

INTRODUCTION

Mark's Gospel is a puzzling piece of ancient literature, and the more one studies it, the more puzzling it is likely to become. To a greater extent than either Matthew or Luke, Mark leaves things unexplained. Mark's story can be abrupt and cryptic, at least for modern readers. Perhaps the writer of this Gospel knew the audience well enough to know what they would and would not assume, what stories they had already heard time and again, what they thought about Jesus and his culturally unusual way of acting and teaching. Perhaps it was perfectly obvious to them why Jesus was baptized for the forgiveness of sins (1:9), or exactly what Jesus meant by the "mystery of the kingdom of God" (4:11), or why Jesus would call the Syrophoenician woman a dog (7:27). Be that as it may, many of the assumptions of these earliest hearers of Mark's story are not readily available to us today. Some

are utterly lost to us. The ideas, values, experiences, and worldview that we bring to the text are different from those of ancient hearers of Mark's Gospel. Even the act of reading Mark, rather than hearing the story read aloud as the ancients would have, changes the ways in which we interpret it. Nevertheless, we are not totally at a loss. Our efforts to make sense of Mark's Gospel often involve efforts to reconstruct the assumptions and experience of these earliest Christians, and then to interpret the text in light of our reconstructions.

One puzzle of particular interest over the last century involves a number of Markan passages collectively known as the "messianic secret." This term has been around since the earliest years of the twentieth century. It is a translation of William Wrede's term *Messiasgeheimnis*, which might also be translated "messianic mystery."¹ Many scholars since Wrede have offered explanations of the significance of Mark's messianic secret. Nevertheless, no scholarly consensus has emerged on this issue. Part of the reason that no consensus has emerged is that scholars do not agree on exactly which passages constitute the messianic secret. The term functions essentially as a cipher: scholars have used it to refer to a wide variety of Markan themes and passages.² In general, some combination of the following sets of passages have been thought to constitute the messianic secret. Many scholars focus on only one or a few of these:

1. Jesus' commands that people whom he has healed tell no one about what he has done (1:40-45; 5:21-24, 35-43; 7:31-37; 8:22-26)
2. Jesus' healing of people in private settings (5:21-24, 35-43; 7:31-37; 8:22-26)
3. Jesus' silencing of demons, who are aware of his special status (1:23-28; 1:34; 3:12)
4. Jesus' commands that the disciples tell no one what Peter has revealed in his confession at Caesarea Philippi, and that those disciples who were with him at the transfiguration tell no one what they had witnessed (8:30; 9:9). It is often noted in this connection that Jesus took only three disciples with him during the transfiguration scene
5. Jesus' seeking solitude and his attempts to escape from the crowds (e.g., 1:35; 4:35-36; 6:32)

6. Jesus' teaching an inner circle of followers in private settings (4:10ff.; 4:34; 7:17-23; 9:28; 10:10; 13:3ff.)
7. The "mystery of the kingdom of God" to which Jesus refers in 4:10-12
8. The disciples' failure to understand Jesus and to respond to him in faith (e.g., 4:13; 4:35-41; 8:31-32; 9:33-37; 10:35-45)³

In subsequent chapters, when referring to the passages in these eight categories as a group, I will refer to them as the Markan concealment passages. One of the points I wish to make in this book is that, from the perspective of Mark's audience, secrecy is not the most appropriate category for thinking about these passages. In the present chapter's review of Wrede and subsequent scholarship, however, I will maintain the use of terms such as "messianic secret" and "secrecy motif," since such terms are part of the technical vocabulary that scholars use to talk about these passages.

WILLIAM WREDE

Modern critical debate on the "messianic secret" began with William Wrede's work, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*, widely recognized today as a landmark in New Testament studies. In this work, Wrede takes issue with nineteenth-century scholars who considered the Gospel of Mark to be a historically reliable source for writing accounts of the life of Jesus.⁴ Wrede identifies a division between the historical and theological facets of the Gospels, especially with regard to the Gospel of Mark. He holds that "the Gospel of Mark belongs to the history of dogma," and consequently the presentation of Jesus in this Gospel is governed primarily by dogmatic concerns.⁵ Mark's Gospel offers only "pale residues" of the historical life of Jesus.⁶

