Some readers may be surprised to find an entry on “riddles” in a volume dedicated to so serious a topic as the Historical Jesus. In modern Western societies, riddles are generally relegated to magazines, children’s books, jokes, and other forms of entertainment. “What’s black and white and red all over?” (a newspaper); “What room can’t be entered?” (a mushroom); “What has four wheels and flies?” (a garbage truck)—these and similar verbal tricks are typical of current Western uses of the genre. Thomas Burns calls such puzzles “leisure-time” riddles, word games that people exchange to amuse themselves. Although riddles perform a wide variety of social functions cross-culturally, Westerners tend to think that leisure-time riddles are the norm. This assumption is not limited to popular conceptions, as leisure-time riddles have been “the focus of the great majority of the [academic] literature on the riddle and riddling.”

Perhaps for this reason, Jesus scholars have generally not explored the riddle as a speech genre in great detail—at least when compared to other oral-traditional forms—and have sometimes been hesitant to endorse the historicity of gospel texts that seem to include them. For example, at Mark 12:35–37, Jesus amuses a crowd by quoting Ps 110:1 and then asking how the Christ can be both “David’s son” and “David’s Lord” at the same time. Robert Funk, founder of the Jesus Seminar and apparently reflecting the collective opinion of that group, refers to this passage as a “piece of sophistry” and asks, “What would be the point of demonstrating that the Messiah was not the son of David?” “Is this way of handling issues consonant with his [Jesus’ teaching] style?”—a rhetorical question which obviously assumes that Jesus did not talk this way. Such comments reflect the fact that many Jesus scholars

have failed to recognize the riddle as a cross-cultural speech form with sophisticated social and rhetorical functions.

This essay will counter this trend by locating riddles in a variety of sources for Jesus and, ultimately, in the ministry of the historical Jesus himself. It will first define the “riddle” as a speech genre and major categories of riddles in the gospels, then note the implications of the evidence for our understanding of both the sources and the historical Jesus.

1. Anatomy of a Riddle

1.1. Definition

A “riddle” is an interrogative statement that intentionally hides its referent (the thing that it is talking about) and asks the audience to name it. While many Western riddles take the form of questions, all riddles, despite their grammatical form, are interrogative in the sense that they seek an answer. Thus, while the English riddle, “There is something with a heart in its head,” does not end with a question mark (?), it clearly requests a response (answer: “a peach”). But the audience’s ability to provide this answer is complicated by the fact that the language of the question is ambiguous, pointing away from the correct solution. Folklorists W. J. Pepicello and Thomas A. Green define “ambiguity” as “the situation which obtains in language when two or more underlying semantic structures may be represented by a single surface representation.” Similarly, Jack and Phyllis Glazier describe a statement as “ambiguous” when “it [potentially] refers to two or more frames of reference depending on one’s interpretation of the term[s].” Essentially, an “ambiguous” statement is one that could reasonably refer to more than one thing, and riddles are ambiguous statements that ask the audience to identify which of these possible options the riddler has in mind. Thus, the question, “What has four wheels and flies?”, is ambiguous in the sense that it could reasonably

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