

INTRODUCTION

One writer calls Jude “the most neglected book in the New Testament.”¹ One seldom hears sermons, Bible classes, or devotional readings from the book. Part of this neglect may be due to the brevity of the letter. Many Christians have trouble finding it tucked between 3 John and Revelation. It may be neglected because most of its content is also found in 2 Peter. The strangeness of the letter itself also explains its obscurity in the church. Jude quotes from books not found in the Bible. Even many of his biblical allusions are to lesser known Old Testament stories.

In spite of its strangeness, Jude has a powerful message for the contemporary church. In a culture that is increasingly apathetic or even antagonistic toward the Christian faith, in an era when pluralism and acceptance are the only ultimate virtues, we need to hear Jude’s reminder that there are times the faith must be defended. In Jude’s day as well as our own, that defense calls us to oppose false teaching, to live lives of faith and love, to pray in the Spirit, and to save those who falter.

AUTHORSHIP

The author calls himself “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James.” Jude or Judas is a form of Judah, one of the sons of Jacob and the tribes of Israel. There are four men named Jude (or Judas) mentioned in the New Testament who might be the author of the letter.

¹Douglas J. Rowston, “The Most Neglected Book in the New Testament,” *NTS* 21 (1975): 554-563.

1. Jude, the brother of Jesus. Mark 6:3 lists four brothers of Jesus, including James and Jude. For more on the brothers of Jesus, see the Introduction to James.

2. Jude, the apostle. In Luke 6:16 and Acts 1:13, he is called “Judas of James.” The usual Greek usage (as reflected in most English versions including the NIV) is to translate this, “Judas son of James.” If it means “brother of James,” it might be a reference to the author of this letter. However, the author of Jude does not call himself an apostle and even quotes the apostles in a way that implies he is not of their number (v. 17).

3. Judas Barsabbas. He is briefly mentioned in Acts 15:22. He may have been a co-worker of James in Jerusalem. If so, “brother of James” would mean Christian brother, not physical brother. Although possible, this use of “brother of” is unlikely.

4. Judas of Damascus. After his vision on the road, Saul stays with him in Damascus (Acts 9:11). We are not sure he is even a believer. Even if he is, he is too obscure a figure to write an authoritative letter to a church.

Besides these four, there are two other possibilities followed by certain scholars.

5. It is written by an unknown Jude, brother to an equally unknown James. Of course, this is possible but seems unlikely.

6. It is pseudonymous, that is, written by an anonymous writer who uses the name Jude to enhance the authority of his writing. Although this practice was known in the ancient world, particularly among students of famous philosophers, no proven pseudonymous letters have been found. The primary argument for pseudonymous authorship is that the Greek of Jude is too good to be written by a Palestinian peasant. However, there is some question as to the high literary quality of the letter; the vocabulary is advanced, but the grammar is fairly simple. More recent discoveries have also shown that first-century Palestine was more heavily influenced by Hellenistic Greek culture than was previously thought. It was not out of the question for a resident of Nazareth to write good Greek.

A second argument for pseudonymous authorship is that certain passages in Jude sound as if they come from the late first or early second century, too late for the biblical brother of Jesus to have written them. For more, see the discussion below on the date of Jude.

Although one cannot be certain, it is most likely that the author is the brother of Jesus and of James. Until quite recently, most scholars held he was the author. The content of the letter is consistent with this position. The author is well respected, familiar with the Old Testament and Jewish tradition, and knows the teaching of Jesus.

DATE, OCCASION, SETTING

If Jude, the brother of Jesus, wrote the letter, then it must date somewhere between 55-80. If “brother of James” implies James was still alive, then it dates before 62.

Some think two passages in Jude point to a date later than the lifetime of the Lord’s brother. Jude 3 speaks of the faith as a body of doctrine delivered to the saints, a situation (some say) that could not have existed before the end of the first century. However, Paul uses similar language when he writes, so it does not necessarily reflect a later time (see the discussion below on v. 3).

