

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Jude

February 3, 2013

Jude and His Letter

Christians and non-Christians alike know who the apostle Peter was. But few Christians have heard of Jude apart from the name of the biblical book that they may know is buried somewhere toward the end of their Bible. This ignorance is not surprising, for the name “Jude” occurs in most English versions (e.g., NIV; NASB; NRSV), only in Jude 1 in the New Testament. Three possible authors are: “Judas son of James,” one of the Twelve (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13); “Judas, also called Barsabbas,” an early Christian prophet (Acts 15:22, 27, 32); and a brother of Jesus named “Judas” (Mark 6:3).

But Jude further characterizes himself in the opening of his letter as “a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James” (v. 1). Now almost any Christian could claim to be a “servant of Jesus Christ,” but the James Jude mentions is almost certainly the man who became a prominent leader in the early church (see Acts 15:13-21; 21:18; Galatians 2:9) and who wrote the letter we now have in the New Testament. And this James was a “brother of the Lord” (Galatians 1:19; see also Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55; John 7:5). Like James in his own letter, Jude sees no point in claiming a physical relationship to Jesus that brought him no spiritual benefit and that did not give to him any special authority.

While we can be rather sure that the letter of Jude was written by a brother of Jesus with that same name, we can be sure of almost nothing else about this letter. We can assume that the letter was written sometime between about A.D. 40 (to allow time for the false teaching to develop) and A.D. 80 (when even a younger brother of Jesus would have been at least seventy years old). Second Peter, as we have seen, was written toward the end of Peter’s life, in the middle 60s. We should probably date Jude at about the same time.

To whom was Jude writing? The evidence points to a Jewish-Christian community in a Gentile society. Jude’s quotations from Jewish noncanonical books suggest that his audience was Jewish in background.

Jude 1-2

Ancient letters typically began with an identification of the sender, an identification of the recipient, and a greeting. The greeting in Jude is the only New Testament greeting that does not include a wish for “grace,” and it is the only one to include a request for “love.” “Jude” translates a Greek word (*Joudas*) that occurs 43 times in the New Testament. Six different men bear the name, but we can be pretty sure that the Jude who writes our letter is the brother of the Lord mentioned in Mark 6:3. We know almost nothing about him. Like Jesus’ other brothers, he did not follow the Lord during his earthly ministry. But, as his self-description here indicates,

that changed, perhaps during the time of Jesus' post-resurrection ministry. Jude is now "a servant of Jesus Christ."

Jude loves to group what he says into "threes." In verse 1 he has described Christians as "called," "loved," and "kept." In verse 2 he prays that his readers may be filled with "mercy," "peace," and "love."

Jude 3-4

Most New Testament letters (especially Paul's) move into a thanksgiving and prayer after the initial salutation and greetings. But Jude skips these points, getting right to the heart of what his letter is about. In these two verses, he explains the occasion and theme of this letter. The occasion is the intrusion into the readers' Christian assemblies of false teachers, impious people living and propagating a heretical form of the faith (v. 4). To meet the needs of this occasion, Jude focuses on a single theme: maintaining the truth of the Christian faith as it has been handed down from Christ and the apostles (v. 3). In verse 4, Jude calls them "godless" (*asebis*) men, a word that becomes almost the keynote of the epistle. We are to imagine Jude preparing to write generally and joyfully about the salvation that he and his readers share together when he learns about a new and serious threat to his readers' faith: the false teachers. Consequently, he discards the letter he was about to write in order to warn his readers of this new threat.

"Faith" describes what Christians believe – such things as Jesus' atoning death and resurrection, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, salvation by grace through faith, and (especially in Jude's situation) the holy lifestyle that flows from God's grace in Christ. These essentials, Jude claims, are not open to interpretation, for this faith "was once for all entrusted to the saints." But this faith has come under attack, and so Jude's readers need to "contend" for it. "Contend" is a strong word. It refers to the exertions of the athlete.

