THE SCANDAL OF THE GOSPELS

Jesus, Story, and Offense



David McCracken

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JESUS, STORY, AND OFFENSE

DAVID McCRACKEN

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For
Rusty Palmer

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Preface

Scandal fascinates. Yet, someone may reasonably protest, this hardly justifies attaching scandal—a low form of human activity that we associate with the tabloid press, corrupt politicians, or rampant sexual license—to the Bible. It seems (the objection might proceed) singularly inappropriate to the Bible, and if it should exist—the story of David and Bathsheba pops into mind—it is preferable not to impose our low form of "scandal" on it, or even our higher, more intellectually respectable form—the scandal of logical contradiction, which is also inappropriate, since the Bible is not an argument or a treatise.

So might a skeptical or respectable reader approach a book on scandal in the Bible, and I would agree that the Bible is radically different from a tabloid or a treatise. And yet the parts of the Bible that are my particular concern in this book are narratives, stories, a form that is also the stuff of tabloids and even of some philosophical treatises. Tabloids, treatises, and the Bible all deal with some semblance of the world we live in, with things we find desirable or repulsive, and with actions that are almost beyond imagining. And though the conjunction of scandal and Bible may seem inappropriate, I am going to claim here that scandal is demonstrably and importantly present in the Bible, both in ways that overlap our low and high forms of scandal and, more importantly, in ways that do not.

I do not claim that scandal is *undeniably* present in the Bible; the history of reading the Bible is to a large extent a history of finding ways to deny its scandal. But even though we understandably may not *want* scandal in the Bible, it is present nonetheless, most obviously in the Greek word *skandalon*, which I call "scandal" or "offense" but which takes its meaning from an accumulation of specific, vivid, powerful images: traps, snares, stumbling blocks, things that obstruct, and things that cause a fall. The action of these images appears frequently throughout the Bible, and while it is commonly recognized in some forms, such as the stumbling blocks encountered by the Israelites or the stumbling blocks that followers of Jesus are enjoined not to place before "little ones," it is almost entirely ignored in its most profound form: the essential offense.

The essential offense builds on and transcends our mundane scandals of desire and our intellectual scandals of contradiction. In the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh not only lays stumbling blocks before the Israelites but *becomes* the stumbling block. In the New Testament, this image of Yahweh is transposed to Jesus, who warns his followers not to scandalize others but who is himself, dramatically and repeatedly, a scandal to those who encounter him. Jesus is the essential offense. Jesus must be an offense, a scandal, to the respectable, ordinary world, because the respectable, ordinary world is naturally offended by what is not respectable, not ordinary. In the Gospels, Jesus associates with the low and the corrupt; identifies with the poor, the sick, and the outcast; and dies a supposed criminal, which is offensive to many. But also, in the same stories, he is said to be the Son of God, which is an offense to the world of common sense. By his very nature, his presence, his words, and his actions, Jesus in the Gospels poses the possibility of offense to those who encounter him. And yet, as he says, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." Offense is not the desired end, but it is an essential part of a Gospel character's encounter with Jesus.

In the crisis of encounter, response is all. There are only two fundamental Gospel responses—offense or faith—and either response is of ultimate importance to life, but, since characters live in narrative as humans live in time, the response is not the end of the story. Offense repeatedly confronts and provokes even the faithful, who find it difficult to be faithful in the face of scandal and difficult not to be scandalous themselves. Offense is the recurring moment of crisis as characters in the Gospels move toward idolatry or truth.

Jesus must be the possibility of offense to all who encounter

him, and this applies not just to characters but to readers as well. The possibility of offense ought to be an essential part of a reader's encounter with the Gospel. But now the possibility has diminished; we have translated and interpreted the Gospels to minimize and domesticate the offense, making it barely recognizable. This is itself a scandal that needs to be exposed, not so we can feel superior to the perpetrators of scandal but so we can encounter the Gospel scandals that exist in the text.

