

Jesus upon 'Stumbling-blocks.'

BY THE REV. JAMES MOFFATT, D.D., D.LITT., YATES PROFESSOR OF GREEK AND
NEW TESTAMENT EXEGESIS, MANSFIELD COLLEGE, OXFORD.

Two things, Jesus taught, were impossible: that the sin against the Holy Spirit could be forgiven, and that 'stumbling-blocks' (σκάνδαλα) could be avoided altogether in human intercourse. The unpardonable sin has arrested the attention of the Church, sometimes to very little profit. But the exceptional severity of the teaching of Jesus upon σκάνδαλα has not always impressed the Christian conscience; it is one of the points at which the ethical emphasis of the gospel has been repeatedly missed. To some extent this has been the result of passing from one language to another. In a recent issue of this magazine (pp. 331-332), Professor Moulton has raised the problem of the etymology of the Greek term, in view of a forthcoming attempt by Archdeacon Allen to establish 'snare' or 'trap' as the proper meaning of σκάνδαλον. I shall be interested to see if any fresh arguments can be added to those which Mr. Carr brought forward in his paper (*Expositor*, 5th ser., vol. viii. p. 344 f.). Not long ago I had occasion to look into this problem, and I confess the evidence for this interpretation of σκάνδαλον and σκανδαλίζειν did not appear cogent, so far as the N.T. was concerned. It is unfortunate that the other sense has no strict or satisfactory equivalent in our language. 'Stumbling-block' is less misleading than 'offence,' but it has no verb, and it hardly conveys to a modern reader what the Greek word carried home to a primitive Christian. Even a rendering like 'hindrance' is too weak. But what I wish to urge in this paper is rather the passion and intensity with which the words of Jesus on this matter are always charged. Whatever the etymology of the Greek term may be, there is no doubt as to the ethical verdict of Jesus upon those who proved σκάνδαλα to other people. One of the very sternest sayings in the Gospels flashed from His lips at the thought of this sin, and every word about σκάνδαλον and σκανδαλίζειν thrills with an acute sense of danger to the soul. I am afraid that the rather conventional associations of the English words 'offend' and 'offence' have been partly responsible for the fact that many readers of the N.T. do not realize the tremendous severity of what Jesus said

about 'stumbling-blocks.' It is true, of course, as any student of patristic literature and interpretation knows, that this evaporation began at an early period, even when Greek was the language of the Church. Chrysostom, for example, took σκάνδαλον in Mt 18⁷ to mean ἡ ὕβρις. 'Do not be surprised,' he added, 'at this, for many τῶν μικροψύχων have felt no common dishonour in being overlooked and insulted.' It is hopelessly flat to suppose that when Jesus spoke about a man causing one 'of these little ones to stumble,' He meant nothing but contempt and dishonour; yet we come upon this view more than once, even in an expositor like Theophylact. Still, the antiquity of an error is no excuse for its survival, and the sharp edge of the sayings of Jesus upon 'stumbling-blocks' is missed to-day by many who have never heard of patristic exegesis.

The central passage is in Lk 17¹⁻²:

'To his disciples he said: "It is inevitable (ἀνένδεκτον; cf. οὐκ ἐνδέχεται, 13³³) that hindrances (σκάνδαλα) should come, but woe to the man by whom they come; it would be well for him to have a millstone hung round his neck, and be flung into the sea, rather than prove a hindrance to one of these little ones.'" The equivalents of both sayings occur in Mt 18⁶⁻⁷, though in the reverse order: Mark (9⁴²) only records the second saying that a man were better dead than be a pitfall for the faith of others.

Jesus here as elsewhere (Mt 13⁴¹) frankly contemplates the existence of people in His community who may become σκάνδαλα to their fellow-members, i.e. the means of causing their fall. To be a 'hindrance,' in this sense, is to bring about the moral fall of another. We must admit, of course, that it is not the only cause of failure. When cases of backsliding or apostasy occur, they are not always due to the bad influence or un-Christian conduct of another person; Jesus elsewhere allows for inward weakness of mind or will, yielding to the pressure of hardship or circumstances. Men and women do fall away from their faith, but it is not invariably a direct result of what some one else in their society has done or said. In fact, we may

