PETER: STUMBLING-BLOCK AND SATAN

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Few of the sayings of Jesus illustrate so well the force of his personality and the vitality of his speech as the words he used to rebuke Peter when Peter refused to accept that his master must be rejected by the Jewish people and die: „Get thee behind me, Satan! For thou thinkest not the thoughts of God, but of men”. (Mk. viii 33).

Four pertinent questions may be asked concerning these words to Peter. It is the purpose of this note to review the answers which have been given them and to suggest an integrated solution to the problems raised which elicits from Jesus’ words an indication of the nature of the anthropology in terms of which he himself understood and explained to his disciples man’s spiritual existence.

(a) Why does Jesus say, “Get thee behind me!” to Peter? Though some critics have suggested that the words οτί οὐ φρονεῖς Τά τοῦ θεοῦ, ἀλλὰ τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων. are the equivalent of οτί (Be off!) by itself 1), or that they mean no more than, “Get out of my sight!” 2), it is generally accepted that Jesus intended them to be taken metaphorically. Of those who adopt this point of view, some have argued that they are a request for Peter to return to his proper place behind his master and among the other disciples (cf. Mt. iv 19: διώτε οτί (Mou) 3), while others feel that Jesus’ language was determined


by his thoughts of the path that would lead him to Jerusalem 1). When Peter attempted to persuade Jesus that as the Messiah of God he need not suffer, he placed himself between his master and a voluntary death, and only by getting behind his master could he cease to be an obstacle on that narrow way. Among the supporters of this last interpretation must be numbered Matthew, who, on the Marcan hypothesis, provides our earliest commentary by adding the explanatory gloss, “Thou art a stumbling-block to me”. (Mt. xvi 23).

(b) Why does Jesus call Peter “Satan”? Two views seem possible. Either he does so because he sees that Peter “for the moment acts Satan’s part” 2), or because he considers Peter temporarily under the control of Satan and therefore identified with him, just as the man who harboured a multitude of demons identified himself with them and called himself “Legion” (Mk. v 9) 3).

(c) What is the link between Peter’s name and the reprimand which he receives? Lagrange has noted how well the meaning of πέτρος, “stone”, suits the Matthaean expansion of this passage and confirms, by the way in which nothing is made of it, the Matthaean interpretation 4).

(d) How are the words, “For thou thinkest not the thoughts of God, but of men”, an explanation of the manner in which Jesus has rebuked his disciple? If the meaning of φρονεῖν τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων is limited to “think (merely) human thoughts” 5), the use of ὅτι is unjustified, and it is necessary therefore to accept that τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων are at the same time τὰ τῶν Σατανᾶ 6). The words, “For thou thinkest not the thoughts of God, but of men”, are thus an explanation of why Peter is called “Satan”. His thoughts are the thoughts of Satan.

This implicit contrast between the thoughts of God and the

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3) A. H. McNenile, op. cit., p. 245. Cf. Jesus’ words to his disciples: “Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?” (Jn. vi 71).
5) J.-M. Lagrange, ibid.