Watson, David F.

Honor among Christians: The Cultural Key to the Messianic Secret


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In Honor Among Christians, David F. Watson (Assistant Professor at United Theological Seminary) examines the Markan secrecy motif against the backdrop of the ancient Mediterranean honor/shame value system. This review will proceed by summarizing each chapter and will conclude with a brief critique.

The book’s introduction offers a brief survey of the Markan secrecy motif in New Testament scholarship, a survey that begins with William Wrede and traces subsequent research trends. Following this survey, Watson discusses his own approach to the Markan secrecy motif, an approach that relies heavily on social-scientific criticism but also incorporates narrative and reader-response criticism. More specifically, Watson states that his primary goal is to consider the Markan secrecy passages in light of the ancient Mediterranean values of honor and shame.

In chapter 1 Watson explores the meaning and significance of secrecy in the ancient Mediterranean world. After examining both the language and function of secrecy in the ancient world, Watson demonstrates that neither play a prominent role in the Markan secrecy passages. As a result, Watson formulates two conclusions: that it is unlikely Mark’s audience would understand so-called “secrecy” passages to in fact be such, and
therefore to use secrecy language to describe these passages is both misleading and confusing. As a result, Watson prefers to use the language of concealment rather than secrecy.

Watson turns in chapter 2 to what he calls Markan concealment passages and analyzes them through the lens of the honor and shame value system. He first considers passages in which Jesus resists “achieved honor,” that is honor that Jesus has merited through his acts of healing or exorcism (Mark 1:40–45; 5:21–24, 35–43; 7:31–37; 8:22–26). For example, Watson notes that in the healing of the leper (1:40–45) Jesus acts as a beneficent patron (or perhaps a divine broker), while the leper acts as his client. He argues that Jesus’ command for the leper to be silent is not an attempt to keep either Jesus’ identity or his ability to heal a secret but is rather an attempt to resist the honor due him from the leper. The recipient of benefaction (the leper) would be expected to repay the benefactor (Jesus) by praising him and by spreading this praise to others—actions that Jesus’ command for silence subverts.

Next Watson considers passages in which Jesus resists “ascribed honor” (Mark 1:23–28, 34; 3:12), that is, honor Jesus received through the bestowing of honorific titles. For example, Watson argues that the demon’s use “the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:23–28) to identify Jesus is a way of ascribing honor to him—honor that would require reciprocation on the part of Jesus. In silencing the demon, Jesus is not seeking to keep his identity a secret but rather is resisting honor. In regard to Jesus’ commands for silence, Watson concludes that Mark’s first-century audience would not have asked why Jesus sought to hide his identity but would instead have asked why Jesus resisted the honor that he was due.

In chapter 3 Watson argues that Jesus’ resistance to honor is only half of the story. Jesus is not rejecting the honor/shame system in toto—a system too deeply ingrained in ancient Mediterranean culture—but rather is offering a new vision of what is honorable and shameful. While Jesus resists the common-place markers of honor and shame (e.g., acts of power, benefaction, honorific titles), he also establishes new markers (e.g., service, self-sacrifice, suffering, and crucifixion). Jesus establishes these new markers through his passion predictions (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33) and teaching on discipleship (8:34–38; 9:33–36; 10:13–16, 29–31, 35–45). For Watson, the Markan Jesus ultimately inverts standard conventions by claiming that the least, the suffering, and the servants should be honored, while the great and the powerful should be ashamed. According to Watson, the Markan motif of failing disciples serves to reinforce this inversion for Mark’s readers.

In chapter 4 Watson addresses passages in which Jesus’ honor is on public display but in which Jesus does not attempt to conceal or resist such honor—passages that are
apparently in conflict with the concealment passages. In his analysis of many of these passages, Watson rejects interpretive efforts either to minimize Jesus’ honor or to maximize elements of concealment—efforts that ultimately seek to harmonize concealment passages with publicity passages. Watson argues that these passages must be accepted for what they are, passages that publicize Jesus’ highly honorable words and actions. Yet, he argues that concealment passages and publicity passages should not be understood as competing with one another. According to Watson, the publicity passages advance a number of different themes, not simply “publicity,” and both these various themes and the theme of concealment are equally important to the Markan Evangelist.

