




Jesus' identity in Matthew 16:13–20 and identity crisis among gospel preachers in Nigeria



Authors:

Prince E. Peters^{1,2} 

Kalu O. Ogbu^{1,2} 

Nnamdi U. Ijeudo^{1,2} 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

²Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Prince Peters,
prince.peters.195254@unn.edu.ng

Dates:

Received: 25 Dec. 2023

Accepted: 26 Apr. 2024

Published: 29 June 2024

How to cite this article:

Peters, P.E., Ogbu, K.O. & Ijeudo, N.U., 2024, 'Jesus' identity in Matthew 16:13–20 and identity crisis among gospel preachers in Nigeria', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), a9651. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9651>

Copyright:

© 2024. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

The Jesus' question which was encased in his shadowy identity was both a fascinating and enigmatic phenomenon to people of Jesus time as well as people of today. The synoptic gospels presented the matter of Jesus identity in varying contexts; however, it is approached in this study from the context of Matthew. After receiving a brief answer of 'who he is' from Peter, Jesus mandates his disciples to keep the information to themselves. This mandate to secrecy shares certain characteristics with the Messianic secret in Mark, but differs in intentions. From the exegesis of the pericope in Matthew, Jesus' refusal to let the public know about his personalities with his motive to keep away from ostentation and self-love. Such ostentation and self-love have been referred to in this study as identity crisis. This study argues from empirical evidence that many Nigerian pastors suffer from identity crisis. It therefore, challenges Nigerian contemporary preachers to emulate Jesus' refusal of self-seeking and to shun hypocrisy and unnecessary publicity.

Contribution: To reroute the Christian church in Nigeria, especially the pastors from ostentation and self-seeking publicity to a selfless and modest lifestyle modelled after Jesus' own personality example according to Matthew 16:13–20.

Keywords: Jesus' identity; Matthew; Nigerian preachers; Messianic secret; identity crisis.

Introduction

Matthew 16:13–20 relates to the Jesus question. It begins with Jesus' arrival at Caesarea Philippi on his journey with his disciples where he engages them in an important discussion on who people thought he was. This discussion leads to Jesus' demand of silence about his person from his disciples. The pericope has parallel in Mark 8:27–30 // Luke 9:18–20 and by theological position on date of writing, it is obvious that Matthew depended on Mark for his work, and that calls our attention to Messianic secret of William Wrede. As correctly described by Garland (1997):

[T]he term 'messianic secret' was first employed by William Wrede in 1901 to explain why Jesus repeatedly tells people not to tell what he has done or who he was. (p. 550)

This effort of Jesus to hide his identity, as long as it can be called 'Messianic secret', obtains only in Mark, but received modifications from other synoptic writers who borrowed the idea away from Mark. Ituma (2019) writes on this Messianic secret from Mark, contextualising it to the African situation, so as to reflect the intentionality and thoughts of Matthew. For Ituma (2019):

[T]he charge to silence in African understanding reveals the virtue of humility demonstrated in approachability, selfless service and compassion. It calls the attention of the followers of Jesus to the worthiness of emulating such a life-style as a pattern for service to God and man. (p. 8)

This almost depicts Matthew's stance on the case of Messianic silence. However, when viewed objectively, Matthew's stance on Messianic silence goes beyond Mark's secrecy to accommodate the full attention on Jesus' question in the whole of Matthew.

Chinwokwu (2015:1) robustly spoke about this Jesus question. For him, the Jesus question is responsible for the Gospels presentation of 'diverse traditions' (2015:1). By diverse traditions, Chinwokwu refers to the Four Gospels namely, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. One would not deny that this Jesus question was also responsible for the creation of other gospel traditions outside the canonised tradition. These texts are mostly Gnostic in nature aspiring to speak of the historical Jesus (Davies 1983:1).¹ While the intention of these Gnostic texts aligns with that of the

1.Church Fathers like Irenaeus classify the following gospels: 'the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, and the *Apocryphon (Secret Book) of John*' as mere inventions of Gnostics and therefore, fraud (see Pagels 1989:17; cf. Barnstone & Meyer 2003:2).

canonised texts in describing the historicity of Jesus, they appeared in the garb of dubiety and spuriousness leading to being discredited by the church. But what is this Jesus question of which Chinwokwu projected as being so strong as to have 'posed the challenging question to [*Jesus*] contemporaries ... as it is today' (2015:1)? That question revolves around the messianic identity of Jesus. Who was Jesus? Was he actually the Messiah? If he was, what are the miraculous evidences to support such claim? Indeed, this question looks easy yet so complex that PhD theses have been written in a bid to answer it (cf. Myburgh 1995:1–226; Orchard 1995:1–276; Ryan 2016:5–15). There are no available data to explain that this question on the identity of Jesus especially, as Messiah, has been successfully answered. This is why many scholars believe that, Jesus is enigmatic and many faced (see Loke 2000:1–39). His enigmatic personality has indeed led to many quests of the historical Jesus (see Ed Komoszewski, Sawyer & Wallace 2006:21–262; Casey 2010:1–97; Lehtonen 2011:4–6; Van Voorst 2000:1–241).

