“WHEREVER THE GOSPEL IS PREACHED”:
THE PARADOX OF SECRECY IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

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The publication of *Mark as Story* in 1982 was a pioneering achievement.¹ The “book that broke the news” was the first monograph to adapt secular literary theory to the study of a Gospel narrative, launching a fresh and paradigmatic shift in Gospels research.² However, while many scholars were intrigued by the pursuit and eagerly adopted this new reading strategy, *Mark as Story* received a mixed response. To interpret the Gospel as a “story”—a “literary creation with an autonomous integrity”—was disconcerting for some within the guild.³ In fact, as the discussion evolved, some insisted that the practice of narrative criticism ignored historical matters and was tantamount to “set[ting] sail on the shoreless sea of existential subjectivity.”⁴ Still others, beyond warning of the program’s “reductive approach” and inherent “danger,” demurred the perceived insignificance of *Mark as Story*, as well as narrative criticism in general. Not only was narrative criticism deemed methodologically suspect, but some argued it promoted a “pointless exercise” that “throw[s] no new light on the problems which have perplexed interpreters of

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Mark since 1901, when Wrede succeeded in detailing the messianic secret in the Second Gospel.\textsuperscript{5}

Though the first of these criticisms has been adequately addressed elsewhere, it is the latter assertion that is the focus of this study.\textsuperscript{6} More specifically, the aim of this essay is to demonstrate that narrative criticism—in concert with performance criticism—is an indispensable tool for shedding light on the messianic secret. The hermeneutical trajectory it sets forth paves the way for a more complete understanding that pushes beyond the current discussion and fosters questions about the use of secrecy and the impact of Mark’s narrative that have been widely overlooked. Attention to the literary features of the Gospel, in the context of a performance, suggests that Markan secrecy is an audience-elevating device that functions in service to a broader rhetorical agenda. While narrative criticism may not be able to unravel the history behind the secrecy theme, it nonetheless complements the traditional methods of interpretation and provides a richer understanding of the circumstances surrounding the use of Mark’s Gospel.

\textbf{Over a Century of Secrecy}

Few would question that William Wrede is one of the more important contributors to Markan scholarship in the last century.\textsuperscript{7} Though Wrede’s work had far-reaching implications, his primary concern was to understand Mark’s so-called “messianic secret”: the perplexing depiction of a messianic Jesus who actively prohibits the revelation of his identity, often instructing others “to tell no one” (8:30). Wrede argued that the element of secrecy pervaded the whole of the Gospel and was evident in a number of diverse contexts, including the prohibitions addressed to demons (1:25, 34; 3:12), disciples (8:30; 9:2–9), and those who experienced healing or were witnesses of thaumaturgical events (1:43–45; 5:37–43; 7:33–36; 8:23–26), as well as Jesus’ repeated attempt to maintain anonymity (7:24, 9:30) and his parabolic manner of speech (4:10–13, 33).\textsuperscript{8} Against some of his contemporaries who interpreted these texts on an individual basis—as representative of Jesus’ humility, lack of confidence,

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\item For a response to some of the common criticisms, see David Rhoads, \textit{Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 25–30.
\item Wrede, \textit{Messianic Secret}, 34–57. As a corollary to these five categories, Wrede also
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or desire to guard against political misunderstanding—Wrede argued that the messianic secret is a unified theme and must be interpreted as a comprehensive whole.  

Though Wrede’s description of the secrecy theme was problematic for some, it was his historical assessment that proved most controversial. Wrede argued that the secret did not begin with the historical Jesus but was a theological concept that originated in the early church and facilitated the blending of variant christological perspectives, the earliest of which is discernible in Acts 2:36, Rom 1:4, and Phil 2:6–11. According to Wrede, Jesus became the Messiah through the resurrection, and it was only due to the passage of time and theological reflection that his messianic status was retrojected back upon the pre-Easter Jesus. The “messianic secret” was thus a transitional doctrine that arose during a period when the early church proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, but his earthly ministry was widely regarded as devoid of “sovereign dignity and power.” The secret alleviated the tension between these perspectives by suggesting that, although Jesus was the Messiah, he intentionally concealed his identity in order to anticipate the definitive revelation of his messiahship at the resurrection (cf. 9:9). Contrary to what is often affirmed in the secondary literature, Wrede did not propose that the messianic secret originated with the Second Evangelist. Wrede argued that such a “notion seems quite impossible,” as the penetration and variability of the theme demonstrates that “material of this kind is not the work of an individual.” While Wrede did not hesitate to suggest that Mark influenced the presentation of the secret, he concluded that the Evangelist was working with traditional elements that were passed down through the community. As far as Wrede was concerned, “Mark knew nothing of when Jesus was acknowledged to be Messiah, and … in the historical sense he had absolutely no interest in this question.”

suggested that the disciples’ incomprehension was an expression of the secrecy motif (231–36).

9. On the various interpretations of the secrecy theme in Mark, see ibid., 255–75.
10. Ibid., 216–17.
Not surprisingly, the response to Wrede was spirited, and the initial reaction was quite negative. Writing in 1907, William Sanday declared that, "so far as I know, Wrede's reconstruction of the Gospel history is accepted by no one," because his "strange hypothesis" is "not only very wrong but also distinctly wrong-headed."15 In time, however, scholars such as Dibelius and Bultmann adopted a more favorable stance before the theory underwent a broad reappraisal beginning in the late 1960s. While the various contours of this discussion have been rehearsed elsewhere and need not detain us here, the importance of Wrede's work and its imprint upon the conversation can hardly be overemphasized.16 As one scholar has observed, "whether strongly supported or vigorously opposed, Wrede has had more influence on the way in which the Gospel according to Mark has been interpreted than perhaps any other scholar."17 Some sixty years after the publication of Wrede's study, Strecke noted that "the problem of the theory of the messianic secret in Mark's Gospel is still defined in exegetical research in the terms of William Wrede's epoch-making study."18 Over a hundred years later, little has changed. Despite the passage of time, "William Wrede is still with us" and continues to exercise significant influence over scholarly discussions of Mark.19 The questions that drove Wrede continue to resonate with and even dictate contemporary approaches to the messianic secret.20 However, while questions of the

15. William Sanday, The Life of Christ in Recent Research (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), 70, 75–76. T. W. Manson takes a similar perspective: "the farther we travel along the Wredestrasse, the clearer it becomes that it is the road to nowhere" ("The Life of Jesus: Some Tendencies in Present-Day Research," in The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology [ed. William David Davies and D. Daube; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956], 216). Ironically, it was one of Manson's students who responded to this critique. In a short review article, Norman Perrin suggested that "the Wredestrasse has become the Hauptstrasse" ("The Wredestrasse Becomes the Hauptstrasse: Reflections on the Reprinting of the Dodd Pestschrift," JR 46 [1966]: 296–300).

16. See, for example, the helpful survey in Heikki Rääsinne, The 'Messianic Secret' in Mark (Studies of the New Testament and Its World; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 38–75.


historical Jesus and Christology deserve careful attention and offer a profitable avenue for inquiry, the conversation has stagnated in recent years due to this uniformity of perspective.