For Wrede, the key to Mark's dogmatic presentation lies in the collection of passages in which Jesus' identity, deeds, and teachings are obscured. Together, these passages form a unified motif, a "messianic

secret,” in which Jesus’ messianic identity and the necessity of his suffering, death, and resurrection are kept hidden from all but a small group of his followers.⁷ Wrede identifies five categories of passages that involve “injunctions to keep the Messianic secret”:

1. “Prohibitions addressed to demons” (1:25; 1:34; 3:12)
2. “Prohibitions following (other) miracles” (1:43–45; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26)
3. “Prohibitions after Peter’s confession” (8:30; 9:9)
4. “Intentional preservation of his incognito” (7:24; 9:30ff.)
5. “A prohibition to speak which did not originate with Jesus” (10:47ff.).⁸

Along with these five categories, he discusses another category of secrecy passages, which he identifies as “cryptic speech as a mode of concealment,” within which he includes Jesus’ parables and the “mystery of the kingdom of God” (4:10–12).⁹ He also discusses briefly the lack of understanding exhibited by the disciples.¹⁰

Wrede judges the secrecy passages to be historically implausible. He claims that, apart from the fact that “the supernatural view of the author” is impossible to believe,¹¹ no one could reasonably expect people to keep silence after Jesus had, for example, raised Jairus’s daughter from the dead.¹² He also notes that Jesus frequently performs healings in full public view. Furthermore, Jesus’ silence commands are often ignored.

The facts can be put this way: since many of the miracles are public, the later prohibitions found after miraculous deeds lose their point. But they also seem pointless for another reason: those healed pay no heed to the prohibition (1.45, 7.36f.; cf. 5.19f.)—“the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.” According to Mark one would have to add that the more they spread it abroad, the more he forbade it. This has a less sensible ring about it.¹³

Wrede’s explanation of the messianic secret hinges on the claim that the oldest view of Jesus’ messiahship is that he became the Messiah after his death.¹⁴ The origins of the messianic secret lie in the fact that only after the resurrection was messianic significance associated

with the events of Jesus' life. Yet early Christians then had to explain why Jesus was not recognized as the Messiah during his lifetime. In pre-Markan tradition, this tension was resolved by adopting the idea that Jesus was the Messiah during his life, but that he kept his messianic identity a secret. The author of Mark's Gospel took over this understanding of Jesus' secret messiahship and incorporated it into his story. Mark 9:9 is crucial for Wrede's argument. In this passage, which immediately follows the transfiguration and God's announcement of Jesus' divine sonship, Jesus orders Peter, James, and John (the only disciples who are with him at the time) "to tell no one what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead." Mark, drawing on the tradition that preceded him, held that Jesus' messianic status was obscured until the resurrection, at which time it was fully revealed.

In 1907 William Sanday wrote, "The chief merit of Wrede's book consists in its independence, its originality, and the newness of the questions which it raises. I consider it to be not only very wrong but also distinctly wrong-headed."¹⁵ To a great extent, Sanday's comment presaged much of the scholarly reaction to Wrede's work: while Wrede's overall thesis would not win the day, the set of questions that he raised would give rise to decades of scholarship. It is a testimony to the enduring nature of Wrede's works that scholarly studies that deal with the Markan concealment passages in almost all cases acknowledge the influence of *The Messianic Secret*, even more than a century after its publication. Sanday may have been right that the value of Wrede's work is in the questions that it raises, but the significance of these questions is borne out in the numerous works that have tried to answer them, including this one.

SUBSEQUENT SCHOLARSHIP: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The history of scholarship on the passages associated with the messianic secret is long and complex. Over the years, the discussion of the messianic secret has followed the methodologies of biblical studies in

becoming more complex and broader in scope. Interpretations have been offered by way of historical, form, redaction, literary, social-scientific, and reader-response criticism. Because the scholarship on this issue is so vast, it is helpful to divide the responses into a few categories:

1. interpretations that attribute secrecy to Jesus' own actions and intentions
2. interpretations that attribute the secrecy motif to Markan redaction
3. interpretations that hold that the secrecy motif is both historical and redactional
4. interpretations that explain the secrecy motif in terms of its literary features or function(s)
5. interpretations that take a social-scientific approach to secrecy

These categories often overlap one another, and some scholars offer multifaceted interpretations that fit into more than one of them. The purpose of using these categories is simply to help us understand the landscape of scholarship on the messianic secret. Over the next few pages I will discuss the different types of interpretations of the messianic secret that have been put forward since Wrede's work. For each category I will reference specific examples of scholarship that exemplify this type of interpretation. This brief survey is incomplete. Indeed, an exhaustive account of the history of interpretation of the messianic secret would be a weighty tome in itself.¹⁶ We will, then, take a broad look at the kinds of interpretations offered by scholars in response to Wrede's work, the work of subsequent scholars, and, of course, the passages that together form the "messianic secret."