Why do Jude's readers need to "contend for the faith?" Because (note the "for" at the beginning of v. 4) "certain men...have secretly slipped in among you." "Certain men" has a contemptuous ring; Jude does not bother to name or even to number them. They have "wormed their way in," as the REB puts it. Jesus warned about "wolves in sheep's clothing" (Matthew 7:15) – these false teachers are just such wolves.

Jude leaves us in no doubt about his opinion of these "men." He says four things about them.

- (1) Their "condemnation was written about long ago." Jude here follows the same pattern Peter used when dealing with the false teachers: to pronounce their condemnation immediately after introducing them (see 2 Peter 2:1-4).
- (2) "They are godless men." As noted, "godless" is an important word in Jude (cf. v. 15; also the cognate noun in v. 18). The word connotes a person who is "without religion," who "fails to worship" (see also Romans 4:5; 5:6; 1 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 4:18; 2 Peter 2:5-6; 3:7).
- (3) They "change the grace of God into a license for immortality." It is a term that connotes especially sins of the flesh: sexual misconduct, drunkenness, gluttony, and so on.
- (4) They "deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord." Probably Jude is thinking of a practical denial of Christ, of people behaving in a manner contrary to what Jesus the Lord demands of his people.

Jude 5-10

Jude's strategy is obvious. By identifying the false teachers with traditional examples of notorious sinners, he moves his readers to reject these infiltrators and, indeed, to regard them with horror.

Three Old Testament Examples of Sin and Judgment (vv. 5-7).

Ancient writers often made their transition from the opening of a letter to its body with what is called a "disclosure formula." It frequently took the form of, "But I want you to know," or, "But let me remind you."

Jude's first example is the desert generation of Israel. Jude reminds his readers that "the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt." However, as Jude's readers and most Christians know, the people whom God delivered from Egypt never got to experience the delights of the Promised Land. Dismayed at the strength of the people already in the land of Canaan, they failed to trust God to give them victory. God therefore sentenced that entire generation of Israelites (with the exception of Joshua and Caleb) to wander in the desert until they had all died off (see Numbers 14).

Jude's first (the Exodus generation) and third (Sodom and Gomorrah) examples of God's judgment are well known from the Old Testament. But not so his second (v. 6): "angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home." This passage is associated with the enigmatic reference in Genesis 6:1-4 to "sons of God" who came down to earth and cohabited with "the daughters of men." Even now, Jude notes, their punishment has begun. "Darkness" is a common way of describing divine punishment in the ancient world.

Verse 7 introduces the third of Jude's warning examples: Sodom and Gomorrah, along with "the surrounding towns." The striking story of God's judgment of these cities had become almost proverbial; they are mentioned often in Jewish tradition and in the New Testament (see, e.g., Luke 17:26-29).

Applications of the Examples to the False Teachers (vv. 8-10)

Jude lists three different sins the false teachers are committing. They "dreaming, pollute flesh," "reject authority," and "blaspheme glories."

(1) "Dreaming, they pollute flesh." The verb used here often refers to the visions that prophets receive, as it does in its only other New Testament occurrence: "Your old men will dream dreams" (Acts 2:17, quoting Joel 2:28). Apparently, then, the false teachers based their immoral behavior on revelatory visions that they claimed to have received.

(2) "They reject authority." Calvin and Luther thought that this meant that the false teachers were rejecting human authority, displaying an arrogant disregard for government and for the leaders of the Christian church.

(3) "They blaspheme glories." As the NIV rendering rightly suggests, "glories" here are "celestial beings," in a word, angels. The word "blaspheme" can also be translated "revile," "belittle." It suggests a disparaging attitude and is often applied to speech or behavior that fails to give God or his representative their due. Yet it makes best sense to identify the "glories" in verse 8 with *evil* angels instead of with good angels.

Perhaps the experience of the Jewish exorcists in Acts 19:13-16 is something of a parallel: Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preached, I command you to come out." ... One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus, I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

I am not suggesting that Jude's false teachers were trying to exorcise demons on their own. But they may have been guilty in a general way of the mistake made by these Jewish exorcists: dismissing the power of influence of evil angels without the authority of Jesus to back it up.

