Insults and face work in the Bible

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Insults play a key role in social interaction in the agonistic culture of the Middle East. This article constructs a social scientific model of social interaction regarding face work and insults and then filters the Gospel of Matthew through that model to highlight the prevalence of insult in the biblical world.

Introduction

A previous study presenting Jesus as a master of insult (Pilch 2012:158–162) regularly raised objections from readers or listeners whose image of Jesus is 'gentle and lowly of heart' (Mt 11:29). The objection failed to recognise key features of Middle-Eastern culture. It is agonistic, that is, conflict prone. Insults, thus, are customary and expected verbal and non-verbal weapons for initiating and sustaining conflict. Furthermore, people from the Middle East live comfortably with inconsistency, so much so that this cultural feature has been identified as 'normative inconsistency' (Malina 1986). Jesus, 'gentle and lowly of heart', can suddenly lose his temper and cause a ruckus in the Temple (Mt 21:12–13; Mk 11, 15–19; Lk 19:45–48; Jn 2:13–17). The cultural puzzle in this scene is not the inconsistency between gentleness and violence in Jesus' behaviour but rather the fact that not one of his disciples intervened to restrain him as is commonly expected in Middle-Eastern and circum-Mediterranean cultures. In this article, I present a social scientific model for understanding insult and examine Matthew's Gospel with insights from that model.

Definitions

Bond and Venus (1991) define an insult as 'a negative, derogatory comment or gesture about who we are, what we think, or what we do'. This, however, is one-sided and simplistic. It does not include the agent, the one who hurls the insult. Miner (1993:925) comes closer to the Middle-Eastern cultural understanding when he notes that insults in the context of poetic contests are 'the verbal expression of a general mode of human interaction – the aggressive and agonistic – whose roots extend deep into biology and psychology' (Miner 1993:925). From this definition, one can see that insults are available to all human beings (biology and psychology), but culture determines whether they should be avoided (= politeness) or honed to perfection (= agonism). Insults are an outstanding example of the agonistic character of Middle-Eastern culture.

Pagliai (2009:63) distinguishes between insults and outrageous speech. Outrageous speech would include obscenities, vulgarities, blasphemy, 'dirty words' and the like (Leach 1989). Every society has outrageous speech, but it cannot nor should not be used lightly. For example, obscenities by themselves are no insult. Often persons using obscenities appear to derive pleasure from that fact. In the contemporary Arab world, young men telephoning each other routinely begin their conversation with a 'friendly' exchange of obscenities. It is a phase of 'growing up' (Pilch 2013:207). Yet, in general, such outrageous speech should be avoided.

Clearly, context is important in determining whether something is an insult or not (Irvine 1992:109). The polysemy of the Hebrew word *ruah* (it can mean 'spirit', 'wind' and 'breath' simultaneously) makes it possible to understand that Micaiah and Zedekiah were exchanging scatological insults in 1 Kings 22:19–25 (Herr 1997). When Micaiah sarcastically asks Zedekiah, 'How did the Spirit/ wind of the Lord go from me to speak to you?', Micaiah answers, '[b]ehold, you shall see on that day when you go into an inner chamber to hide yourself.' The 'inner chamber' is a likely reference to a room in three or four-room house of the Iron Age. Archaeologists have discovered in the back room of some houses kraters (large bowls) that served as chamber pots ('toilets') which would be emptied once a day (Wilkinson 1982). Micaiah insultingly says that the spirit/wind passed to him from Zedekiah when the latter passed gas in the inner chamber.

Insults, too, are not necessarily threatening and cannot always be interpreted as aggressive or violent behaviour or even as causing offence to the other party. It all depends on context.