Jesus' identity according to the pericope of study seems initially hidden from the public but revealed to his disciples alone. The revelation of his identity comes as an answer to a question which only Peter attempted to answer correctly. The discourse led Jesus to warn his disciples not to let anyone know that he was the Christ. In reality, this revelation of Jesus identity and why he tried assiduously to keep it hidden while on earth still remains an enigma. There are a number of possible reasons for this. Firstly, it has been proposed that Jesus was being an introvert regarding his personality (York 2016:36; cf. Kroeger & Oswald 1988:674–679). Secondly (which is dependent only on the tradition of Mark), it is possible that he didn't want people to hear a wrong gospel – a gospel without the cross. For an announcement of the person of Jesus before his passion, would deny the people the knowledge of the necessity of his suffering. This is closely related to Ehrman's argument. Ehrman (2008:84) says 'Jesus in Mark's Gospel does not want people to have the wrong idea about him ... as messiah, Jesus was the Son of God who had to suffer and die.' However, in the third occasion when the secret of his person was betrayed, 'it brought about the death of Jesus' (Powley 1979:62). We may propose a third explanation to the puzzle. Jesus may simply have tried not to bring ostentation to his person. With this new proposition, this study challenges the Narcissistic² lifestyles associated with modern Nigerian preachers. We observe that such exaggerated self-love displayed by Nigerian preachers in the forms of undue publicity and flamboyant life styles is antithetical to the personality of the Lord whom they emulate.

Redactional positions of the identity of Jesus in the Gospels

Many scholars, who discuss Messianic secret, have rightly discussed it as only related to the book of Mark (see Dunn 1970; Ituma, Solomon & Uroko 2019; Rao 1964; Wrede 1971). This implies that the hidden identity of Jesus in Matthew was

²The study uses this term in the context of exaggerated self-love.

not a case of Messianic secret as it is in Mark. In fact, in Mark Jesus' 'full identity was revealed in a different way ... through his suffering and death' (Anshiso 2016:1). However, in Matthew, especially in the pericope of study, Jesus' refusal to proclaim his identity was neither associated with his passion, eschatology, nor apocalypse. It was an effort to show social modesty. Matthew 16 merely echoes what Jesus has taught in other passages of the gospels against ostentation and leadership pride (see e.g., Mt. 6:1; 5; 20:25–28; 23:1–12). Jesus' refusal to be publicly proclaimed the Messiah in Matthew is antithetical to the hypocritical ostentatious display of the religious leaders of his day (cf. Viljoen 2018:6). Following Viljoen's, we understand Jesus' statement which prevented his disciples from publicly proclaiming him the Messiah in Matthew as an effort to shun hypocrisy and unnecessary publicity. This seems to be characteristic of a humble servant of God.

Unfortunately, same hypocrisy (Umoh 2013:19–24) and cheap publicity that go with materialism (Biwul 2013:29–44) are what have eaten deep into the fabrics of gospel preachers in Nigeria. Their ostentation and affluence have been frowned upon even outside Nigeria (see Quiroz 2016). Such publicity which promotes self-identity of a preacher as against promoting Jesus has become rife especially with the great influence of Pentecostalism on the whole of Christianity in Nigeria (Achunike 2004; Ngbea 2015:67–76). This study therefore produces a statement of problem which reads Matthew 16:13–20 as to produce in its exegesis a new understanding of Jesus' identity, shunning unnecessary publicity of his identity. This should have direct implication to the aspiration of shunning affluence and extravagance among Nigerian preachers. Therefore, the study makes a frantic effort to present a more appropriate reading through its exegesis. Additionally, while the passage emphasises the Messiahship of Jesus, the study seeks to know the extent to which the approach of Jesus in expressing his Messiahship is observed in the passage. This shall receive adequate attention in the exegesis. The scope of the study is on the gospel preachers in Nigerian Christianity. Nigerian Christianity is that brand of Christianity which 'has attained the level of indigenous religion in the country' (Iheanacho 2009:104–117). It is characteristic of what can be referred to as 'gospel merchandising' (Diara & Mokwenye 2019:2) which directly sponsors such affluence that fuels publicity of one's identity. Furthermore, the 1st century missionary enterprise of Jesus in Palestine forms part of the scope. The study aims to reread the text of Matthew 16:13–20 with the argument that Jesus did not prefer a hidden identity in Matthew as a form of Messianic secret as in Mark, but as a way to avoid ostentation and undue publicity. Such publicity should not characterise contemporary Christianity. The significance of the study would be beneficial to the body of Christ in Nigeria. This would precisely be on the impact it will make on the preachers by enlightening them on the proper ethical conduct towards identity making; modelling it towards that of Jesus. The study's methodology is built on the fact that its primary data is the text of Matthew 16:13–20. Form and redaction

criticisms were used to analyse this data. Participant observation method was used in fixed environment (the church), to understudy the behaviour of pastors towards publicising their identity. Other secondary sources like books and journals especially relating to Nigerian situation on identity management among pastors were employed.