Interpretations That Attribute Secrecy to Jesus' Own Actions and Intentions

One line of interpretation holds that some aspects of the secrecy motif can be traced to the figure of Jesus. These secrecy traditions are not the product of the evangelist or of some historic community, though these may have had an influence on the ways in which the traditions

were preserved. Rather, the traditions are at their core authentic and historic. For scholars who hold this position, an important task is to ascertain the reasons for Jesus' secrecy and its cultural significance.¹⁷ Oskar Holtzmann, for example, ascribes to Jesus a concern that making public his messiahship might hinder his work.¹⁸ Therefore, Jesus did not disclose his messiahship; rather, the disciples gradually recognized him as the Messiah. "The knowledge communicated to Jesus at his baptism by a revelation of God, that he is the Messiah (i. 11), forms the introduction to his public preaching; but he is silent about this belief until his disciples of their own accord recognise him as the Messiah (i. 25, 34, iii. 12, viii. 29 f.)."¹⁹ Jesus, however, does not allow his disciples to call him the Messiah, "until by his entry into Jerusalem, his purification of the Temple, and his defiant answer to the emissaries of the Council, he publicly announces himself to be such—a declaration which he finally confirms again in the most solemn way in the course of the hearing before the Council . . ."²⁰

Some scholars, such as Albert Schweitzer and James D. G. Dunn, have argued that the secrecy traditions represent an attempt by Jesus to redefine the role of the Messiah (though Dunn objects to the term "messianic secret").²¹ Had he made known his messianic identity from the outset, the crowds who followed him would have understood him in terms of their traditional understandings of messiahship (often political or militaristic), rather than in the redefined manner that would be borne out in Jesus' ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection. Schweitzer, for example, held that Jesus wished to recast the messianic role in terms of suffering. For Dunn, Jesus was avoiding the temptation to become a popular messiah and specifically disavowing certain false views of messiahship. Instead, Dunn argues, Jesus wanted to show that the Messiah was one who would serve and suffer, and only after his death be exalted.

Interpretations That Attribute the Secrecy Motif to Markan Redaction

There have also been a number of scholars who have claimed that the messianic secret is not to be attributed to Jesus of Nazareth or to the pre-Markan tradition, but is mainly or entirely the product of the evangelist as he is responding to the needs of his community

by reworking pre-Markan tradition. These types of arguments are many and varied. For example, some scholars, such as Ulrich Luz, have argued that the messianic secret represents a redefinition of messiahship, though not by Jesus, but by the evangelist.²² Mark wishes to cast Jesus' messiahship in terms of the cross and resurrection. Eugene Boring holds that the evangelist is attempting to reconcile two opposing Christologies within the Markan community, one that emphasized Jesus as the powerful Son of God, and one that emphasized Jesus' suffering, cross, and resurrection.²³

Other scholars, such as Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann, have argued that Mark's Gospel should be understood as a book of "secret epiphanies."²⁴ In using this term, they mean that, although continually disclosed throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus' messiahship is hidden from all but a select few. This theme, they argue, is the product of the evangelist. Although these scholars worked prior to the emergence of redaction criticism, like Wrede they anticipated some of the important insights that redaction critics would build upon and develop, and it is appropriate to account for their contributions in connection with later redaction-critical approaches. More recently, Adela Yarbro Collins has argued for a variant of this position, arguing that the "various themes of secrecy in Mark . . . are all literary devices created or adapted by the author of the Gospel to reveal and yet conceal Jesus and to imply that, during his lifetime, his identity was similarly revealed yet concealed."²⁵

