: the exorcism of the Syrophenician woman's daughter lacks even these elements (see 7:24–30). By contrast, we may consider Josephus's account

of an exorcist who utilized incantations composed by Solomon. The exorcist employed a ring containing a specific type of root, drawing out the demon through the nostrils of the possessed man. Following this procedure, the exorcist invoked the name of Solomon in recited incantations, commanding the demon not to return into the formerly possessed man.<sup>51</sup>

Nor does it appear that in the passages associated with the messianic secret, Jesus is attempting to create exclusive social cohesion, establish group solidarity, or ward off envy. First of all, when Jesus does try to limit the spread of information about his deeds or identity, information is not always limited to his group of followers. In the story of Jesus' cleansing of a leper, for example (1:40-45), Jesus commands in no uncertain terms that the healed leper say nothing to anyone. There is no indication, however, that Jesus is alone in this passage. In fact, in 1:38 he invites others to join him in his proclamation in neighboring towns. His command to say nothing to anyone nevertheless applies only to the leper and not to others present. Moreover, one might expect that the method of the leper's healing would come out in conversation with the priests, which is, moreover, supposed to serve as a "witness" (*marturion*) to them (1:44).

In two of the three passages in which Jesus heals in private (7:31-37; 8:22-26), Mark in no way specifies that only Jesus' followers are with him. After healing a deaf man, Jesus orders "them" (*autois*) to tell no one (7:36). The antecedent of the pronoun, however, is unclear. In 8:23, Jesus leads a blind man out of the village before healing him. Yet exactly who is with Jesus at the time is not specified. Being out of the village does not necessarily equate to being in solitude. The episode in 5:21-24, 35-43 is rather a different story. Mark writes that Jesus took only the child's father and mother and "the ones with him," apparently Peter, James, and John (see v. 37). Nevertheless, the mourners are already wailing (v. 38), and Jesus' statement that "the child is not dead but sleeping" (v. 39) meets with contemptuous laughter (v. 40). The deed itself is not likely to remain concealed. Similarly, when Jesus silences demons, his intention does not appear to be to limit information to his closest followers. He simply silences the demons. The disciples receive no more information than anyone else.

Jesus' command to the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah after Peter identifies him as such (8:29-30) could be

interpreted as an attempt to keep information strictly within the in-group for defensive purposes. If this is the case, however, we are at pains to explain why Jesus confesses that he is the Messiah before the high priest (14:62), who is most certainly not an in-group member. Similarly, in the episode of the transfiguration, Jesus' command to the disciples not to tell anyone what they have seen "until the Son of Man has risen from the dead" (9:9) could be interpreted as an attempt to keep information within the in-group. Yet this silence command has a time limit. After Jesus has risen, they may tell, but not until then. The issue, then, is not so much who knows about the transfiguration, but when it is appropriate for such information to come out.

When Jesus attempts to seek solitude and escape from the crowds in 1:35, 4:35-36, and 6:32, he is not exclusively with his circle of followers. In the first of these passages, it appears that Jesus has left his followers behind. Simon and those with him must search for Jesus (1:36). In 4:35, Jesus may take only his disciples in the boat with him (though the text does not specify). Nevertheless, Mark includes the cryptic detail "other boats were with him" (4:36). Whatever the significance of this statement may be, it militates against a sense of exclusiveness in this boat journey. When Jesus seeks solitude with his followers in 6:31-32, Mark provides a motive: Jesus and his disciples have no time for leisure, not even to eat. In none of these three passages does the motive seem to cohere with ancient social functions of secrecy.

Of the categories of passages often associated with the messianic secret, Jesus' private teaching to an inner circle of followers (4:10ff.; 4:34; 7:17-23; 9:28; 10:10; 13:3ff.) looks the most like the kinds of secrecy practiced in Hellenistic religions. Looking carefully at these passages, however, the similarities are not as clear. These teachings are not mysteries revealed only to initiates. Further, the private nature of the teachings seems to result from Jesus' followers' choice to ask him about these things in private, rather than Jesus' decision to keep them secret from the masses. The case appears to be not that either Jesus or the disciples wish to hide information from outsiders, but that Jesus' followers do not always comprehend Jesus' teachings, and try to gain clarity by approaching him for additional teaching. Consider, for example, 4:10: "When he came to be alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables." In 7:17 we read, "When he

had gone into the house away from the crowd, his disciples asked him about the parable.” In 9:28, after Jesus’ disciples are unable to cast out a demon, they approach him in a house “privately” (*kat’ idian*). They ask him, “Why were we unable to cast it out?” In 13:3, Peter, James, John, and Andrew wish to know more about the destruction of the Temple about which Jesus has just spoken. The only instance of private teaching in which the text does not specify that this is at the disciples’ request occurs in 4:34.

