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MATTHEW'S USE OF *SKANDALON / SKANDALIZŌ*: A PROJECT OVERVIEW

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Abstract. This study examines Matthew's distinctive use of *skandalizō/skandalon* terminology as a narrative motif that structures both christology and ecclesiology. While earlier scholarship has treated these lexemes lexically or thematically, their role as a coherent motif has remained underexplored. By analyzing twelve passages, the project shows how Matthew intensifies inherited traditions from Mark, Q, and Sondergut material, weaving "scandalization" into moments of crisis and decision. On the christological level, the motif highlights paradoxical aspects of Jesus' identity: Judge, Compassionate Shepherd, therapeutic Son of David, suffering Messiah, and prophet rejected in his hometown. On the ecclesiological level, it portrays disciples and other characters as either rejecting Jesus outright or faltering under persecution, thereby becoming *skandala*. Grouping the passages into three clusters reveals Matthew's literary artistry and theological depth, demonstrating that "scandalization" functions as a hinge of narrative tension and a lens for understanding faith, failure, and discipleship.

Keywords: *skandalizō*, *skandalon*, christology, ecclesiology, paradox, tension, discipleship.

Matthew's Gospel repeatedly deploys *skandalizō/skandalon* as a hinge for narrative tension, yet its role has rarely been examined in depth. Moreover, scholarship has seldom treated it as a coherent motif warranting synchronic analysis. In response, this article traces the trajectory of my doctoral research, which approaches *skandalizō/skandalon* as a concept developed consistently within Matthew's narrative. The first section surveys the most significant contributions to the study of this motif within Matthew and argues for the methodological fruitfulness of a synchronic approach in uncovering its full exegetical potential. The second section advances a new hypothesis concerning the function of the *skandalizō*/*skandalon* passages in Matthew's narrative and delineates the framework of the proposed doctoral study. I contend that Matthew employs this terminology not merely as a metaphor for offense or sin, but as a narrative device that shapes the Gospel's portrayal of Christological paradox and structures the disciples' evolving (self-)understanding within that paradox.

The simple overview is enough to reveal Matthew's considerate interest in the *skandalizō/skandalon* language. Namely, in his Gospel, the verb *skandalizō* appears 14 times (cf. Mk 8 and Lk 2), whereas its cognate *skandalon* occurs 5 times, which is 5 times more than it appears in Mark and 4 times more than in Luke. Matthew not only retains every instance of *skandalizō/skandalon* found in his sources but also integrates the motif repeatedly into his redactional material.[1] Beyond the sheer number of *skandalizō/skandalon* occurrences in Matthew, the various translations across contexts reveal its semantic complexity. The NRSVUE translates *skandalizō* as "causing to sin" (cf. 5:29-30), "causing to stumble" (cf. 18:8-9), "taking offense" (cf. 11:6; 13:57; 15:12), "giving offense" (cf. 17:27), "becoming a deserter" (cf. 26:31,33), "falling away" (cf. 13:21; 24:10). The meanings ascribed to *skandalon* are a "cause of sin" (cf. 13:41), and a "stumbling block" (cf. 16:23). Depending on the context, *skandalizō* also assigns shifting roles: disciples, Pharisees, and people of Nazareth are "scandalized by" Jesus; disciples, in turn, "scandalize" other followers; and Peter, in one episode, becomes a *skandalon* to Jesus. The verb's nuance is also inflected by voice, active or passive. What remains to be asked is what element in a subject or its actions generates the scandalizing effect and why.

I

The motif of *skandalizō/skandalon* has received comparatively limited attention within New Testament scholarship.[2] The most substantial treatments of these lexemes are found in four works: Stählin's entry in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (*TDNT*), A. Humbert's "Essai d'une théologie du scandale dans les synoptiques," Judith V. Stack's monograph *Metaphor and the Portrayal of the Cause(s) of Sin and Evil in the Gospel of Matthew*, and Mark

[1] Strictly speaking, Matthew omits one *skandalizō* instance from Mk 9:43-47, where the verb occurs 3 times, whereas in the Matthean block, Mt 18:8-9, it appears twice. However, it would not be right to speak of Matthean omission here, considering that he only smooths Markan text by joining "hand" and "foot" in the same sentence (cf. 18:8), and, in fact, makes a doublet of these sayings by placing them also in his Sermon on the Mount (cf. 5:29-30). Overall, Matthew inserts *skandalizō/skandalon* 4 times into Markan material (cf. 16:23; 15:12; 24:10; 26:33), and twice into Q material (cf. 18:7). He also incorporates two more Sondergut pericopes with *skandalizō/skandalon* terminology into his Gospel (cf. 13:36-41 and 17:24-27).