Exegesis of Matthew 16:13–20

Structurally, the text on a broader scale embraces three episodes which are loosely linked together. There are two previous episodes before the studied pericope, Peter's walk upon the water (Mt. 14:22–33) and the encounter with the Canaanite woman (Mt. 15:21–28). Both episodes lead Jesus to pay special attention to the faith of his disciples on him as the Messiah, forming an immediate context upon which the question of Jesus identity can be understood in the passage. It culminates to forbidding them from making his identity a public issue. This last part of the discussion of Jesus with his disciples is where a contextual reinterpretation of this study is based. Earlier in the chapter (1–6), Matthew presents Jesus as being confrontational with the religious leaders of his day. One can see the irony of drawing attention to his person through this controversy whereas in the same chapter he shows his real intention which is to maintain secrecy of his person. However, his call to secrecy as a form of hiding his identity is the focus of the article.

Historical and literary context

The events culminating to the Jesus question, which he wanted his disciples to explain, were cast in an episode preceded by two more (Mt. 14:22–15:21–28). The first two creates the big thoughts of who Jesus was in the hearts of the disciples though they did not have the boldness to ask. Having seen that the first two episodes help in forming an immediate context to the whole narrative in the third episode, our concern is with this third episode. This is where the all-important question was finally asked. 'This episode takes place in the region of Caesarea Philippi, approximately twenty five miles north of the Sea of Galilee' (Roden 2015:2). It is also important to note that 'although just within the boundaries of ancient Israel (near the Old Testament Dan on the northern border), in the first century it was predominantly Gentile in population' (Roden 2015:2; see also Keener 2009:424):

An underground shrine to the Greek god Pan and a temple to Augustus Caesar built by Herod the Great made it a place of pagan worship. This setting provides a contrast between the mythological gods and divinized human beings, on the one hand, and 'the Son of the living God' (v. 16) on the other. Roden (2015:2)

However, 'in the apocryphal and pseudoepigraphic tradition the area of Caesarea Philippi [*sic*] stands out as a place where eschatological revelations are produced' (Armenteros 1955:398–406). This makes the region the perfect place to establish the identity of Jesus in the minds of his followers.

The pericope of study – Matthew 16:13–20 – has its form as the stories about Christ since it emphasises 'the identity of

Jesus as the Christ' (Chinwokwu 2015:39). It establishes as its socio-historical context the misunderstanding of Jesus' personage by his Jewish contemporaries, who associated his person to several Old Testament figures. 'Jesus asks the disciples who people say He is, and reply with a list of prophetic figures' (Roden 2015:2–3). Some said John the Baptist, some said Elijah, and others Jeremiah. It seems that, to justify the appearance of Elijah at the mount of transfiguration as the contemporary theory currently known as the *return of Elijah* proposed from Malachian theology (see Mt. 3:1, 23–24), Matthew added the prophet as one of Jesus' come-back prophetic personage (see Geddis 2020). Unlike the accounts of Mark (8:28) and Luke (9:19), Matthew was the only synoptic gospel to include Jeremiah in the list of these prophets. Winkle (1986) classifies the groups who identify Jesus differently into just two instead of three groups.

After he enquired about the opinions of the *hoi polloi*:

Jesus then makes the question more personal; specifically seeking the disciples' opinions as to His identity, and Peter responds with a positive statement recognizing Jesus as the Messiah (Roden 2015:2–3). Jesus proclaims a blessing upon Peter, giving him information about his future role in the church. The section concludes with a command for the disciples not to divulge His identity to outsiders. (Roden 2015:2–3)

Data analysis

Verse 13: Who is the Son of Man?

Jesus himself was concerned about the question surrounding his person right from his own time. The two groups identified by Winkle (1986) who hold variant opinions about the identity of Jesus may not in fact be the only groups in Palestine with assertive opinions about Jesus. A lot of other people may have formed opinions that are quite assertive about Jesus to the extent that Jesus found the verb *λαλεω* weak enough to express their convictions, but instead *λέγω*. Unlike *λαλεω* which speaks of mere human speeches used in conversations, and used in secular Greek as mere chatter, the verb *λέγω* speaks of assertion, boldly made as pronouncements.³ Such authoritative pronouncement on the person of Jesus explains that many Jews of Jesus time understood him from very distinctive positions and believed their understanding to in fact, be authentic. Again, the use of the phrase *Υἱός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου* 'Son of man' by Jesus in this verse reflects his Jewish heritage. Its foundation traces down to the Second Temple period. This is confirmed by Pennington who said that the concept of the Son of man is one of the 'fundamental ideas', as found in the Second Temple literature and especially the Rabbinic [*sic*] material, [*which*] are then used to explain the words of Jesus' (Pennington 2007:18). Jesus may have also regularly employed that phrase to himself to assert his self-understanding of the continuity of Israel's prophetic line (mostly from prophet Daniel) into the New Testament through him (Ferch 1979). Regarding the appearance of this phrase 'Son of man' in this verse, it appears

3. While *λέγω* remains a verb in the indicative mood, and never an imperative, it is however, usually found in statements of pronouncements, cf. Matthew 3:9; 5:18, 20, 32; 19:9

distinguishable from the person of Jesus in some quarters. That is, some people believe that Jesus first wanted to know the Jews' understanding of the Son of man and then later to know their understanding about Jesus. Lehtonen (2011) stated:

