



Mark's Messianic Secret?¹

Introduction

When a “scholar” refers to Messianic Secret in Mark, he or she is referring to the fact that Jesus’ wants secrecy regarding His miracles, His transfiguration and His identity (Son of God, Messiah). You see this related to demons in Mark 1:25, 1:34, and 3:12. One sees it related to men in Mark 5:43, 7:36, 8:26, 8:30, and 9:9. Simply claiming to be the Messiah or the Son of God would not have got him crucified.

There were many people who claimed to be the Messiah. One of the most common beliefs at the time was that the Messiah (the anointed one, Christos in Greek) was that the “warrior” Messiah would come to liberate the Jews from the rule of Rome. Cyrus the Persian, who freed Judah from Babylonian exile was thought to be the Messiah. Alexander the Great was thought to be the divinely appointed Messiah. The Qumran inhabitation thought there would be two Messiahs, one royal and one priestly.

The Davidic Kings were referred to the “Son of God.” Psalm 2 says: “I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, “You are my son; today I have begotten you.”² Even the corporate Israel was called the Son of God.

It would have taken much more than these beliefs to warrant crucifixions. I contend that Mark has another secret that he, with the help of the Holy Spirit, is revealing! Let’s start with the Proclamation of John the Baptist.

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

In verse 3, Mark is citing Isaiah 40:3: “A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.””³ In this case, the “LORD” is

¹ A large portion of this lecture was based on a lecture by Dr. John Kincaid during the fifth session of my Trinity and the Divine Economy course at John Paul, the Great, Catholic University.

² Ps 2:7.

³ Is 40:3.

YHWH. In Mark, the voice crying out from the wilderness was John the Baptist and he is clearly making the path straight for Jesus. Now, let's turn to Mark 4.

Jesus Heals a Paralytic

Setting the scene, four friends bring a paralytic to Christ for healing:

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? **But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins**"—he said to the paralytic— "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"⁴

So, Christ forgave sins, a characteristic attributed only to God. More importantly, Christ identifies himself with the "Son of Man." Turning to Daniel:

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a **[son of man]** coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. **To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.**⁵

While the Nation of Israel was monotheistic, it was a complicated issue. Clearly, the son of man is, at a minimum, like a human being and shares in the glory of the "Ancient of Days," the God of Israel. Daniel 7 is not the only place where someone shares the throne of God. Psalm 110:1 says, "The LORD says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." Another significant "second person" prophecy can be found in Isaiah 9:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be

⁴ Mark 2:5–12, emphasis added. All citations are from the NRSV, unless otherwise stated.

⁵ Dan 7:13–14, emphasis added.

endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.⁶

Again, while the Nation of Israel was monotheistic, there seems to be a belief that someone else will be sharing in God's glory. Daniel Boyarin says, "the idea of a second God as viceroy to God the Father is one of the oldest of theological ideas in Israel."⁷

Returning to the cited scripture, note how the scribes were thinking, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" They did not respond with blasphemy regarding the claim of being the "Son of Man." They only spoke of blasphemy regarding the forgiving of sins. Now let's move to the two stories related to Jesus stilling the storms.

Jesus Stills a Storm and Walks on the Water

To set the scene, Jesus has just finished telling several parables to a large crowd beside the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and the Apostles board a boat to go to the other side when a storm arises.

A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"⁸

Control of the wind and sea in the Old Testament is only attributable to God. One such example that closely matches the wording in Mark is in the Psalms:

Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;
they saw the deeds of the LORD,
his wondrous works in the deep.
**For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.**

⁶ Isa 9:6–7.

⁷ Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 44.

⁸ Mark 4:37–41.

They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;
they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and were at their wits' end.
Then **they cried to the LORD** in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;
he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
Then they were glad because they had quiet,
and he brought them to their desired haven.⁹

In the italicized portions, note the similarities to the words of Mark. However, in this Psalm the writer is speaking about YHWH, the God of Israel.

Jesus, again, calms the seas in Chapter 6. The same points made related to Mark 4 on calming the sea apply here. However, in this section, Jesus ups the ante. The winds cease when Jesus enters the boat. Just before this happens, however, the Apostles are afraid because they believe Jesus to be a ghost. Jesus calms them by saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."¹⁰ The Greek term used for "it is I" is *ego eimi*. This term is a similar term used when Moses asks YHWH his name in Exod 3:14 in the Septuagint (LXX), *ego eimi*. Coincidence, I do not think so. You must determine the correct translation of *ego eimi* by the context. The context is that he is WALKING ON WATER. To support that Jesus is invoking the name of God, you can turn to the Matthew version of the same story in Matthew 14 and those in the boat worship him without rebuking them. So, he does not reject being worshipped. We now turn to Jesus' trial before the council.

Jesus before the Council

Setting the stage, Jesus has been arrested and has been taken before the Council. They had witnesses saying that Jesus said He would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Yet, their testimony did not agree and was therefore not enough for any type of conviction. The high priest became frustrated that Jesus would not respond to any of these charges. There was no indication that these charges alone would have resulted in the death penalty that eventually occurred. Then the crucial exchange was set in motion. "Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"¹¹ There were others that had claimed or had been thought to be the Messiah. Others were titled the "son of God," like the Davidic Kings. Answering "yes" would probably not have been considered blasphemous.

⁹ Ps 107:23–30, emphasis added.

¹⁰ Mark 6:50b.

¹¹ Mark 14:61b.

But Jesus did not answer “yes.” He answered, *ego eimi*, the divine name of God. According to David Stern, a Jewish New Testament scholar:

Here, in response to the direct question of the *cohen hagadol* [high priest] Yeshua [Jesus] does not hesitate; moreover, he uses the very word “*Adonai*” [the God of Israel] used to identify himself to Moses at the burning bush. . . Thus Yeshua not only affirms that he is the Messiah, the Son of God (see Mt 4:3N), but hints that he is to be identified with *Adonai* himself.¹²

Then Jesus follows up by claiming to be that “second” divine figure found in Daniel 7 by saying, “and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven”¹³. This last part clearly invoked Daniel 7:13, combined with Psalm 110:1. Both of these verses in Second Temple Judaism would have been claiming to BE YHWH. It is only after this point that the high priest tears his clothes and accuses Jesus of blasphemy. In the mind of the unbelieving Council, they had no choice but to invoke the punishment of Leviticus 24. “Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “Why do we still need witnesses? ⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?” All of them condemned him as deserving death.”¹⁴

What was Mark's Secret

Mark not only seed Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah. That point is clear. Mark sees Jesus as the one God of Israel. He forgives sins. He controls nature. He identifies himself with the Son of Man. He sees Himself sitting at the right hand of the Power or the Ancient of Days or the Father. He is not an instrument of the God of Israel, he IS the God of Israel. Did Mark understand the doctrine of the Trinity? Probably not. But he certainly saw Jesus as God, the Son.

Interestingly, the Sanhedrin came to the right conclusion. They concluded that Jesus was claiming to be YHWH. They simply reacted incorrectly. Instead of crucifying him, they should have worshipped him. It took a Roman Centurion at the foot of the cross to get it right.

Maybe we should call it “Mark's Second Person of the Trinity Secret,” but then that wouldn't have the same rhythm, now would it.

¹² David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A Companion Volume to the Jewish New Testament*, electronic ed. (Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1996), Mk 14:61 [explanations added].

¹³ Mark 14:62.

¹⁴ Mark 14:63–64.