Anthropological insights

Anthropologists situate insults in a wider context. In general, insults are a form of verbal aggression that violates the cultural norms of politeness. Verbal aggression is '… a personality trait that predisposes persons to attack the self-concept of other people instead of, or addition to, their positions on topics of communication' (Infante & Wigley1986:61). This Middle-Eastern 'personality trait' is a product of the cultural value of agonism that is culturally determined, nourished, accepted and promoted. Pagliai (2010a:65) is even more to the point with regard to Middle-Eastern and similar cultures. Insults, she says, are 'aggression against face'. Thus, politeness and face are two key elements for understanding insults. Though intimately intertwined, I shall consider each separately.

Face and face work

According to Goffman (1967:5), face is 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact'. In the Middle East, this is one's honour status. Face or honour status is thus a social rather than a psychological construct. Face develops from communicative strategies that create, maintain or seek to challenge a positive self-image. Face does not reside in an individual. Rather it exists in the flow of events in a social encounter. Goffman (1959:141) points out that the social self is vulnerable and subject to discrediting and that a general problem in social interaction is to control the exchange of potentially destructive information. Thus it is important for a culture to have a repertoire of 'information control devices' which regulate the exchange of offensive information. Politeness, which will be discussed next, is the major control device.

Children are another such device. In many cultures – particularly the Middle East – children are expected to spy on the scandalous behaviour or discussions of other adults and report back to their parents. Parents – who may or may not have known this damaging information – may then spread this information through gossip (Rohrbaugh 2001), but it is the children who search it out. When Jesus rebukes his disciples for seeking to prevent children to come to him (Mt 19:13–15; Mk 10:13–16; Lk 18:15–17), he is allowing them to spy upon and report his words and deeds to their adults. Parents will judge whether Jesus' behaviour and deeds are scandalous or not.

Others play this role as well. In his study of an Oaxacan village, Dennis identified the drunk as playing a key role in revealing such offensive information. Such a person is, however, always under the guardianship of a woman who manages the behaviour of these males. The drunk is permitted to speak the truth but is not held responsible for his revelations (Dennis 1975). Insane people are also excused for making offensive information known. Early in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has angered authorities to the extent that they seek to kill him (Mk 3:6). To save his life, his family declares that he is out of his mind (see Mk 3:21). Perhaps prophets also played this role in biblical culture. As spokespersons for God, they are free to speak the damaging truth without fear of retaliation (e.g. 2 Sm 12; Is 7).

Spiers (1998) offers the clearest and most up-to-date understanding of face and face work. We rely on her presentation of the foundational work by Brown and Levinson (1987) as modified by Lim and Bowers (1991). Face work, a process using specific communication strategies, is one of the basic conventions of social interaction (Tracy 1990). In the Brown and Levinson model, everyone is concerned about positive and negative face. Positive face reflects the basic human need for esteem, the desire to be acknowledged and approved. In other words, everyone wants to be considered a member of the in-group. Positive face includes a sense of satisfaction about one's intelligence, appearance and a general ability to cope. It is affirmed and supported when people express understanding, affection, solidarity and positive evaluation or explicit recognition of the other's qualities. Positive face is threatened when others express negative emotions, disapproval, criticism and insults amongst other things. A person can threaten his or her own positive face by loss of control over one's body, bodily leakage, stumbling, unintended self-humiliation or the failure to control one's emotions. Negative face is the desire to remain autonomous and includes a concern for the inviolability of personal space, freedom from imposition and freedom of action. Threats to negative face include order, commands, warnings and threats (see the chart in Spiers 1998:33).

Lim and Bowers (1991) have refined the Brown-Levinson model by replacing positive and negative face with three more explicit kinds of face: fellowship face (the want to be included, competence face (the want to be respected for one's abilities) and autonomy face (the desire not to be imposed upon). Threats to these three face concerns are inherent in communication within the context of social interaction, for example requests, criticism, orders and the like. To deal with face threats, the socially competent person directs his or her efforts towards affirming solidarity (belonging and liking), approbation (appreciating the abilities of others) and tact (respecting the autonomy and freedom of action of others). The hope is that the person receiving such affirmations will respond in kind. The dyadic relationship will be peaceful. Strategies for affirming solidarity include expressions of empathic understanding, emphasis on commonalities and cooperation, actual manifestation and demonstration of personal knowledge and abilities and acknowledging others as part of the group.