say that Jesus spoke about 'being hindered or tripped up' (*σκανδαλίζεσθαι*) from two points of view. It was a sin, He taught, to find any hindrance in Himself or in His gospel, to be taken aback and disconcerted by the hardships involved in His service, for example,¹ or by the new departures which He made in religion.² He knew that there was a temptation to be disappointed with what He said and did,³ and that when people saw Him running counter to their prejudices or ignoring some cherished ambition or tradition of their circle, they might be tempted to object, to doubt Him, to cool in their loyalty,⁴ if not to drop out of the ranks of His followers altogether. Paul afterwards spoke of the *σκάνδαλον* which the cross proved to Jews, but Jesus knew in His own lifetime that He was a *σκάνδαλον* to some of His contemporaries, owing to the very loyalty of His life to the will of God. It upset some people, among His adherents, to discover that He took a Messianic line so different from what as patriots and pious Jews they expected. In this sense Jesus was a *σκάνδαλον* to them; He repelled them, and they resented Him; but the fault was theirs not His. On the other hand, He taught that it was a heinous, deadly sin⁵ to prove a *σκάνδαλον* to others by one's bad conduct. 'Whoever is a hindrance to one of these little ones who believe in me, better for him to have a great millstone hung round his neck, and be sunk in the deep sea. Woe to the world for hindrances! Hindrances have to come (*ανάγκη γὰρ ἔλθειν τὰ σκάνδαλα*), but—woe to the man by whom the hindrance does come!' These are terrible words on what Jesus regarded as the terrible sin of endangering the faith of others, and it is always relevant to analyze what He meant by this particular sin.⁶

¹ So *σκανδαλίζονται* in Mk 4²⁷=Mt 13²¹, for which Luke substitutes *ἀφίστανται*.

² So Mt 11⁶=Lk 7²³, the beatitude: *μακάριός ἐστιν ὁς ἐὰν μὴ σκανδαλισθῆ ἐν ἐμοί*.

³ So Mt 13⁶⁷=Mk 6³ (his fellow-countrymen), Mt 26³¹=Mk 14²⁷ (the disciples), and Mt 15¹³ (the Pharisees). Chrysostom points out, from Mt 15¹² and 17²⁷, how Jesus 'taught us when to consider those who are offended' (*σκανδαλιζομένων*).

⁴ This is the thought of Jn 6⁶¹ (*τοῦτο ὑμᾶς σκανδαλίζει*).

⁵ 'Même la mort la plus ignominieuse et la plus cruelle serait préférable au sort éternel qui l'attend après le scandale donné' (Loisy, *Les Évangiles Synoptiques*, ii. pp. 77-78).

⁶ A pointed comment on the subject, from the standpoint of the 'little ones,' is given by Augustine's letter to Felicia (*Ep. ccviii*).

The context in Mark throws little light on the meaning. Mk 9⁴²⁻⁴⁸ is a paragraph on the danger of *σκάνδαλα*, both those which arise from human intercourse (v. 42) and those which are due to the passions of one's own nature (vv. 43-48); but the saying on the former does not connect naturally with the preceding sayings and incidents.⁷ The context in Luke may indicate that one of the main features of this sin was the unforgiving spirit in the community, for the saying is at once followed by a demand for mutual forgiveness (Lk 17^{3, 4}). Here again it is what follows that serves to elucidate the meaning. But in Matthew's record the context is more explicit. Jesus has just (17²⁴⁻²⁷) agreed to pay the temple-tax, in order to avoid giving needless offence (*ἵνα δὲ μὴ σκανδαλίωμεν αὐτούς*). He refuses to leave a wrong impression on the mind of the authorities, or to create a prejudice gratuitously against Himself and His adherents. Then follows the rebuke to the ambitious disciples, leading up to the saying about the danger of outraging and upsetting the faith of weaker disciples. That is, Matthew suggests, by this juxtaposition of sayings on *σκάνδαλα*, an argument from less to more; if you ought to avoid outraging public opinion, how much more careful should you be to eschew anything that would deflect and injure the religious character of your fellows in the society? Consideration for the interests of the latter is a paramount duty. He then reproduces the Marcan sayings about the members of one's own body⁸ as sources of 'hindrance,' and finally echoes the sayings reproduced in Luke about the duty of brotherly forgiveness, though he does not suggest that the uncharitable, implacable temper was a 'hindrance,' as Luke probably⁹ does.

It is in the light of such references to this sin that we can understand what Jesus had in mind. He was speaking from experience, when He said these heavy words about the people who led or tried to lead others astray. Not long before, He

⁷ The nearest is in v. 37.

⁸ It is possible that Matthew meant members of the community by 'hand' and 'foot' in this connexion (cf. 1 Co 12¹⁴⁻²¹); this would tally with the following paragraph (cf. v. 17). The interpretation goes back to Origen, and is developed by Theophylact and Isho'dad of Merv.

