Jesus Challenges

Teacher Background

Honour and Shame
Every social interaction in which Jesus engaged with had a potential for challenge, both a positive and a negative challenge. His honour and that of the One who sent him was always “on the line”. Some knowledge of how honour and shame worked as a value and behaviour in the first century Mediterranean world, is essential for interpreting Scripture.

Honour and shame are values within all cultures. In modern and ancient Mediterranean countries, a visitor is immediately aware of the nexus between shame and honour because they experience the “shock” of a different cultural dynamic. People are concerned with appearances. For example, married women typically dress in black, with scarves covering their hair and men congregate together in the square, to drink, play cards or bowls, joke, smoke and observe passers-by. Men and women rarely share the same places. Anthropologists describe this phenomenon in terms of a value considered dominant in Mediterranean culture, namely honour. To understand the ways such cultures organise their world and social structures and relations, it is important to understand this value as pivotal. Honour can be defined as a person’s or group’s feeling of self-worth and the public, social acknowledgment of that worth. Honour in this sense applies to both sexes and it is the basis of one’s reputation, of one’s social standing, regardless of sex. Shame is a positive symbol, meaning sensitivity for one’s own reputation and sensitivity to the opinion of others. To ‘have shame’ in this sense is a very positive value because you are concerned for your reputation and there is a strong chance that you will behave in such a way as to uphold an honourable reputation.

In the first century Mediterranean world, the social value of honour and shame is also pivotal. The honour/shame phenomenon had become a cultural code that impacted upon all social and cultural behaviour. It was one way the society of this time maintained its traditions and social order. In Hebrew and Christian Scriptures this value pervades most texts.

To be shamed in this time and context meant damnation not only for oneself but one’s family and kin. Laws and social codes were fiercely upheld so that individuals and their families were not shamed. Sins of the forefathers and mothers were upheld. Shame and damnation often meant poverty, death and suffering. Unfortunately, it was very difficult, especially for the lower classes and the poor, to remain honourable in such a litigious society.
The sources of honour in this world were ascribed or acquired. Ascribed honour happens to a person passively through birth, family connections, or endowment by notable persons of power. Honour in this case is like inherited wealth. Acquired honour, which is either honourable or dishonourable, is actively sought and achieved - usually at the expense of equals in the social contest. The social context is called ‘Challenge - Riposte’.

Challenge-Riposte
Challenge-Riposte describes a constant social tug of war in the first century Mediterranean world. It involved a public, rhetorical interaction between two people. Someone would challenge another person in terms of some action (word, deed, or both). The receiver of the verbal and or physical reaction would gain a perception of the intention of the message, as would those listening and observing in the public arena. Finally, there would be a reaction by the receiving individual and the evaluation of this reaction on the part of the public. The result of the interactive duel would be either riposte (honour) or a loss of honour. The gospel stories frequently exhibit this interactive social tug of war game between Jesus and others who were seeking to dishonour him. Jesus likewise
uses this interactive technique in the public domain to do likewise and to teach about his vision of the reign of God.

The Pharisees
The Pharisees were totally convinced that their laws (both written and oral) and religious observances were correct. The idea of the Messiah breaking these laws was unthinkable to them. It's not hard to see why the Pharisees and others were challenged by Jesus. He did things such as have table fellowship with people who were morally questionable. Other things that offended the Pharisees and others included:
- He mixed freely with tax collectors and sinners, making Him ceremonially unclean (Luke 7:39).
- He ate and drank with them and was called a glutton and a drunkard (Luke 7:34).
- He ate with ceremonially unclean hands (Luke 11:38).
- He forgave people’s sins, which to the Pharisees was blasphemy (Luke 5:21).
- He also freely criticised the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and self-righteousness (Luke 11:37-52).

