

# Overview of Jude

## The Neglected Epistle

The message and world of Jude are strangely unfamiliar to modern readers. Whether among lay people, pastors, teachers, or seminarians, this unfamiliarity is conspicuous. With good reason, the letter of Jude has been called “the most neglected book in the NT” (Rowston: 554). Most readers of the Bible, puzzled by cryptic references to Enoch, Michael the archangel, the devil, and a slate of OT characters, are acquainted at best with the letter’s doxology.

Although most of the NT epistles mirror something of the historical situation and pastoral needs lying behind their writing, Jude offers little in the way of clues. Comprehensive neglect of Jude extends even to serious students of the NT. In the main, biblical scholarship has bypassed a thorough treatment of the letter. Where it is studied, Jude is usually lumped together with the other catholic (general) epistles or subsumed under the study of 2 Peter, because of parallel material in the two letters. The assumption typically follows that Jude and 2 Peter reflect nearly identical historical occasions, with the later writing—normally held to be 2 Peter—presumably exhibiting either a considerable lack of literary originality or the need to “smooth out” particular features in Jude.

The epistle of Jude is an impassioned exhortation to a church that is being compromised. The writer’s concerns, while touching on doctrine, are foremost ethical in nature. Posing a threat to the Christian community is a self-indulgent group that spurns spiritual authority and arrogantly appropriates its own authority.

The reader finds it impossible to identify precisely who these schismatics are. Nevertheless, Jude grants us insight into the dangers they pose. They retain a religious guise while supporting a lifestyle of licentiousness. Jude further assumes a minimal acquaintance among his readers with Jewish apocalyptic tradition that is characteristic of the intertestamental period [*Apocalyptic Literature*]. For this reason, the fate of the ungodly is spelled out in apocalyptic terms. To this end, the writer employs themes rooted squarely in the OT—election, predestination and divine foreknowledge, apostasy, theophany (a visible manifestation of God), judgment by fire, the day of the Lord, and divine kingship.

The literary form of Jude is just as important as its message. Effective literature embodies meaning in a way that allows the reader to experience it. With passion and great eloquence, Jude engages his audience. He effectively exploits the imaginative and sensory dimensions of language. Taken together, graphic symbolism, wordplay, frequent alliteration, parallelism, the use of triplets, typology, midrash (explanation), and woe-cry all add force to the writer's burden as he addresses pastoral needs of the Christian community. The modern reader becomes witness to a literary-rhetorical artist at work (Watson: 32-76; Wolthuis: 126-134; J. D. Charles, 1993b: 25-48)—all this within the incredibly brief span of only twenty-five verses.

### Structure of the Epistle

In considering the structure of Jude, one is struck by the writer's repeated use of particular catchwords. These terms are rhetorically significant and not arbitrarily chosen (Bauckham, 1983:3-6; J. D. Charles, 1993b: 30-32). In a mere twenty-five verses, nine terms occur five times or more, with five of these appearing seven or more times (J. D. Charles, 1993b: 30). Consider the following survey of vocabulary, based on the Greek text:

- ungodly/ungodliness: Jude 4, 15 (3 x), 18
- you: 3 (3 x), 5 (2 x), 12, 17, 18, 20 (2 x), 21 (yourselves), 24
- keep/guard: 1, 6 (2 x), 13, 21, 24
- these: 4 (some), 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 19
- Lord: 4, 5, 9, 14, 17, 21, 25
- holy: 3, 14, 20 (2 x), 24 (blameless)
- love/beloved: 1, 2, 3, 12, 17, 20, 21
- mercy/show mercy: 2, 21, 22, 23
- judgment/condemnation: 4, 6, 9, 15

A conspicuous use not only of catchwords but conjunctions as well reflects conscious deliberation on the part of the writer in the structuring of his material. Consider the logical progression of Jude's argumentation within sections of material as well as between them:

- Jude 1-2, greeting: To those who are called, . . . beloved . . .
- 3-4, occasion/purpose: *For* certain individuals have slipped in . . .
- 5-19, illustrative: *Now* I wish to remind you . . .  
     paradigms, reminder: *for* the Lord destroyed . . .  
                                   *and* the angels who did not keep . . .  
                                   *but rather* abandoned . . .  
                                   *just as* Sodom and Gomorrah . . .  
                                   gave themselves over . . .  
                                   *Yet* in the same manner,  
                                   these dreamers also defile . . .  
                                   *But* Michael did not dare . . .  
                                   *but rather* he said . . .  
                                   *yet* these blaspheme . . .  
                                   *for* they walk . . .  
                                   *Indeed*, Enoch . . . prophesied . . .  
                                   *but* you, beloved, remember . . .  
                                   *for* they said . . .
- 20-23, exhortation: *But* you, beloved, build yourselves . . .  
                                   pray . . .  
                                   keep yourselves . . .  
                                   *and* . . . be merciful . . .  
                                   *and* save . . .  
                                   *and* show mercy . . .
- 24-25, closing: *Now* to the One is able . . .