With regard to approbation, the socially competent person minimises blame and maximises praise through compliments appropriately expressed to the other (with the addition of the statement 'no evil-eye intended' in Middle-Eastern culture; Elliott 1991:150). With regard to tact, the socially competent person respects the autonomy of others by giving options, being indirect or even tentative. Clearly then, since

satisfaction of face needs can only be given by others, it is in each person's interest to attend to the other's face, which in turn supports one's own face (Spiers 1998). The Lim and Bowers model makes this much clearer than the Brown and Levinson model.

Politeness and impoliteness

Politeness is 'the mitigation of face-threatening acts' (Tetreault 2010:72). It reduces face threats and promotes face needs or desires, namely fellowship, competence and autonomy. Politeness presupposes the potential for aggression and seeks to disarm it so that potentially aggressive individuals can communicate. (This would seem to be the model for formal diplomatic protocol). Spiers (1998:31) notes that politeness face work is practically universal though culture determines the appropriate types of communication strategies and the evaluation of violations of face. Because face is mutually vulnerable and emotionally invested, social interaction is a critical context in which it can be lost, maintained or enhanced. Conscious of this risk, socially competent persons use complex combinations of politeness in order to minimise the threat to autonomy (negative face) and promote desirability (positive face). Positive politeness includes ingratiation, cooperation, negotiation, gift-giving and the like. Negative politeness strives to enhance the negative face of the other by hesitating to infringe, apologising for imposing, showing deference, et cetera.

Impoliteness

Whilst politeness strives to create harmony between individuals (or groups), impoliteness seeks the opposite, namely social disruption (Bousefield & Locher 2008). Insults are a major manifestation of impoliteness. Impoliteness strategies attack face, an emotionally sensitive concept of self (Culpeper 1996:356; Goffman 1967; Leech 1983). Positive impoliteness strategies seek to damage the addressee's positive face wants. Positive impoliteness strategies would include the following:

- Ignoring the other (Mk 7:24–30; Syrophoenician woman)
- Excluding the other from an activity (Mt 17:1–8; Mk 9:2–8; Lk 9:28–36; Jesus favours Peter, James and John over the other nine disciples)
- Disassociate from the other (Mt 16:23; Mk 8:33; 'Get behind me, Satan' to Peter)
- Be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic (Mk 7:24–30; Syrophoenician woman)
- Use inappropriate identity markers (Jn 8:48; enemies call Jesus a Samaritan)
- Use obscure or secretive language (Mk 4:10–12; parables)
- Seek disagreement (Mt 22:15–22; tribute to Caesar)
- Make the other feel uncomfortable (Lk 7:36–50, eating with Simon and pointing out his insult)
- Use taboo words
- Call the other names (Mt 6:2 *hypokrites*; Mt 23:33 *brood of vipers*; see Culpeper 1996:357–358; Malina & Neyrey 1988).

Negative impoliteness strategies include frightening the other; condescending, scorning or ridiculing the other (Mt 22:29); invading the other's space; explicitly associating the other with a negative aspect (Mt 23:1–12) or putting the other's indebtedness on record (Culpeper 1996:358).

Thus, whilst politeness restrains insults, impoliteness allows degrees of insults or various means of attacking face. Here is a list of face-threatening acts (FTA) ranked according to degree.

