

**JUDE**

**The Letter of Jude**

## Introduction

The author introduces himself as ‘Jude (‘Judas’, Greek: Ioudas), brother of James’. In the tribe of Judah, as one would expect, Judas was a common name, as was James (‘Jacob’, Greek Iakōbos). In the New Testament we know of Judas Iscariot, Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:34), Judas of Damascus (Acts 9:11), and Judas called Barsabbas’, a member of the Jerusalem Christian community (Acts 15:22). There is no reason to associate any of these with the author of this letter. Luke mentions another Judas among the Twelve (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13). John refers to him during the last supper (John 14:22). However, it is clear from verse seventeen of the letter which we are about to examine that our author does not include himself among the apostles.

This leaves one other person called Judas who is named along with James, Joseph and Simon as being one of ‘the brothers of Jesus’(Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). It is necessary to recall that in the extended family unit among the Jews the word ‘brother’ can refer also to a half-brother, a stepbrother or a cousin. As a brother of Jesus and also of James, this may be the Judas who is the author of our letter. The James whom we have just mentioned was the son of Clopas and Mary. There was another more famous James who belonged to Jesus’ extended family. Hegessipus states that he was a son of Joseph by a previous marriage. This James became the leading presbyter in the Jerusalem community (Galatians 2:9; Acts 12:17; 15:13-21). Jesus appeared to him after his resurrection (1Corinthians 15:7). Paul refers to him as ‘the brother of the Lord’(Galatians 1:19), and he is probably the author of the Letter of James.

It seems likely, then, that our author is related both to Jesus and to James. Hegessipus tells us that his grandsons were leaders of the Christian community in Palestine until the time of the emperor Trajan, and so into the first two decades of the second century (see Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 3.19-20). This means that the Christians in Palestine were still looking to relatives of Jesus for leadership as late as the second decade of the second century.

The letter is composed in good Greek, both as regard vocabulary and style. This may mean that Jude used a scribe. However, as already noted in the Introductions to James and 1Peter, the Greek language was widespread in Palestine in the first century. There is no reason why Jude could not have mastered Greek himself. His allusions to Scripture seem to depend on knowledge of the Hebrew rather than the Greek version, and he is clearly at home with Jewish writings.

We find this letter being used by the author of the Second Letter of Peter. It is mentioned in the Muratorian fragment c.200AD, and by Tertullian in the West at about the same time. Two papyrus manuscripts (P<sup>72</sup> and P<sup>78</sup>) attest to its use in the third century, and by 400AD it was accepted as part of the canon of the New Testament in the East and West. Besides the papyrus manuscripts just mentioned, the text is preserved in the fourth century parchment codexes Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, and in the fifth century parchment codex Alexandrinus.

The only section used in the lectionary is verses 17,20-25, on the Saturday of the Eighth Week of Ordinary Time, Year II.

Jude introduces himself as one who has given himself to the risen Christ as a slave to his lord, committed body and soul to carrying out the will of his master. As noted in commenting on James 1:1, the title ‘slave’ can also be a claim to authority, associating the writer with previous ‘slaves of the Lord’ like Abraham, Moses and David. If, as suggested in the Introduction, he is the brother of the leading presbyter in the Jerusalem church, this is also an appeal to authority. He is of Jesus’ own family.

He reminds his readers that they are a community, not through their own initiative, but because they have been ‘called’ (Greek: *klētos*), as the chosen people were called into a holy assembly. They are ‘beloved’ (Greek: *agapaō*), by God the Father, and, because they live within God’s embrace, they are loved by Jude as well, and by all who share their faith. It is this divine love that is keeping them safe (Greek: *tēreō*) for the day when they will enjoy the fullness of divine communion with the one to whom they have given their lives, ‘Jesus Christ’. We are reminded of Jesus’ prayer: ‘Holy Father, protect (*tēreō*) them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one’ (John 17:11). Paul expresses much the same idea in his parting words to the Thessalonians: ‘May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1Thessalonians 5:23).

In the first of a number of series of three that characterise this short letter, Jude wishes his readers ‘mercy, peace, and love’. For a reflection on the rich biblical concept of ‘mercy’ (Greek: *eleos*), see the commentary on 1Peter 1:3; on ‘peace’ (Greek: *eirēnē*), see 1Peter 1:2; and on ‘love’ (Greek: *agapē*), see James 2:8). The same three ideas are closely linked also in the greetings of 2John: ‘Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, in truth and love’ (2John 3).

Each of these graces has a special importance for those to whom Jude is writing, as will become clear as the letter unfolds. They will need them ‘in abundance’, for their peace is being disturbed by the unloving and divisive behaviour of people who are scoffing at their faith. The ‘in abundance’ reminds us of the greeting in Peter’s first letter: ‘May grace and peace be yours in abundance’ (1Peter 1:2).

**<sup>1</sup>Jude, a servant  
[‘slave’] of Jesus  
Christ**

**and brother of James,**

**To those who are  
called,**

**who are beloved in  
God the Father**

**and kept safe for Jesus  
Christ:**

**<sup>2</sup>May mercy, peace,  
and love be yours in  
abundance.**

**<sup>3</sup>Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share,**

**I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.**

**<sup>4</sup>For certain intruders have stolen in among you,**

**people who long ago were designated for this condemnation as ungodly,**

**who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness**

**and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.**

Jude would like to focus on ‘the salvation we share’ – all the blessings that have come to them through Christ, and all that the future holds for them. However, he feels it incumbent upon him to ‘appeal’ to them to ‘contend for the faith’. A battle is going on within their community and the stakes are high. ‘Intruders’, perhaps travelling missionaries claiming to be prophets speaking for the Spirit of Christ, have wheedled their way into the community and are teaching in a way that is in opposition to ‘the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints’. We are reminded of Paul’s description of what happened at the Assembly in Jerusalem where there were ‘false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us’ (Galatians 2:4).

