

**THE EPISTLE OF JUDE:  
A Study in Apocalyptic Imagery**

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**Introduction**

The Epistle of the Jude, as one author puts it, “has been one of the most neglected texts in the New Testament” (Thurén, 451). This is unfortunate, for it sheds a great deal of light on the hermeneutical tradition of the early church, especially its early Jewish adherents. Jude’s use of both Old Testament scripture and Jewish apocryphal writings, almost interchangeably, raises the question of how the early church understood the writings of the Jews, and in particular how they saw those writings fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jude’s status as part of the New Testament canon was for a time in doubt. Interestingly the reason for this was not its apostolic authorship or its message but its references to “non-canonical” books<sup>1</sup>. Two passages in Jude are directly taken from books outside of the standard Old Testament canon: the Book of Enoch, and the Assumption of Moses. The epistle is cited in the Muratorian Canon as part of the books recognized by the Church. It also mentioned in the writings of such notable church fathers as Polycarp, Origen, and Clement of Alexandria. Nonetheless, its inclusion in the Church’s bible was still contested due to these two quotations.<sup>2</sup>

The Epistle of Jude, however, wades into non-canonical waters in more ways than merely using two short passages from apocryphal books. The entire letter is full of apocalyptic references. Echoes of these references in Jude can be heard throughout the Petrine corpus and the Gospel of Matthew, as well as the Revelation to John. Indeed, the apocalyptic writings of Israel must have made a tremendous impact on the Jewish Christian community’s understanding of whom Jesus was. Since Jesus himself used apocalyptic language, this is not at all surprising. In order to see how Jude sheds light on the role of the apocalyptic in the Jewish Christian community, and how Jude used it to combat false teachers in the church, the following will be examined in turn. First, the format and thesis of Jude’s Epistle; second, the place of apocalyptic imagery in the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles; and third, how the Epistle of Jude uses apocalyptic imagery from all of the Jewish haggadah indiscriminately to make his point.

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<sup>1</sup> The two passages in question are Jude 9, supposedly from the lost Assumption of Moses, and Jude 14-15 from the Book of Enoch.

<sup>2</sup> It is Jerome who informs us that the quotations from 1 Enoch were the reason for doubts in the early church (Guthrie, 915).

### **Jude: A Homily on Heresy**

The Epistle of Jude is a masterful work of rhetoric. “Indeed the style of the writer is that of a literary artist, whose polemic is sharp, succinct, creative and multi-faceted” (Charles, 133). This is no mere literary feat: the epistle is also a brilliant sermon, written for oral delivery. Like a letter, it begins with the customary salutation. However, like a sermon, it has an introduction with matching conclusion, an interpretive middle section based on Scripture, and closes with a doxology. This is consistent with the belief held by many that the Epistles were meant to be read aloud during Christian worship services (Guthrie, 108).

The introduction and conclusion of the letter make clear the Epistle’s purpose. Jude 3 and Jude 20 provide the theme of the letter, which is contending for the faith delivered once and for all to the saints. The saints are to be in vigilant opposition to those who “deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (Jude 4). The middle section of the sermon-letter is written in the style of Jewish midrash, with illustrations from the haggadah or Jewish narrative interspersed with comments from the author. The verses meant to be quotations (5-7, 9, 11, 14-15, 17-18) are in the past tense, with interpretations provided in the present tense (Guthrie, 913). Jude closes the body of his sermon with a quote from “the words foretold to you from the Apostles of the Lord” (Jude 17). The Old Testament and other writings are used as illustrations, but it is the words of the Apostles close out or “top off” the sermon. These are, after all, the words of those who taught the faith delivered once and for all to the saints.

The fact that Jude quotes from books outside of those considered a part of the Old Testament canon is not unique to his letter. Paul, in 2 Timothy 3:8, quotes from an extra-biblical source book regarding the destruction of Jannes and Jambres. Paul also quotes a pagan poet in Acts 17:28. And, as will be shown, Jude’s use of Jewish apocalyptic thought is in fact common in the writings of the Jewish Christian community as well as in the teachings of Jesus himself.

### **New Testament Apocalyptic: An Excursus**

Jesus speaks of his own work, and the coming of the reign of God, in apocalyptic terms. Angels, comparisons to the flood, and the destruction and judgement of the world spoken of by Jesus bear startling resemblance to the thought patterns present in books such as 1 Enoch. Mark’s so called “little apocalypse” and Matthew’s record of Christ’s eschatological discourses are good examples of his apocalyptic thought.

Mark 13:26-27 records Jesus' words about the coming of the Son of Man. He says, "at that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels..." Matthew 24:30-31 repeats similar words of Jesus. Matthew adds the sound of a loud trumpet at the coming of the angels, and the mourning of the nations of the earth. In Matthew's account of the final judgement, Jesus again speaks of the Son of Man sitting on his throne, with his angels, in his heavenly glory, come to judge "all the nations...gathered before him" (Matthew 25:31-32). Compare these words to 1 Enoch 62:1-3:

"Open your eyes and lift up your horns if ye are able to recognize the Elect One.<sup>3</sup>  
And the Lord of Spirits seated him on the throne of His glory,  
And the spirit of righteousness was poured out upon him,  
And the word of his mouth slays all the sinners,  
And all the unrighteous are destroyed from before his face.  
And there shall stand up in that day all the kings and the mighty,  
And the exalted and those who hold the earth,  
And they shall see and recognize how he sits on the throne of his glory."