In 4:11 we have the very language of Hellenistic religious secrecy appearing in a passage about private teaching: Jesus refers to the “mystery of the kingdom of God.” Indeed, if any passage in Mark looks like ancient religious secrecy, this is it. Yet this passage also presents some problems when understood in terms of secrecy. The issue here is not that Jesus and his followers are forbidden to reveal some truth to other people. Group members are not intentionally to conceal the content of Jesus’ teaching. Rather, Jesus’ preaching is public, and the disciples are never forbidden to talk about it. In fact, Jesus sends the twelve in 3:14 and 6:12 precisely for the purpose of proclamation.

Jesus does offer special teaching to “those around him with the twelve” (4:10), who are probably people among the crowds who have heard Jesus’ teaching and responded positively to it.<sup>52</sup> Yet this is simply an explanation of Jesus’ more public teaching, and Jesus seems taken aback by the fact that these followers do not understand from the outset. “You do not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?” (4:13). Jesus’ question seems to indicate that this circle of his followers should be able to understand the parable without explanation. Nevertheless, the disciples, whom Jesus attempts to make insiders, suffer from a lack of comprehension repeatedly throughout the narrative (4:13; 4:35–41; 8:31–32; 9:33–37; 10:35–45). It is important to note, though, that their lack of comprehension comes in spite of Jesus’ teaching to them, rather than because he has kept secret certain crucial truths.

The reason that Mark refers to a “mystery” in 4:11 probably has to do with the fact that some people will comprehend Jesus’ teaching in response to faith, some will do so only partially, and some not at all. As Joel Marcus notes in relation to Mark 4:10–12, “Human beings as human beings do not know the truth about God, Jesus, or their own condition. For them to recognize vital truth, an act of God

is necessary. Knowing is connected with God's act of bringing in his kingdom."<sup>53</sup> We have, then, a mystery, not in the sense of secret knowledge concealed by the community for purposes of piety, but of revelation by God to the elect. This might be called secrecy, but it does not establish group boundaries or function defensively. Here we come closer to the notion of secrecy as an unspeakable truth: Mark seems to have in mind an understanding that surpasses what can be gleaned from simply hearing the teaching. Some people have "ears to hear" (e.g., 4:9), and others do not. In 4:12, Mark hearkens back to Isaiah 6:9-10 to make this point: Jesus speaks in parables *so that* the truth of Jesus' teaching will be obscured from outsiders. Only God's revelation allows one to enter another level of understanding and respond in faith to Jesus' teachings. Interestingly, however, the common Greek terms for ineffable, unspeakable truths, *arrētos* and *aporrētos*, do not appear in Mark. In fact, the only place in the New Testament in which either of these terms shows up is 2 Corinthians 12:4, in which Paul mentions *arrēta hrēmata*, "words not to be told."

## CONCLUSION

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In the world of the New Testament, there was a broad Greek vocabulary for secrecy. This vocabulary, however, rarely appears in Mark's Gospel. Secrecy also had specific functions in the cultural context of the New Testament, though we rarely see these functions at work in Mark's Gospel. In sum, secrecy, as understood by ancient Mediterranean people, simply does not do very much heavy lifting in Mark's Gospel. This is in no way to invalidate previous work on the messianic secret in Mark, since "messianic secret" is a technical term used by scholars to refer to some subset of a select group of passages. Yet given the understandings of secrecy prevalent in the historical context of Mark's Gospel, the language of secrecy can cause confusion. Among ancient Mediterranean people, secrecy established and preserved boundaries. It functioned defensively to preserve the reputation



of a person or a group. Since in this study I am attempting to reconstruct in part the ways in which an ancient Mediterranean audience would have heard these passages associated with the messianic secret, I will avoid the language of secrecy. Instead, I will cast the argument primarily in terms of honor and shame.