Verse 9 is a notoriously difficult verse. We face two problems: the source for the story Jude refers to, and the application of the story to the false teachers.

(1) The word "archangel," used only one other time in the New Testament (1 Thessalonians 4:16), refers to the highest rank of angel, as Jews developed these ranks in the intertestamental period. We do not find anywhere in the Old Testament or in extant Jewish literature the story that Jude refers to here. However, several early Christian fathers tell us about a book that they were familiar with that contained the story. It is variously called *The Assumption of Moses* or *The Testament of Moses*.

(2) More important for our immediate purposes is the significance of the story for Jude. According to most English translations (including the NIV), the main point is that Michael, archangel though he was, "did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him [Satan]." Presumably Jude's point is that the false teachers are so presumptuous as to do what even Michael, the archangel, refused to do: rebuke, without the Lord's authority and backing, Satan or his associates. For Michael did not himself rebuke Satan; he called on the Lord to do so. The false teachers, however, disparage evil angels on their own authority.

Jude 11-13

Jude launches one more attack against the false teachers. Like the first one, this one also begins with three examples of notorious Old Testament sinners (v. 11). The second part of the paragraph (vv. 12-13) also follows the pattern Jude has established in that, with the word "these," he focuses attention directly on the false teachers, characterizing them in six brief and very negative descriptions.

Three Old Testament Examples (v. 11)

Jude's three Old Testament examples serve to back up his "woe" pronouncement on the false teachers. This word was used especially by the prophets in the Old Testament to announce the pain and distress people would experience as a result of God's judgment on them. Cain, Balaam, and Korah are the three examples.

Jude's first example is Cain, who murdered his brother out of envy. He may be suggesting that as Cain murdered Abel, so the false teachers "murder" the souls of people. In Jewish tradition, however, Cain became a classic example of an ungodly skeptic.

Balaam, the second character in Jude's list, is known in the Bible especially for his greed, an emphasis Jude picks up also by claiming that the false teachers follow the way of Balaam out of a desire for "reward" or "gain." According to the story in Numbers 22-24, Balak, king of Moab, desperate to halt a threatened Israelite invasion, tries to hire Balaam to curse Israel. We know of many traveling teachers in the ancient world who taught people whatever it would pay them to teach; these false teachers may have been doing the same.

Korah's story is told in Numbers 16:1-35. He "became insolent and rose up against Moses" (vv. 1-2), leading 250 other prominent Israelites in rebellion against Moses' leadership. In response, God caused the earth to open up and swallow Korah, his followers, and their households. As early as the time of Moses, Korah had become "a warning sign" to those who might be tempted to rebel against the Lord and his appointed leaders (cf. Numbers 26:9-10). Jude almost certainly cites Korah last (out of canonical order) because of the sudden and spectacular judgment that he and his followers experienced. Such is the fate of the false teachers also, who will be "destroyed" on the Day of the Lord.

Application of the Examples to the False Teachers (vv. 12-13)

Verses 12-13 contain six brief descriptions of these false teachers.

(1) *"These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm."* The NIV "blemishes" is a controversial translation (cf. also NRSV; TEV); the word also means "(hidden) reef" (cf. 2 Peter 2:13; cf. NASB). Jude is suggesting that the false teachers, like a hidden reef that rips the bottom out of a boat, lie in wait to bring destruction on the faithful. The NJB captures the metaphorical significance very well: "They are a dangerous hazard at your community meals." "Community meals" usually included both the celebration of the Lord's Supper and the eating of a regular meal together. The false teachers, Jude implies, continued to participate in these regular community meals without any hesitation. By doing so they posed a real danger to other believer who might be emboldened by their example to think that one could remain a Christian while following such a libertine lifestyle.