Jesus parallels the coming judgement to that of the flood of Noah's time (Matthew 24:37-38). This is the exact move that the Book of Enoch makes, using the flood of Noah as a type of the coming apocalypse. Jesus' words to the ones come to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane also bear a close resemblance to words found in the Book of Enoch. Jesus says in Matthew 26:53 "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" 1 Enoch 1:9 says that the Son of Man would come "with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgement upon all, and to destroy the ungodly."

Given that the Savior himself interpreted his person and work using language similar to that of extant apocalyptic texts, it is not at all surprising that those of his followers familiar with that genre used it in their own preaching and writing. The Book of Revelation is of course a classic example, itself a masterpiece of the apocalyptic genre. Traces of apocalyptic thought can also be found in many of Paul's letters. His first letter to the Thessalonians is good example, where he writes, "the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God" (1 Thes. 4:16).

It can also be seen in both of Peter's epistles. 1 Peter 3:18-20 is a further example of Jewish apocalyptic, with the allusion to the flood of Noah connecting it to the same thought patterns as the Book of Enoch.

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<sup>3</sup> In Enoch the phrase "the Elect One" is also referred to as the "Son of Man" in 1 Enoch 46:4, the one who is preeminent before "the Lord of Spirits" forever.

The allusion to the “spirits in prison” is directly paralleled in 1 Enoch 21:9-10: “Uriel (the angel) answered me: 'Enoch, why hast thou such fear and affright?' And I answered: 'Because of this fearful place, and because of the spectacle of the pain.' And he said unto me: 'This place is the prison of the angels, and here they will be imprisoned for ever.’” Clearly Jude is not unique in his use of Jewish apocalyptic, since it is used in other epistles and can be traced back to Jesus himself.

### **False Priests and Fallen Angels**

That Jude is speaking against false teachers – priests, in fact – in his letter has been debated. Some have suggested he is merely attacking a problem of morality among certain “false Christians” (Thurén, 463) while others see Jude’s diatribe as against a proto-gnostic group (Charles, 139). It seems most probable from hints within the text itself that these are indeed false priests, and not merely heretical “rabble”. The most obvious hint comes in Jude 12, where Jude uses the phrase “ἐαυτου, ποιμαινοντε” to describe those who are disturbing the community. This phrase is translated as “serving only themselves” in the KJV, “shepherds who feed only themselves” in the NIV. The Greek participle used here, ποιμαινοντε”, is literally “ones who are shepherding”. The phrase in this verse might more literally be rendered “shepherding themselves”.

Jude emphasizes the fact that these false teachers are rebelling against the doctrine and therefore the authority of the Apostles. There is first of all the reminder of the faith delivered once and for all in Jude 3. There is the example given of Cain, Balaam, and Korah. In the literature of the Church, these names were code for a rejection of authority (see 2 Peter 2:15, Revelation 2:14). The Apostles themselves in their words predicted the coming of such people. Jude quotes from τῶν ῥημάτων τῶν προειρημένων ὑπο τῶν ἀποστόλων: the words foretold by the Apostles. These words may indeed have been the 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter of Peter itself, for the quote Jude makes is almost identical to that of 2 Peter 3:3. Coupling all these references with the denial of Christ in Jude 4, and the admonishment to contend for the faith in Jude 3 and Jude 20, it is certain that Jude is talking about a heresy that goes to the heart of the church’s understanding of who Jesus is.

But the more interesting move that Jude makes in his Epistle is to parallel the battle on earth between the apostolic teachers and the heretics with the battle in spiritual realms between angels and demons. Just as the heavenly angels “transgressed the commandment of the Lord” and did not “come forth at the appointed time” (1 Enoch 18:14-16), so the heretical teachers are departing from the appointed teaching. Jude writes that these false teachers “deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (Jude 4). Likewise, 1 Enoch 48:10 writes of the Fallen Ones who “have denied the Lord of Spirit and His Anointed”. Jude

calls these teachers “wandering stars, for whom the blackest darkness has been reserved forever” (Jude 13). 1 Enoch 18:15-16 speaks of “the stars which roll over the fire...they which have transgressed the commandment of the Lord in the beginning of their rising, because they did not come forth at their appointed times”. In Jude 14, the author quotes directly from the Book of Enoch itself: “See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones”. Interestingly this is the same passage that is similar to the words of Jesus at the time of his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.

## **Conclusion**

The use of apocryphal imagery in the epistle of Jude is not limited to a single quote from the Book of Enoch or from the lost “Assumption of Moses”. In fact, it saturates the whole sermon to the point where almost half of it is in some way paralleled to thought-patterns present in Enoch. Furthermore, it is clear that Jude feels free to quote from both “canonical” Old Testament books (Cain from Genesis, and Balaam from Numbers) as well as more apocryphal works. The fact that this apocryphal thought is found also in Jesus words leads one to interesting conclusions regarding the hermeneutic of the apostles. Jude uses all the Jewish narrative, the haggadah, to make his points regarding the false teachers in his community. It would seem that the whole haggadah of the Jewish people, and not merely “canonical” texts, were seen as fulfilled in Christ. This in turn seems to argue for a strong typological hermeneutic in the early Christian community, a hermeneutic that saw Christ as the fulfillment not just of certain specific prophecies, but of the whole literary tradition of the Jewish people.

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