Among the variety of reasons that *Mark as Story* is to be celebrated is that narrative criticism has opened up new vistas for methodological investigation. Although historical criticism has traditionally focused on the world behind the text (authorship, provenance, etc.), narrative criticism has drawn attention to the entirety of the communication process—from sender to receiver. 21 This concern for the world in front of the text, and the concomitant experience of the message, poses one of the more exciting opportunities for reflection, particularly as it relates to Markan secrecy. Although scholars have readily postulated about the origins, continuity, and historical implications of the secrecy theme, there has been little sustained discussion of the possible impact of this device. Before turning directly to the question of audience experience, it is necessary to clear the way by addressing recent scholarship that has challenged the unity of the theme.

A Secret or Secrets?

Since the effectiveness of a theme is dependent upon its coherency, it is important to consider whether Markan secrecy is an integrated concept. One of the hallmarks of Wrede’s thesis was that the messianic secret functioned as a collective whole, but the majority of scholars no longer regard this as a tenable position. 22 Donahue and Harrington, for example, argue that “what are often lumped together under the heading of ‘messianic secret’ are quite disparate phenomena.” 23 Luz is more specific but offers a similar assessment: “a look at what is usually called the ‘messianic secret’ in Mark has shown that there are really two phenomena: the messianic secret, under the constraint of which the demons and after Caesarea Philippi the disciples stand; and the miracle secret which cannot be kept and shows that Jesus’ miracles press onward into

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22. In one of the first reactions to Wrede, Albert Schweitzer noted that the inclusion of the parable theory was “one of the weakest points of the entire construction” (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus* [trans. J. R. Coates, W. Montgomery, Susan Cupitt, and John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001], 346).

the public realm of proclamation.”24 Räisänen adopts a similar perspective but presses further, discerning four “loosely connected” themes: the commands to silence addressed to the demons and disciples, the secret healings, the parable theory, and the disciples’ lack of understanding.25 While delineating the number of strands remains a matter of debate, the broader question of a single, coherent theme has been sufficiently answered. The matter is so widely accepted that Dunn claims the issue is “beyond dispute.”26 As a result, contemporary discussions of the subject typically dissect the theme into numerous strata, often in an attempt to minimize the overall significance of Markan secrecy.

It should be noted that these perspectives offer a helpful corrective to Wrede’s thesis. To assume, with Wrede, that the secrecy related texts convey a “messianic secret” appears to conflate certain episodes and minimize others. It is difficult, for example, to understand how the prohibitions associated with the miracles exemplify the messianic secret when the deeds of Jesus rarely lead to an accurate awareness of his identity.27 Just the opposite seems to be the case. Although Jesus’ hometown is cognizant of the “miracles performed by his hands,” they remain convinced that he is nothing more than “the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon” (6:1–3). Likewise, though Herod and others perceive that Jesus occupies a more exalted status, they do not identify him as Messiah but variously associate him with John (raised from the dead), Elijah, or one of the prophets (6:14–16; cf. 8:28). In terms of the narrative, the definitive revelation of Jesus’ identity is not made through public displays of power but through the cross, at which point the first genuine confession of his messiahship is proffered (15:39).28

Despite these legitimate objections, it would be premature to conclude that the secret is not a unified theme, even though the above texts illustrate that the miracles do not necessarily lead to an understanding of Jesus’ true identity. To draw this conclusion betrays a hermeneutical perspective that is driven by a concern for historical inquiry or by a text-centered approach that

25. Räisänen, Messianic Secret, 242–43. According to Räisänen, only the first category may be classified as the messianic secret proper.
27. A notable exception occurs in 7:31–37, when the crowds begin to echo Isaianic language (Isa 35:5–6).
brackets out the role of the audience. There may be no basis for arguing that the secret is *messianic* or that the Markan or historical Jesus invoked secrecy for a singular purpose, but this does not negate the potential for a uniformity of purpose on a different level. Although the role of the audience has often been disregarded, supposing that a “concern for the reader” is “a commercial blemish on the otherwise spotless face of art,” it has become increasingly clear that the phenomenology of reading (or hearing) requires more than the exegesis of the actual text. 

29. Wolfgang Iser, in an important article entitled “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” has shown that an appreciation of literature necessitates a consideration of the text as well as an understanding of how the text attempts to evoke and stimulate the audience. 

30. Of Iser’s many insightful observations, the most relevant for the present discussion pertains to the reading experience. Iser repeatedly notes that interpretation is a “dynamic” process that is dictated by the interplay between author, text, and reader. Though understanding is shaped by the story’s “component parts” and “various perspectives,” the audience stands within and beyond the narrative world created by the writer and therefore makes connections between episodes that are seemingly unrelated in the narrative.

29. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 90. In narrative-critical discussions, the term “reader” typically refers to those who are the recipients of the story. However, given that only a small percentage of the population possessed the skills to “read,” scholars have become increasingly aware of the oral milieu in which the Gospels were received and transmitted. The term *reader* is therefore somewhat anachronistic, as the Gospels were likely performed in an oral context. See Kelly R. Iverson, “Orality and the Gospels: A Survey of Recent Research,” *CBQ* 81 (2009): 71–106.


31. Although there are differences between the two interpretive methods, both share a concern for the dynamics of storytelling. For an example of how oral performance affects one's conception of the narrator, see Philip Ruge-Jones, “Omnipresent, Not Omnisicient: How Literary Interpretation Confuses the Storyteller’s Narrating,” in *Between Author and Audience in Mark: Narration, Characterization, Interpretation* (ed. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon; New Testament Monographs 23; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 29–43.


31. Ibid., 280–82.
in the "imaginative game" between author and audience, these links are often intentionally obscured in order to stimulate audience participation. This rich interplay often results in "unforeseeable connections" through which the elements of the story begin to take on "a far greater significance than [they] ... might have seemed to possess." While the text guides the audience's understanding of the story and its "unwritten implications," the audience becomes a vital and active participant in the interpretive process—a process that may involve the formulation of "something that is unformulated in the text, and yet represents its 'intention.'"  

Iser's differentiation between that which is in the text and that which is formulated by the text is important, since commentators rarely consider the possibility that Markan secrecy includes subthemes that are not explicitly related in the narrative, yet function as coherent themes beyond the narrative (i.e., in terms of rhetorical impact). Though this statement might seem like a contradiction, it more accurately reflects the artistic and aesthetic potential of Mark's Gospel. At the exegetical level (the story), it is difficult, if not impossible, to account for the concealment of Jesus' actions, speech, and identity with a one-size-fits-all explanation; indeed, it might be argued that the narrative resists such an impulse. Despite this exegetical uncertainty, ignoring the potential impact of Markan secrecy would be a significant oversight. The nuancing of the theme does not negate the sheer number of episodes betraying the secrecy theme nor the potential for an audience to assimilate "schematized views." Even if Markan secrecy represents a broad and diverse conglomeration of texts at the exegetical level, it does not inexorably follow that an audience perceives these events as isolated, unrelated instances. Approach-

32. Ibid., 283.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 281, 292.
35. The most recent attempt to posit a holistic explanation (from within the story) is by David F. Watson, Honor among Christians: The Cultural Key to the Messianic Secret (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010). Watson argues that Markan secrecy must be understood in relation to the Mediterranean values of honor and shame. According to Watson, Mark utilizes secrecy in order to emphasize Jesus' reinterpretation of contemporary social conventions. Though a unique approach to the issue of secrecy, I am not convinced that the analysis accounts for the various occasions where Jesus manifests his power via public display. The natural byproduct of these episodes is the conception of honor that Watson argues is rejected by Mark. Watson attributes this conflicting portrayal to the nature of orally derived texts, but he fails to appreciate that the depiction is not congruent with a primary characteristic of such literature: the concept of "variation within the same" (Eric A. Havelock, Preface to Plato [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963], 148).