1. Bald on record impoliteness is a circumstance in which an FTA is a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise attack on face.
2. Positive impoliteness involves strategies purposely intended to damage the target's positive face wants.
3. Negative impoliteness involves strategies purposely intended to damage the target's negative face wants.
4. Sarcasm or mock impoliteness is FTAs that are clearly insincere. Whilst sarcasm is mock politeness intended to cause social disharmony, banter is mock impoliteness intended to promote social harmony. Examples of banter include 'sounding', 'playing the dozens' or 'signifying'. In these instances, the insult is understood by all to be untrue based on the shared knowledge within the group. These are ritual (and not personal) insults (Labov 1972:352–353; see also Dirks 1988).
5. Withhold politeness where it would be expected such as neglecting to express gratitude for a gift. This is deliberate impoliteness.

Context

Irvine reminds us that insult is contextual. According to him (Irvine 1992), insult or:

... verbal abuse involves evaluative statements grounded in specific cultural systems. Even with a detailed familiarity with cultural context, there can still be no hard-and-fast semantic criterion distinguishing statements that are abusive from statements that are not. (p. 109)

Rather, it is important to know the specific context and the identities of the participants in the social interaction. It is only contextually that one decides which insults are more or less insulting. Irvine (1992:110) concludes that no expression, action or even lack of action could be considered as insulting per se.

Thus along with Bowers and Lim, Pagliai (2010b) correctly observes that face itself is emergent in performance. It is collectively achieved in context. Face needs depend upon the context of the social interaction. Yet everyone will understand face differently: the two parties involved, the audience, the passers-by, et cetera. 'Face is in the eye of the beholder' (Pagliai 2010b:93).

To summarise, because social interaction always runs the risk of offending the other, the parties involved strive to avoid this through specific communicative strategies. The idea is to respect and maintain each other's positive and negative face (fellowship, competence, autonomy).

Politeness is the major communicative strategy to safeguard harmony. Impoliteness seeks to stir disharmony. Insult is one major strategy of impoliteness.

Insults and face work in the Bible

Lexical approach

Biblical scholars typically begin their research with a lexical search. The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (TDOT) and Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT) are often the first sources consulted. In TDOT, Seebass (1995:55–60) examines *bosh*, Kutsch (1986:209–215) investigates *harraph*, and Wagner (1995:185–196) analyses *kelimmah*. In TDNT, Bertram (1967:630–636) reviews *empaidzo* whilst Schneider (1967:238–242) evaluates *oneidos*, *oneidizo* and *oneidismos*. These articles present many insights and illustrations. However, they are uniformly lacking in cultural considerations. Not one of these recognises honour as the core cultural value of the Mediterranean world. They seem totally unaware of cultural considerations and differences. Therefore no one draws important and evident conclusions from the usage of their respective words.

Knowing the Hebrew and Greek vocabulary is important, but a purely lexical approach to terms of verbal abuse such as insults is quite limited (Conley 2010:15). Understanding insults requires that one attend to context (the scenario, the situation), especially to the intention of the one hurling the insult. This is because linguists agree that there are no inherently abusive terms. One has to evaluate what is said within the context of specific cultural systems. The agent, the one doing the insulting, possesses a complex of shared understanding and values that constitute a 'pre-knowledge' necessary for honing the perfect insult. The audience also possesses this shared understanding and values.

As already noted, the agonistic character of Middle-Eastern culture significantly modifies the understanding of face work and its concern for fellowship, competence, and autonomy. Fellowship was restricted primarily to family and the tribe. Extra- or intertribal conflict was mainly verbal, an honourable expression of manliness. Violence, however, could emerge. As Patai (1983:211) notes, 'compared to the value of honor that of a human life was minor'. Jephthah sacrificed his daughter to keep his word of honour (vow) to God (Jdg 12). Competence face work for males includes mastery of language. Jesus' use of parables is a parade example of such competence as is his ability to craft stinging insults (e.g. *hypokrites* against the Pharisees chiefly in Matthew; 'oh you of little faith' against his disciples). Autonomy, that is, freedom from imposition, quite likely is not a part of Middle-Eastern culture which is collectivistic. This means that the individual submits to the wishes of the group and sacrifices or foregoes self-interest. Imposition within the group is acceptable and accepted.

