

Jude: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] The Book of Jude Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James. To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ, may mercy, peace and love be multiplied to you.

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord Jesus Christ.

Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe, and the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.

Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

[1 : 11] Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones. But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, The Lord rebuke you.

But these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively. Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain, and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error, and perished in Korah's rebellion.

These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves, waterless clouds swept along by winds, fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted, wild waves of the sea casting up the foam of their own shame, wandering stars for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.

It was about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.

These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires. They are loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage. But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[2 : 45] They said to you, In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions. It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.

But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith, and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.

And have mercy on those who doubt, save others by snatching them out of the fire, to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garments stained by the flesh. Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God our Saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority before all time, and now and forever.

Amen. The similarities between the book of Jude and 2 Peter are quite obvious, especially between their respective cause. Jude verse 4 to 18, and 2 Peter chapter 2 verse 1 to chapter 3 verse 3.

The similarities are so pronounced that either one of them must be presumed to have used the other, or they both used a common source. Of these, by far the most likely position is that there was no common source, but that Jude came first, and 2 Peter incorporated and developed much of its material.

[4 : 05] For instance, in 2 Peter we see the thread of God's preservation of the righteous being introduced alongside the theme of the destruction of the wicked. The epistle seems to have come from a time when the ministry of the apostles had ended, at least among those to whom it is addressed, as verse 17 implies.

However, their ministry is well remembered. Indeed, the purpose of the epistle is, in large measure, that of stirring up its readers to remember what they had been taught earlier, at a critical moment.

I suspect that we should date the epistle to the final years of the 60s AD. The most probable author of the epistle was Jude the brother of Jesus, referred to in Mark chapter 6 verse 3.

James, another brother of Jesus, was an early leader of the church in Jerusalem, and the most likely author of the epistle of James. His introduction of himself as a servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James, is interesting.

The James to whom he refers was clearly very well known. James, the brother of John, had been killed back in Acts chapter 12. The next most famous James was James, the brother of Jesus.

[5 : 09] He is described as a slave of Jesus Christ. Servant is a bit too soft, but the brother of James. This contrast between the relationships that he has with his two brothers is noteworthy.

He doesn't appeal to some brotherly privilege relative to Christ. The addressees are beloved in God the Father, upheld by his love, which preserves them for his son Jesus Christ.

Jude wishes his hearers mercy, peace and love. This is the only occasion that love is mentioned at the beginning of such an epistle. He had wanted to write a more general treatment of the salvation that they had received, and which they awaited.

But as false teachers arose, he needed to speak to that situation more urgently. At stake is the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. The church has received a deposit of truth, and must jealously guard it from pollution with error.

There are persons within the church who have crept in. They are seeming members of the church, but they do not share its spirit. No one noticed the sowing of the tares, but now that they are growing, they have become unavoidably apparent and active.

[6 : 13] However, the rise of such false teachers is not a surprise to God. Their rise was determined long beforehand, and occurs according to prophecy in precedent. Jesus had foretold the rise of such false teachers in the Olivet Discourse, and then there was Old Testament prophecy and typology.

They are distinguished by their ungodliness, their licentiousness, and their denial of the lordship of Jesus. They live without reference to God. Their lives are characterised by debauchery and by sexual immorality and excess.

They denied the lordship of Christ, most probably practically in resisting his authoritative claim over their lives, but perhaps also in a denial of his divinity. They perverted grace into licence, twisting the teaching of the gospel into an excuse for sin.

He presents his readers with three Old Testament types for their situation. The exodus from Egypt, the fall of the angelic sons of God prior to the flood, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

And the use of these particular examples finds plenty of precedent in Jewish extra-canonical works. In the book of Sirach, chapter 16, verses 7-10, In the book of Jubilees, chapter 20, verses 5-6, And he told them of the judgment of the giants, and the judgment of the Sodomites, how they had been judged on account of their wickedness, and had died on account of their fornication and uncleanness, and mutual corruption through fornication.

[7 : 53] And guard yourself from all fornication and uncleanness, and from all pollution of sin, lest ye make our name a curse, and your whole life a hissing, and all your sons to be destroyed by the sword, and ye become a curse like Sodom, and all your remnant as the sons of Gomorrah.