[2] It has been treated in the commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew, although not in great depth. In my rendering, the most significant explanations are that of U. Luz and R.T. France. They both differentiate between the "weak" meaning of *skandalizō/skandalon* where the translation "to offend/offense" is appropriate, and the "more serious" meaning where the translation suggests something that destroys people's lives and endangers their salvation. See: U. LUZ, *Matthew 8-20*, Hermenia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, trans. James E. CROUCH (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 432; R.T. FRANCE, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 162.

Goodacre's contribution to the volume edited by Philip McCosker.[3] The following section will survey these studies, critically evaluating their arguments and identifying the lacunae that remain.

Stählin's lexical approach to *skandalizō/skandalon* is straightforward: he first treats passages centered around the noun, then those with the verb. His division rests on a key insight: *skandalon* denotes the occasion for a fall, *skandalizō* the act of causing it, and *skandalizomai* its actual occurrence.[4] Within the noun group, he distinguishes "eschatological *skandala*," which reveal tempters seeking to destroy faith (13:41; 24:10), from "present *skandala*," signs that the eschatological falling away has already begun (18:7–8; 16:23; cf. 11:3). The verb group, called 'present scandalismos,' is further nuanced into three types: "the falling away of the unstable" (13:21; 24:10; 26:31-35), "skandalismos at Jesus" (11:6; 13:57; 17:27; 26:31, 33), and "avoidance of causing the faith of the disciples to stumble" (18:6; 5:29-30). Despite these subdivisions, Stählin emphasizes their shared eschatological dimension: whether self-inflicted or imposed, all threaten faith in Jesus and thus eternal salvation. His concise survey commendably respects the polyvalence of *skandalizō*, allowing pericopes to overlap categories (e.g., 26:31-35; 12:41; 24:10). Yet his work leaves unresolved questions – particularly the precise nature of eschatological consequences for the disciples. If "being scandalized" equals loss of faith, is restoration possible at all? Moreover, his focus on Jesus' suffering and freedom in interpreting the Law overlooks other dimensions of messiahship that *skandalizō* reveals.

Humbert's 1954 essay remains one of the few extensive 20th-century studies on *skandalon* in the New Testament. He distinguishes between its "religious" and "moral" aspects. The religious dimension includes "scandals caused by Satan," traced to the Old Testament use of *skandalon* for idols, later associated with Satan and his forces (cf. Mt 13:41; 24:10; 16:23); and "scandals caused by Jesus." The latter arises when sinners, bound to Satan, encounter Christ's demand for faith, particularly his teaching on the suffering Messiah, which proved difficult for followers (cf. 1 Cor 1:23). The moral dimension encompasses "individual" and "social scandals." "Individual scandal" occurs when one is both cause and victim

[3] Wilhelm STÄHLIN, "σκανδαλίζω, σκάνδαλον," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard KITTEL and Gerhard FRIEDRICH, trans. Geoffrey W. BROMILEY, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 339–358; Alphonse HUMBERT, "Essai d'une théologie du scandale dans les synoptiques," *Biblica* 35 (1954): 1–28; Judith V. STACK, *Metaphor and the Portrayal of the Cause(s) of Sin and Evil in the Gospel of Matthew*, Biblical Interpretation Series 182 (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Mark GOODACRE, "The Rock on Rocky Ground: Matthew, Mark and Peter as *Skandalon*," in *What Is It That the Scripture Says?: Essays in Biblical Interpretation, Translation, and Reception in Honour of Henry Wansbrough OSB*, ed. Philip MCCOSKER, Library of New Testament Studies (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 61–73.

[4] STÄHLIN, *ibid*, 345.