Politeness coexists with impoliteness. Elders and authorities in general are paid respect and politeness. Paul apologises for his impoliteness towards the high priest at a hearing by claiming ignorance (Ac 22:30–23:5).Then he engages in face work from his standing as a Pharisee in a mixed group of Pharisees and Sadducees (Ac 23:6–9). It works to his advantage when the Pharisees take Paul's side against the Sadducees. Impoliteness towards authorities is blasphemy. Jesus is punished by a soldier for his perceived blasphemy of the high priest (Jn 18:19–23). In general, impoliteness and insult are expressions of the aggressive propensity (agonism) that characterises Middle-Eastern culture.

Seebass (1995:53) interprets the Hebrew word, *bosh* (shame), as disgrace for acting shamefully. He believes that Saul's statement to his son Jonathan for taking sides with David against him, his own father, illustrates the point.

You son of a perverse rebellious woman, do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established (1 Sm 20:30).

This interpretation of shame is correct. By his shameful behaviour, Jonathan has disgraced himself. However, Seebass seems to overlook entirely the idiom of insult that Saul hurls at his son, Jonathan, in pointing out his shameful deed.

Saul's reference to his wife, Jonathan's mother, as a 'perverse rebellious woman' is insulting both to the mother (whose true identity scholars find difficult to ascertain) and to her son. Whilst the contemporary practice amongst some ethnic groups (e.g. the African-American practice of the 'dozens') accepts such insults as humorous, good natured and not intended to harm anyone (Labov 1972), Saul is not jesting. Though he speaks in anger, he speaks his true feelings. Further, the Hebrew word translated with 'nakedness' refers to the shameful exposure of pudenda, in this instance Jonathan's mother's pudenda. The meaning is indeed 'shame', but the word and imagery used adds force to the insult.

Finally, in the biblical world, a curse or insult depends on the status of the speaker. When the king utters an insult as vice-regent for God, God is the power behind it (1 Sm 17:43). Thus Saul expects his insult to Jonathan, his son, to be effective. This is the power of the word (Patai 1983:213). He forgets, however, that God has rejected him irrevocably (1 Sm 15:26–30). God does not stand behind Saul's insult to his son.

Louw and Nida (1988:433–438) list 'insult' in the semantic domain of communication. The subdomains P' to W' involve adverse content (Subdomain P'– Insult, Slander; Q' – Gossip; R' – Mock, Ridicule; S' – Criticise; T' – Rebuke; U' – Warn; V' – Accuse, Blame; W' – Defend, Excuse). Subdomain P' (insult slander) includes *katalaleo*, *oneidizo*, *hybrizo*, *loidorei*, *ekballo to onoma*, *dysphemeo*, *kakologeo*, *blasphemeo* and respective related nouns. Specific insult words are not listed. In fact,

only a few scholars (to my knowledge) examine words used as insults (e.g. Esler 2012; Herr 1997; Miller 1996; Pilch 2012). A brief review of Matthew's Gospel through the lens of face work will help to highlight insults.

Matthew

It is important to recognise that the Gospel is not a transcription of factual events. The Evangelist (Level 3) reports and interprets events from the life of Jesus (Level 1). Nevertheless, I can examine the evangelist's presentation of insults attributed to the persons about whom he writes. John the Baptist begins the list of insults by calling the Pharisees and Sadducees approaching him a 'brood of vipers' (Mt 3:7; Jesus repeats this insult to the scribes and Pharisees in Mt 23:33). The fact that the insult appears on the lips of both John and Jesus suggests that it might have been commonly used in the culture. Clearly it is in the realm of the 'dozens' though, in these cases, it is serious and not made in jest. The phrase attacks the origins, specifically the parentage of the other. Aristotle identifies such attacks on one's origins as common in insults (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.6 [1383b12 – 1385a15]). The insulters here seek to consolidate the audience's (listeners') position of 'us against them' by repeating what 'everybody knows' (Conley 2010:97–99): '*They* are no good.' It is definitely not an attempt to include the others (Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees) in 'our group'.