Particularly important when reading Jude is to recognise that while it is inspired, and non-canonical works are not, the New Testament should not be hermetically sealed off from the world of first-century Judaism.

The scriptures were not written in a vacuum, in detachment from the world into which they were delivered. To understand books like Jude, it really matters that we have some awareness of wider Jewish writings.

Many of the New Testament writings would primarily have been heard within such a world of texts and thought. This also matters when interpreting the book of Jude. When we appreciate that the story of the watchers and the giants was a key evidence for God's judgement in other Jewish texts of the time, in association with the wilderness generation, and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, it starts to strain credulity that Jude isn't referring to these traditional readings of Genesis chapter 6 verses 1 to 4.

This is strengthened by the reference to the prophecy of Enoch a few verses later. While this can trouble some people, it is by far the most natural reading of 1 Peter chapter 3 verses 19 to 20, 2 Peter chapter 2 verse 4, and Jude 6.

[9 : 18] Had Peter and Jude not meant to refer to this tradition of the angelic watchers and their sin with human women, they would have been inviting all sorts of confusion in their hearers by the way that they spoke.

The first of the three cautionary examples is that of Israel coming out of Egypt. This particular example is used elsewhere and developed in far greater length in places such as Hebrews chapters 3 and 4 and 1 Corinthians chapter 10 verses 1 to 11.

In those verses we read, For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea and all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink for they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them and the rock was Christ.

Nevertheless, with most of them, God was not pleased for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were, as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and 23,000 fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer.

[10 : 38] Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. In that passage, Paul wants his hearers to recognise the resemblances between themselves and the people of the wilderness generation, and Jude has something similar in mind here.

Verse 5 raises textual questions, as there are different versions, some with Jesus and others with Lord. Jesus is likely the stronger of the two positions on merely textual grounds.

However, it is a highly surprising reading. It identifies Jesus as the one who brought Israel out of Egypt, which isn't what we would expect, even though Paul presents Christ as being personally active in the deliverance, identifying him with the rock that followed them, and arguing that they put Christ to the test before they were destroyed by the serpents.

Perhaps we might also see some identification of Christ as the angel of the Lord that leads them out. Both textually and theologically, this would be a possible reading, although it is unexpected enough to make us wonder whether the alternative reading was the original.

Those who did not believe were destroyed. They failed to enter into the promised land and perished in the wilderness. Even though they participated in the salvation from Egypt, they did not enter into the promised land.

[11 : 53] Jude wants his hearers to recognise the parallels between false believers who are among them, but who will not enter into the blessings of the age to come. The angels left their proper dwelling, their appointed domain.

This traditional reading of Genesis chapter 6, verses 1 to 4, is found in non-canonical texts like in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs or the Book of Jubilees or the Book of First Enoch.

In the Testament of Naphtali, for instance, a very similar connection is drawn between the angels prior to the flood and to Sodom. But ye shall not be so, my children, recognising in the firmament, in the earth and in the sea, and in all created things, the Lord who made all things, that ye become not as Sodom, which changed the order of nature.

In like manner the watchers also changed the order of their nature, whom the Lord cursed at the flood, on whose account he made the earth without inhabitants and fruitless. Both relate the sin of Sodom and the sin of the watchers.

While Sodom is judged for other sins too, the perversity of the sexual behaviour of Sodom is especially focused upon in Jude. This perversity has different facets to it. Both the watchers and the men of Sodom go after strange flesh.

[13 : 05] The angelic watchers pursue relations with human women, and the men of Sodom pursue violent homosexual relations with the angelic visitors, when men should only have sexual relations with human women.

The manner of their relations is violent, and the most extreme form of inhospitality. But the object of homosexual relations is itself presented as an abomination by Jude, as it is the objects of their violent intentions, not just the violent intentions themselves, that he holds out as examples of their perversity.

In some way, these examples are comparable with the false teachers. They are characterised by the same sort of unbelief that characterised the Israelites in the wilderness. They are also characterised by the gross sexual perversity and rejection of station that characterised the angelic watchers and the men of Sodom.