(Mt 5:29-30; 18:8-9). "Social scandal" divides into active – deliberately leading believers into spiritual ruin (Mt 18:6), punished by Gehenna or the millstone, and passive, arising from misunderstanding, as with Pharisees offended by Jesus' interpretation of the Law (Mt 15:12; 17:27). While Humbert's linkage of Satan and *skandalon* is significant,[5] his nomenclature is somewhat outdated, and requires further explanation as to what the author exactly means by "religious" and "moral" categories, especially in light of recent debates on the concept of "religion."[6]

Judith V. Stack approaches *skandalizō/skandalon* as a metaphor for sin and evil, distinguishing between intentional and unintentional sin. Unintentional sin arises from external forces, with the sinner as a victim of the "stumbling," while intentional sin involves culpability for "ensnaring" others. Particularly complex are cases where Jesus is the "cause of sin." Stack interprets these as dependent on a person's predisposition: Jesus is not the perpetrator, nor are the scandalized victims, but rather individuals who choose to reject him. Mt 18:6-7 illustrates a dual sin: the intentional act of the perpetrator and the unintentional fall of the victim. Stack generalizes that sin originates externally, though predispositions (for sin) may render one vulnerable.[7] Yet her study leaves gaps: she never defines "sin," and her categories raise unresolved questions about the disciples. If their "scandalization" reflects rejection of Jesus, is it intentional or unintentional? Stack insists their failure is not mere intellectual confusion but a lack of faith, suggesting an inner propensity to "get scandalized."

Mark Goodacre's article *"The Rock on the Rocky Grounds"* demonstrates the value of a synchronic, narrative-critical approach to Matthew's use of *skandalizō/skandalon*. He challenges the redaction-critical claim that Matthew "whitewashes" Peter and the disciples, arguing instead that such conclusions ignore Matthew's narrative portrayal. Building on Mary-Ann Tolbert's thesis in *Sowing the Gospel* – that the Parable of the Sower is the hermeneutical key to Mark, with the disciples as "rocky ground" (*petrōdē*) – Goodacre shows that Matthew applies the same framework.[8] Peter, who eagerly embraces Jesus' call yet later "gets scandalized"

[5] For the potential connection between Satan and *skandalon*, see Hector M. PATMORE, "Arrière de moi, Satan! Tu m'es en scandale! (Mt 16:23). Analyse de l'ajout du rédacteur dans son contexte juif," *New Testament Studies* 66 (2020): 1–20.

[6] Tim WHITMARSH, "The Invention of Atheism and the Invention of Religion in Classical Athens," in *Skeptic and Believer in Ancient Mediterranean Religions*, ed. Babett EDELMANN-SINGER, Tobias NICKLAS, Janet SPITTLER, and Luigi WALT, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 443 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 38–40; Jan N. BREMMER, "Youth, Atheism, and (Un)Belief in Late-Fifth Century Athens," in *ibid*, ed. EDELMANN-SINGER et.al., 53.

[7] STACK, *Metaphor and the Portrayal of the Cause(s) of Sin and Evil,* 137.

[8] Commenting on Matthew's Gospel, Tolbert argues that Matthew recognized Mark's intention to put the disciples into *petrōdē* category with Peter, with the meaning "rock" functioning as a paradigm for "rocky ground." However, she claims that the Second Evangelist offers the alternative in his Gospel: Peter - the rocky ground, becomes *petra* – the foundation of the Church. See: Mary Ann TOLBERT, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis:

under persecution, embodies this rocky ground symbolism. Goodacre highlights Matthew's deliberate use of *skandalizō/skandalon* language as evidence that he understood and extended Mark's imagery, applying it to Peter and the disciples in the context of tribulation (cf. 13:21). Goodacre's article is pivotal for the study of *skandalizō/skandalon* motif, showing the value of narrative-criticism, however, he limits his focus to the Parable of the Sower and the flight of the disciples (cf. Mt 13:1-9, 18-23; 26:31-35).

To sum up, the study of *skandalizō/skandalon* has been shaped by several important contributions, yet each leaves notable gaps. Stählin's lexical survey commendably catalogues occurrences and offers nuanced subcategories, but his work stops short of clarifying the precise eschatological consequences of "scandalization," particularly whether restoration of faith is possible. Humbert's essay traces the link between *skandalon* and Satan and distinguishes religious from moral aspects, yet his categories remain dated and imprecise, especially in light of current debates on the very notion of "religion." Stack's analysis interprets *skandalon* as a metaphor for sin, dividing it into intentional and unintentional forms, but she neglects to define "sin" itself and leaves unresolved whether the disciples' "scandalization" is a consequence of their inner predispositions, and what would that exactly mean. Goodacre's narrative-critical approach, finally, demonstrates Matthew's deliberate use of *skandalizō/skandalon* in relation to Peter and the disciples, but his focus is limited to the Parable of the Sower (13:1-9, 18-23) and Jesus' prediction about Peter's denial and the disciples' flight (Mt 26:31-35) and does not extend to the broader Matthean corpus.