The scandal-offense-stumbling block becomes vivid and powerful when we return to reading the Gospels as stories. Their two forms of offense—first, the worldly offenses of desires, idolatry, and human obstacles to faith and, second, the essential offense of Jesus—flourish in narrative contexts. Gospels are stories to be heard, and the power of these stories comes not from doctrines or messages contained in them but from the stories themselves, as stories. Jesus is a dramatized hero of the four Gospels; he is the *skandalon* who blesses those who are not, dramatically, offended by him; and he himself characteristically tells stories, full of worldly scandals, that he calls parables. These parables, I will argue, are not modes of instruction but rather forms of offense. Furthermore, the stories *about* Jesus—the Gospels—place the scandalous Jesus before the reader and become, themselves, occasions for offense.

As occasions for offense, Gospels constitute not only a source of fascination but also a danger to readers. We have become expert at dealing with this danger through mitigating it by interpretation—sometimes by allegorical interpretation that substitutes one thing for another, sometimes by historical interpretation that explains away offensive passages as interpolations *because* they are offensive, and sometimes by critical interpretation that renders the text acceptable and even comfortable. But my argument is that Gospel stories are inherently scandalous for characters in them and for readers of them. Like parables, Gospels call on us to "hear," not to interpret. "Hearing," in the gospel sense, is different from interpreting or from rational understanding, and this odd "hearing" requires the stumbling block, which obstructs. It also reveals. But the revelation cannot exist without the obstruction.

By making use of Søren Kierkegaard's writings and paying attention to Gospel stories, I am trying to reanimate the biblical *skandalon* that is central to the Gospels.

During the process of writing this book, I have incurred debts that are a pleasure to acknowledge: to David Van Liew and friends who

(without knowing it) led me to start this project; to the late Esther Branch and friends who responded to the ideas here; to members of my 1990 graduate seminar on biblical narratives; to Doug Collins, whose perfectly timed gifts were invaluable; and to Steve Eberhart, Paul Flucke, Eugene Lemcio, Helene Solheim, Mark Lloyd Taylor, and Dale Turner. I would also like to thank the University of Washington Graduate School for its award of the Humanities Research Professorship, which provided time for research and writing.

I owe special thanks to all the members of my family, especially my wife, Marcia, who have made extraordinary support something almost ordinary, and to colleagues who have generously read and commented on parts of the manuscript: Don Bialostosky, Doug Collins, Alan Fisher, Mona Modiano, and Eugene Webb. To the friend who responded to ideas and prose with what Mikhail Bakhtin called the "questioning, provoking, answering, agreeing, objecting activity," this book is gratefully dedicated.

Seattle D. McC.
May 1993

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I

THE OFFENSE

Act just once in such a manner that your action expresses that you fear God alone and man not at all—you will immediately in some measure cause a scandal.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD, *Journals and Papers*

And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.

JESUS IN MATTHEW 11:6, LUKE 7:23

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1

Introduction: The Offense and Us

In 1848, Søren Kierkegaard wrote, "Offense is never mentioned these days—alas." Now, however, it is not quite true that offense is never mentioned; it—or its near relation, scandal—is mentioned, for example, by Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, and Bakhtin, but it is also not quite true that in 1848 offense was "never mentioned." It had in fact been discussed at some length by Johannes Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and by Vigilius Haufniensus in *The Concept of Anxiety*, and it was about to be discussed at still greater length by Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness unto Death* and later in *Practice in Christianity*. All of these books, of course, were written by Kierkegaard himself; the putative authors, representing different points of view, were part of his ventriloquistic strategy to awaken his readers to things unknown to the Hegelians and the established church. Offense, for Kierkegaard, is something of profound human and religious importance, as is apparent from the full lament, of which I have quoted only a part: "Offense," he wrote in his journal, "is never mentioned these days—alas, and even to the disciples, the believing disciples, Christ said: You will be offended in me" (*Journals* 3: 3028; cf. Matt. 26:31 and Mark 14:27). But the truth is that in this sense the offense is still seldom mentioned, in spite of Kierkegaard's best efforts to awaken the world to what he called the essential offense. Kierkegaard would find his "alas" no less applicable today than in 1848.

In spite of the fact that the offense is not much mentioned, it is hard to avoid it altogether, either in or outside the Bible. Before looking at biblical narratives, I want to consider, very briefly, some implications of offenses that we are accustomed to living with, to acknowledge my indebtedness to Kierkegaard in this enterprise, to raise the problem of modern Bible translations (a serious problem for me, since they tend to translate my subject out of existence), and to mention a few recent critics and philosophers who have been fascinated by offense or scandal.