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ing Mark’s story from the audience’s perspective, at issue is not the messianic secret per se but the element of secrecy, which cascades back and forth across the story like waves across a shore. The persistent and repetitive pattern within the narrative functions in service to the Evangelist’s rhetorical strategy and potentially creates a distinct impression upon the audience’s experience of the story. Moreover, the consistent element of secrecy, displayed in all of its manifold forms throughout the Gospel, is quite possibly the catalyst for the creation of “something that is unformulated in the text, and yet represents its ‘intention.’”

That “intention” will be discussed in the next section; however, besides being a hermeneutical possibility, the unity of the theme can be demonstrated from a literary perspective. Though scholars quite often refer to the presence and/or absence of themes without methodological precision, William Freedman has outlined a helpful approach for the identification of thematic elements. Freedman suggests that any literary motif (or theme) is based upon the notion of repetition, but the identification of a motif is typically not characterized by the verbatim reoccurrence of words and phrases. Rather, a motif is developed and enriched through a conceptual domain—or an “associational cluster”—that is reformed in the narrative by the use of similar, though varied, elements. The repetition of a motif is intentional and is a means by which the author communicates with the audience through the story. Ultimately, a motif is crafted for the sake of the audience and is intended to facilitate a cognitive, affective (emotional), or structural appreciation of the literary work.

Freedman argues that the establishment of a literary motif is dependent upon two factors. First, a motif requires conceptual frequency. Though

37. William Freedman, “The Literary Motif: A Definition and Evaluation,” in Essentials of the Theory of Fiction (ed. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy; Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 200–212. Freedman discusses a literary “motif” as opposed to a “theme.” However, Freedman’s work can be safely adapted to the present study with only minor qualification, given that Freedman himself defines a motif as “a recurrent theme” (206) and that narrative theorists often use the terms interchangeably. Some have argued that a “motif” refers to a pattern of verbal repetition that is concrete, as opposed to a “theme,” which is abstract and conceptual. For instance, in Mark’s Gospel one might refer to the bread motif (a specific image) as opposed to the theme of discipleship (a broad concept). On the similarities and differences between these literary devices, see H. Porter Abbott, The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 95.

39. Ibid., 203.
40. Ibid., 204–5.
Freedman correctly refrains from selecting an arbitrary, fixed number of times that an element must occur within the narrative, he affirms the centrality of thematic recurrence. At issue is the matter of purpose and the discernment between features derived from narratival coincidence and those intentionally marked by repeated appearance. Second, along with the necessary repetition of an element, Freedman also suggests that a motif exhibits the principle of avoidability. The more unlikely an element’s appearance, the more likely a motif is deliberately at work in the narrative. This criteria is closely related to the first, since the question of frequency takes on greater significance if the context does not demand the appearance of the particular motif. For example, Freedman provides the illustration of a narrative whose principal subject is a milliner. Although the inclusion of hats may occur with noted repetition—thus satisfying the criteria of frequency—the contours of the narrative likely dictate these insertions and undermine the importance of the conceptual field. In this respect, the criteria of frequency and avoidability complement one another and aid the interpreter in detecting the presence of literary motifs/themes.

Returning to Mark’s Gospel, the repeated focus on secrecy and concealment satisfy the criteria of frequency and avoidability that demarcate the presence and identification of literary themes. Though short in length, Mark’s baptismal scene creates an aura of secrecy that permeates the story and launches the narrative in a unique trajectory. Perhaps most striking is that there is no indication that anyone except Jesus hears the heavenly voice that identifies him as “the beloved Son” (1:9–11). The subtle concealment of Jesus’ identity is even more perceptible when viewed against the backdrop of Matthew’s Gospel. In Mark, the heavenly voice declares that “you are my beloved Son” (1:11), while the Matthean voice states that “this is my beloved Son” (3:17). This shift from the second-person singular (Mark) to the near demonstrative (Matthew) might seem insignificant, but the rhetorical effect is pronounced. The Markan voice speaks directly to Jesus, as if engaged in private conversation, whereas the Matthean voice utters a public announcement to John and the crowds.

If the implicit secrecy in this text is uncertain, the repetition of the theme in the ensuing narratives alleviates the concern. The element of secrecy, first posed in the baptism, is thrust forward into Mark’s story of Jesus. Not only is Jesus taken by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by Satan and later supported by angels (1:12–13)—all of which takes place in isolation—but upon his return Jesus himself begins to impose secretive elements upon his ministry. During his first encounter with a supplicant, Jesus commands an evil spirit to “be quiet” (1:24–25). Although Kee argues that the scene “has nothing to do with secrecy” and instead depicts a “struggle for dominance,” his conclusion
is problematic in view of the narrative arc set in motion through the baptism, temptation, and encounters that frame the exorcism.\(^{41}\) Moreover, in the summary account that follows the scene (1:32–34), Jesus is described as performing “many” exorcisms and uniformly prohibiting the demons from speaking. Similar to 1:25, Jesus in essence commands the demons to “be quiet” (1:25), but not in an attempt to assert himself, as Kee suggests. Rather, Mark indicates that Jesus rebukes the demons “because they knew who he was” (1:34). Similar commands follow throughout the narrative and occur in individual episodes (1:40–44; 5:43; 7:36) and summary statements (3:11–12), further highlighting the discrete nature of at least some of Jesus’ actions.

The element of secrecy is also accented in Jesus’ interaction with the disciples. Of the numerous occasions where Jesus withdraws from the crowds to teach the disciples (7:17–23; 9:30–37; 10:32–34), the most revealing takes place in the region of Caesarea Philippi (8:27–30). Although Jesus has taught through word and deed, his identity remains largely an enigma among the (human) characters in the story, with no individual having yet perceived his true identity. Though Peter’s conception of Jesus is deficient (8:31–33) and he, like the blind man, is in need of a second restorative touch (8:22–26), it is noteworthy that immediately after the confession Jesus commands the disciples “not to tell anyone about him” (8:30). At this stage in the story, the instruction both coincides with similar secrecy injunctions and the now discernible tendency in Jesus’ ministry.

In addition to further establishing the frequency of the theme, the episode implicitly underscores patterns enacted at junctures throughout the narrative. The underlying assumption is that the disciples have been made privy to Jesus in a way that is unparalleled among the crowds. This perspective is further depicted in the ensuing episode, when Jesus selects Peter, James, and John—eliciting an additional element of secrecy—to go up the high mountain “by themselves” (9:2). Before descending, the disciples witness the appearance of Elijah, Moses, and the transfigured Jesus, which is accompanied by the voice from the cloud declaring, “this is my beloved Son” (9:7). While the statement is to be differentiated from the baptismal scene in that those alongside Jesus are cognizant of the heavenly voice, there is nevertheless a similarity in that both events are shrouded by secrecy. Though the disciples are participants in the transfiguration, they are ordered not to relate what they had seen until after the resurrection (9:9).