In the other passage, Jude urges his readers to “remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold” (v. 17). The argument is that this implies the apostolic period was in the fairly distant past. However, the next verse reads, “They said to you . . . ,” implying that Jude’s readers had direct contact with the apostles. At best, the language is ambiguous and does not clearly indicate a late date.

The specific occasion for writing is to warn of false teachers who have crept into the church. It is impossible to identify these false teachers with any known heretical group in the early church. Some have suggested they follow an early form of Gnosticism. The early Christian leader Irenaeus (130-200)

says Cain and Korah were heroes to some Gnostic groups, so perhaps Jude is refuting that position by using them as negative examples (v. 11). Denigrating angels (v. 8) and even Jesus (v. 4) may have been characteristic of some Gnostics. However, our knowledge of early Gnosticism is quite limited, so we cannot be certain that Jude's opponents are Gnostic.

It is wiser to stay with Jude's own description of his opponents. They have misunderstood grace and perverted it into license (v. 4). They are antinomian ("against law"). They believe they are so advanced spiritually (perhaps as evidenced by their dreams and visions, v. 8) that they no longer are subject to God's law. Thinking themselves free from all moral restraint (v. 8), they pollute their bodies (v. 8), care only for themselves (v. 12), and end up like unreasoning animals (v. 10). These specific charges indicate Jude is fighting actual false teachers who have infiltrated a congregation, and he is not simply talking of heretics in general.² The false teachers he describes are similar to those in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy 1:6-7,19; 4:1,7; 6:3-5, 20; 2 Timothy 1:13; 2:14,16, 25; 3:1,13; 4:3-4; Titus 1:10,16; 3:9) and the Epistles of John (1 John 2:18,22,26; 4:1; 2 John 7; 3 John 9).

We have no clear indication of the location of Jude or of the church to whom he writes. Some scholars suggest a setting in Alexandria, Egypt;³ others, Syria or Palestine.

RELATION TO 2 PETER

Jude 4-16 and 2 Peter 2:1-18 are so similar that one must account for them in one of the following ways:

²See Stephan J. Joubert, "Persuasion in the Letter of Jude," *JSNT* 58 (1995): 75-87. However, Frederik Wisse, "The Epistle of Jude in the History of Heresiology," in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Alexander Bohlig*, ed. by Martin Krause, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), p. 142, argues "The author is not trying to combat heresies within the church. . . . The author's purpose is to inform Christians everywhere that the enemies of the last days have arrived."

³John J. Gunther, "The Alexandrian Epistle of Jude," *NTS* 30 (1984): 549-562.

1. Coincidence. While possible, the extent of the similarity makes this unlikely. Of course, God could have inspired them both separately to write this way; but since inspiration is not dictation, one of the explanations below seems more likely.

2. They each independently use another document. If so, the document has not survived. Since almost all of Jude is similar to 2 Peter 2:1-18, then Jude would have added little of his own work to the document he copied. This is unlikely.

3. Jude adapted 2 Peter 2:1-18. If so, he would have shortened what Peter said. Usually, however, later writers expand on their sources.

4. Jude was written first, and 2 Peter 2:1-18 is an expansion of Jude's material to fit a different situation. Again, one cannot be certain, but this seems most likely.

Since there are so many parallels to 2 Peter 2:1-18 in Jude, the commentary will not refer to those passages in lists of cross-references. Instead, the reader is urged to read Jude with 2 Peter open beside it.

JUDE'S USE OF NONBIBLICAL WRITINGS

Jude 1:9 refers to the story of Michael the archangel disputing with Satan over the body of Moses. This story is not found in the Old Testament but in a book called *The Assumption of Moses* written early in the first century. Jude 1:14-15 quotes directly from the *Book of Enoch* (also known as *I Enoch*), a work written by several authors in the second century B.C. These two books are part of what is called the pseudepigrapha, that is, writings attributed to but not actually written by famous persons of the Old Testament. Although other New Testament writers may have known these books and have been influenced by them, Jude alone quotes directly from one of them and identifies the quotation as a prophecy.