[L]ong time ago I heard a sermon that suggested that Jesus was first polling the disciples about the popular opinion about the identity of the Son of Man (not himself directly), and then queried the disciples' opinion about himself. (p. 3)

While this argument may not be impossible (consider that both in Mark 8:27 and Luke 9:18, Jesus did not ask about the Son of man, but about himself), but in Matthew, he self-designated himself with this popular title in order to bring to fore his divine assignment to the Jews specifically. Schweizer is reported to have said that:

... Jesus deliberately employs this ambiguous title to suggest, although not explicitly to define, his divinely-sent mission to proclaim the presence of the Kingdom and to indicate the relationship of his earthly life and death to its coming. (Hodgson 1961:101)

This brings the full realisation of Jesus' belief that he was both Jewish and had a mission centred on the Jewish populace.

Verse 14: Jesus understood as model of Old Testament prophets

It was not only Jesus who believed that his prophetic ministry has a link to the ancient Jewish religion; people of Palestine within Jesus time also did the same. They saw in the ministry of Jesus a replica of John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. It is not immediately clear whether what the Jews saw about Jesus was a replica or a reincarnation of one of these prophets. But Pryce (1911:3) was sure that Jesus was indeed a reincarnation of one of the prophets. His certainty was built not on exegesis of some biblical passages (exegesis looks like part of the things Pryce called 'undesirable accretions') (1911:4), but on interpretation of such passages on their face-value. One challenge with interpreting scriptural texts on face-value (literal interpretation) is that immediately, the *Sitz im Leben* of the passage is lost and the text is seen as a mere literature only understandable by the author's choice of words. Incidentally, part of our studied text (Mt. 16:13–16) is in Pryce's considered texts. The people's inclusion of John the Baptist in the list of the ancient prophets, whom Jesus possibly reincarnated from, brings to our understanding what is called *quick* reincarnation of persons. This theory existed among the people of Ancient Near East especially within the time of Jesus. This is mostly expressed by Pryce when he wrote:

Those who held that he [*Jesus*] was John must have believed either that the latter had been restored to life after his beheading, or that it was possible for the soul of a dead man to replace that of a man still in the flesh. (1911:4)

Pandarakalam (2009:1) is one of those who believe that 'Christian theologians cannot shy away from the

reincarnationistic view of John the Baptist' because the idea of reincarnation is becoming popular.

What is however, clear to this study, is that the use of the interrogative pronoun, *τις* in the masculine singular accusative case, by Jesus in verse 13 does not suggest that one of the prophets resurrected from the dead in the form of Jesus, but that Jesus himself was indeed one of these dead prophets. A clear case of contradiction follows in Matthew 14:1 where Herod the tetrarch stated that Jesus was John the Baptist resurrected. Whatever the case is, Jesus' contemporaries saw him as the come-back of someone who was dead. His works did not suggest that his immediate existence was the first; he must have existed before in this clime, they rightly assumed.

Verses 15–17: Who the disciples thought Jesus was

The Jews may have seen Jesus as a reincarnated prophet of old or as John the Baptist resurrected; but Jesus' concern was how his disciples see him. His question, "Υμεῖς δὲ τίνα με λέγετε εἶναι" (But whom do you pronounce me to be); confirms this. The verb to be, *εἰμί*, appearing in the passage as an infinitive present active, makes it clear that Jesus was interested in his eschatological personality than some obsolete idea of his person. At that point, it became clear that almost none of the disciples have thought about Jesus immediate personality. Their silence shows that they were not sure of his true identity except to accept the popular identity created for him by the *hoi polloi* (the masses) majorly referent to misunderstood Old Testament prophetic personages. It was Simon Peter, the ever forward disciple, and 'mouthpiece of the apostolic band' (Varghese 2021) who saved the day by declaring that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. In other words, the Messianic status of Jesus according to Matthew was made public from the lips of Peter. No one knows if Peter had privy information to this effect, rather, that Jesus hailed his information as a revelation from the Father, explains that probably, Peter did not receive this information from any human source.

Verse 18: Peter the rock

There are two serious theological problems contained in this verse that have defied all attempts towards a solution. The first is of a general note, affecting both the Roman Catholic and the Protestant, while the second is on the use of the phrase either as a material for spiritual warfare or eschatology. Matthew 16:18 is therefore, no easy nut to crack. The first one is rightly described 'as the foundational basis of ecclesiastical structures' (Armenteros 2009:59). It concerns Peter as the rock. It has been argued that:

[I]n the polemics of the reformation two basic positions were staked out: (a) the reformed position that 'upon this rock' refers to Peter's confession and (b) the Catholic position that the expression refers to Peter and all his successors. (21st Sunday n.d.:3)

Jesus addresses Peter by his name and quickly adds that on this rock he will build his church. Some theologians have

come to argue that Peter was the rock referred to, while others disagree. Internal evidences in the passage make it hard to say for certain that Jesus was calling Peter the rock. See for example that the demonstrative adjective τῷ (this) does not show reference to a human person but a pointer to an assumed object. On the other hand, some other internal evidences seem to be pointing to Peter as the said rock. For example, Jesus called Peter with a first person personal pronoun, σὺ (you); meaning that he was referring to Peter and Peter alone. This is quite a dilemma. Roden (2001:373–374) explains that:

The identity of the rock in v. 18 finds three major interpretations throughout church history. The Eastern interpretation holds that the rock is Peter's confession of faith in Jesus' identity as Messiah and Son of God. This view was adopted by the reformers, as it supported their anti-papal stance, and many Protestants today still advocate it. Augustine taught that the rock was Christ, based in part on Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 3:11 that Christ is the established foundation. The final major view is the Roman interpretation, which holds that Peter as the first pope, and his successors in the papal office, constitute the foundation rock of the church.

