

משיח MASHIACH

Apostolic
Writings
Messiah
Hebrew Bible
Second Temple
Judaism

“Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—no to put an obstacle or a *stumbling block* in a brother’s way” (Rom 14:13 NASB). It is significant that Paul uses the Greek word *skandalon* for “stumbling block.” This is the same word that appears four times in Matthew 18:6–7:

If any of you put a stumbling block [*skandalizo* = verbal form of *skandalon*] before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks [*skandalon*!] Occasions for stumbling [*skandalon*] are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block [*skandalon*] comes!



David Rudolph, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Bible and Theology at Messianic Jewish Theological Institute, and Chair of the Theology Committee of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations.

Matthew draws attention to the word *skandalon* like someone drawing a bullseye around a target. I suspect this is because Matthew views *skandalon* as a kind of Jewish code word that points his Jewish readers back to a foundational commandment at the center of the Torah. Notably, the metaphorical use of *skandalon* (as in Matt 18:6–7 and Rom 14:13) is limited exclusively to biblical Jewish literature, and

the verbal form of *skandalon* does not appear outside of the Greek translation of Israel’s Scriptures and the New Testament. The only use of *skandalon* in the Greek Pentateuch (Torah) is Leviticus 19:14.¹ Here the Lord commands Israel, “You shall not . . . put a stumbling block (*skandalon*) before the blind.”

A reasonable case can be made that in Matthew’s *Besorah* (Gospel), Yeshua is appropriating the “before the blind” command in Leviticus 19:14 and applying it to “little ones,” a group that is metaphorically blind (in the sense that they are untaught, untrained, uninformed, inexperienced, naïve, innocent, and oblivious to danger around them).²

Similarly, Paul may be applying the Leviticus 19:14 “before the blind” command to the situation in Rome, where the strong were putting stumbling blocks in front of the “weak” (i.e. those who were metaphorically blind). What were these stumbling blocks? Paul’s language in Romans 14:13 (“Therefore, let us not judge one another. . .”) suggests that the stumbling blocks were unnecessary judgments that Jews and Gentiles were making about each other.

The modern Messianic Jewish community can learn a lesson from Paul’s bilateral ethics: When Jews and Gentiles judge one another, they set up stumbling blocks that cause the metaphorically blind (those who lack knowledge) to fall. Given Yeshua’s words in Matthew 18:7 (“woe to the one by whom the *skandalon* comes!”), we should be very careful not to violate this weightier matter of the Torah.³

1 Matthew and Paul would have been familiar with this text because Leviticus 19 was a primary source of ethical teaching in the Second Temple period (e.g. both Matt 19:19 and Rom 13:9 quote Lev 19:18).

2 This was how the Qumran community and Josephus interpreted the term “blind” in Deuteronomy 27:18. They understood it to include the metaphorically blind—people who were uninformed or lacking in knowledge (4Q271 3, 7–10 = 4Q270 5, 14–17; 4Q269 9, 1–3; *Ant.* 4.276). This is also how the later rabbis interpreted the word “blind” in Leviticus 19:14 (*b. Mo’ed Qatan* 5a; *Lev. Rab.* 19:14).

3 Cf. the “woe to you” in Matthew 23:23.