Through the centuries many Christians have been disturbed by the idea that Jude would quote from a nonbiblical book. Tertullian (A.D. 160-220) and a few other early Christian

writers argued that *1 Enoch* was inspired since Jude quotes it as Scripture. Jerome (A.D. 342-420) tells us that others rejected the inspiration of Jude because he quotes *Enoch*. Both conclusions are based on the unwarranted assumption that Jude is quoting *Enoch* as inspired Scripture.

However, other New Testament writers (as well as Jewish authors) quote nonbiblical sources because their words are true and valuable, not because they consider them inspired. Paul quotes from three Greek poets, Menander (1 Corinthians 15:33), Epimenedes, and Aratus (Acts 17:28). He introduces another quotation from Epimenedes by calling him a “prophet” (Titus 1:12). Obviously Paul did not think the writings of Epimenedes were inspired; Epimenedes was a “prophet” in the sense that the Cretans accepted him as such, and the particular statement Paul quoted (“Cretans are always liars . . .”) was true.

In the same way, Jude may have had great respect for the *Book of Enoch* and have considered its prediction of the coming one as a true prophecy without accepting it as inspired Scripture (just as Christians today quote C.S. Lewis or other authors to make a point without claiming they are inspired). His references to *The Assumption of Moses* and to the *Book of Enoch* should not lessen our respect for the authority of Jude. He quotes these writings because, like Jude, they teach that God will ultimately judge false teachers who lead others astray.⁴

LITERARY THEMES AND STRATEGIES

The central theme of Jude is judgment of false teachers. Jude is best understood as a Jewish-Christian apocalyptic writing. Apocalyptic literature focuses on the end of the world and final judgment. Jude’s examples of judgment are drawn

⁴For more on why Jude quotes these writings, see Walter M. Dunnett, “The Hermeneutics of Jude and 2 Peter: The Use of Ancient Jewish Traditions,” *JETS* 31 (September 1988): 287-292.

primarily from the Old Testament (Israel in the wilderness, Cain, Balaam, Korah) but also from other Jewish apocalyptic literature such as the *Assumption of Moses* and the *Book of Enoch*. Jude follows a commentary pattern as he cites these past examples and then applies them to the false teachers of his day.

Literarily, Jude is fond of grouping three related items:

Called, loved, kept (v. 1).

Mercy, peace, love (v. 2).

Godless, change grace, deny Jesus (v. 4)

Israel, angels, Sodom (vv. 5-7).

Pollute, reject, slander (v. 8).

Cain, Balaam, Korah (v. 11).

Clouds, trees, waves (vv. 12-13).

Faith, love, hope (vv. 20-21).

Be merciful, snatch from fire, show mercy (vv. 22-23).

Before all ages, now, forevermore (v. 25)

He also contrasts his readers with the false teachers through the repeated use of two phrases: “dear friends” for his readers (vv. 3,17,20), and “these men” or “certain men” for the false teachers (vv. 4,8,10,12,14,16,19).

OUTLINE

- I. ADDRESS AND GREETING – 1-2**
- II. REASON FOR WRITING – 3-4**
- III. THE JUDGMENT OF THE UNGODLY – 5-19**
 - A. Three Biblical Examples of Ungodliness – 5-7**
 - B. Application of Examples to Jude’s Opponents – 8-10**
 - C. Three Further Biblical Examples of Ungodliness – 11**
 - D. Metaphors from Nature Applied to the Ungodly – 12-13**
 - E. Enoch’s Prophecy against the Ungodly – 14-16**
 - F. The Warning of the Apostles – 17-19**
- IV. A CALL TO FAITH, LOVE,
AND MERCY – 20-23**
- V. DOXOLOGY – 24-25**