Watson addresses in chapter 5 the perplexing relationship between the concealment passages and the publicity passages. His explanation of this relationship is rooted in the oral nature of ancient literary stories. Watson gives particular attention to the role of repetition and inconsistency in ancient stories. Because stories in the ancient world were often written to be heard rather than read, their thematic development was heavily dependent on repetition. Watson concludes that the Markan Jesus’ repetitious rejection of honor in the concealment passages develops a clear theme that would not be missed by Mark’s readers. This theme, however, would neither be the only nor the most important Markan theme, and other passages would forge additional themes, perhaps even themes that were inconsistent with the theme of rejected honor. However, Watson argues that such inconsistency is not nearly as problematic in ancient literature as it might be in modern literature. He argues that the thematic inconsistency was quite common in ancient literature and that we should not be surprised to see inconsistent themes interwoven throughout Mark’s Gospel.

In the conclusion, Watson considers how the Markan inversion of the Mediterranean honor/shame system would encourage the persecuted Christians in the Markan community. He argues that such Christians would have been cut off from the honor of the wider culture. Mark’s Gospel not only claims that such honor is unimportant but also provides Mark’s community with a new divine standard for evaluating honor: service, self-sacrifice, and suffering. Though a Christian might be shamed by the wider culture, this shame actually brings honor in the eyes of God and in the eyes of one’s new Christian family. Ultimately, Mark is telling his community how they can and should gain “honor among Christians.”

Watson is to be commended for his efforts to locate the meaning of the Markan “secrecy” motif in the social world of the ancient Mediterranean people. Far too few Markan interpreters have asked the crucial question that Watson asks, “How would Mark’s original readers understand Jesus’ commands for silence.” Watson’s work on the meaning and significance of “secrecy” in the ancient Mediterranean world fills a surprising void in
the copious amount of work that has been produced on the “messianic secret.” He is able to make a strong case that what have often been described by modern scholars as “secrecy” passages were unlikely to have been understood in such terms by ancient readers. If Watson is right (and I believe he is), he significantly undermines previous attempts to explain the Markan “secrecy” motif (e.g., Wrede, Marxen, Burkill, Räisänen) and sets a new trajectory for future research.

Watson is also to be commended for bringing the ancient Mediterranean values of honor and shame to bear on the Markan text. Though he is not the first to consider honor and shame in Mark’s Gospel, Watson’s work brings fresh and rewarding insights to many Markan pericopes. Not least of these is Watson’s insight that the Markan Jesus’ commands for silence would be best understood by first-century readers as a surprising resistance to honor.

That being said, Watson’s work is open to some critique. While Watson does well in identifying both concealment passages and publicity passages in Mark’s Gospel, I find his explanation of their relationship unsatisfactory. As we have seen, Watson argues that the concealment passages work to invert (and thus subvert) the ancient Mediterranean honor/shame value system. However, he also acknowledges that the publicity passages seem to embrace (or at least presuppose) this value system and lack in them any sort of critique of it. Watson’s explanation is that both types of passages are seeking to convey different themes and that such “inconsistent” material is quite common in ancient literature. But to use the word “inconsistent” to describe the relationship between Mark’s concealment and publicity passages seems to be misleading. As the passage types are understood by Watson, “contradictory” seems to describe their relationship better than “inconsistent.” Passages that seem to promote/presuppose the conventional honor/shame system (publicity passages) would seem to undermine passages in which the conventional system is subverted (concealment passages). Perhaps ancient readers could handle inconsistent themes (as Watson demonstrates), but would not such contradictory themes prove confusing to them?

This first critique raises questions about Watson’s understanding of the concealment passages, namely, that through them Jesus is attempting to subvert the existing honor/shame value system and replace it with his own. If in the publicity passages Jesus is operating under the existing honor system and thus affirming it (e.g., 2:1–12; 3:1–6; 6:30–44; 11:1–11), it seems unlikely that Mark’s readers would understand Jesus to be subverting that system in the concealment passages. Such mixed messages seem to undermine aspects of Watson’s reading of the Markan concealment motif. As a result, I find persuasive Watson’s argument that Jesus’ commands for silence should be understood terms of resisting honor rather than in terms of secrecy. However, I find
unpersuasive Watson’s understanding of Jesus’ resistance to honor, namely, that it ultimately functions to invert/subvert the ancient Mediterranean honor/shame value system—a system Mark regular presents Jesus participating in.

In this well-written and erudite book, Watson has taken a decisive step forward in our understanding of the so-called “messianic secret,” and he has set a significant trajectory for any future research. All further work on Markan “concealment” passages should consider the arguments and conclusions of this book, and Honor among Christians should be on the bookshelf of every serious reader of Mark’s Gospel.