Alternatively, other scholars have argued for a "history of revelation" interpretation. In this line of thought, Mark develops a schema such that Jesus' messiahship must remain hidden for a short time, but will be revealed at the appropriate time (for example, at the crucifixion or resurrection). Joel Marcus, for example, holds that in Mark's Gospel Jesus' identity cannot be truly known until his death and resurrection.²⁶ He proposes that "Mark is telling a story about what happened 'way back when' in Jesus' earthly ministry, when the full truth about him could not yet be revealed because the epistemological revolution created by the crucifixion and resurrection had not yet occurred. Hence the messianic secret."²⁷

Still other interpreters maintain that some or all of the secrecy passages in Mark's Gospel are attempts by early Christians to explain some aspect of their faith that would be embarrassing or harmful

to their cause. Wrede's interpretation falls into this category, since he holds that the messianic secret explains why no one recognized Jesus as the Messiah during his lifetime.²⁸ T. A. Burkill also offers an example of this type of "apologetic" interpretation.²⁹ He holds that, by crafting his narrative in such a way that the "true status of Jesus was a predetermined secret,"³⁰ Mark attempts to deal with the problem posed by Jesus' lack of success with the Jews and his crucifixion by Gentiles. "The Master was not accepted as the Messiah, and the evangelist maintains that it was an integral part of the divine purpose that he should not have been so accepted."³¹

Additionally, there are interpretations that explain some or all of the secrecy passages as having a polemical purpose. Joseph Tyson offers one such interpretation in his essay, "The Blindness of the Disciples in Mark."³² He argues that there is a polemic in Mark's Gospel that is directed against the Jerusalem church. The evangelist was probably influenced by Paul, and his perspective may represent a form of Galilean Christianity, both factors that may have contributed to his low estimation of the disciples. Mark saw Jesus' death as having redemptive significance. This redemption was for all people, rather than only for Israel. A nationalistic, royal conception of messiahship was from Mark's perspective erroneous. The disciples, who have a narrow view of messiahship and an inflated view of their own position, and who lack understanding regarding the significance of Jesus' death, represent the Jerusalem church. Their negative portrayal shows the erroneous nature of these positions.

Heikki Räisänen likewise offers a polemical interpretation. He interprets the messianic secret within the context of a polemic against the Q tradition, which, he argues, involves a Christology much different from Mark's own. For Mark, the Q tradition reflects an inadequate understanding of the passion and the resurrection. Q's depiction of Jesus as an eschatological prophet contrasts sharply with Mark's view of Jesus as the Son of God and the Christ. By using Jesus' commands that both demons and the disciples remain silent with regard to his identity, Mark attempts to demonstrate that the advocates of the Q tradition, who appealed to the historical Jesus, had an incorrect understanding of Jesus' identity. Because of his secrecy, Jesus' identity was not known to everyone. Only privately to his disciples and fully in the resurrection was Jesus' identity truly revealed.³³

*Interpretations That Hold That the Secrecy Motif
Is Both Historical and Redactional*

Some scholars have taken what James Blevins refers to as the “mediating view,” which entails the idea that, while Mark’s secrecy motif may have a genuine historical core, the evangelist has recorded these traditions in such a way as to shape them to his own purposes or the purposes of his community.³⁴ Robert H. Stein has articulated such a position in his commentary on Mark. From the “historical Jesus” perspective, he maintains that Jesus’ avoidance of an open proclamation of his messiahship averted an immediate confrontation with Rome. Pilate would not have tolerated a popular leader who referred to himself by such titles as Messiah and Son of David. From the redactional perspective, Stein maintains that the evangelist wished to demonstrate that Jesus was not a political revolutionary. Jesus’ reticence to reveal his identity as Messiah makes this point. The evangelist also uses the secrecy motif to highlight Jesus’ greatness: Jesus’ secrecy commands, coupled with frequent revelations of his authority and identity, show that the Messiah and Son of God cannot be hidden.³⁵

*Interpretations That Explain the Secrecy Motif
in Terms of Its Literary Features or Function(s)*

Up to this point, all of the interpretations that we have considered might be grouped into three large categories: historical interpretations, theological interpretations, and those that combine these. The emergence of literary criticism offered another way of approaching the messianic secret. Some scholars began to look at these passages in terms of their function within Mark’s overall narrative, the literary devices that Mark uses to advance the secrecy theme, or the ways in which it would affect readers or hearers of the Gospel. In *The Genesis of Secrecy*, for example, Frank Kermode brings his skill as a literary critic to bear on the Gospel of Mark.³⁶ He is attentive to the ways in which the secrecy passages affect readers and reading. His interest in the messianic secret has to do with the way secrecy functions in the narrative, the ways in which it guides the reader and interacts with other parts of the text.