The testing of Jesus (Mt 4:1–11) involves an exchange of challenge and ripostes between the devil and Jesus. Challenges can be viewed as insults especially if they go unanswered. In this case, however, Jesus answers each challenge fittingly, causing the tempter to leave the fray (v. 11).

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7) is masterfully constructed from various statements by Jesus throughout his career. At the outset, he advises his followers to 'rejoice and be glad' when others insult them (Mt 5:11–12). Then he urges them to be 'salty characters', that is, to 'stoke fires,' to respond to insults in kind (Pilch 2011).

In the first part of the Sermon (Mt 5:21–48), Jesus contrasts his interpretation of commandments with that of the scribes, the experts in interpreting the Torah. This is surely an insult to the experts, whether they are present or not. As Jesus says, 'I have not come to abolish [*the law and the prophets*] but to fulfil them' (Mt 5:17). Whilst the scribes focus on the commandment (e.g. 'thou shalt not kill'), Jesus expands its meaning. One of the antitheses here specifically concerns insults: '[W]hoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council' (Mt 5:22, RSV). The word translated with 'insults' is literally 'whoever says to his brother "Raqa"'. The Aramaic word *rēqā* means 'imbecile' or 'blockhead'. Jesus continues and says 'whoever says, "you fool!" shall be liable to the Gehenna of fire.' Yet later in the gospel, Jesus himself says this to the Pharisees 'you blind fools!' (Mt 23:17). Once again, we notice the cultural value of 'normative inconsistency' in play (Malina 1986). This is something of a variation on a theme. Just as parables say one thing but mean something different,

so these prohibitions explicitly forbid an action which later on is an acceptable and excusable strategy in conflict.

The second part of the sermon (Mt 6:1–18) is also a series of insults directed against the Pharisees, whether present or not, and certainly not identified as such. Here the insult is explicit; Jesus calls them 'actors' (*hypokrites*). This insult against the Pharisees is repeated throughout Matthew's Gospel (Mt 6:2, 5, 16; 7:3–5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 24:51). It is Jesus' favourite insult for the Pharisees (Pilch 2012:158–162). The result is a very clear separation between Jesus and his followers and the Pharisees and theirs. They are not at all part of 'our group'. There is never any attempt to preserve or respect the face of these others.

The third part of the sermon (Mt 6:19–7:28) expounds the 'better' righteousness that ought to characterise Jesus' followers (Mt 5:20). It must be rooted in the entire person described in terms of its three symbolic body zones: heart-eyes, the zone of emotion-fused thinking (Mt 6:19–34); mouth-ears, the zone of self-expressive speech (Mt 7:1–12) and hands-feet, the zone of purposeful activity (Mt 7:13–27; see Malina 2001:68–75).

Following the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew presents a series of ten mighty deeds of Jesus (Mt 8–9). His reply to the centurion's humble request is an insult to the fellow members of his ethnic group:

> Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. (Mt 8:10–12)

During the storm on the sea, Jesus sleeps while the disciples panic. When they wake him, he insults them: 'Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?' (Mt 8:26). This is his favourite insult for his disciples (Mt 14:31; 16:8; 17:17, 20). Faith means loyalty, and the disciples' fear indicates that they break faith with God and seek help from Jesus the broker. He does not fail them, and God rescues them from nature's threat thanks to Jesus' intercession. On another occasion, when Jesus dines with tax collectors and sinners, the Pharisees express their criticism of this behaviour to his disciples. Jesus replies with an insult:

> Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice' [*Hs 6:6*] 'For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners'. (Mt 9:12–13; cf. Mt 12:7)

To tell the Pharisees, scripture experts who claimed to know God's will extensively, to go and discover the meaning of Hosea's report of God's message is a stinging insult. It shows absolutely no interest in face work on Jesus' part. He challenges their competence face.

