For this week’s Readers’ Mailbag, I address a question of central importance for understanding the Gospel of Mark, our earliest Gospel and often thought to be the one that best represents what actually happened in the life of Jesus. I’ll have to *explain* the question before answering it (!). Then most of this post will be setting up the answer with the crucial background information, which, as it turns out, the vast majority of casual Bible readers have never even thought of or heard.

**QUESTION:**

I’ve looked back through the archives, but I can’t find anything on Mark’s “Messianic secret”. It’s possible I simply missed it, but if you haven’t dealt with it before would you consider doing a post on the subject, please?! Particularly on why it’s no longer accepted by scholars.

**RESPONSE:**

The “messianic secret” is a term that over a century ago came to be applied to the Gospel of Mark to explain one of its most distinctive and puzzling features. Mark portrays Jesus clearly as the messiah. Note the very first verse! “The Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah.” Many scholars think, in fact, that Mark meant this opening line to be the actual title of the book. It’s all about Jesus as the Messiah.

But there’s a strange feature in mark’s portrayal of the messiahship of Jesus. Mark is unique among the Gospels in having Jesus tell his disciples and everyone else who starts to recognize who he is NOT to tell anyone. He tries to keep it hushed up. But why?

The most common explanation among most readers, in my experience, is that Jesus does this so he doesn’t get arrested too soon and crucified before his time. Makes sense. But it’s not the view held by many scholars who have studied Mark’s “messianic secret.” (it is interesting, by the way – even vital – to note that the you don’t find the “secret” pronounced in the other Gospels, such as Matthew and especially John, where Jesus’ identity is no secret at all! If Jesus really did try to hush it up, why don’t the other Gospels say so?)

To explain further how Mark employs his understanding of the messianic secret, it is first important to realize that if he, or any other Christian, wanted to show Jesus as the messiah, he had a terribly difficult task. This is simply unrecognized by virtually all Christian readers today, who think that of *course* Jesus was the messiah. He did everything the messiah was supposed to do, as predicted in the Scriptures by the Hebrew prophets of old. He was born in Bethlehem, of a virgin, he did great miracles, one after the other, he taught the true understanding of God, and at the end of his life he was crucified and then raised from the dead. Who *else* has done all these things? So he’s the messiah, all according to God’s plan, right? How could it be wrong?

The very big problem is that...

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