



Honor Among Christians: The Cultural Key to the Messianic Secret

David Watson

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Readers have long puzzled over peculiar aspects of the Gospel of Mark: Jesus' attempts to conceal his deeds and his identity. William Wrede called these and similar motifs the "messianic secret" in Mark, and proposed that Mark had invented the "secret" to explain why the announcement of the arrival of the Son of God had not taken the world by storm. Other scholars have disagreed: perhaps Mark meant to highlight Jesus' divinity (after all, Jesus usually doesn't succeed in keeping himself hidden!) . . . or perhaps Mark wanted to tie Jesus' identity to his destiny on the cross as a warning to disciples that they may face persecution. Or, some have proposed, there simply is no single explanation for all of Jesus' bewildering behaviors in the Gospel.

David F. Watson brings a new perspective to the "messianic secret," relying not on the Christological concerns of 19th- and 20th-century theologians, but on recent insights into the role of honor and shame in ancient Mediterranean culture on the part of social scientists. Mark's portrayal of Jesus simultaneously shows his ability to provide favors and benefits to others and his refusal to put himself forward or draw attention to himself as a benefactor, thereby teaching that in God's kingdom it is not the great and powerful who are most highly regarded, but the humble. Mark's depiction of Jesus is part of a larger effort to promote a radically different understanding of honor within the family of faith.

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