### Literary Character

In its own right, Jude is a remarkable piece of literature. Rich and original in style and vocabulary, this short letter is “filled with flowing words of heavenly grace” (Origen, *Comm. in Ev. Sec. Matt.* 17.30 [Migne, *PG*, 13.1571]). It not only displays an astounding brevity but a thorough acquaintance with and calculated use of Jewish literary sources. The literary milieu of Jude is chiefly Palestinian Jewish-Christian. For his purpose, the writer marshals extracanonical source material—notably, 1 Enoch (mid-second century B.C.–A.D. first century) and the Assumption of Moses (first or second century)—as well as OT figures. He frames it all in a concise, well-conceived polemic that exhorts the faithful and warns the unfaithful.

Although not a single explicit citation from the OT is to be found in Jude, the letter is nonetheless replete with prophetic typology. No fewer than nine subjects—unbelieving Israel, the fallen angels, Sodom

and Gomorrah, Michael the archangel, Moses, Cain, Balaam, Korah, and Enoch—are employed against ungodly figures of this type. The ungodly have “wormed their way in” (Kelly: 248) among the faithful and thus pose a danger to the believing community. It is these unfaithful (Jude 4, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 19) who are the focus of Jude’s invective.

The epistle of Jude bears some similarity to the commentary on the OT found in the *pesharim* or commentaries of the Qumran community (Ellis: 226; Bauckham, 1983:4-5,46-47; 1988:303-305). Jude links types from the past with corollaries in the present, to confront need prophetically and pastorally. This is achieved logistically, as already noted, by the use of catchwords—e.g., *these*, *keep*, *ungodly*, *judgment*, *error*, *blaspheme*—which form links in Jude’s polemical argument.

Commentators have traditionally focused attention on both the notable literary parallels in Jude and 2 Peter as well the order in which these appear:

- a greeting of peace being multiplied (Jude 2 // 2 Pet. 1:2)
- denial of Christ’s lordship (1 // 2:1)
- fallen angels imprisoned in chains of darkness, awaiting judgment (6 // 2:4)
- Sodom and Gomorrah (7 // 2:6)
- defiling flesh, despising authority, blaspheming angelic beings (8 // 2:10-11)
- angelic restraint before the Lord (9 // 2:11)
- blasphemers as brute beasts, ignorant of what they speak (10 // 2:12)
- following the way of Balaam (11 // 2:15)
- spots/blemishes in the love feasts (12 // 2:13)
- clouds and water (12 // 2:17)
- blackest darkness (13 // 2:17)
- great, swelling speech (16 // 2:18)
- lust of the flesh (16 // 2:18)
- being foretold by the apostles (17 // 3:2)
- scoffers in the last days (18 // 3:3)

Since Jude appears like an abstract of 2 Peter, most commentators explain the parallel material by holding that 2 Peter used (and supplemented) Jude, rather than vice versa. Some, however, hold to a third view, that both epistles employ a common written source (Reicke, 1964:192-194; Hillyer: 13-14). Such an explanation is plausible.

In any case, the use of the material in Jude differs from its use in 2 Peter. One survey of this literary dependence has shown that of the

total number of words in both epistles, 70 percent of the vocabulary is different (Guthrie: 925). This observation lends support to the notion that the historical situations behind Jude and 2 Peter are different and unique, and thus the intents of the two writers.

Copying a literary source, while editing 70 percent of the material in the process, seems rather unlikely. Furthermore, two different social situations are indicated by the epistles. Evidence of this includes Jude's reference to *James*, his use of material from the OT and Jewish tradition, and his rampant use of triplets. On the other hand, 2 Peter employs a Hellenistic rhetorical device (a catalog of virtues), a conspicuously pagan-mystical vocabulary, a reference to *Tartaros*, common proverbial imagery, and chronological ordering of historical examples.

### Authorship and Date

Scholarship has traditionally considered Jude to be of pseudonymous authorship, a reflection of the subapostolic era, and thus assigns a relatively late date to it. This dating has ranged from the late-first century to mid-second century. Several factors have contributed to this scholarly consensus: Jude's literary relationship to 2 Peter (normally viewed as second-century), the lack of historical markers in the epistle, the strident nature of Jude's warnings against antinomians (people rejecting moral standards), and the assumption that Jude exemplifies a second-century response to Gnosticism. The view of Mayor a century ago is representative: "The communications of the Apostles had now ceased, either by their death or by their removal from Jerusalem" (cxlv).

The literary relationship between Jude and 2 Peter, rather than determining authorship, raises important questions about the author's purpose in writing and his selection of material. Both epistles may be drawing from a third document or source, in much the same way that Paul, writing in the first century, could make use of traditional material on occasion from pagan proverbs, poets, apocryphal legends, and Stoic or Epicurean philosophers.