That the disciples are the recipients of divine revelation and insiders to the teachings of Jesus is depicted in 8:27–30 and 9:2–9, but the seeds for this privilege lie in the disciples’ calling to be “with him” (3:14–15) and are given verbal expression in 4:10–12. Following the teaching on the soils, Jesus provides insight concerning the use of parables: “The secret to the kingdom of God has been given to you; but to those on the outside, everything comes in parables” (4:11). Though it appears that this passage is related in some fashion to 8:27–30 and 9:2–9, Räisänen argues that the “idea found in these verses is not repeated elsewhere”42 and that “there is no theory carried through in Mark’s Gospel such as 4:11–12 might at first suggest.”43 Taken in isolation, these verses do present a rather jarring picture, particularly in view of the depiction of Jesus as one who enjoys the company of sinners (2:1–12; 3:15–17) and garners the attention of great crowds (2:1–12; 4:1–9; 6:53–56; 8:1–9). However, the scene does not present the interpretive problem that Räisänen supposes; rather, it accounts for and resonates with the various episodes that speak to the disciples’ insider status. Though the disciples are certainly not the only insiders (see 7:24–30) and typically do not comprehend the revelation they are given (6:52; 8:14–21, 31–33, 9:30–32; 10:32–45), they are nonetheless recipients of instruction that is often excluded from others. This two-tiered distinction is enacted in various texts (4:33–34; often when Jesus teaches the disciples in a house [7:17–23; 9:28–29; 10:10–12] or elsewhere [13:1–37]) and emphasizes the disciples’ unique calling, as well as underscoring the pattern of secrecy throughout Mark’s narrative. It bears repeating that this does not imply that a single theological basis undergirds the episodes or that the element of secrecy is depicted for the same purpose within the story (i.e., in relation to the characterization of Jesus). Instead, these scenes portray the repetition of a similar phenomena that points to the presence of a literary theme.

A more exhaustive examination of the secrecy theme would provide additional support to this picture and draw further attention to the frequency of the theme in Mark’s Gospel (e.g., 16:1–8). This brief sample indicates that secrecy is a key component in the dynamics of Mark’s story and is featured prominently across the narrative. Moreover, the theme is situated in strategic contexts—for example, the baptism, temptation, Peter’s confession, and the transfiguration—and evidences the flexibility and variation that Freedman suggests.

43. Räisänen, Messianic Secret, 243.
Considering the frequent reoccurrence in Mark, the question thus becomes whether the theme is avoidable. Upon initial reflection, this may seem like a rather daunting criterion to establish. How, after all, does one argue that a feature in the narrative is avoidable and can be omitted without disrupting the development of a particular episode? Ironically, many who have attempted to discount the coherency of the theme have unwittingly supplied the literary grounds for the opposite conclusion. In the judgment of these scholars, Mark has simultaneously juxtaposed secrecy and publicity, resulting in a dialect of contradiction that is not easily resolved, except by “violent and artificial manipulation.” If this is the case, then the inclusion of these traditions only complexifies and obscures the dynamics of the story, thus diminishing the overall effectiveness of the narrative. Though this conclusion is based upon hermeneutical presuppositions concerning the competency and role of the Evangelist, many who have attempted to undermine the unity of the theme have actually demonstrated its viability on literary grounds via Freedman’s principle of avoidability.

Perhaps the most compelling and objective evidence for avoidability stems from an analysis of the secrecy theme across the Synoptic traditions. The earliest interpreters of the Second Gospel, Matthew and Luke, tell us a great deal about their perception of Mark’s story and, considered together, tacitly affirm the avoidability of the theme. Their redaction suggests that neither Matthew nor Luke understood secrecy (as articulated by Mark) to be an unalterable feature of Mark’s Gospel.

A brief survey of Markan secrecy as transmitted across the Synoptic Gospels illustrates this propensity. For example, Mark’s initial exorcism scene establishes the element of secrecy in the public ministry of Jesus (1:21–28), but the episode is completely absent in Matthew’s narrative. The summary account in Mark 1:32–34 is retained in Matt 8:16–17, but the First Evangelist omits Mark’s silencing of the demons (Mark 1:34) and instead transforms the account into a fulfillment citation (Matt 8:17; cf. Matt 1:22–23; 2:15, 17–18, 23; 4:14–15; 12:17–18; 13:35; 21:4–5; 26:56; 27:9). While these episodes appear early in Mark’s story, they are instructive and exhibit a repeated point of departure. Unlike Mark, where Jesus repeatedly commands demons to be quiet (1:25; 1:34; 3:12), the Matthean Jesus never prohibits the demons from speaking.

The healing episodes display similar variation. For example, in the scene involving Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:21–24, 35–43), Matthew provides no indication that, along with the girl’s parents, only Peter, James, and John were permitted to enter the room (9:18–26); neither does Matthew include the prohibition that Jesus “gave strict orders … that no one should know about this” (Mark 5:43). Furthermore, in the episode depicting the healing of the deaf mute (Mark 7:31–37), although the Markan Jesus commands the people “not to tell anyone” (7:36), Matthew only alludes to the story in a summary account that makes no reference to the element of secrecy (Matt 15:29–31).

In addition to the exorcism and healing stories, the Markan travel narratives also display significant redaction. When Jesus travels to the region of Tyre (Mark 7:24–30), which represents the farthest and presumably most isolated geographical setting in the narrative, the Evangelist indicates that Jesus entered a house and “wanted no one to know” (7:24). Luke, however, does not include this scene, and though Matthew does, it is not certain that Jesus actually ventures beyond the Jewish homeland (thus diminishing Mark’s geographical secrecy). Furthermore, while many aspects of the Markan scene are repeated in Matthew, there is no suggestion that Jesus attempts to conceal his identity (Matt 15:21–28). Likewise, as Jesus begins to instruct the disciples concerning his passion, making his way through Galilee, the Markan narrator states that he “did not want anyone to know” (9:30). Though Matthew (17:22–23) and Luke (9:43–45) both retain this scene, neither Evangelist assumes the element of secrecy found in Mark.

This brief sketch is not intended to obscure the fact that aspects of the theme are carried across the Synoptic tradition. At times both Matthew and Luke preserve the commands to secrecy inscribed in Mark’s story (Mark 1:26 || Luke 4:35; Mark 1:34 || Luke 4:41; Matt 13:10–11 || Mark 4:11–12 || Luke 8:9–10; Matt 16:20 || Mark 8:30 || Luke 9:21). However, despite the perceived value of Mark, evidenced by its use as a primary source (assuming Markan priority), it is not unusual to find that Matthew and Luke adopt portions of Mark (at times unconsciously) and ignore/redact other aspects of the tradition. What is more, both Matthew and Luke appear to exhibit different levels of understanding and appreciation for Mark’s secrecy theme. According to Davies and Allison, who conclude along with Wrede that “the idea of the messianic secret no longer has the importance for Matthew that it has for Mark,” the First Evangelist appears to have been a “little nonplussed” by Mark’s use of the theme. Luke, on the other hand, seems to have “retained and even sharpened the idea of the ‘messianic secret’ which is otherwise much more

46. Ibid.
prominent in Mark,” 47 modifying the theme by transforming it into a “passion secret.” 48 Thus, while aspects of Markan secrecy have passed into Matthew and Luke, both Evangelists demonstrate a willingness to ignore, modify, and/or adapt Markan material for their own theological purposes.