Mary Ann Tolbert has a multifaceted explanation of the secrecy motif, but with regard to its literary functions she writes, “Jesus’ efforts to prevent his name from becoming known throughout the first part of the Gospel are ultimately efforts to hold back the denouement, to create time where time no longer exists. In other words, *he tries to buy time for sowing the word*.”³⁷ The messianic secret, in other words, is a narrative device that allows the plot of the story to continue. Once Jesus reveals his identity, the story proceeds quickly to the crucifixion.

Dennis MacDonald offers another literary interpretation of the secrecy motif. He argues that Mark has utilized the *Odyssey* as a model for the themes of secrecy and recognition in the Gospel narrative. MacDonald identifies a number of thematic and narrative similarities between Odysseus’s attempts to conceal his plans and identity and Jesus’ actions in Mark’s Gospel. Like Tolbert, MacDonald holds that secrecy allows Jesus to avoid immediate and swift reprisal by the authorities. Jesus is most secretive in public, Jewish settings in which he could be seen as claiming publicly that he is the Messiah or Son of God. The reader, however, is privy to information that is concealed from many characters in the story. “Mark seems to have borrowed from Homer the motifs of disguise, testing, signs, recognitions, disclosure, and silence, and, as in the *Odyssey*, the use of these motifs permits situation irony in which the reader, knowing the identity of the stranger, enjoys the narrative at a level inaccessible to the characters themselves.”³⁸

Interpretations That Take a Social-Scientific Approach to Secrecy

Most relevant for this analysis are interpretations that approach the secrecy motif by way of social-scientific criticism. Gerd Theissen, for example, has argued that secrecy has a protective function. In Mark’s Gospel, there is tension between secrecy and revelation, tension that reflects the lives of people within the Markan community. Secrecy is a protective measure for the Markan community, which is enduring persecution. Just as Jesus initially kept his identity a secret, these early Christians may also keep their identity a secret, therefore avoiding unnecessary hardships. Just as Jesus confessed his identity before his persecutors, however, the Markan Christians will have to confess their

identity someday as well. For now, these Christians may enjoy the protection of secrecy, but it will not always be so.³⁹

A number of other scholars in the social-scientific camp have made extensive use of cultural anthropology. In this line of interpretation, the ancient values of honor and shame are very important. I will say much more about these values later. Scholars such as Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch see the secrecy motif as a way to protect one's honor, as well as the honor of one's in-group.⁴⁰ This protective function works on a few different levels. First of all, Jesus' secrecy shows that that he was not trying to grasp at glory, praise, and reputation—in other words, honor. Ancient Mediterranean people saw such self-promotion as dishonorable behavior. There was only so much honor to go around, and intentional self-promoters were seen as trying to get more than their share. Jesus shows himself to be an honorable person precisely because he is not trying to gain honor for himself.⁴¹ Second, if Jesus were seen as attempting to gain public praise for himself, he could expect backlash from other people in the community. In other words, secrecy has a defensive function. It allows one to avoid envy and its negative consequences. Third, secrecy divides insiders from outsiders and therefore creates social cohesion among those insiders. Only insiders are privy to certain information. In the next chapter, I will deal with these kinds of interpretations more extensively.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES: THE APPROACH OF THIS WORK

The term “cultural anthropology” is generally used for “ethnographic works that are holistic in spirit, oriented to the ways in which culture affects individual experience, or aim to provide a rounded view of the knowledge, customs, and institutions of a people.”⁴² In other words, cultural anthropology takes a “big picture” approach, looking at broad cultural trends that affect many different aspects of life. Its breadth of scope distinguishes it from “social anthropology,” which isolates and

analyzes more specific systems of social relations, such as domestic life, economics, law, or politics.⁴³ In particular, scholars associated with the Context Group, a working group of international academics committed to the use of the social sciences in biblical interpretation, have done invaluable work in looking at the ways in which the values of honor and shame affected virtually every aspect of life in the ancient Mediterranean world. Among the leading New Testament scholars of the Context Group are Jerome H. Neyrey, Bruce J. Malina, Richard Rohrbaugh, and John J. Pilch. Other scholars not associated with the Context Group, such as Louise J. Lawrence, Mario I. Aguilar, and David A. deSilva, have also drawn fruitfully upon the insights of cultural anthropology as tools for investigating the Bible.⁴⁴