Encountering and Suppressing Offense

We are all to some degree familiar with offense; whether we give it, take it, or avoid it, we know that it is the nature of offense to threaten us or our kind—our group, profession, race, or nationality. Our sense of self, our beliefs, or our ways of seeing things are challenged whenever we encounter an offense. When we feel an offense deeply, it is most likely because it challenges something of fundamental importance to us. And even though many of us prefer not to be challenged or threatened at all, we know that especially in a diverse, democratic society there must be some spirit of toleration, creating a tension between the individual's or group's comfortable security and the right to be offensive.

How to manage this tension is no easy matter. For example, in 1989, when the United States Supreme Court found unconstitutional a Texas statute prohibiting flag burning, Justice William Brennan argued in the majority opinion, "If there is a bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment, it is that the Government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable." On the other hand, Chief Justice William Rehnquist, in his minority opinion, argued that the Texas statute should be upheld because the flag burning in question was "a form of protest that was profoundly offensive to many" (*New York Times*, June 22, 1989, A12).

Rehnquist's opinion seems to rest on a desire for harmony, for uniformity that to some extent represses diversity, and for protection of the beliefs of the majority in a community. Brennan's position, on the other hand, willingly accepts the existence of disharmony, of diversity that supersedes uniformity, and of threats to whatever constitutes our "I," our sense of self within a community. In spite of the undeniable attractions of institutional and personal comfort and security, Brennan argues on the basis of freedom of

expression that even profound offense must be tolerated and protected. Mikhail Bakhtin raises the stakes even higher: truth, in his view, lives only on the threshold where the dialogic encounter among words, persons, and ideas takes place, and that encounter is often a scandalous or offensive one. For Bakhtin, a world without the possibility of offense is a world without the possibility of truth. Even so, in the sufficiently tricky business of managing our lives and forming responses to those we encounter, many of us find ourselves harboring a divided practical, if not theoretical, attitude toward offense. Many of those who on principle defend offense would prefer not to encounter it, and those who relish offense usually find it more blessed to give than to receive.

The tension that is built into any response to offense, I believe, has much to do with our recurring fascination with the Bible, which is less a collection of doctrines than a collection of narratives, or to many readers *the* narrative. The Bible is full of offense—actual, dramatic offense to characters in the narrative, as well as offense to readers. I find the term *fascination* useful in this context, since what repels us is often as fascinating as what attracts us. Theodor Adorno says of Kierkegaard, "Fascination is the most dangerous power in his work" (11). By this he means that the reader or critic is drawn, willingly or not, into the landscape of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors, his cunning choice of words, his dialectical seduction, and his paradoxical claim that subjectivity is truth, in such a way that the reader succumbs to its "magical provenance," becoming a prisoner in that landscape and a blind pursuer of (to Adorno) Kierkegaardian error. Adorno himself assumes the role of a fox hunter, self-consciously pursuing the fox in its landscape of "infinitely reflected interiority" with the intention of catching the fox—Kierkegaard—in traps the fox himself has set (11–12).

The Bible, too, has its fascinating and dangerous landscape—including traps, snares, foxes, wolves, and, if not a magical, at least an illogical provenance. My role in this enterprise is not to smoke out the fox but to encounter the fascination and at the same time to observe the laying of traps, snares, and offenses, without trying to account for them as historical artifacts or trying to extricate myself from them by deconstructing them. I write from within a Kierkegaardian landscape, observing the laying of traps without trying to chart a route whereby they may be avoided and without suggesting that they can or should be avoided. In fact, I want to argue that the complex of traps-snares-stumbling blocks-offenses-scandals, which abide in the Greek word *skandalon*, is an essential part of the Jewish

and Christian Bibles, and that it is essentially, dangerously, and fascinatingly embodied in Gospel narratives. A corollary to my argument is that the *skandalon* is sufficiently offensive that readers and institutions naturally want to domesticate it to nullify its dangerous power.