II

Our investigation builds on these foundations but adopts a wider synchronic approach. We argue that *skandalizō/skandalon* is a relational concept operating on two interdependent levels. On the **christological level**, the passages reveal diverse facets of Jesus' messiahship: exalted Son of Man, therapeutic Son of David, suffering Messiah, compassionate Shepherd, eschatological Shepherd-Judge, etc. On the **ecclesiological level**, they distinguish between those who reject Jesus and become *skandala* to others, and those who accept his paradoxical identity yet falter in the process, which is what makes them *skandala* on occasion.

In order to prove this hypothesis, a thorough analysis of the twelve *skandalizō/skandalon* passages is required. Even though it has been shown that the categorisation can be misleading, in order to navigate easier between the *skandalizō* passages, they have been divided into three groups based on the literary connections

Fortress Press, 1989), 146. As shown, Goodacre demonstrates that Matthew's intensified use of *skandalizō/skandalon* language goes against that hypothesis.

between the passages.[9] By refraining from translating *skandalizō/skandalon* until each pericope is analyzed, we allow Matthew's literary connections – shared language, imagery, and motifs across twelve passages – to shape the meaning of the lexemes. In this way, our study addresses the lacunae of earlier scholarship and demonstrates how Matthew's narrative use of *skandalizō/skandalon* illuminates both christology and ecclesiology.

The first group comprises five pericopes with parallel structure and a common message. Mt 5:27-30 and 18:8-9 form doublets in which Jesus identifies bodily limbs as sources of *skandalon* and urges their removal to prevent the whole body from being cast into hell. Mt 13:36-43 and 15:10-20 employ plant imagery: what is not planted by the Father must be uprooted. Just as "scandalizing" limbs threaten to corrupt the body, the tares risk contaminating the wheat, so their elimination is delayed until harvest; a similar concern underlies 15:10-20. Together these passages reveal four literary parallels: the object, method, reason, and punishment of elimination.[10] Mt 18:6-7, though lacking limb or plant imagery, fits the same fourfold pattern.[11] An in-depth analysis of these texts will show that they are thematically linked, focusing, on the **ecclesiological level**, on *skandala* that harm others (the "reason for elimination"). While primarily concerned with people who become *skandala*, the passages also contribute to Matthew's characterization of Jesus. On the **christological level**, their vocabulary recalls John the Baptist's depiction of the "one coming after him" (Mt 3:10, 12): the exalted Son of Man who discerns between worthy and unworthy, gathering the wheat and burning the chaff, and who stands as Judge over Israel.[12]

The five passages in the second group, though without parallel structure, share a common theme: Jesus' message and persecution. Three focus on Jesus' messiahship and his suffering (Mt 11:2-6; 16:13-23; 26:31-35), while two center on the kingdom message and the persecution of its recipients (13:18-23; 24:9-14). On the **christological level**, Mt 11:2-6 raises the question of Jesus' identity, portraying

[9] The groups are unnamed because I do not wish to impose any nomenclature upon *skandalizō/skandalon* passages, preventing its reduction to a single meaning. The groups are also flexible, taking into consideration that the literary links exist not only among the passages from the same group, but also between certain passages put in different groups. The idea was to let the text speak for itself and establish the categories that will not centre around a single aspect of *skandalon*.

[10] The "objects for elimination" when it comes to limbs are: right eye and right hand (5:29-30), again – a hand, a foot, and an eye (18:8-9). The plant imagery employs: the weeds (tares, 13:25ff), a (general) plant, something that is planted (15:13). For the "method of elimination" Matthew uses: *exaireō, ballō, apollymi, ekkoptō* (5:27-30 and 18:8-9), and *ekrizōō* in 15:13.

[11] The "object of elimination" is the whole person who should be "eliminated" by drowning due to the heavy millstone hanging around his/her neck (note that another body part is mentioned, 18:6).