In terms of Freedman’s criterion, this survey suggests that Markan secrecy, as reflected in these episodes, was often considered a redactable or “avoidable” feature of the narrative. Again, it is not disconcerting that Matthew and Luke include elements of Mark’s secrecy theme, since a fidelity to the traditions is expected. More significant to the criterion of avoidability is the handling of the theme in what Freedman describes as the “particular uses” and “certain contexts.” 49 When viewed from this perspective, a multitude of texts in a variety of contexts (e.g., exorcisms, healings, travel narratives) have been altered by either or both of the Evangelists. It seems that neither Matthew nor Luke considered the thematic instances, nor the particular Markan articulation of the theme, to be beyond modification. While Matthew and Luke adopted elements of the tradition, neither felt compelled or constrained to reproduce the theme with the frequency of occurrence or the same broad vision as Mark. In short, Matthew and Luke did not consider Mark’s approach to the secrecy theme to be essential to the construction of what the Evangelists ostensibly believed was a faithful depiction of Jesus.

This section began by asking whether Markan secrecy represented a theme or themes. Though the conclusion runs counter to the trend in contemporary research, it is now possible to affirm that Markan secrecy is a coherent and unified feature of the narrative. While the messianic secret does not constitute a distinct theme, the element of secrecy pervades the narrative and evidences the frequency and avoidability indicative of a literary theme. Unfortunately,


the conversation has all too often been framed in response to Wrede's messianic secret—a course that has unwittingly obscured a much broader theme that is discernible from a literary or performance perspective.

SECRET AS AN AUDIENCE-ELEVATING STRATEGY

If Markan secrecy is a distinguishable theme, as seems to be the case, then what is its rhetorical function? Iser suggests that a thematic element “sinks into our memory” and is evoked again and again in order to prompt “the awakening of responses within.” But how precisely is the repeated element of secrecy intended to evoke an audience, and what is the desired response?

SECRET AND PREDESTINATION

To date, Francis Watson is one of the few scholars to have explored the issue in detail. Watson argues that secrecy is a major concern of the Evangelist and is best understood in sociological terms. Responding in part to those who suggest that Mark has stratified time according to salvation history (the era of secrecy surrounding Jesus’ earthly ministry and the era of revelation following his death and resurrection), Watson instead argues that secrecy is closely aligned to a theology of predestination. Watson suggests that the purpose of the theme is not to divide two epochs of history but to distinguish two groups of people: the disciples and the crowds. Mark’s concern for the theme is exemplified in the distinction between insiders and outsiders and is fully articulated in Mark 4:11–12 (cf. 4:34). According to Watson, the theological basis for this teaching is the doctrine of predestination, which functions as the theological framework on which Mark erects both the “parable secret” and the “teaching secret.” It is through the various expressions of secrecy that Mark communicates a broader theological message concerning the revelation of God’s saving will.

51. Ibid., 280.
Watson further suggests that the theme takes on additional meaning when situated within the context of the Markan community—a community plagued by the experience of persecution and suffering.55 In the face of society’s hostile reaction to the community, Mark utilizes a theology of predestination in order to encourage hope and reassurance among Markan disciples. In this respect, the secrecy theme has a social function, which Watson suggests is “to strengthen the barrier between the community and the world—a barrier which is in danger of being broken down.”56 In addition, besides fortifying the boundary between the community and the world, Mark’s use of the theme provides validation for the community’s “eliteness,” as well as “an explanation for society’s incomprehension and hostility.”57

Watson’s study is to be appreciated in that it attempts to break out of the Wreden shadow, as well as providing a seemingly pragmatic explanation for the secrecy theme. But while it is possible to imagine Mark’s theological stance nurturing and inspiring a persecuted community, the persuasiveness of Watson’s argument is limited by a number of factors, not the least of which is that his “social” analysis does not interact with any sociological research.58 Most problematic, however, is the attempt to construct a comprehensive theory that accounts for the totality of the theme in relation to the teaching and activities of Jesus. If, as Watson argues, predestination is the basis for secrecy and “refers to the belief that God determines whether people are to be granted salvation or whether they are to be condemned,” then it is extremely difficult to explain the thematic variations of the theme in Mark’s Gospel.59 Although Watson attempts to understand the theme in relation to miraculous healings, it is not at all clear how this reading fits within a theology of predestination. Why, for example, does Jesus prohibit the revelation of his miraculous works if their christological significance can only be comprehended by the elect? If God has already predetermined those who are to be saved and condemned, what purpose do the injunctions actually serve, since the transmittal of such information ostensibly has no bearing upon God’s purposes? Even more specifically, why does Jesus communicate with the crowds, since they stand condemned?

55. Watson argues that the theme of suffering dominates the later half of Mark (8:31–
33, 34–38; 10:32–34) and indicates that Mark is “therefore not motivated by historical
interest but by the situation of the ‘disciples’ in his own day” (ibid., 61).
56. Ibid., 62.
57. Ibid.
58. The only attempt to interact with sociological data occurs in a single footnote,
though this is mediated through a secondary, biblical source devoted to the particularities
involving Petrine communities (see ibid., 69 n. 67).
59. Ibid., 68–69 n. 62.
Unfortunately, Watson's theory, rather than providing a coherent rationale for the secrecy injunctions, actually renders them perfunctory and superfluous to the narrative.

Equally as problematic is Watson's rigid bifurcation between the crowds and the disciples. He consistently argues that "the crowds who have gathered to hear him or to be healed by him are kept in ignorance" and that secrecy "differentiates[s] the disciples, to whom saving knowledge is given, from the crowds." But this distinction does not account for the nuances of Mark's story nor the contextual features surrounding the parable of the soils. Watson assumes that the phrase "those who are outside" (4:11) is a circumlocution for the crowds, but this presumption is highly dubious, if not impossible to substantiate from the context. Considering what has just transpired in the preceding episode, those "who are outside" cannot refer to the crowds. Ironically, while Jesus is located in a home, those "outside" refer not to the crowds but to the family of Jesus (3:32) who believe that he is "out of his mind" (3:21). Furthermore, instead of emphasizing the presence of the disciples with Jesus (whose place must be assumed), Mark twice notes the presence of the "crowd" (3:20, 22). Thus, those whom Watson assumes are "outsiders" are here depicted as "insiders" according to Mark's schematization. The differentiation is not between the crowds and the disciples but between those who do and do not do "the will of God" (3:35). It therefore appears that Markan discipleship is more complex than Watson envisions and that he has attempted to provide a singular explanation for a complex locus of texts, when in fact a unified historical or theological rationale (in relation to Jesus' teaching) remains elusive.