⁹ Cyril of Alexandria (*Comm. on Luke*, tr. from Syriac by R. Payne Smith, vol. ii. p. 533 f.) takes it so. 'And what,' he said, 'are the offences? Mean and annoying actions, I suppose; fits of anger, insults, slanders very frequently.'

had turned sharply on Peter with the rebuke, 'Get behind me, you Satan. You are a hindrance to me' (Mt 16²⁸). The subtlest temptations may come to us from those who mean well to us, from our very friends who act or speak in all good intention. Peter thought Jesus was throwing His life away, in taking the path that led to suffering and the cross. He thought so, and said so. Jesus was strong enough to brush this hindrance out of His way, but He knew that many weaker disciples would be tempted to yield to the same insidious suggestion. His intense care for them¹ was part and parcel of His teaching on the power and responsibility of influence. 'Let your light shine before men.' 'You are the light of the world.' If you do right, you help others to do right; also, if you do wrong, you drag others down. But He does not imply that this misleading influence is always deliberate. Our personal character and conduct, no doubt, move others either towards or away from God, but Jesus implies that to prove a *σκάνδαλον* to others need not be a conscious attempt to upset their faith. Sometimes (we may probably say much more often) it is involuntary; the man does not realize what are the consequences of his action. None the less, Jesus warns the disciples, a man is responsible for them. He speaks on behalf of the 'little ones,' because it is they who trust instinctively the example and counsels of older Christians, and who are most easily led astray by careless conduct or thoughtless utterances which are taken to sanction a wrong course.² To refuse forgiveness, to suggest by one's example that the demand of discipleship is not so hard as might be supposed, or to teach that confession and hardship may be avoided with impunity—that is, for Jesus, a sin which He visits with the utmost reprobation. We say it is diabolic for any man to corrupt wilfully the innocence of a younger person. Jesus said (cf. Mt 13⁴¹ 16²⁸) it was diabolic to deflect another's faith, even without any deliberate intention of doing harm; a man were better out of the world altogether than do anything which would lead another Christian to be less loyal to God or to lapse from the faith. Hindrances of this kind are unavoidable, He admitted. Even in a society organized for the highest ends, one

member can interfere with another. Our lives cross one another repeatedly, and no association of men, even for the advancement of the interests of God's kingdom, can exclude the obstacles and pitfalls which arise out of ambition, self-seeking, censoriousness, softness, the natural tendency to shrink from hardness and discipline, undue laxity or undue severity, especially on the part of those who have some authority and influence. We are accustomed to lay grateful stress upon the value which Jesus attached to personal influence as the supreme method of advancing the kingdom of God in this world. But His teaching at this point has a reverse side, and for that we must look to the various groups of sayings about 'hindrances' and 'hindering.' It is a warning to all who teach Christianity,³ a warning not to add or omit, from any motive whatsoever, truths which are vital to the gospel. They will be held responsible for having induced others to take Christ less seriously than He meant. It is also a warning to others, not to convey an erroneous impression of the gospel by their words or actions, when their example or precept may prove the undoing of simpler souls in their own circle.⁴ 'Woe to the world for hindrances!' We have no right to take 'the world' here, with Origen, as the pagan society with which Christians have no connexion. Jesus means the world, 'the very world, which is the world of all of us,' where His followers have to live together, and experience not only the help but the temptations of human intercourse. 'But,' He adds, 'woe to the man by whom the hindrance comes,' that makes another fall away.⁵ It is morally certain that such pitfalls will be met with, in the course of life; yet that does not, in the judgment of Jesus, absolve the individual whose misconduct proves an obstacle to his neighbours. He may bring disaster on them, but he brings a worse disaster on himself.

³ Cf. Ro 16¹⁷. Origen's definition of *σκάνδαλον* (*Cels.* v. 64) is: *ὑπερ εἰώθαμεν λέγειν περὶ τῶν διαστρεφόντων ἀπὸ τῆς ὑγιᾶς διδασκαλίας τοὺς ἀπλουστέρους καὶ εὐεξαπατήτους.*

⁴ Cf. Paul's attitude in Ro 14¹⁻¹⁵, 1 Co 8⁸⁻¹³.

⁵ In Mt 24¹⁰, where Dn 11⁴¹ (*σκανδαλισθήσονται*) is quoted—though there is no allusion to temptation in the O.T. passage—ruin or final apostasy is meant, and this sense is never far from most of the references of Jesus. But the term did not necessarily involve an irremediable relapse, as we can see from Paul and Hermas (*Vis.* iv. 1. 3: 'I ask the Lord . . . to grant repentance to his servants' (*τοῖς ἐσκανδαλισμένοις*)).

¹ It is reflected in Paul's passionate word of 2 Co 11²⁹ (*τὸς σκάνδαλιζέται καὶ οὐκ ἐγὼ πυροῦμαι*).

² *Σκάνδαλα δὲ νοεῖ τοὺς ἐμποδίζοντας πρὸς τὰ καλὰ* (Theophylact).