Others also insult Jesus. When He tells the crowd and flute players to go away because 'the girl is not dead but sleeping' (Mt 9:24), they laughed at him. Insults need not be verbal. As

Irvine (1992) notes:

> Insult is a communicative effect constructed in interaction – constructed out of the interplay of linguistic and social features, where the propositional content of an utterance is only one such feature. (p. 110)

Here the crowd's laughter is the insult. Jesus' reply is the restoration of the girl to well-being, 'and the report of this went through all that district' (Mt 9:26). Who has the last laugh now?

After consolidating his faction (Mt 10:1–4), Jesus sends them on a mission and begins with an insult to non-Israelites and Samaritans: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans' (Mt 10:5). This is a positive impoliteness strategy: disassociation from lack of interest in non-Israelites and Samaritans. Indeed, the worst insult Jesus can think of for stubbornly resistant fellow members of his ethnic group is to consider them to be non-Israelites (Gentiles) or tax collectors (Mt 18:17). The advice to his disciples to 'shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that [*inhospitable*] house or town' (Mt 10:14) is a non-verbal insult.

There is an interesting report of how some 'outsiders' referred – insultingly – to Jesus: Beelzebul (Mt 10:25; see also Mt 12:24). Jesus informs his disciples that, since He has been insulted with this association, they can expect it as well. In other words, 'outsiders' say: You are really not one of us at all.

The next section of Matthew's Gospel (11:2–16:20) presents reactions to Jesus and his message. Outsiders insult John the Baptist by claiming 'he has a demon' (Mt 11:18). Such name-calling, of course, is an insult intended to discredit the person (Malina & Neyrey 1988). Jesus identifies another insult from the outsiders towards him: that He is a glutton and a drunkard (Mt 11:19). Exegetes differ in their interpretation of this charge, but perhaps the most culturally plausible explanation is that Jesus is a 'rebellious son' such as described in Deuteronomy 21:20 ('glutton and drunkard'). Aristotle notes that 'suspect family ties,' which one is to be ashamed of, are a common basis for insult (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.6 [1383b12 – 1385a15]). Whilst the spurious insulting charge in John 8:48 ('you are a Samaritan and have a demon') comes readily to mind, a reputation as a rebellious son is nothing to be proud of either. Jesus in his turn levies an insult against his adopted home town, Capernaum: '[*W*]ill you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades' (Mt 11:23).

Jesus has an interesting observation about blasphemy, that is, saying something dishonourable against a person (Mt 12:31; *blasphemeo*). He appears to say that God forgives such insults against persons but not against the Holy Spirit, that is, the power of God especially as active in Jesus. This might help to understand the prohibition against insult, on the one hand (Mt 5:22), and the free use of it, on the other (e.g. Mt 23:17). God will forgive the lapse against fellow human beings but not against the power of God.

Still further in this discussion, Jesus levies another stinging insult against the scribes and Pharisees calling them 'an evil and adulterous generation' (Mt 12:39; cf. also 16:4). In the Hebrew Bible, adulterous likely means failing to keep the covenant with God, apostasy and the like. This is quite a charge against those who believed themselves to be models of correctness and righteousness, eminently pleasing to God.

The parable chapter (Mt 13) contains Jesus' explanation for why he speaks in parables: 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them (outsiders) it has not been given' (Mt 13:11). Whilst the ambiguity of parables has been variously explained, from the perspective of face work, it is clearly a strategy of positive impoliteness: using obscure or secretive language, speaking with the intent to confuse, to leave oneself open to multiple interpretations.

Astonished by his teaching in his hometown synagogue, his fellow countrymen are initially impressed but then recognise Jesus' lack of credentials, so they took offence at him: 'Where did this man get all this?' (Mt 13:56).