Much social-scientific criticism of the Bible operates on two levels. On one level, this type of scholarship operates by *analogy*. Anthropological investigation of the ancient world is very different from modern anthropological research, since we cannot engage in fieldwork with these ancient people. We cannot sit at their tables, observe their festivals, listen to their stories, note their mannerisms, or ask them specific questions. If we could, the insights would surely be rich and enlightening, but we cannot. Therefore, biblical scholars working with insights of cultural anthropology must work in part by analogy. This means that they utilize models developed in modern anthropological investigations of the Mediterranean world, applying them to the lives of people in the ancient Mediterranean world.⁴⁵

In fact, the values of honor and shame are not unique to the Mediterranean, though the cultures of this region do have their particular manifestations of these values. Rather, honor and shame tend to be important in “face-to-face” cultures, cultures in which there is a great deal of interpersonal interaction among community members. In such cultures, people do not interact with one another primarily by phone, letter, e-mail, or text message. They do not find out what is going on in the community primarily by reading about it in a newspaper or online, or watching the news on television. They interact personally, in direct, face-to-face conversation. Members of a community know one another, know one another’s families, and are keenly aware of individual and family reputations. It stands to reason that in the ancient world, in which aspects of face-to-face interaction would be even more widespread than in many areas of the

Mediterranean world today, characteristics associated with honor and shame would inhere.

Social-scientific criticism of this kind, however, does not proceed simply by analogy, but also through a painstaking process of *verification* and *modification*. We have access to a vast body of literature and archaeological data from the ancient Mediterranean world. The ongoing task of social-scientific criticism is to examine our assertions about the cultural world of the ancient Mediterranean region—drawn in large part from models of modern anthropology—against data from the ancient world. To what extent do ancient writers support our assertions? To what extent must we refine, or even reject, our assertions in light of our ancient sources? Statues, temples, coins, and inscriptions can lend credence to our claims, or they can lead us to reevaluate. The work of the social historian, then, like all other kinds of historians, is never done, but remains within an ongoing process of verification, reevaluation, and refinement.

This body of social-scientific work provides new insights into those passages generally associated with the messianic secret. Scholars taking this approach have demonstrated that, for first-century Mediterranean people, issues such as fame, publicity, reputation, secrecy, kinship, group solidarity, and gift giving were governed by the values of honor and shame. Since these issues show up in many of the Markan concealment passages (as well as in passages in which Jesus is open about his identity and power), it follows that we must understand the ancient values of honor and shame if we are to understand these passages.

As I discuss many of the Markan concealment passages, I will pay special attention to the ways in which the ancient values of honor and shame come to bear on them. In the world of Mark's audience, honor was the primary value governing one's interactions with others. Yet honor meant something different to these ancient Mediterranean people than it does to people in the modern West. We tend to think of honor as an individual virtue. If I do what is right, even if it seems that everyone is against me, I have acted honorably. This conception of honor did not obtain in the world of the Bible, however. Social-scientific critics have shown that honor and shame were construed socially. Bruce Malina's influential definition is as follows: "Honor is the value of a person in his or her own eyes (that is, one's claim to worth) *plus* that person's value in the eyes of his or her social

group.”⁴⁶ In other words, from an ancient Mediterranean perspective, honor involves not only the way in which I think about myself, but the way in which other people think about me. Moreover, some opinions matter considerably more than others. Specifically, the opinions of my immediately family, and then other blood relatives, are of the highest importance. In general, the opinions of other people take on less significance as the relationship of those people to me becomes more distant. Exceptions to this rule were, for the most part, limited to high-ranking people who could bestow honor or shame even on people with whom they previously had only the most distant relationships.

By identifying the cultural values of ancient Mediterranean people, we can begin to look at the ways in which ancient people might have interpreted the story we read in the Gospel of Mark. When Jesus performs great deeds of power, there is potential for his honor to increase. When people spread word of his deeds, when the crowds seek after him, when he becomes known as a prophet, when Peter identifies him as the Messiah—these are all events that ancient Mediterranean people would interpret according to their system of values in which honor and shame were key components. By the same token, when Jesus makes efforts to resist becoming known, when he tries to hinder the spread of his fame, and when he silences those who know he is the Messiah, ancient Mediterranean people would again interpret these according to the honor system, though in these instances they would experience a certain disconnect: Why would Jesus behave in ways that prevented, rather than promoted, the spread of his honor broadly among the public?