He elaborates upon their sins in verses 8-10, connecting them with the sins of the groups previously mentioned, with in like manner. Here we discover that the false teachers seem to have appealed to dreams to justify their behaviour.

The three sins he lists are sexual perversions, rejection of authority, presumably that of Christ and his servants, and blaspheming of angels. The three groups mentioned earlier were guilty of these sins in various ways.

[14 : 19] The Israelites were guilty of rejection of the authority of God and of Moses and Aaron, and of sexual immorality. The men of Sodom were guilty of the rejection of God's authority, mistreatment of the angelic visitors, and sexual perversion.

And the angelic watchers were guilty of rejection of God's authority, of sexual sin with human women, and also of the violation of the proper relative station of angels and humans. In contrast to the preparedness of the false teachers to blaspheme the glorious ones, Jude gives the example of Michael the archangel, who in contention with the devil himself, did not revile him, but called for the Lord to rebuke him.

There is a close parallel here between this account and Zechariah chapter 3, verses 1 to 2. Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him.

And the Lord said to Satan, The Lord rebuke you, O Satan. The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you. Is not this a brand plucked from the fire? However, the particular story to which Jude refers seems to be in an apocryphal work, The Assumption of Moses.

The story effectively illustrates Jude's point, whether or not he believed it to be true. There is no reason to believe that he considered the book to be canonical, much as Paul quoted pagan poets and alluded to extra-canonical Jewish traditions, such as that of Jannes and Jambres being the opponents of Moses in 2 Timothy chapter 3, verse 8.

[15 : 45] Jude could quote extra-canonical works without claiming that they were divinely inspired in the way that scripture is. Non-canonical is not synonymous with false, nor is it synonymous with sinful, and the church has long considered certain non-canonical texts to be of great value, or even in certain quarters to be penumbrally related to the canonical texts themselves.

Why is blasphemy of evil angels an issue? Some people, when they see sin and authority figures, love to speak of them in a way that dishonours and reviles them, not showing the respect that is due to their office and authority.

How many people speak of politicians, for instance, or how rebellious children might speak of their parents are examples of this. Blasphemy in this context is a lower form of blasphemy than the blaspheming of God.

It is extremely serious, nonetheless, as it represents a willful rejection of authority, which is ultimately from God. To speak in a way that dishonours our political leaders, for instance, is one thing.

It is quite another to speak in a way that dishonours angelic authorities. That is to play a game that is entirely out of our league, manifesting only our presumption and pride. Jude declares woe upon the false teachers, suggesting that they are walking in the way of Cain.

[16 : 58] Cain was the first murderer, killing his brother Abel in his anger and envy. However, Cain's sin began with his presumptuous approach to God, approaching God on his own terms and being angry when God did not accept his offering, but accepted the offering of his brother.

Balaam was a mercenary prophet who perverted the way of a prophet for the sake of money. The false teachers were likely travelling teachers who sought money from those that they taught, perverting their message to open their hearers' wallets.

Korah rejected the authority of Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. He declared that all Israelites were equally holy and that no one should be placed over others. Jude describes the character of the false teachers further.

They are like hidden reefs in their congregations, people upon whom the unwary might run aground. When they gathered together in their shared meals, presumably followed by the Lord's Supper, these individuals were brazenly participating with them.

They are described as shepherds feeding themselves. Jude here alludes back to Ezekiel chapter 34, verses 2 and 8. Thus says the Lord God, Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep?

[18 : 05] And then, The shepherds have fed themselves and have not fed my sheep. By describing them as false shepherds, Jude suggests that they may have been pastors. They are waterless clouds swept along by winds.

They promise life-giving water, but they disappoint. They are like trees that never deliver fruit, no matter how late into the season of harvest you wait. They are twice dead, not just dead in their original state of spiritual insensitivity, but facing a second death too.

This is because they are uprooted. They have no grounding in the one from whom we draw our life. They toss around like the restless sea, incessantly casting up the foam of their wickedness.

This is likely an allusion to Isaiah chapter 57, verse 20. But the wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. They are wandering stars, heavenly bodies that stray off their course and cannot be looked to for any sure direction.