Recognizing the amount of the epistle that focuses on denouncing the unfaithful (Jude 5-19), some have concluded that Jude reflects a later period when the church is encountering mature forms of heresy. In the second century, however, the writer would be less likely to allude to OT characters and intertestamental Jewish sources because of the church's expansion in the Gentile world, where fewer people would know them. In a first-century Palestinian environment, on the

other hand, these would be pregnant with meaning. It is a notable tendency of the NT writers—especially in Matthew, James, Hebrews, Jude, 1 and 2 Peter—to quote or allude to the OT.

An “early Catholic” interpretation of Jude and 2 Peter has been broadly assumed by NT scholars, owing greatly to the theological assumptions expressed in 1952 by Ernst Käsemann. Along with other theologians, Käsemann sought to explain the church’s reaction to incipient gnosticism. Käsemann’s “early Catholicism” presupposes the existence of an ecclesiastical hierarchy several generations after the apostles. The chief rationale for an “early Catholic” reading is the belief that a “creedal” faith had emerged, guarded by the growing prominence of church leaders, to counter heresy and a fading hope in Christ’s return (1952: 272-296). This, it is argued, was necessary in order to bridge the gap between the apostolic and postapostolic eras.

Yet, as one NT commentator has noted, “early Catholicism” wrongly assumes what it seeks to prove (Green: 53). Nothing in Jude requires an “early Catholic” reading of the epistle. Moreover, the character of Jude’s dispute with the opponents is more one of moral obligation than doctrinal heterodoxy (Bauckham, 1983: 9) [*cf. Virtue as Theme, essay for 2 Peter*].

In the second and third centuries, Gnosticism had developed into sophisticated schools of thought, with elaborate myths appearing in various documents. However, its seeds were already evident by the mid-first century (Martin: 289-290). First Corinthians and Colossians provide ample evidence of church leaders’ efforts to counter gnostic tendencies. Furthermore, Jude alludes to what the apostles have *said* (*legein*) and not what they have *written* (*graphein*). Nothing in Jude requires a considerable chronological gap between the apostolic and subapostolic era.

In spite of its brevity, Jude is rich in Christology, particularly its lordship Christology (Jude 4, 9, 14, 17, 21, 25). The readers are eagerly awaiting the appearance of Christ’s *mercy* and *eternal life* (23). The hope for the Lord’s return (the *parousia*) is very much alive in Jude, contrary to the supposition of most scholars. Hence, the language of lordship and the focus on the Lord’s return clearly place Jude squarely within a first-century NT environment, alongside writings such as the Corinthian and Thessalonian correspondence.

Finally, all of the exhortations in the epistle are addressed to the hearers. Not a word is present that indicates the need for church officials to intervene, as one would expect in the second century. Jude’s readers themselves are to deal with the problem at hand. They are to

keep themselves in the love and mercy of God. Hence, finally, an “early Catholic” reading of Jude is found wanting.

At the advent of the Christian era, the name Jude (*Ioudas*) was commonplace among the Jews. The writer identifies himself as a *brother of James* (Jude 1). The NT mentions several men with the name *James*: James the son of Zebedee (Matt. 10:2), James the son of Alphaeus and one of the twelve (Matt. 10:3), James the brother of Jesus (Matt. 13:55), James the younger and son of Mary (Mark 15:40), James the father of Judas the apostle (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13), and James the author of the NT epistle (James 1:1).

Matthew 13:55 links James and Jude as brothers of Jesus: “his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas.” Thus, there is good reason to identify the James of Jude 1 with the brother of Jesus. According to tradition (cf. Acts 15:13-21; Gal. 2:9; 1 Cor. 15:7), this James became a leader in the Jerusalem church and was stoned by the Sanhedrin in the year 62 (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.200). If Jude was younger than James, a date of composition falling in the 60s or 70s is likely.

Clement of Alexandria tells us that the author of this epistle is Jude, the brother of James, the Lord’s brother. The same claim is made by Origen, Athanasius, Jerome, and Augustine. Given Paul’s allusion in Galatians 1:19 to “James the Lord’s brother,” it is a reasonable assumption that the Lord’s brothers were widely known, particularly in Palestine.

In his *Church History*, Eusebius relates a story told by Hegesippus: the grandsons of “Jude the brother of the Lord” had been accused by the emperor Domitian (81-96) of being revolutionaries (3.19-20). The grandsons, according to Hegesippus, eventually became bishops in the church. Some commentators, favoring a second-century composition of the letter, use this as evidence to support the claim that Jude the Lord’s brother would not have lived long enough to be the author. Nevertheless, this tradition related by Eusebius does in fact square with NT chronology. Mayor, earlier this century, showed that Jude could have been in his early 70s at the beginning of Domitian’s reign. After our weighing of all these matters, the epistle of Jude mirrors no inherent conflict with NT chronology.