Avoiding the New Testament texts entirely regarding this dilemma, Armenteros (2009:59) appealed to 'midrashic and targumic material of a haggadic type' in search for solution. But first of all before that, he observes that the LXX presents Θεός [God] anywhere Yahweh was called λίθος [stone]. He came to the following conclusion:

[U]nder no circumstances would a *tannaitic* Jew think of Peter as the rock. The OT texts and the parallel ones of the LXX wouldn't have permitted it so. The rock refers to the divinity. (p. 71 [author's own emphasis])

This suggestion by Armenteros has kinship with Augustine's theology on this matter. Though in his initial theological treaty, Augustine recognised Peter as the rock (Rotelle 1993:327) however, in his *Retractatio* he recanted that idea (Eller 1946:151–153).

The last interpretation looks like a possible way forward on this argument considering that internal evidences to the passage support arguments on the two parallel poles and is weak to render any meaningful help. Armenteros (2009) finally opines that:

[T]he use of the term πέτρα in the story found in Matthew 16:18 is associated with the Hebrew expression *tsur* that obviously refers to God. This term (πέτρα) is used in the LXX to refer to the rocks (Num. 24:21; Judg. 20:47; 21:13; Ps. 26:5; 60:3) and in the NT only in Matthew 27:60. (p. 71, [author's own emphasis])

However, to beef up Armenteros' point one should consider that 'The Greek clearly has a wordplay [*sic*] between Πέτρος and πέτρα so it is likely that something similar was already present or implied in an underlying Aramaic original' (Nolland 2005:53).

The second theological problem in the passage relates to whether "'the gates of Hades'" (Mt 16:18 [NIV]) refer to the

battlements of the kingdom of Satan or to the realm of the dead' (Roden 2001:1). Christians who engage in spiritual warfare press on all to accept that the phrase 'gates of Hades' refer to satanic strongholds against human beings. This could be, because of some learned opinions that do not stem from an exegetical process. For example, Hendriksen (1973:649) states that "'gates of hell" by metonymy represents Satan and his legions as it were storming out of hell's gates in order to attack and destroy the church'. There is a more appropriate interpretation flowing from exegesis. The verb κατασχύω [I overpower] appearing in the passage as future active, third person plural, is a term that suggests fight or struggle:

Among Greek writings especially by Polybius, Diodorus, Dionysius Halicarnassus; properly, [*the verb κατασχύω means*] to be strong to another's detriment, to prevail against; to be superior in strength; to overpower. (Thayer 2011)

Obviously, 'gates do not overcome'. In warfare, gates (πόλαι) are defensive, not offensive. This means that, what Jesus was saying is that the defences of Hades cannot stop the church from successfully launching assaults against it. When one considers that Jesus himself holds the keys of Hades (Rv 1:18), this claim in Matthew 16:18 becomes clear and certain.

Verse 19: Discussing Peter's primacy

Jesus continues to speak to Peter in this verse promising him the keys of the kingdom. The authority given to Peter stretched to include binding anything and it is bound, and loosing anything and it is loosed. The singularity of the verbs δέω and λύω of which Jesus used in aorist subjunctive capacity, confirms this. But that Jesus also gave same authority to bind and loose to all the disciples (see Mt 18:18) becomes worrisome to the personalisation of that authority to Peter. This in fact challenges the primacy of Peter. But should we see the primacy of Peter from the apostolic roll call of Matthew in 10:2? Here Peter was called 'first' [πρῶτος]. Though some English translations do not write ὁ [the] and πρῶτος [first] together for obvious grammatical reasons, adding the article ὁ to the adjective could emphasise the primacy of Peter among the disciples. Davies and Allison (1997:648–649) interpret it to mean that 'Peter is "first" (10:1–2) because he is the first apostle to be called (4:18–22). His primacy therefore belongs to salvation-history'. But Cullmann (1962:26–27) states that Matthew's use of 'first' for Peter is only 'characteristic expression ... used to designate the group of disciples'. This does not show primacy.