There are also many passages in which Jesus seems not at all concerned to conceal his deeds, his authority, or his special relationship to God. A good example of this is the story told in 2:1–12, in which Jesus heals a paralytic. This healing occurs in the midst of a large crowd. Indeed, the house in which the healing takes place is so crowded that people cannot enter through the door. Jesus also pronounces the forgiveness of the paralytic’s sins, and subsequently calls attention to this healing in his dialogue with the scribes, healing the man publicly “so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (2:10). This display of healing power, along with the claim to be able to forgive sins, and thus to have authority on a par with God’s authority, is anything but secretive. It is quite public, as a matter

of fact, and there are a number of other such episodes in Mark as well. In fact, in some passages, such as the healing of the leper in 1:40–45, elements of concealment and publicity are woven together in the same episode. We cannot develop a clear picture of the passages in which Jesus attempts to conceal his deeds and identity without also accounting for those passages in which he makes no such attempt.

What would ancient Mediterranean people have made of this inconsistency? It is helpful to bear in mind that, while scholars sometimes dissect Mark's Gospel and closely examine it in discrete units, such was not the approach of first-century Christians. They would have engaged Mark, in fact, as a story, told from beginning to end. Much recent scholarship on the Gospel of Mark has focused on its literary aspects.⁴⁷ Narrative critics and reader-response critics have emphasized that, in approaching the Gospel of Mark as a story, we gain insights that we miss when we dissect the text or mine it for historical data. Moreover, given the general consensus that most people in the Greco-Roman world were illiterate, it stands to reason that the Markan audience was composed mainly of hearers, rather than readers. The abundance of recent scholarship on oral-aural communication in the Greco-Roman world has established clearly that such communication involves a set of dynamics much different from those which attend communication in high-literacy cultures.⁴⁸ In thinking about the passages so long associated with the messianic secret, then, it is appropriate to consider them within this oral-aural context.

It will become clear as we work through these passages that ancient Mediterranean people hearing Mark's story would have interpreted these passages much differently than modern Westerners. As noted above, the term "messianic secret" is a technical term used by scholars to talk about a group of passages in Mark, or some subset of that group. Yet if we approach these passages from the perspective of ancient Mediterranean people, the language of secrecy may influence the results of this social-scientific study before we even begin. Secrecy had rather specific functions in ancient Mediterranean culture. Jesus' behavior, however, does not look very much like secrecy from an ancient Mediterranean perspective. Nor does it seem that what he most wishes to conceal is his messianic identity. If this is the case, then assuming the presence of a theme of secrecy in Mark leads us in the wrong direction and may keep us from seeing certain possibilities for interpreting Jesus' words and deeds in Mark.

Chapter 1 of this work, then, will examine ancient conventions regarding secrecy. I will argue that ancient Mediterranean people thought about secrecy in rather different ways than modern Westerners, and therefore we are well served if we do not bind ourselves to the language of secrecy in analyzing these passages. In chapter 2, I will explore a number of passages long associated with the messianic secret in terms of the ancient Mediterranean values of honor and shame. As I will argue, the values of honor and shame, which are related to reputation, prestige, and fame, formed the backdrop against which ancient people would have understood these passages. Chapter 3 will shed more light on these passages by discussing Jesus' new vision for the kinds of actions and attitudes that should be considered honorable. Chapter 4 will take up the issue of those passages in which Jesus seems quite open about his deeds and identity. After all, if we are to identify passages in which Jesus conceals his deeds and identity, it behooves us to look just as closely at passages in which he does not. In chapter 5, I will examine the relationship of the passages discussed in chapters 2 and 3 to those in chapter 4. In other words, I will discuss the ways that the passages in which Jesus engages in specific types of counter-cultural behavior relate to those in which such behavior is absent. Understanding communication in cultures that retain strong elements of oral expression, as was the case in the world of Mark's audience, can shed light on the connection between these passages. We will also benefit from some of the insights of modern reader-response theory. Perhaps by looking at these much-studied texts through new lenses, we may develop a fresh perspective on those passages so long associated with Wrede's "messianic secret."