60. Ibid., 59–60.
62. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon argues that both the disciples and crowds are followers and that "discipleship is both open-ended and demanding; followership is neither exclusive nor easy" ("Disciples/Crowds/Whoever: Markan Characters and Readers," in In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark's Gospel [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000], 96).
63. In addition, predestination does not account for the element of secrecy in relation to the distinction among the disciples. On three occasions Peter, James, and John are singled out from among the Twelve and given unique access to Jesus' activities and teaching: (1) the healing of Jairus's daughter (5:21–24, 35–43); (2) the transfiguration (9:1–13); and, (3) the eschatological discourse (13:1–37). The element of secrecy in these texts, as it relates to the differentiation among the disciples, is not explained by Watson. To take Watson's theory to its logical conclusion would be to suggest that the three are given a "saving knowledge" that supersedes and distinguishes them from among the other elect (who presumably have also received saving knowledge). The selection of some disciples
Watson further argues that Mark attempts to reify the “barrier” between the community and the world, since those outside were judged “unworthy” of the kingdom. It may be true that the theme functions, in part, to circumscribe the identity of the community in relation to the nonbelieving world, but Watson’s analysis overstates the case. In particular, the argument makes no attempt to address the concern for mission, an equally important and pervasive theme in Mark’s Gospel. Though the Markan community was undergoing persecution and living in “opposition to society,” it does not follow that the Gospel promotes a “sense of eliteness” in the face of pagan hostility. On the contrary, modeled after Jesus’ obedient suffering, Mark promotes a commitment to mission in spite of opposition. The centrality of mission is foundational to the narrative and is underscored by a brief selection of texts. The theme is detectable in the opening verses of the Gospel (1:2–3), which prophetically describe John’s wilderness ministry and the coming of Jesus in terms of Mal 3:1 and Isa 40:3. Twice in these two verses, the “way” (1:2, 3) is depicted in relation to the mission of Jesus, inaugurating what scholars traditionally refer to as the “way” or “journey” motif. Though it may be argued that the motif undergirds the entire Gospel (see 2:23; 4:4, 15; 6:8; 8:3; 10:52; 11:8), the most concentrated use of the terminology is clustered around the midsection of the narrative (8:27–10:46; cf. 8:27; 9:33, 34; 10:17, 32, 46). On the “way” to Jerusalem, Jesus informs the disciples that he will be handed over for crucifixion and that through suffering and death God’s purposes will be achieved for all humanity. The journey is not about self-aggrandizement but mission, a notion that is poignantly summarized in Mark’s famous ransom saying (10:45): “the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45).

and the concomitant nonselection of others cannot be explained according to Watson’s understanding of predestination and secrecy.

64. Watson, “Social Function,” 62. It would appear that underlying Watson’s thesis is an overemphasis upon and possible misunderstanding of the parable secret, which some suggest is not concerned with predestination but instead offers a “more limited goal when seen in its historical context” (Adela Yarbro Collins, Mark: A Commentary [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007], 249). Although Watson constructs his understanding of Markan secrecy by appealing to 4:11–12, there is no analysis of these debated verses. For a review of the issues surrounding this passage, as well as the interpretive options, see Craig A. Evans, To See and Not Perceive: Isaiah 6.9–10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation (JSOTS Sup 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989); Kyle R. Snodgrass, Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 145–77.

That Mark is infused with a sense of mission is further indicated by the activities, teaching, and geographical movement of Jesus. In Mark’s drama, Jesus displays a willingness to engage in missional work, even though it necessitates crossing traditional religious boundaries. Jesus repeatedly defies purity standards and demonstrates a compassion for the marginalized, including physical contact with the sick (1:29–31, 40–41; 7:31–37; 8:22–26), dining with tax collectors and sinners (2:15–17), and healing on the Sabbath (3:1–6). Though such actions draw the ire of the religious establishment (2:1–12, 15–17; 3:1–6, 20–30), the Markan Jesus presses onward to fulfill God’s missional objective. Because he “did not come to call the righteous but sinners” (2:17), the Markan Jesus engages in activities often characterized by a disregard for social and religious tradition. Just as new wine demands new wineskins (2:19–22), so does Jesus transgress “all the boundaries” in the demonstration of his compassion for the disenfranchised.66 This is perhaps no better illustrated than in the crossing of geopolitical borders that demarcate Jewish and Gentile space. Although Jesus has come first to satisfy the children of Israel (7:27), Mark describes various sea crossings (4:35–41; 6:45–51; 8:13–21) and land journeys (7:24, 27) that position Jesus beyond the Jewish homeland. The christological significance of these episodes cannot be underestimated and accentuates the universal implications of Mark’s Gospel.67 The unprecedented growth of the kingdom (4:30–32) is no doubt exhibited in Jesus’ own ministry among the outcasts and rejected. And just as the disciples are sent out on mission, both in the narrative and presumably beyond (6:17–13, 30–32; 13:9–13), would-be disciples are commanded to follow the “way” of Jesus (8:33–38). Despite persecution and opposition, giving one’s life for the sake of others is the essence of the heart and the gospel of Mark’s discipleship.

Watson’s neglect of this theme is a major lacuna. While predestination and mission are not necessarily incompatible, he leaves little room for the interplay between these conceptual themes. The depiction of an isolated and elitist community does not harmonize with the sacrificial and missional exhortation of the narrative. Instead, this brief survey has shown that, “not only does mission have a firm place in Mark’s Gospel, but it comes to the fore in precisely those texts and themes that are at the center of the Evangelist's


concern.” The theme is so prominent that Senior and Stuhlmueller (following Pesch) describe Mark as a “Mission Book” due to the recurrent focus on the universality of the gospel. The discussion thus far has concentrated on establishing the presence of secrecy and the possible rationale for its occurrence, but the remainder of the essay will explore how a skilled performer might use secrecy to paradoxically advance a theology of mission.

DISCLOSURE AND MISSION

It may seem odd to suggest that, while secrecy is embedded within the narrative, there are no secrets for the audience of Mark’s Gospel. Secrecy affects the way in which the story is experienced, but the truths of the gospel are concealed only from the characters in the narrative. As Dahl noted decades ago, “The so-called messianic secret … is not a literary device intended to maintain suspense by keeping something hidden from the reader until he learns the solution of the enigma. The Christ-mystery is a secret only for those persons who appear in the book. The readers know the point of the story from the very beginning: it is the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Consequently, regardless of the audience’s opinion of Jesus, they are made insiders to the mysteries of the Gospel, enjoying a perspective that is not shared by those within the story world. Rhetorically, this technique exposes the contrast between the perceptions of the characters and the audience. Sternberg refers to this as a “reader-elevating” strategy (or perhaps better, “audience-elevating”) that capitalizes on the “discrepancies in awareness” enacted by the narrative design and places the audience in a semi-omniscient position over the story. Thus while the characters in the story (usually) remain oblivious to the truths of Mark’s Gospel, the secrets of the narrative are revealed to the audience.

The question that naturally follows is why Mark employs this audience-elevating strategy. Among those who have attempted to appreciate the rhetorical effect of this device, it is often suggested that Mark uses secrecy to

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69. Dahl, “Purpose of Mark’s Gospel,” 29. *Contra* Dan O. Via, who argues that the audience is prone to the same confusion as the disciples (*The Revelation of God and/as Human Reception: In the New Testament* [Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997], 104–10). Though Via offers several insightful observations, he assumes that the audience’s perspective is aligned with the disciples, when in fact it is more distinctly shaped by the narrator.

enhance the tension in the story and to entice the audience further into the dramatic world of the narrative—a conclusion that resonates with many literary theorists who regard secrecy, mystery, and surprise as forms of suspense.71 Others have argued that Mark uses secrecy "as a means of revelation to hearers/readers of the gospel" and to draw "attention to the real significance of the story."72 But while secrecy may pique audience interest, it is questionable whether these descriptions pay due consideration to the religious make-up of Mark's Gospel. Further, although the theme raises awareness of certain features in the narrative, it is erroneous to assume that Markan secrecy is tethered to a single aspect of the storyline (the \textit{real} significance). At the very least, it seems unlikely that the Evangelist utilized the theme merely to disseminate information or to generate audience interest.