(2) *"Shepherds who feed only themselves."* The shepherd is the epitome of a person who selflessly watches out for others. It was therefore a natural term to apply both to the Lord (e.g., Psalm 23; cf. John 10:1-18) and to the leaders of the people of God in the Old Testament (e.g., 2 Samuel 5:2) and in the New (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2). But the false teachers were abandoning their natural responsibility to care for others, thinking only of themselves. Jude is likely alluding to Ezekiel 34:2: "Son of Man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?'" This reference to shepherds may, of course, imply that the false teachers were leaders in the church.

(3) *"They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind."* Jude's last four descriptions of the false teachers are all drawn from the natural world – and, whether intentionally or not, from each of the four regions of the earth, according to the ancients: the air (clouds), the earth (trees), the sea (waves), and the heavens (planets). "Clouds without rain" is a natural metaphor for those who do not deliver what they promise (cf. Proverbs 25:14: "Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of gifts he does not give").

(4) “*Autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted – twice dead.*” A tree that is still without fruit in the autumn has not fulfilled its purpose in being. And so “autumn trees” conveys a point similar to “waterless clouds.” Jude refers to the false teachers’ eventual judgment. The New Testament calls eschatological judgment “the second death” (Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). So these false teachers, Jude may be alleging, will not only die physically; they will also die spiritually and eternally.

(5) “*They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame*” (v. 13a). Jude here is probably dependent on Isaiah 57:20: “But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud.” The word “shame” in the Greek is plural; Jude is thinking of the “shameful deeds” committed by the false teachers.

(6) “*Wandering stars, for whom the blackest darkness has been reserved forever*” (v. 13b). Ancient people believed that the heavens should display order and regularity. They therefore had difficulty in accounting for the planets, which seemed to “wander” across the night sky in no discernible pattern. Jude has again stressed the instability of these people.

Jude 14-25

Jude caps his denunciation of the false teachers with a prophecy. Enoch is a biblical figure, but no Old Testament book contains the prophecy quoted here – or, for that matter, any prophecy of Enoch. But we do find almost these exact words in the Jewish intertestamental book, *1 Enoch*. His apparently authoritative use of a book that is not part of the canon raises some obvious questions. We can understand why Jude chooses to quote this particular prophecy, for it reinforces the two key points that he has made about the false teachers. (1) They are “godless” (or “ungodly,” v. 4; cf. also v. 18). This word occurs three times in the prophecy (cf. v. 15) and may have been what drew Jude’s attention to it in the first place. (2) The false teachers will suffer the Lord’s condemnation. Enoch’s prophecy, of course, foretells the coming of the Lord as judge.

Enoch was an early descendant of Adam through the line of Adam’s son Seth. He appears in the Old Testament only in genealogical lists (Genesis 5:18-24; 1 Chronicles 1:3), but he stands out because of the comment made about him: “Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away” (Genesis 5:24). This verse apparently means that Enoch did not die, but, like Elijah (2 Kings 2:1-13), was transported directly to heaven; this supposition is confirmed by Hebrews 11:5, which reads, “By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away.”

The combination of this extraordinary commendation from God and the almost complete silence of Scripture about him made Enoch a fascinating character to the Jews. We therefore find a number of legends about him in the intertestamental literature; at least two books of apocalyptic visions, written during this period, are attributed to him. It is one of these books, *1 Enoch*, that Jude quotes from. This book was popular in Jude’s day, and both he (cf. v. 6) and Peter (1 Peter 3:19-20; 2 Peter 2:4) allude to it. Enoch was considered to be “the seventh from Adam”; the genealogical list goes Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch (Genesis 5:1-24). Both the author of *1 Enoch* and Jude probably name Enoch the “seventh” because that number

symbolized perfection. Like other New Testament writers, Jude assumes that the prophecies find their fulfillment in Christ and the church he founded.

The subject of Enoch's prophecy is a common theme in Jewish apocalyptic writers: the coming of God to judge the wicked. The text Jude quotes is *1 Enoch* 1:9. In one of the latest translations of this book into English, it reads:

Behold, he will arrive with ten million of the holy ones in order to execute judgment upon all. He will destroy the wicked ones and censure all flesh on account of everything that they have done, that which the sinners and the wicked ones committed against him.