[12] The imagery is that of a tree who does not bear the good fruit, hence it will be cut down and thrown into the fire (3:10), and the wheat which will be collected in contrast to the chaff that will be burned with fire. The pattern is similar to the above mentioned fourfold structure, as well as the language such as *ekkoptō and ballō*.

him as the compassionate Shepherd and the therapeutic Son of David. *Skandalon* is arising from the tension between Jesus' *Vollmacht* (authority), the one who is to come, and *Niedrigkeit* (lowliness), his representation as the Compassionate Shepherd and the healing messiah.[13] This tension culminates in Mt 16:13-23, where Peter confesses Jesus as Christ yet rejects the suffering dimension, earning the label *skandalon*. His discipleship hinges on embracing both authority and lowliness, a challenge that reappears in the Passion narrative (26:31-35), where Jesus predicts the disciples will be scandalized and deny him. Together, these pericopes trace a storyline: paradoxical aspects of Jesus' messiahship cause initial ambiguity, which indeed happens in Caesarea Philippi: upon learning about the suffering aspect, Peter rebukes Jesus; this rebuke foreshadows the disciples' failure to fully grasp Jesus' identity, which becomes apparent in the passion account when the disciples' ultimately abandon Jesus during his arrest. On the **ecclesiological level**, the Parable of the Sower (13:18-23) and the eschatological discourse (24:9-14) depict believers who joyfully receive the kingdom message but falter under persecution. Both cases describe the second seed – those who "scandalize" amid tribulation.

The third group are contrasting passages (Mt 13:54-58; 17:24-27) that complement the two main clusters by offering inverse perspectives. On the **ecclesiological level**, Mt 13:54-58 contrasts with the second group: whereas the disciples initially accept Jesus' message but later falter under persecution, his hometown rejects him outright. Their immediate "scandalization," labeled "unbelief" (*apistia*), sharpens the meaning of *skandalizō* as refusal from the outset rather than failure under pressure. On the **christological level**, Mt 17:24-27 stands opposite the first group. While those passages warn against "scandalizing" others, Jesus himself deliberately avoids it, embodying the principle he demands of his followers. Together, these texts reinforce the dual framework: *skandalizō/skandalon* can signify both the rejection of Jesus' identity and the responsibility to prevent others from "scandalizing."

Schematically, the above explained division can be presented in a following way:

[13] *Vollmacht* and *Niderigkeit* terminology is borrowed from: Hanna STETTLER, "Die Bedeutung der Täuferanfrage in Matthäus 11,2-6 par Lk 7,18-23 für die Christologie," *Biblica* 89, no. 2 (2008): 183. Analyzing v. 6, Stettler comes to the valuable insight that the "offense" (*Anstoß*) anticipated by Jesus in 11:6, is a result of the tension between Jesus' authority (*Vollmacht*) and his "humility / lowness" (*Niedrigkeit*). In this particular case, his authority consists of the fact that he can and does perform the mentioned miracles, while his "humility" is to be found in the fact that nobody was expecting this type of the Messiah, the one who is "the helper of the poor."

Cluster	**Passages**	**Christological level: facets of Jesus' messiahship**	**Ecclesiological level: characters' attitude towards different facets of Jesus' messiahship**
Group I	Mt 5:27-30; 18:8-9; 13:36-43; 15:10-20; 18:6-7	Jesus as Judge who discerns between worthy and unworthy; echoes John the Baptist's eschatological figure from 3:10-12	Focus on those who harm others: scandalizing limbs/plants → elimination; punishment (Gehenna, millstone)
Group II	Mt 11:2-6; 16:13-23; 26:31-35; 13:18-23; 24:9-14	Jesus as Compassionate Shepherd, therapeutic Son of David, Suffering Messiah; tension between authority (Vollmacht) and lowliness (Niedrigkeit)	Disciples and believers who initially accept Jesus/kingdom message but falter under persecution → "second seed" from the Parable of the Sower
Group III	Mt 13:54-58; 17:24-27	Jesus as prophet rejected in his hometown; Jesus as one who deliberately avoids scandalizing others	

Conclusion

To conclude, this doctoral study intends to demonstrate that by weaving the *skandalizō/skandalon* motif throughout the narrative, Matthew underscores different aspects of Jesus' messiahship and the stakes of discipleship: faith in the paradoxical Messiah determines whether one stands firm or stumbles. This approach highlights Matthew's literary artistry and theological depth, moving beyond lexical studies to show how "scandalization" structures the Gospel's portrayal of the Messiah and his followers. Beyond its lexical meaning, *skandalizō* functions as a key narrative pivot in Matthew's Gospel. It marks moments of crisis and decision, forcing characters and readers alike to confront the paradoxes of Jesus' identity and mission. This narrative function invites readers into a participatory reflection on faith and failure. Future studies might explore intertextual links between Matthew's use of *skandalizō* and

Old Testament wisdom literature or Second Temple Jewish texts. Comparative analyses with other Synoptic Gospels could also deepen understanding of Matthew's unique theological emphases.

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