Verse 20: A hidden identity

The culmination of this pericope is found with an instruction not to make the recently discovered identity of Jesus as the Christ public. This has little to do with Messianic secret even though some persons believe that 'in Matthew ... the messianic secret is decentralized from the primary theme as it was in Mark, and resides as a tacit trait' (DePoe 2013:9). DePoe reports that Wrede, the father of Messianic secret himself, asserts that:

In Mark the secrecy of the revelations is essential. The whole phenomenon of Jesus in its higher and true significance must remain hidden. Matthew no longer had this idea. Only residual traces of it remain. (DePoe 2013:9; Wrede 1897:163)

The idea that Matthew conveyed was that Jesus eschewed ostentation. This is because, the theories advanced earlier on to explain Jesus' call to silence on his person all favoured Messianic secret in Mark and its eschatological implication; they did not suit Matthew's context. Therefore, Jesus' call for silence on his person in Matthew is antithetical to the hypocritical and ostentatious display including outward show of righteousness often exhibited by the Pharisees and Sadducees, religious leaders of his day. This is the only interpretation that justifies the Matthean passages where Jesus warned of ostentation (Mt. 6:1; 5; 20:25–28; 23:1–12).

Solving textual problem

There are two textual problems in the studied pericope, one in verse 13 and another in verse 20. To start with verse 13, there are four variant readings, whereas the first reading states: *Τίνα λέγουσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι* [Whom do men pronounce to be]; the second reading says, *Τίνα οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι λέγουσιν* [Whom do men to be pronounce]. The third reading says *Τίνα λέγουσιν με οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι* [Whom do men pronounce me to be], and the final reading says *Τίνα με λέγουσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι* [Whom me do men pronounce to be]. On the external evidence, and regarding the date and character of the witnesses, or otherwise, manuscript support, Codex Vaticanus (B) is more reliable, being the earliest manuscript (15th c.). It supports only the first reading. Regarding geographical distribution, the first reading is massively supported by Alexandrian and Coptic texts, making a concurrent support of this variant. Regarding internal evidence, and speaking precisely of transcriptional probability, the first two readings which omit the personal pronoun *με* sound to be both the difficult reading and the shorter one. It looks like *με* was an addition to smoothen the difficulty in understanding the person to whom Matthean Jesus was referent. On the intrinsic probability, Matthean Jesus was not known by referring to himself with first personal pronouns; rather, he often speaks of himself in third person terms. To adopt a reading therefore, the first reading is considered the appropriate rendering of Jesus' statement in verse 13. Metzger (1971) gives a nod to the choosing of the first reading as the most authentic by saying:

[B]oth the variety of positions of [*με*] in the witnesses that include it and the fact that in the parallel passages the word is firm indicate that it was originally absent from Matthew's account. (p. 34)

On verse 20, there are three variant readings. The first says *ὁ Χριστός* [the Christ], the second says *Ἰησοῦς ὁ Χριστός* [Jesus the Christ], and the last reading says *ὁ Χριστός Ἰησοῦς* [the Christ Jesus]. Following the above method as applied in verse 13, this study adopts the first reading. This is supported by Metzger's words:

To the shorter reading, which is supported by widely diversified ancient witnesses (8* B L Δ Θ f¹ f³ 28 565 700 1010 1424 it syr^{c,p} cop^{sa} Origen *al*), inattentive scribes added *Iesous* either before *ho Christos* (8² C W lat syr^h *al*) or after *ho Christos* (D⁸⁷ it^c). But since others knew and acknowledged Jesus' personal name, it would have been useless to deny or affirm that he was Jesus; the point under discussion was whether he was the Messiah (*ho Christos*). (p. 34)

Exegetical conclusion

The exegesis yielded the results that Jesus' identity was initially hidden from all the people, but later revealed to his disciples. However, internal evidence in Matthew does not suggest that the hidden identity of Jesus has anything to do with his passion and suffering, but Jesus' shun to ostentation. In Matthew (unlike in Mark), we notice that he prefers to build his church, directing attention to the disciples instead of himself. However, this diverted attention created some theological problems which is primarily centred on Peter's primacy. The problem lingers so far as Jesus used a word play [*πέτρα*]. Theologians have for long battled on whether *πέτρα* meant Peter or some other abstract things.

Nigerian gospel preachers and the case of identity crisis

The application of the text under study draws directly from its exegesis. The concluded exegesis shows that Jesus did not want any form of publicity about his messianic role. Since this is not the same with Messianic secret, something must have led to his forbidding his disciples to make his person as the Messiah known publicly. This study believes that he was working against an unhealthy feeling of self-importance. However, this is far from what many Christians are. Many Christians (especially pastors) in their observed behaviour show serious signs of identity crisis. The acquiring of new clothes for each programme or church service sounds like something stemming from lack of self-confidence augmented by ostentation. Some pastors add pictures of miracles that never happened in their churches into church fliers just to attract undue attention. Some others wear heavy jewellery and flamboyant dresses to simple occasions just to belong to the happening society. Almost all observed pastors prefer to blow their own trumpet amid their preaching about what God used them to do or what they have achieved in ministry so far. Such ostentation undoubtedly comes from the wealth of their individual churches, which causes the raising of eye-brows, accusing the church of merchandise (Diara & Mokwenye 2019; Nwanganga 2017:1–11). Nigerian Christianity has become a public show with some church auditorium designed to mimic disco clubs and drama theatres. This leaves one in the confusion of the exact driving motive of such churches. Are they trying to entertain men or to tell them about Jesus? No wonder these practices have been called 'advertising' and 'marketing' (Anyasor 2018:192–199). Jesus' warning to his disciples in Matthew 16:13:20 against undue advertisement of his person produces an antidote to such behavioural challenge when applied religiously.