Both the Old Testament (e.g., Daniel 7:10) and the New claim that Jesus will be accompanied at his Parousia by huge numbers of angels (cf. Matthew 25:31).

The false teachers are “grumblers and faultfinders.” Who are they grumbling against and finding fault with? Church leaders, some say. But the biblical background of the term “grumbler” suggests that these false teachers are directing their complaints against God himself. The word used here often occurs in Old Testament passages that depict Israelites “grumbling” against God for bringing the people out of Egypt into the inhospitable desert (see, e.g., Exodus 16:7-12; 18:3; Numbers 14:27-29; 17:5, 10).

Jude's second description of the false teachers in verse 16 picks up the reference to their “ungodly acts” from the Enoch prophecy: “They follow their own evil desires.” These evil desires probably encompass both the false teachers' sexual lust and greed (see vv. 8, 10-11). According to the NIV, Jude's third accusation against the false teachers here is that “they boast about themselves.”

Jude's final criticism returns to the issue of the false teachers' greed, which he has briefly alluded to in verse 11. He employs here a biblical idiom that denotes partiality or favoritism.

1 Enoch has never been given official canonical status by any religious body. It has never been in the Jewish canon, nor in the Apocrypha (those books accepted by the Roman Catholic church but rejected by Protestants). But doesn't Jude's use of *1 Enoch* create, then, a problems for our belief that God has inspired only those books contained between the two covers of our Bibles and that only these books are to be used as an authoritative source of doctrine?

Several church fathers considered *1 Enoch* to be an inspired book based on the reference here in Jude. Others took the opposite tack: Because Jude quoted a noncanonical book, Jude did not belong in the canon. Augustine thought that Jude's reference showed that *1 Enoch* was inspired at some points, but he argued that this did not mean that the entire book was inspired. It is crucial to note that Jude does not refer to *1 Enoch* as Scripture; that is, the critical word “Scripture” is not used here.

In verse 17-23 Jude shows that he is now resuming the topic of the beginning of the letter: the way Christians should respond to false teaching. Specifically, Jude tells the believers to do three things. (1) They are to remember that the apostles themselves had predicted the kind of false

teaching they are now experiencing (vv. 17-19). From a human standpoint, these false teachers have “secretly slipped in” (v. 4). But God knew all along that they were coming. (2) Jude’s readers are to devote themselves to their own spiritual growth (vv. 20-21). (3) Jude’s readers are to reach out to those affected by the false teaching (vv. 22-23).

A Reminder of Apostolic Teaching (vv. 17-19)

“In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.” We have no prophecy from an apostle using just these words. The closest is 2 Peter 3:3: “In the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desire.” Just in case we may have missed the point, Jude removes all doubt by adding that these false teachers “do not have the Spirit.” As possessing a “soul” is the invariable mark of a living person, so possessing the Spirit of God is the invariable mark of being a redeemed person (see Romans 8:8-10).

A Call to Stand Fast (vv. 20-21)

We have in verses 20-21 four separate commands:

- (1) “build yourselves up in your most holy faith;”
- (2) “pray in the Holy Spirit;”
- (3) “keep yourselves in God’s love;”
- (4) “wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.”

The frequent New Testament use of the imagery of “building” to describe the spiritual development of the community probably comes from the idea that the Christian church forms God’s new temple (1 Corinthians 3:9-15; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-10).

A Call to Reach Out (vv. 22-23)

It would be easy for the faithful to shun such people or lambaste them for their doubts. But Jude wants the faithful to show mercy to them. Christians themselves have received God’s unmerited mercy (see v. 2); they should display a similar mercy to people who are wavering. For mercy is far more likely than harsh rebuke to keep them within the fold of the orthodox faith.

We should note that what is absent from the end of Jude (vv. 24-25) is the typical matters, such as greetings and prayer requests, that close New Testament letters. The omission of these typical epistolary forms gives Jude the flavor of a sermon. Indeed, a doxology was often used in Judaism to conclude sermons, and so Jude’s use of it here fits well.