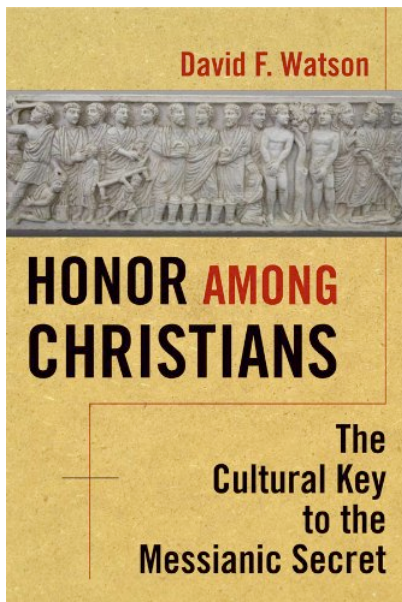


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**Watson, David F.**

***Honor among Christians: The Cultural Key to the Messianic Secret***

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Jonathan A. Draper  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Wilhelm Wrede's famous discovery of the "messianic secret" in Mark's Gospel has in many respects set the agenda for all subsequent scholarly work on the Gospel. As each new critical methodology has been applied to the Gospel, it has had to attempt to answer the riddle of the passages where Jesus prohibits demons and those he heals from telling anyone about what has happened and yet achieving the opposite effect. The application of models from cultural anthropology to the New Testament texts is no exception, and the challenge has already been probed by members of the Context Group, such as Bruce Malina and John J. Pilch, who have mainly been concerned to explain Jesus' secrecy in Mark. This book by David Watson provides a plausible attempt to read the whole Gospel consistently from the perspective of the model of honor-shame and patron-broker-client relationships.

After setting out in brief the *status questionis*, Watson proceeds to address the question of secrecy. His patient analysis of the texts shows that secrecy is, in fact, peripheral to the main concerns of the Gospel. Jesus does not consistently conceal his miraculous healings; indeed, he heals many people in public without any word of caution. Rather, Jesus in Mark rejects the patron-broker-client values and practices of the ancient world, by which honor is ascribed and acquired. His prohibition of spreading praise in response to a

benefaction (healing or exorcism) is an attempt to turn the traditional understanding of what is honorable and what is shameful on its head. Illustrating his thesis with contemporary texts from the Greco-Roman world, Watson argues that members of Jesus' community reflected by Mark's Gospel are expected to reject the "grab for honor" (and power) and value instead self-denial, the no-honor role of a child, to identify the most extreme form of shaming in the ancient world with what is most honorable. Joining the community resulted in being shamed by the world, something now seen as providing honor within the new community that will finally be recognized at the return of Jesus.

Watson turns next to the so-called "contradictions" to or "gaps" in the secrecy theme (e.g., the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac), where Jesus heals openly and makes unambiguous statements and acknowledgements of who he is. Watson points out that such openness is by no means anomalous and denies that the messianic secret is the rule that is contradicted. Instead, such open public behavior is "conventional" in the Gospel. The secrecy injunctions are connected directly to the theme of Jesus' rejection and subversion of traditional understandings of honor-shame, while the public demonstrations are related to other themes in the Gospel. In an oral-aural context of performance of Mark, which would be the overwhelming norm for the reception of the text in the ancient world, no contradiction would have been noticed or experienced between the "secrecy" theme and the "conventional" passages. Taking up the terminology of Walter J. Ong, Watson finds oral characteristics of *additive*, *aggregative*, and *redundant* expression designed to imprint the narrative on the minds of the hearers. Likewise, the "narrative gaps" (Wolfgang Iser) play the role of drawing the hearer into the world of the narratives as they filled in the missing pieces in a way that "made sense" in their cultural milieu. The role of these features in the narrative of Mark's Gospel is compared with the (roughly) contemporary narrative of the *Life of Aesop*, where the contradictions do not hinder the major themes of honor-shame in the narrative but support it. In fact, the Aesop narrative is designed to puncture and deconstruct normal understandings of honor and shame in a satirical fashion in a way not dissimilar to Mark's narrative. Both narratives "make sense" in their own cultural context and would not have been perceived as showing internal contradictions in the same way they might do in our modern context.

Watson concludes that the problem of the "Messianic Secret" in Mark is a modern Western construct that disappears once read against the background of the deconstruction of conventional notions of honor and shame and the construction of an alternative social universe that reverses them. Watson ends with a brief consideration of the kind of ostracized community that might embody these countercultural values in a new fictive kinship group.

This is a slender, readable volume that paints with broad brushstrokes but puts ample material in the footnotes for interested readers to follow up. It presents a helpful picture of a text that “means” against a quite different cultural matrix to that of modern readers (in the West). It will certainly provide newcomers to the debate with an excellent introduction to the study of Mark’s Gospel from a cultural-anthropological standpoint and has many original insights beyond that. My reservation with the methodology would first be its assumption of a uniform “ancient Mediterranean” culture, despite the common perspective of a thoroughly hellenized Palestine in the first century C.E. that has prevailed since Martin Hengel. Living, as I do, in South Africa, which has been colonized and exposed to global Western cultural influence for over four hundred years, I can observe all around me the persistence of cultural particularity and indigenous knowledge systems despite the massive impact of modern media and educational systems that were not available in the ancient world. Mark, like the Christian community, stands at the interface of cultural difference and cultural conflict. The significance of this needs to be argued in more depth. Second, while any acknowledgement of the impact of orality/aurality in New Testament studies is welcome, scholars working in the field of orality studies have for many years problematized the model of Walter Ong that is used here, even while acknowledging a debt to his work. These caveats aside, I would recommend this book for its freshness and for demonstrating the fruitfulness of a new methodology for approaching an old question such as the venerable messianic secret.