Recommendation

The Bible and the church believe that ministers of the gospel are to be modelled after Christ; this explains that any character not in consonance with that of Christ while he walked on earth is inimical to the gospel. If the exegesis of the studied text showed that Jesus shunned ostentation and ostentation presently characterises the behaviour of contemporary preachers, then there should be a reorientation on the part of those called into the vineyard of God. On this premise, the study recommends the following:

- That every Christian denomination should set up ethical standards drawn from the Bible itself in their theological schools for every preacher and intending preachers in their denominations.
- That every Christian denomination should make it a rule that their preachers go through their theological schools so as to be abreast with such ethics necessary to conform to the life of Christ. Whereas this is necessary to curb ostentation, the study is not ignorant that even the act of attending a theological training can itself trigger ostentation. However, the ethics learnt in such institutions, would serve as a check to such pride.
- That the preachers of the gospel deemphasise on the gospel of wealth and prosperity (since this leads to ostentation) and speak more on Christ and him, crucified.
- That the psychological health of gospel preachers be confirmed to be sound before sending them to reach out to the public.

Conclusion

This study was about understanding Jesus personality (enshrined in the kind of identity he presented) as a socially modest one. He eschewed ostentation like the religious leaders of his day and instead did everything he was called to do for humanity selflessly. However, it is observed among Christians in Nigeria especially the gospel ministers that unnecessary publicity of their person has taken the centre stage. They manage to present themselves instead of Jesus and this is a worrisome development when one studies the exemplary conduct set by Jesus in Matthew 16:13–20.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

All authors, P.E.P., K.O.O. and N.U.I., contributed equally to this work.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Nigeria, Department of Religion and Cultural Studies.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author(s) are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

- Achunike, H.C., 2004, *The influence of Pentecostalism on catholic priests and seminarians in Nigeria*, African publishers Limited, Onitsha.
- Anshiso, B.D., 2016, *Jesus and the marginalized and the liminal: The Messianic identity in Mark*, dissertation presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (New Testament), in the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University.
- Anyasor, O.M., 2018, 'Advertising motivations of church advertising in Nigeria', *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development* 5(1), 192–199. <https://doi.org/10.31142/ijtsrd150>
- Armenteros, V.M., 2009, 'A rock in the path: Possible Jewish readings of Matthew 16:18', *DavarLogos: Revista Biblico-Teologica* 8(1), 59.
- Barnstone, W. & Meyer, M., 2003, *Gnosticism, Gnostics, and Gnostic Bible*, Shambhala publications, Boston.
- Biwul, S.A., 2016, *Towards a theological and philosophical understanding of materialism and its effects on the believer*, ECWA Theological Seminary, viewed n.d., from <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.10930.96963>
- Case, S.J., 1909, 'The origin and purpose of the gospel of Matthew', *The Biblical World* 34(6), 391–402.
- Casey, M., 2010, *Jesus of Nazareth an independent historian's account of his life and teaching*, T&T Clark, London.
- Chinwokwu, E.N., 2015, *A critical introduction to the traditions of Jesus*, University of Nigeria Press, Nsukka.
- Cullmann, O., 1962, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr: A historical and theological study*, SCM Press Limited, London.
- Davies, S.L., 1983, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom*, The Seabury Press, New York, NY.
- Davies, W.D. & Allison Jr. D.C., 1997, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vol, International Critical Commentary, T&T Clark, Edinburgh.
- DePoe, J.M., 2013, *The Messianic secret in the Gospel of Mark: Historical development and value of Wrede's theory*, viewed from <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/11521716/the-messianic-secret-in-the-gospel-of-mark-john-m-depoe>.
- Diara, B. & Mokwenye, M.E., 2019, 'A critical analysis of the social implications of gospel merchandising among Nigerian Christians today', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(1), a5391. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5391>
- Dunn, J.D.G., 1970, 'The Messianic secret in Mark', *Tyndale Bulletin* 21(1), 92–117. <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30666>
- Ed Komoszewski, J., Sawyer, M.J. & Wallace, D.B., 2006, *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics miss the Real Jesus and mislead popular culture*, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Eller, M.F., 1946, *The retractationes of Saint Augustine*, a PhD dissertation submitted to Boston University Graduate School, Boston University.
- Ehrman, B.D., 2008, *The New Testament, a historical introduction to the early Christian writings*, 4th edn., Oxford University press, New York, NY.
- Ferch, A.J., 1979, *The Apocalyptic 'Son of Man' in Daniel 7 (1979)*, dissertations, 48, viewed 14 March 2023, from <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/dissertations/48>, 1-204.
- Garland, D.E., 1997, *'Mark, Gospel of,' MDB*, Mercer University Press, Macon, GA.
- Geddis, A.W., 2020, *The concept of the return of Elijah in Matthew 11:2–24 and its Christological implications*, MA dissertation, Dept. of Theology, University of Otago, viewed n.d., from <https://hdl.handle.net/10523/10271>.
- Hendriksen, W., 1973, *Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew*, Baker book house, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Hodgson, P.C., 1961, 'The Son of Man and the problem of historical knowledge', *The Journal of Religion* 41(2), 101. <https://doi.org/10.1086/485320>