In the Pharisees' eyes, Jesus was guilty of law breaking and blasphemy. The idea of Jesus criticising them was an outrage (Luke 6:11). They also saw Him as a threat both to their popularity and their authority over the people (Luke 13:17). Because of this they plotted to get rid of him. Throughout His ministry they challenged his honour and sought to shame him through the technique of challenge and riposte of which Jesus was a master and this infuriated them further. They questioned Him, trying to catch Him in His answers in order to hand Him over to the Roman Governor (Luke 11:53) e.g. questions about inheriting eternal life (Luke 10:25ff), as to the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:34ff, Mark 12:28ff) and as to the law of divorce (Matthew 19:3, Mark 10:2).

Tax Collectors
The Roman system for collecting taxes lent itself to excess, exploitation and corruption. They "auctioned off" the right to collect taxes in a region of the empire. Wealthy people would bid on the right to collect taxes in that region. Anything they collected above the government's demand was their profit. These regional collectors often would hire managers in specific districts of the region (like Zacchaeus). The man would have a specific sum he must collect in the district. Anything he collected above that sum was his. This is not to suggest that every tax collector was dishonest, but it acknowledges that tax collectors were commonly associated with dishonesty.

Firstly, they were considered "unclean" by the "faithful" in Jewish society because they had unacceptable forms of contact with Gentile people. Secondly, they were regarded to be thieves because they were often fraudulent. The common attitude toward tax collectors easily is seen in the way to which they are referred. Often in the gospels, the Pharisees associated them with sinners: "Why does Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (c.f. Matthew 9:10-13) At times, the chief priests and elders denounced them by associating them with prostitutes: Jesus noted that tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom before the Chief Priests and elders did. (c.f. Matthew 21:31)

Samaritans
The Samaritans were despised by ordinary Jews because of what was considered defects in their devotion to the Jewish faith and their partly pagan ancestry. Because the Samaritans were sometimes hostile and also the fact that the Jews believed that they could become contaminated by passing through Samaritan territory, Jews who were travelling from Judea to Galilee or vice versa would cross over the Jordan river and avoid Samaria by going through Transjordan and cross back
over the river again once they had reached their destination.

The Samaritans often taunted the Jews. They rejected all of the Old Testament except the Pentateuch and they claimed to have an older copy than the Jews and boasted that they observed the precepts better. The Jews repaid them with hatred.

- Samaritans were publicly cursed in their synagogues.
  - They could not serve as witnesses in the Jewish courts.
  - They could not be converted to Judaism as proselytes.
  - They were excluded from the after-life.

The New Testament reveals that they were heavily looked down upon by the Jews and scorned. This makes them very important in the New Testament, because Jesus taught that the common attitude toward the Samaritans had to change and not only the Samaritans, but that of the whole Gentile world.

Jesus passed through Samaritan towns instead of crossing the Jordan to avoid them. When he spoke with the Samaritan woman, contrary to Jewish custom, he said a time would come when worshipping in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerazim would not be important, but they who desired to worship God would worship in the spirit. When Jesus was asked whom to regard as a neighbour, Jesus told them the story of the Good Samaritan precisely because Samaritans were despised.

**Women**

Jesus ignored many centuries of Jewish law and custom. He consistently treated women and men as equals. He violated numerous Old Testament regulations, which specified gender inequality. He refused to follow the behavioural rules established by the three main Jewish religious groups of the day: the Essenes, Pharisees and Sadducees. The actions of Jesus of Nazareth towards women were therefore revolutionary.

Jesus subverted some of the most sacred taboos of his time by:

- speaking with women
- affirming Mary's role as a disciple when questioned by Martha
- defending the woman who entered an all-male banquet and washed Jesus' feet
- welcoming women as members of his itinerant group

**The Death of Jesus Challenges**

The death of Jesus would have presented the ultimate challenge to his believers. Jesus was the new 'Messiah', the Saviour. His death would have provoked emotions of fear, confusion and despair. This was not the end that one would expect of a messiah, king and saviour. His death reflects yet another social paradox. The world of the believers is turned upside down once again. This was not the way it was all supposed to end for them. For those who were hostile to Jesus, the world was back on course: this was the end they desired and predicted for Jesus the revolutionary. It is only through Jesus' death and resurrection that the story of hope and the vision of the kingdom of God come into their full glory for believers of the first century Mediterranean world and today.