THE DISCIPLES AND THE MESSIANIC SECRET IN MARK

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It would be difficult to underestimate the significance of Heikki Räisänen’s book The “Messianic Secret” in Mark’s Gospel. Although dealing primarily with the theme of the so-called “messianic secret” in Mark, Räisänen ranged far and wide over a large number of important broader issues relating to the interpretation of a text such as Mark’s gospel. Above all, Räisänen pointed to the problematic nature of interpretations of Mark which assume too high a level of sophistication on the part of the author. In relation to the messianic secret, Räisänen’s brilliant analysis made clearly visible the fault lines inherent in many previous interpretations of the secret in Mark. He also showed convincingly that “the” secret in Mark, i.e. the collection of different motifs considered together as part of “the” messianic secret ever since Wrede’s epoch-making book of 1901, should really be split up and seen as a conglomeration of different motifs, each serving a potentially different purpose. By no means the least impressive part of the analysis in the book is Räisänen’s willingness to enter into critical dialogue with some of his own earlier views, to question some of his own previous results and to think through afresh many of the key issues in the debates concerned.

3 Räisänen’s 1990 book represents the combining of two previous studies: Die Parabletheorie im Markusevangelium (PFES 26; Helsinki, 1973) and Das “Messiasheimeinis” im Markusevangelium. Ein redaktionskritischer Versuch (PFES 28; Helsinki, 1976). However, the 1990 book was no mere straight translation into English of the earlier works; rather, the later book represented at a number of points a radical rewriting of many of the arguments of the earlier studies, and reached in some cases very different conclusions, at times arguing directly against Räisänen’s own earlier claims. This was especially the case in relation to the analysis of the “parable theory” in Mark 4. Räisänen also rewrote the conclusion of his Messiasheimnis book; and it is part of that rewritten conclusion that is the focus of the present essay.
Heikki Räisänen has built up a formidable reputation as an international scholar in his own right; he has also nurtured and developed an impressive group of younger Finnish scholars in NT studies and related disciplines. Yet Räisänen has never apparently (or at least so it appears to an outsider!) encouraged any kind of cult following among his students or admirers. Rather, he has actively encouraged others to pursue their own ideas, rigorously and honestly, wherever that may lead them. Certainly it would appear that he has never regarded his own theories as sacrosanct and incapable of being re-evaluated, as his own rewriting of his book on the messianic secret makes clear. It is in that spirit that the present essay is offered to a good friend and a fine scholar, with thanks for many personal kindnesses as well as gratitude for the stimulation and interest which his work has aroused.

In this essay I would like to pursue further some of Räisänen’s suggestions about the origin of the secrecy theme in Mark. And if I question some of the individual details of his suggestions, it is I believe only to press more positively the implications of other aspects many of his overall claims about the secrecy texts in Mark.

One of the most intriguing parts of Räisänen’s latest book on the messianic secret concerns his claim that there might be a link between some of the secrecy elements in Mark and the Christians responsible for collecting and preserving the Q material in the gospels. Räisänen refers in this context to some aspects of the picture painted by Mark of the disciples in the gospel. Mark is well known for presenting the disciples in a poor light. In particular, the disciples are shown as failing to understand at many points in the narrative. As is well known, Wrede argued that this theme of the incomprehension of the disciples is to be regarded as part of the complex of secrecy texts in Mark, including commands to silence (to the demons, as well as to the disciples as in 8:30 and 9:9).

According to Räisänen (e.g. pp. 217–18), the incomprehension of the disciples can be seen as focused in three areas. First, the disciples fail to recognise Jesus’ true identity (as the divine Son of God) on the basis of the miracles they witness (cf. 4:41; 6:52; 8:17–21). Second, they fail to understand the fact that Jesus’ teaching means the abrogation of the Jewish food laws (cf. 7:18, a “context which

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