At the heart of the use of secrecy is the interchange between the audience and performer. As Georges argues, "only by attempting to study storytelling events holistically can we begin to appreciate" that the dynamic between

71. Jerry Camery-Hoggatt has suggested that secrecy functions to actively involve the audience in the unfolding drama: "The \textit{secret} insight the reader enjoys will naturally place him at an advantage over the characters of the story, and at virtually every point he will be called upon to pass judgment on them for their blindness or obtuseness" \textit{(Ironic in Mark's Gospel: Text and Subtext) [SNTSMS 72; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 93.}

audience and performer is foundational to the process of interpretation.\textsuperscript{73} Although the process of reading may evoke emotive responses, an enacted performance is something “palpably different ... [from] turning pages in a detached textual artifact.”\textsuperscript{74} Commenting on his first experience of a South Slavic oral epic, John Foley noted that it was “more vivid, more arresting, more demanding, more contingent. The audience played a much larger and more determinative role in the moment-to-moment reality of the evolving song than I had suspected.”\textsuperscript{75} This “unspoken agreement” between audience and performer represents an implicit contract, but it is a powerful force in performance. “If anything, its status as an understood, behind-the-scenes agreement only increase its word-power. Its rules ... [have] become part of the grammar of performance.”\textsuperscript{76} In light of the performative context in which the Gospels were enacted, the issue is how the revelation of perceived “secrets” impacts the audience. In order to better understand the aesthetic exchange that takes place between performer and audience, it is necessary “to unpack the dynamics” of this relationship by turning to the social sciences, particularly to what is referred to as the “disclosure-liking” relationship.\textsuperscript{77}

In an important article entitled “Self-Disclosure and Liking: A Meta-analytic Review,” Nancy Collins and Lynn Carol Miller discuss the social and psychological effects of revelatory disclosure.\textsuperscript{78} Drawing from the wealth of research stemming from Jourard’s groundbreaking study on the positive relationship between self-disclosure and liking, Collins and Miller adopt a comprehensive, meta-analytic approach that incorporates “all relevant studies available in published form.”\textsuperscript{79} Besides the sheer breadth of the project, the study’s unique contribution is in the organization of the disclosure-liking relationships and the delineation of three disclosure-liking effects, which may be articulated as three separate, though related, questions: (1) Do individuals generally like people who disclose information to them, as compared to others

\textsuperscript{73} Quoted in Elizabeth Fine, \textit{The Folklore Text: From Performance to Print} (Indianapolis: Indianapolis University Press, 1984), 46.

\textsuperscript{74} John Miles Foley, \textit{How to Read an Oral Poem} (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 84.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 85.

\textsuperscript{77} Rhoads, \textit{Reading Mark}, 37. Although narrative criticism is derived from literary theory, Rhoads suggests that narrative critics may profitably benefit from the social sciences.


\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 460.
who do not? (2) Do individuals reveal more to people who they like? and (3) Do individuals show a stronger liking for those to whom they have disclosed?

Although the analysis of the data involves a number of variables (gender, relationship between individuals, etc.), Collins and Miller argue that "the meta-analyses revealed significant positive relations for all three disclosure-liking effects."80 In general, as long as an act of disclosure does not violate normative, social expectations, "any information about oneself that a person verbally communicates to another person," including descriptive and/or evaluative information (i.e., beliefs), has a notable and defining impact upon the development of relationships.81 The reason for this positive affiliation is that, "when people perceive that they have been personally selected for intimate discourse, they feel trusted and liked and are more apt to evaluate the discloser favorably."82 In this respect, disclosure has a symbolic function in interpersonal relationships and communicates something beyond that which is transferred by the exchange of information: "disclosing to another communicates that we trust that person ... [and] that we are interested in knowing them and having them know us."83 The result is that disclosure unleashes a cycle of responses that build and nourish developing relationships. Typically, people like others who disclose to them, they themselves like those to whom they have disclosed, and those to whom information is revealed often reciprocate through mutual self-disclosure. What is more, the disclosure-liking effect is such a powerful phenomena that it is observable in interpersonal relationships and group contexts.84

In view of this research, it is profitable to consider Mark’s use of the secrecy theme in relation to the disclosure-liking effect.85 It bears repeating that there are no secrets for the audience of Mark’s narrative, but the manner in which the story is told creates the impression that the performer is disclosing information that is not shared by all. This informational discrepancy is not derived from the exclusivity of the Markan community, as Watson surmised, but through the plotting of the narrative discourse. The performance of the

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80. Ibid., 470.
81. Ibid., 458.
82. Ibid., 459.
83. Ibid., 471.
85. A degree of prudence is always required when interpreting the ancient world through modern, social-scientific research. However, just because Mark was not familiar with the data does not mean the Evangelist was ignorant of the dynamics behind the theory.
Gospel creates an aura of secrecy, even though the community and its message are neither closed nor secretive.\textsuperscript{86} Rather, the effectiveness of the technique—that is, the disclosure of information previously unknown—is dependent upon the historical situation of the first century and the yet-unfulfilled mission of the church. The repetitive use of secrecy establishes the audience as insiders to whom the revelation of Mark’s story is disclosed and simultaneously fosters the positive rapport between performer and audience necessary for relational development. While the rhetorical device encourages the formation of community among those already established in the church, the impact of the technique is most pronounced among a different constituency. When viewed in relation to the importance of mission, Mark’s narrative disclosures may be intended to complement a broader theological purpose. In particular, though Mark was likely written for Christians undergoing persecution, the concern for mission and the creative use of secrecy hint at another possibility. In line with the research of Collins and Miller, the manner in which the gospel is disclosed (i.e., through the use of secrecy) may provide subtle indication that Mark was also interested in the reception of the narrative by those not already committed to the faith. To state it another way, since the repeated telling of “secrets” has a diminishing effect among those who have already believed, the secrecy theme is most impactful among those who are not yet intimately familiar with Mark’s story of Jesus.

This assertion is not to imply that Mark was written for the purpose of evangelizing unbelievers, but neither does it rule out the possibility that that objective was beyond the Evangelist’s purview, as some would suggest.\textsuperscript{87} Aune, for instance, has argued that the rapid expansion of the early church had a direct bearing upon the manner in which the Jesus story was depicted. Although the Gospels are written to reinforce and strengthen the faith of those who already believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the structure of the Mediterranean life (i.e., the inclusion of extended family, slaves, laborers, clients, etc.) necessarily meant that many household churches included some

\textsuperscript{86} Neyrey discusses the sociological function of secrecy in John but notes an element of “espionage” in Mark’s Gospel (11:28–30; 12:13–15). This perspective, however, blurs the distinction between story and discourse and assumes that community practice mirrors the secrecy in the Gospel. Unfortunately, this approach addresses the function of secrecy but neglects the disclosure-like nature. See Jerome H. Neyrey, The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 252–81.


who were “outsiders” to the faith but “insiders” from a social perspective. 88 In this respect, the social location of the early church influenced the composition of the Gospels such that Aune describes them as a form of “Christian literary propaganda.” 89 Furthermore, given that stories are not the most effective means to engage in theological debate, Tolbert has argued that Mark’s selection of a narrative format is most readily explained as an attempt “to enlist the sympathy of an audience.” 90 Having analyzed the rhetorical style of Mark in detail, she concludes that one of the Gospel’s purposes is “to persuade its hearers to have faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ … and to become themselves sowers of the good news of God’s coming kingdom.” 91 It appears that both from a social and rhetorical standpoint, Mark likely envisioned an audience that encompassed some who were already devoted to the faith, as well as “individuals interested in Christianity but not yet fully committed” and “who needed to be persuaded.” 92