Their final destination is the inky blackness of God's wrath. Jude references the prophecy of Enoch here, seemingly quoting the non-canonical and pseudepigraphical book of 1 Enoch, specifically chapter 1, verse 9.

[19 : 15] Even though at first glance it might appear otherwise, in quoting the text in such a way, we need not assume that Jude believed that 1 Enoch was an inspired text, just that this particular quotation was true in some sense.

Perhaps he used it because the false teachers made use of 1 Enoch themselves. Did he believe that these were actually the words of the historical Enoch? Possibly, but by no means necessarily. Presumably it was widely known that the book was not by the actual historical Enoch, but was a fictional text that was nonetheless of theological insight, being the product of a deeply scripturally formed imagination, much as many Christians might regard a text like John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress.

Part of the challenge for scholars in such cases is working out such things as the conventions that surround genres, the ways that certain books were regarded, and how they were used. For instance, when Paul refers to Jannes and Jambres, should we read that as a claim that the historical characters that opposed Moses were named Jannes and Jambres?

Or is he merely referring to a traditional elaboration of a story, much as many Christians might speak of three wise men called Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar, without assuming its historical veracity?

Whatever is the case, Jude relates the judgment that Enoch, whether the historical person or his fictional portrayal, prophesied concerning the wicked to the false teachers that he is condemning.

[20 : 38] The prophecy itself is a fairly generic one, which draws upon elements found at various other points in scripture. God's coming and judgment in the prophecy is described in a way reminiscent of Deuteronomy chapter 33, verse 2, where God's glory at Sinai is described.

He said, Similar statements are found in the New Testament, in places such as Matthew chapter 25, verse 31, When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.

The wicked will be judged for their ungodly works and their ungodly words, which they have spoken against God. Jude describes the false teachers as grumblers and malcontents, like the Israelites in the wilderness, and rebellious characters such as Korah.

They are critical people who stir up trouble. They are driven by their sinful desires, rather than by any commitment to edifying others. They are arrogant, boastful in their rebellion, while strategically flattering others to gain a following and an advantage.

The rise of such false teachers was foretold by the apostles and before them by Christ himself in the Olivet Discourse and elsewhere. For instance, Paul spoke of this to the Ephesian elders in Acts chapter 20, verses 29 to 30.

[22 : 02] I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them.

The rise of such false teachers is a characteristic feature of the last days. Their rise will be a cause of division within the church, as their affections are earthly and their lives are unspiritual.

Jude, however, hopes for better things than his hearers. He exhorts them to renewed vigilance and faithfulness in this situation. There is a Trinitarian character to his exhortation, in contrast to the false teachers who are devoid of the Spirit.

They must build themselves up in the faith and pray in the Holy Spirit, drawing upon the Spirit's resources as they draw near to God in their prayer. They must keep themselves in the love of God the Father, abiding in his love by living in a way that ensures that their fellowship with him is not broken by unrepented sin and that they don't become alienated from him by spiritual neglect.

They must wait for the mercy of Jesus Christ, sustaining themselves in the hope of the salvation that they await. They must be watchful over each other. Three types of persons are mentioned.

[23 : 13] They should be merciful to those who doubt, people whose faith is uncertain. Such persons should be gently persuaded of the truth when they have been misled by false teachers. The second type seem to be more seriously affected and more urgent and immediate action is required to snatch them from the fire.

The final group are in the most serious state of all. They must be treated with mercy, but also with a deep awareness of the gravity and danger of their condition and how desperately contaminating it can be.

In these last two cases, there might be some allusion to Zechariah chapter 3. In such a perilous climate, filled with false teachings and misled brothers and sisters, how can anyone remain faithful?

Jude concludes the epistle by looking to God for this. It is God who is able to preserve us from stumbling, shepherding us safely through the dangers of this present age until he presents us unblemished before him as pure sacrifices offered up to him.

He will do this with great joy. He does not wish to see us fall. He rejoices in our overcoming and will give us the strength that we need to endure as we look to him. To him belong all praise and authority throughout all ages.

[24 : 22] A question to consider. Considering the stories of the flood, the rebellious angels and sinful humanity, and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, what might have made them stand out as the primary paradigms of divine judgment?

What further lessons might we draw from them as we examine them more closely?