

## Self-Review of *The Messianic Secret*

William Wrede<sup>1</sup>

Translated by  
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*Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien. Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums.* By Dr. W. Wrede. Professor in Breslau. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901. 291 pages.

I cannot publish a self-review of this book in *Die Christliche Welt* in a way that it would be homogeneous with the ways of thinking that are predominant in this magazine. This, however, is also not, after all, the expectation for the self-reviews published here. The only requirement is that the book discussed have “some sort of interest” for the circle of readers (vol. 1899, col. 957). This I may believe to be the case for my book. To be sure, it is aimed not at the general public but rather at scholarly circles. However, its arguments touch upon such important questions of New Testament research and distance themselves so strongly from the dominant views that I may nevertheless count on interest from the theologically engaged readers of this journal. Under these circumstances, I gladly take the opportunity to indicate what my writing aims to accomplish.

I start from the question of when Jesus became known as Messiah according to the Gospels. The investigation is devoted in the first place to the Gospel of Mark, which, as I assume along with most contemporary critics, underlies the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The result is as follows. Despite certain contradictory indications, the Gospel of Mark is dominated by the view that *Jesus wanted to keep his messianic dignity secret during his whole earthly life*; it is the resurrection that first brings the revelation of the secret. The main proof lies in Jesus’ commands that no one should speak of his messiahship (or also of his miracles as its distinguishing mark). The messianic dignity is thought of here as a matter of absolutely supernatural knowledge, as only God or the demons could have it and human beings only on the basis of special revelation. Alongside this series of thoughts stands a second, closely related one, which is specifically related to

<sup>1</sup>Wrede published this self-review (*Selbstanzeige*) of *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* in *Die Christliche Welt*, Nr. 34, Aug. 22, 1901, 805–806. I have translated it from the German text published in H. Rollmann and W. Zager, eds, “Unveröffentlichte Briefe William Wredes zur Problematisierung des messianischen Selbstverständnisses Jesu,” *ZNTbG/JHMTb* 8 (2001): 274–322, here 303–305. For the English translation, I have provided it with a descriptive title. Hans Rollmann and Werner Zager give it the title “[William Wrede, *Selbstanzeige: Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*].” The German term *Selbstanzeige* could also be translated with “self-announcement.”

the disciples. They continually receive from Jesus the highest revelations, but they remain completely obtuse and blind toward them. Their understanding of Jesus – it is implied – likewise begins only with the resurrection. These views cannot be regarded as historical pieces of information. Rather, they are later ideas about the life of Jesus that arose in the Christian community. I claim this not merely in general, but I seek to prove in every individual point I investigate that the relevant pieces of information are not trustworthy. This demonstration has its own value. It is, however, not an end in itself but only support and supplement for the demonstration that Mark really has the view ascribed to him. My leading interest is indeed defined by this positive aspect. This is roughly the first fundamental section.

The second section shows how Mark's view is blurred or modified by his successors Matthew and Luke, and yet especially how in the Gospel that is farthest from the life of Jesus, i.e., in John, a view is present that has close points of contact to that of Mark: here too the knowledge of the disciples has its starting point in the resurrection.

The third section asks about the emergence of the two ideas found in Mark. The idea that Jesus hides his messiahship until the resurrection is derived from the demonstrably available old view that the resurrection first *makes* Jesus the Messiah. The idea that the disciples were completely without understanding during the earthly life of Jesus is a reflection of the historical fact that the real disciples were conscious of having come to an entirely new understanding of Jesus through the appearances of the risen one. While the question of whether Jesus himself wanted to be the Messiah is touched upon, it is not brought to a conclusion.

The whole book stands in sharp opposition to the method followed by the majority of contemporary critics. I hope, however, that I have not transgressed the limits of a polemic that is interested purely in the subject matter. A special subsidiary aim is to unsettle the dominant view of Mark. The plan that people find in his presentation and in which people perceive a good knowledge of the course of Jesus' life does not exist. And although no judgment is made about the value of the material that is not touched upon in the investigation, it nevertheless follows that in his *overall* presentation the evangelist already no longer possesses a real view of the actual conditions of the life of Jesus.

Breslau

W. Wrede

### Bibliography

- Rollmann, H., and W. Zager, eds. "Unveröffentlichte Briefe William Wredes zur Problematisierung des messianischen Selbstverständnisses Jesu," *ZNTbG/JHMTb* 8 (2001): 274–322.