Once again in conflict with scribes and Pharisees over purity matters (Mt 15:1–20), Jesus tells his disciples that these scribes and Pharisees are 'blind guides' (Mt 15: 14; see also Mt 23:17). Whilst no longer in their presence, Jesus' insulting description of his opponents is part and parcel of his customary 'impolite' stance towards them in Matthew's Gospel. In this same chapter, Jesus insults a Canaanite woman requesting healing for her daughter by inferring that she is a 'dog' (Mt 15:26). Actually he begins his insulting stance towards her by ignoring her (Mt 15:23). In this culture, an unrelated man and woman should not engage socially in public, all the more when the woman is a foreigner. This deed is culturally appropriate but rude and insulting. Furthermore, Jesus explains his behaviour ethnocentrically: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Mt 15:24). There is no obligation to engage in face work in such a context. The woman gives a perfect riposte to Jesus' challenge, thus making this the only argument in the New Testament that Jesus loses. As Conley (2010:121) observes: '[*R*]udeness in the face of rudeness is, if we agree with the principle of the just war, permitted and, indeed, appropriate.' Nevertheless, as a good loser, Jesus grants the favour.

Yet another insult often missed by pious readers of the Bible is Jesus' exhortation to his disciples to 'become like children' (Mt 18:3; see also Mt 11:16–17). Childhood was a time of terror in antiquity (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:336). To propose children as a model for adults is highly insulting, and even Jesus' disciples are not spared.

In the Gospels, Jesus seems to distinguish in his audience those who are literate and those who are not. In the Sermon on the Mount, presumably addressing illiterate people, He says: 'You have heard ...' (Mt 5:21, 27, [31], 33, 38, 43). When dealing with the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and chief priests, He asks 'Have you not read...?' (Mt 12:3, 5;

19:4; 21:16; 21:42; 22:31). No more than ten per cent of the population was literate, and the number was probably as low as half of 1%.

In his book on insults, Conley (2010:93) described some views of dinner as a 'contact sport', a place for insults. Matthew reports one such incident (Mt 22:1–14). Hosts in antiquity customarily gave two invitations to a banquet. The first notified participants of the time and place; the second came when the meal was already prepared for the occasion. That all the invitees excused themselves indicates collusion to insult the host, who takes revenge. The second invitation brings guests in from the streets. One such guest arrives in a soiled garment, another insult to the host. He should have declined the invitation or cleaned his garment before coming. Irvine would classify this as an insult by omission (Irvine 1992:110), that is, failing to meet an expected appropriate standard. The host again takes appropriate action and ejects him. The skeletal elements of the story (apart from its interpretation) thus report two very serious insults to the host.

Scholars have identified the Passion story of Jesus as a status-degradation ritual, filled with insults (Malina & Neyrey 1988:70–91; Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:126–139, 412–414). Only a few explicit examples are mentioned. When Jesus is in custody, the soldiers strip him, put a scarlet robe and crown of thorns on his head and a reed in his hand and then mock Him as the king of Judeans. They also spit on him (Mt 27:28–29; see also Mt 26:67). Passers-by 'wag their heads' – an insulting gesture accompanied by mocking words: He saved others but cannot save himself (Mt 27:39)

Conclusion

This cursory review of Matthew's Gospel highlights the insults that permeate it from beginning to end. The model developed at the beginning of this article explains in general how insults are part and parcel of every language. As Conley (2010:120) notes, '[a] language without insults – to paraphrase what Agatha Christie once said about a kiss without a mustache – is like an egg without salt.' Yet many cultures seek to avoid them and have strategies equivalent to face work for this purpose. In contrast, the agonistic Middle-Eastern culture gives insult a special place. It serves as a key strategy for maintaining and increasing one's honour. Thus Matthew's gospel reveals how its characters violate the rules of face work as presented in the model. However, adapted to Mediterranean culture in which agonism radically modifies face work, the model remains truly heuristic.

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Competing interests

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