The very notion of biblical truth presupposes and thrives on offense, but, though there is no hiding all of the offense, we as readers are oblivious to much of it. It is regularly translated out, and interpreted out, of the Bible. And that is a scandal worthy of study, because without the offense a reader has a severe handicap when encountering ideas and characters of the Gospels, especially the hero, Jesus. The offense I want to consider here is a distinctively biblical idea; it was developed in the Bible for the sake of its story, its theology, and its readers, none of which can be altogether disentangled from the others. Without it, we miss the biblical representation of the hero and his actions, and we miss the fundamental power of much of the hero's dialogue, including the speech genre always associated with Jesus: parables.

In defense of our blindness, we may say that the offense is understandably translated out of the New Testament: there is no good, single word to be found to serve as an equivalent for the idea and the word—*skandalon*—that contained a certain power two thousand years ago. It is true that the Bible still demonstrably has the power to offend, as well as to move in other ways. But the loss of a word for the idea and the dissipation of parts of the idea into many words pose serious difficulties. The Greek *skandalon* became the Latin *scandalum*, which became the English *scandal*, but in spite of the similarity no one would argue that they mean the same thing. In the verb form, the Latin *offendere* is close to the Greek *skandalizein*; both mean "to cause to stumble," and both have found their way into English. But, as Owen Barfield has pointed out, "for us there is a subtle difference between *scandalize* and *offend*; for [while] *scandalize* and *scandal* merely hint at the liveliness of an emotion, *offend* and *offence* convey a sober warning of its probable results" (*History in English Words*, 96). In fact, I suspect that the meanings of these words have changed since Barfield observed this distinction sixty-five years ago. *Offense* still conveys a warning of results to the offender, but it also increasingly conveys the challenge that must be endured by the person who has been offended (such as the patriotic citizen), regardless of the consequences to the offender (the flag burner).

This increasing emphasis on the offended is particularly rele-

vant to my argument about the Gospels, where characters and readers are repeatedly challenged by an offensive Jesus. Jesus poses the possibility of offense to those who may themselves be an offense to God, and he offers them an escape from their offensiveness only through offense. The offenders (Jesus's audience within the text) are sometimes offended by Jesus and sometimes not, but Jesus himself repeatedly takes the form of an offense, a stumbling block. And his offensiveness is reciprocated: in the end, those who are offended crucify him. After the death, the cross itself becomes the scandal: Paul refers to "the offense of the cross," an offense that he does not want to be "removed" (Gal. 5:11). But whether it comes from Jesus or the cross or elsewhere, the challenge to the individual's most fundamental and cherished beliefs is at the heart of the New Testament *skandalon*.[1]

Our word *scandal* is charged with passion, the unexpected, and the violation of norms—all of which are relevant to my topic—and I continue to make use of the word here, but it is too late in the history of *scandal* to think that it can be extricated from its now usually sexual or political confines to allow it alone to carry the biblical weight the text requires, which indeed is sometimes sexual or political but far less exclusively so. René Girard has pointed out that modern scandal excites indignation, "a feverish desire to differentiate between the guilty and the innocent. . . . The person who is scandalized wants to bring the affair out into the open; he has a burning desire to see the scandal in the clear light of day and pillory the guilty party" (*Things Hidden*, 426). Our scandal is a form of violence, as indeed it is in the Bible—the cross being an instrument of violence—but it is also a way of suppressing the biblical offense. A scandal may titillate or outrage us; either way, the titillation or moral indignation effectively prevents any challenge of the sort that offense brings to the assumptions and truths we hold most dear and the idols we cherish most deeply. Offense violates our assumptions about what our world is or what we think it ought to be. Whatever is unofficial, unestablished, non-normal, deviant, or nonstandard, in our view, carries with it the possibility of offense.

The difficulties of translation are inevitably formidable, and it is not remarkable that there is no uniform translation for the numerous appearances of *ton skandalon*, "the stumbling block" or "the offense," and its verb form *skandalizō*, "I cause to stumble" or "I offend."[2] It *is* remarkable, however, that the Revised Standard Version (RSV) *never* translates the noun with any form of "offense" or "scandal," thereby giving special poignancy to Kierkegaard's lament