- Iheanacho, N.N., 2009, 'A critical look at contemporary Nigerian Christianity', *International Journal of Theology & Reformed Tradition* 1, 104–117.
- Ituma, E., Solomon, E.I. & Uroko, F.C., 2019, 'The cleansing of the leper in Mark 1:40–45 and the secrecy motif: An African ecclesial context', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(4), a5128. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5128>
- Keener, C.S., 2009, *The Gospel of Matthew: A socio-rhetorical commentary*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Kroeger, O. & Oswald, R.M., 1988, *Personality type and religious leadership*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Washington, DC.
- Lehtonen, T., 2011, 'Jesus' preferred self-designation: The Son of man', in *A research paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of 'The Jesus of the Bible and Popular Culture'*, Acadia Divinity College, Wolfville, 4–6 August, pp. 1–25.
- Loke, A., 2000, *Investigating the resurrection of Jesus Christ a new transdisciplinary approach*, Routledge, London.
- Metzger, B.M., 1971, *A textual commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 4th rev. ed., Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft United Bible Societies.
- Myburgh, J.A., 1995, 'Jesus the Jew: Eschatological prophet, Galilean Hasid or Cynic sage', in *submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology in the subject New Testament at the University of South Africa*, October 1995, pp. 1–226.
- Ngbea, G., 2015, 'Influences of Pentecostalism on the Mainline Churches in Nigeria', *Archives of Business Research* 3(3), 67–76. <https://doi.org/10.14738/abr.33.1178>
- Nolland, J., 2005, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek text*, W.B. Eerdmans & Paternoster Press, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Nwanganga, P.A., 2017, 'Church Commercialization in Nigeria: Implications for public relations practice', *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 28, 1–11.
- Orchard, H.C., 1995, 'Jesus as victim: The dynamics of violence in the Gospel of John', PhD thesis, Dept. of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield.
- Pagels, E., 1989, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Vintage books, New York, NY.
- Pandarakalam, J.P., 2009, *The Biblical Reincarnation*, viewed 26 April 2023, from https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/members/sigs/spirituality-spsig/james-pandarakalam-the-biblical-reincarnation.pdf?sfvrsn=ba640336_2.
- Pennington, J.T., 2007, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*, Brill, Leiden.
- Powley, B.G., 1979, 'The "Messianic secret" in Marks gospel: An historical survey', PhD thesis, Faculty of Divinity, University of Glasgow, viewed n.d., from <https://theses.gla.ac.uk/id/eprint/932>.
- Pryce, J.M., 1911, *Reincarnation in the New Testament*, Theosophical Publishing House, New York, NY.
- Rao, O.M., 1964, 'The Messianic secret and the resurrection', *Indian Journal of Theology* 13(3), 105–112.
- Roden, B.P., 2015, 'An exegesis of Matthew 16:13–28', *B1500 Interpretive Practices, Fuller Theological Seminary*, (December 11), p. 2.
- Rotelle, J.E., 1993, *Sermons*, New City Press, New York, NY.
- Ryan, J.J., 2016, 'The kingdom of God and the assembly of the people: The role of the synagogue in the aims of Jesus', PhD thesis, School of Gratitude Studies, McMaster University, June, pp. 5–15.
- Thayer's Greek Lexicon, 2011, *Electronic database*, BibleSoft, Inc., Des Moines, WA.
- Quiroz, S., 2016, 'The dilemmas of monogamy: Pleasure, discipline and the Pentecostal moral self in the Republic of Benin', *Religions* 7(8), 102. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7080102>
- Umoh, D., 2013, 'The Eleventh Commandment: Ethics of hypocrisy', *Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 12(5), 19–24. <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-1251924>
- Varghese, J.P., 2021, *Apostle St. Peter – THE ROCK – Mouthpiece of Apostolic Band*, viewed 15 April 2023, from <https://oneinchrist.in/apostle-st-peter-the-rock-mouthpiece-of-apostolic-band/>.
- Van Voorst, R.E., 2000, *Jesus outside the New Testament an introduction to the ancient evidence*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Viljoen, F.P., 2018, 'The controversy dialogue leading towards Jesus' severe response in Matthew 23', *In die Skriflig* 52(1), a2349. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v52i1.2349>
- Winkle, R.E., 1986, 'The Jeremiah model for Jesus in the temple', *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 24(2), 155–156
- Wrede, W., 1897, *Über Aufgabe und methode der sogenannt neuteamentlichen Theologie*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- Wrede, W., 1901, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums*, English edn., Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- Wrede, W., 1971, *The Messianic secret*, transl. J.C.G. Grieg, James Clarke & Co, Cambridge.
- York, D.E., 2016, 'Not Saul's armor: Introversion and effective pastoral leadership', PhD thesis, Faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary, Asbury Theological Seminary.