CHAPTER FIVE

JESUS’ COMMANDS TO SILENCE IN MARK’S GOSPEL

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter led to the conclusion that the Gospel of Mark gives expression to the idea that Jesus, although rightly called ‘Christ,’ was not a royal pretender in a political sense, but rather God’s final envoy who will definitively inaugurate God’s kingdom on his return from heaven. Mark’s representation of Jesus as someone without political ambitions is underscored by a remarkable literary motif in Mark’s Gospel, that is, the motif of Jesus’ commands to silence.¹

Since in 1901 William Wrede published his classic study on what is usually known as the ‘Messianic Secret,’² the motif of Jesus’ commands to silence has been the subject of much scholarly debate.³ Therefore, I will briefly discuss Wrede’s theory of the ‘Messianic Secret’ and some of its problems, before proceeding with my own analysis of the motif of Jesus’ commands to silence in Mark’s Gospel. I intend to argue that Mark introduced this motif to sustain his view that Jesus had no ambition to assume political power, and no intention of mobilizing the masses in preparation for a revolt.

¹ These commands to silence are found in Mk 1:25, 1:34, 1:44, 3:12, 5:43, 7:36, 8:26, 8:30, and 9:9.
1. WREDE’S THEORY OF THE ‘MESSIANIC SECRET’

Prior to Wrede’s study on the so-called ‘Messianic Secret,’ the motif of Jesus’ commands to silence in Mark’s Gospel was often seen as an element of the preaching of the historical Jesus. It was thought to show that Jesus had tried to prevent the rise of a political interpretation of his messiahship among the people by revealing his identity as the Christ only gradually.4 Wrede, however, maintained that the silencing commands were all non-historical, and later additions to the tradition.5

Wrede argued that the phenomenon of these injunctions to silence was related to another non-historical element in Mark’s Gospel, the so-called ‘parable theory’ propounded in Mk 4:10-11 and 33-34. According to this ‘parable theory,’ Jesus couched his teaching in parables in order to hide its import from the multitude and reveal it only to an inner circle of followers. Part of this secret teaching was, in Wrede’s view, Jesus’ messiahship.6 Wrede suggested that also the fact that Jesus is depicted as sometimes fleeing the crowd (Mk 1:35; 3:13), and healing or giving instruction in the presence only of a small group of followers (Mk 1:29; 7:17; 9:28, 33; 10:10; 13:3-4) may be seen as connected to the secrecy motif.7 In addition, according to Wrede, Mark’s image of the disciples as often failing to understand Jesus should also be seen as part of the motif.8 On the basis of Mk 9:9, Wrede argued that according to Mark and the Christian group to which he belonged the secret of Jesus’ messiahship, as well

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5 W. Wrede, *Messiasgeheimniss*, pp. 22-51. Wrede regards as part of this motif not only Jesus’ commands to silence in Mk 1:25, 1:34, 1:44, 3:12, 5:43, 7:36, 8:26, 8:30, and 9:9, but also the passages in which Jesus tries to keep his whereabouts secret (Mk 7:24; 9:30-31), and the passage in which the crowd attempts to silence Bartimaeus (Mk 10:48).


7 W. Wrede, *Messiasgeheimniss*, pp. 51-54 and 63-64. Wrede is undecided with regard to the historicity of these passages, and therefore also with regard to the question of whether they are part of Mark’s secrecy motif.

8 W. Wrede, *Messiasgeheimniss*, pp. 81-114. Wrede strongly denies that there is any progression in the disciples’ understanding.