that "the offense is never mentioned these days"—these days now being nearly a hundred and fifty years later. Whenever *skandalon* appears in the Greek text, it is translated in the RSV as "cause for stumbling," "cause of sin," "difficulty," "hindrance," "hindrance in the way," "make fall," "pitfall," "stumbling block," "temptation," or "temptation to sin." With these varied translations, is it any wonder that we fail to recognize a common idea repeatedly surfacing in the New Testament? The verb *skandalizō* has fewer, but still varied, translations in the RSV: "cause of falling," "cause to fall," "cause to sin," "fall away," "give offense," "make fall," "offend," and "take offense." There is no form of "stumble" or of "scandal" here, but, in fewer than one-quarter of the appearances, there is some form of "offense." The diffusion of an important idea contained in this word is not limited to the RSV. It occurs in all modern translations, although, happily, the *New* Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is a distinct improvement. It uses some form of "offense" or "stumbling" for most of the noun forms of *skand-* and for slightly more than half of the verb forms.[3]

I do not want to suggest, however, that the idea of the offense resides only in appearances of the Greek word *skandalon*. On the contrary, it is essentially a dramatic action, at work in the narratives of the Gospels. To recognize it at work, however, and to recognize its power as an action, we must recognize that it has a name, *skandalon*—a name repeatedly used in crucial contexts by Jesus, by all of the Gospel writers, by Paul, and by Peter. Furthermore, in addition to appearing dramatically, with no name at all, it is sometimes referred to in other ways—sometimes in other words for "stumbling" or "offense" (*proskomma*), "an occasion for taking offense" (*proskopē*), or even "fall" (*ptōsis*).

Some Contemporary Varieties of Offense

With the exception of a very few scholars, mainly German, only three modern writers have, to my knowledge, paid serious attention to the significance of the biblical offense: Girard, Bakhtin, and, most important, Kierkegaard.[4] René Girard uses the idea in conjunction with his theory of "mimetic desire"—essentially the idea that we humans desire not some object as such but whatever is already desired by a rival or model. We desire only what is given value by another. Girard has applied his theory not only to literature (especially Dostoyevski, Stendhal, Proust, and Shakespeare) but also to

anthropology, psychology, and theology—challenging the anthropologists with a new theory of the origin of violence (in *Violence and the Sacred*), psychologists with non-Freudian notions of desire (in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*), and biblical scholars with desacralizing interpretations (in *The Scapegoat* and *Job: The Victim of His People*). The idea of the *skandalon* is crucial to Girard's larger argument about violence. The *skandalon* is the obstacle that one is obsessed by, or, as he says, the "obstacle-model of mimetic rivalry" (*Things Hidden*, 416), which in fact is not usually real at all but a metaphysical illusion created by the mechanism of desire, imitation, and rivalry. In the Hebrew Bible, the quintessential scandal is idolatry (421); in the New Testament, it is the "other as an object of metaphysical fascination" (425). In both cases, and throughout history, the underlying principle of this obsession is violence, the principle of dominating and being dominated. This mechanism of violence, in Girard's view, is exposed by the New Testament, which teaches that rivalry and violence can be suppressed only through childlike imitation (as opposed to mimetic rivalry) in the biblical logic of love.

Unlike Girard, Mikhail Bakhtin (to whom I will return in chapter 8) has little to say about biblical narratives, but he does argue that the "scandal scenes" in Dostoyevski and other writers lead back to "the basic narrative genres of ancient Christian literature—'Gospels,' 'Acts of the Apostles,' 'Apocalypse,' and 'Lives of the Saints and Martyrs'" (*Problems*, 135). Both Girard and Bakhtin may have encountered the *skandalon* in their reading of Kierkegaard, although it is not until late in the development of Girard's theory (*Things Hidden* [1978] and *The Scapegoat* [1982]) that he equates the *skandalon* with his earlier idea of mimetic desire, and he never explicitly connects it to Kierkegaard.[5] Similarly, Bakhtin says little about Kierkegaard in his writings, but he read Kierkegaard in German translations and began to learn Danish to read his works in the original language (Clark and Holquist, 27).

Whatever the origin of their interest in scandal, it is certain that Kierkegaard is the preeminent modern philosopher of the *skandalon* or (in the Princeton translations of Kierkegaard's works) the "offense." In *The Sickness unto Death* (1849), Anti-Climacus calls the offense "Christianity's crucial criterion" and "an eternal, essential component of Christianity." In both his signed and his pseudonymous writings, Kierkegaard emphasizes its importance in order to show the folly of Christians' ignoring "Christ's own instructions,