This broad vision for the Gospel audience appears to have a firm basis in the text, for not only does the Evangelist note that the “gospel must first be preached to all the nations” (13:10)—essentially providing a mandate for the early church—but this same point is underscored in the subsequent episode when an anonymous woman anoints Jesus for burial with a costly vial of perfume (14:3–9). Though the disciples are incredulous at the women’s apparent waste of resources, her actions are singled out for attention. Unlike the disciples, the Markan Jesus affirms the significance of the act, as well as the perpetuity of the memory surrounding the woman’s provision: “Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed throughout the whole world, what


89. Aune argues that, while the Gospels are not missionary tracts, “the aggressive conversionist orientation of early Christians profoundly shaped their understanding of the mission and message of Jesus and imprinted itself indelibly on Gospel tradition” (ibid., 59).

90. Tolbert, Sowing the Gospel, 303–4.

91. Ibid., 302.

92. Ibid., 304. Tolbert goes on to state that “Mark’s rhetorical goals are exhortation and proselytizing” (304). Adela Yarbro Collins makes a similar assumption about Mark’s audience. See her “Mark and His Readers: The Son of God among Jews,” HTR 92 (1999): 393–408. This perspective is confirmed by recent generic research, which has demonstrated that ancient biographies such as the Gospels were written “about friends, by friends, and for others” (Justin Marc Smith, “About Friends, by Friends, for Others: Author-Subject Relationships in Contemporary Greco–Roman Biographies,” in The Audience of the Gospels: The Origin and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity [ed. Edward W. Klink III; LNTS 353; London: T&T Clark, 2009], 49–67).
she has done will be told in memory of her” (14:9). Like the eschatological discourse (13:10), the centrality of mission is restated (“throughout the whole world”), but here there is an explicit reference to the use of Mark as a tool to fulfill the missionary objective of the Evangelist. The “gospel” (14:9) that is to be proclaimed by the church appears to be a direct reference to the “gospel of Jesus Christ” (1:1), which Mark designates as the titular description of his own composition. In other words, embedded within this laudatory statement concerning an anonymous woman’s gracious display, Mark tips his hand at an anticipated function of the narrative.

Mark’s concern for the mission of the church, indicated by the explicit statement that his story of Jesus would be used for these purposes, manifests itself in the rhetoric of the Gospel. Although there are many facets of the story that potentially contribute to this goal, the element of secrecy is perhaps the most unexpected feature to advance this objective. It seems, however, that Mark has carefully and deliberately narrated the story in order to place the audience in the enviable position of acquiring information that the characters in the story do not possess. While the numerous instances of concealment (e.g., Jesus’ identity, miracles, teachings) cannot be explained according to a single theory within the narrative (i.e., Jesus’ desire for rest or to avoid publicity), the element of secrecy nonetheless exists as a unified theme. By providing the audience with “insider” knowledge, Mark utilizes a rhetorical device to cultivate a favorable relationship between the audience and performer, since, as one scholar has noted, it is virtually impossible to “initiate, develop, or maintain a relationship without self-disclosure.”

It might be objected that, if this assertion were correct, it obscures Mark’s ultimate concern, which is the reception of the gospel message, not the perception of the performer. However, while a distinction between the performer and message might be envisioned, those working in the field of rhetorical studies have shown that the perception of the speaker and the reception of the message are closely aligned. Ancient rhetoricians such as Aristotle have long observed that the character (ethos) and perception of the speaker play an important role in the overall persuasiveness of an argument (Aristotle, Rhet. 1.2.1356), and more recent studies have only confirmed this assess-

93. Matthew clarifies this connection by redacting Mark 14:9 to read, “wherever this [i.e., Matthew’s] gospel is preached” (Matt 26:13). Although likely not original, many Markan manuscripts (A C ∩ Ψ f1 et al.) follow Matthew’s reading, reflecting the early perception that Mark’s story of Jesus would be used for the preaching of the gospel.

ment. Scholars have shown that effective communicators often use “peripheral routes” to influence and persuade an audience. Beyond the presentation and strength of an argument, audiences may also be influenced by indirect techniques, “such as whether the auditor considers the source to be credible … [and the] liking for or attractiveness of the source.” In terms of the present study, this rhetorical assessment helps to explain the importance of the disclosure-liking relationship, and it is perhaps why some have argued that disclosure is an effective, goal-based strategy for obtaining desirable responses from others.

When approached from this angle, Mark’s secrecy theme is not simply a device that attracts the audience to the performer. Rather, the employment of the technique is an affective tool (see Freeman) that facilitates the very reception of Mark’s message. As Elizabeth Fine observes, the rhetorical power of performance has the potential to change attitudes and alter events. Its capacity to function as a catalyst for change “lies in the epistemological nature of artistic verbal performance,” which “embodies knowledge in an heightened self-conscious way that binds the audience and performer together in the creation and fulfillment of aesthetic form.” The rhetoric of the Gospel facilitates the construction of a relational bridge between the performer and audience, which ultimately impacts the audience’s perception of the narrative. By revealing the “secrets” of the drama, the performer attempts to foster the mutual trust and admiration that are necessary for the reception of Mark’s worldview. This, in essence, is the “paradox of secrecy.” Through the measured disclosure of information, the gospel is proclaimed and received by those on the margins of the church.

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98. Fine, *Folklore Text*, 64.

99. Kingsbury comes closest to this position: “The purpose of this motif is to invite readers to appropriate for themselves that ‘thinking’ about Jesus which places them ‘in alignment’ with God’s ‘thinking’ about Jesus” (*Christology of Mark’s Gospel*, 155). While a helpful comment, Kingsbury does not provide an explanation for how this occurs, nor does he consider the more specific function of the theme in the context of mission.
CONCLUSION

Thanks in no small part to the work of Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, the rise in narrative criticism has awakened scholars to fresh insights and alternative angles of vision. Despite these advancements, however, William Wrede continues to exert a controlling influence over the question of Markan secrecy. Although contemporary scholarship has effectively minimized the importance of the theme, its prominence and unity are rooted firmly in the text. Mark’s use of secrecy has a powerful rhetorical effect and, when employed by a skilled narrator, is a strategic tool for developing and shaping the relationship between audience and performer. By subtly influencing the perception of the performer, the rhetoric of the Gospel encourages the audience to embrace the message communicated through Mark’s story of Jesus. According to Iser, this is the “something that is unformulated in the text, and yet represents its ‘intention’”100 Mark’s narrative is only “the beginning of the gospel” (1:1), but the Evangelist has utilized a rhetorical device to ensure that it is not the end of the gospel story. Simply put, wherever the gospel is preached, the concealment of Jesus’ activities in the narrative contributes to reception of Mark’s message by the audience.

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100. Iser, “Reading Process,” 292. The upshot of this conclusion is that it fully accounts for the diverse contexts in which the theme appears without attempting to impose a unified theory of genesis. At the same time, this approach recognizes the broad use of the theme and its effect upon the audience.