Jude describes these intruders as ‘ungodly’ (Greek: *asebēs*), for they are not acting in accordance with the will of God. He accuses them, too, of ‘licentiousness’ (Greek: *aselgeia*), for they are insolent, a law unto themselves, and lack reverence for the tradition of faith. He brings his description to a climax by insisting that they ‘deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ’. They deny him as their ‘Master’ (Greek: *despotēs*), for they refuse to obey his commands. They deny him as the ‘Lord’ (Greek: *kurios*), for they turn their back on the salvation which God offers through him.

His use of the word ‘deny’ echoes Jesus’ words: ‘whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven’ (Matthew 10:33), and prepares us for the sections which follow. Jude’s main theme is that it matters how we behave, and that we will certainly be judged accordingly. His constant insistence on this point leads us to conclude that the intruders were scoffing at tradition and teaching that behaviour was not important.

Jude goes first to the Exodus generation who, having been saved by the Lord, failed to reach the Promised Land because they failed to believe:

None of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it.

– Numbers 14:22-23

What happened to them is a classical demonstration of the fact that God's saving action is no guarantee that those saved will not be destroyed. God is faithful, but the salvation which God continues to offer must be welcomed by us in a faith that involves commitment, obedience and perseverance. Salvation is unconditionally offered, but it is not unconditionally received. Jude and those to whom he is writing 'share salvation'(1:3), but it can be lost. What is happening in their community is of the utmost seriousness. They must contend against it.

The next two examples are chosen to parallel the description already given in verse four. They demonstrate what happens to the 'licentious' and 'ungodly'. The first is based on a strange narrative preserved in Genesis 6:1-4, and embellished in Jewish lore. The intruders are haughty, insolent and insubordinate. Jude reminds his readers of what happened to the angels when they behaved in a similar way. If the angels were unable to get away with such behaviour, how do the intruders expect to avoid God's righteous punishment?

So it was at Sodom and Gomorrah and 'the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire from the Lord out of heaven'(Genesis 19:24). Jesus himself refers to this in a warning issued to the towns that rejected him: 'Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town'(Matthew 10:15). How can the intruders flaunt God's judgment and expect not to suffer the 'eternal' consequences?

**<sup>5</sup>Now I desire to remind you, though you are fully informed, that the Lord, who once for all saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe.**

**<sup>6</sup>And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great Day.**

**<sup>7</sup>Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.**

**<sup>8</sup>Yet in the same way these dreamers also defile the flesh, reject authority, and slander the glorious ones.**

**<sup>9</sup>But when the archangel Michael contended with the devil and disputed about the body of Moses, he did not dare to bring a condemnation of slander against him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!"**

**<sup>10</sup>But these people slander whatever they do not understand, and they are destroyed by those things that, like irrational animals, they know by instinct.**

In describing the intruders as 'dreamers', Jude may be alluding to the statement in the Torah:

If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, "Let us follow other gods" (whom you have not known) "and let us serve them," you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul. The Lord your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandments you shall keep, his voice you shall obey, him you shall serve, and to him you shall hold fast.

– Deuteronomy 13:1-4

The licentious and ungodly people who are disturbing the community are practising and encouraging sexual immorality. They are rejecting authority and tradition, and they are 'slandering the glorious ones'. Their teaching and their attitude reveal a profound disrespect for the Christian community who are 'chosen' and 'beloved' and 'glorious' in the sense that they are destined by grace to enjoy the glory of God.

Jude turns to a legend concerning the death of Moses, a legend based on the story of Moses' death as described in Deuteronomy 34, and found, according to Clement of Alexandria in a work entitled 'The Assumption of Moses'. It is possible that this work has been lost, though Clement may be referring to a now lost section of a work which is today generally called 'the Testament of Moses'.

Jude's point is that even Michael, 'the great prince and protector of Israel'(Daniel 12:1), had the humility not to usurp power that belongs to God. He did not go beyond 'his proper position'(verse six), even to rebuke the devil. Yet here are these intruders, flouting authority, and arrogantly scoffing at sacred traditions which they do not understand. They are acting like animals from their natural instinct, not from the inspiration of the Spirit. Instead of experiencing the salvation and the glory of those who live in communion with Christ, they will be destroyed.

Following the three examples of divine punishment in verses five to seven, Jude offers three more. In taking away his brother's life, Cain acted as though God does not judge. He was wrong;

And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.

– Genesis 4:11-12

The Book of Numbers (chapters 22-24) gives a fairly sympathetic picture of Balaam. This is not the picture that dominates in Jewish lore. His greed led him to sell his secrets to the Midianites to help them seduce Israel into idolatry. He fell by the sword along with the kings of Midian (see Numbers 31:8).

Korah challenged the authority of Moses, used the claim of prophecy in an attempt to seduce the people into apostasy, and so 'despised the Lord'(Numbers 16:30). He and his followers did not avoid punishment:

The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, along with their households—everyone who belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they with all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol; the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly.

– Numbers 16:32-33

The intruders are so lacking in respect for the divine ('fear'; *phobos*) that they dare to bring their impurity into the 'love-feasts'(Greek: *agapē*). These were the *agapē* meals during which the Eucharist was celebrated. We are reminded of Paul's concerns in his First Letter to the Corinthians 11:23-32.

Jude embarks upon a highly polished rhetorical flourish in which he describes the vanity and ultimate destruction of those responsible for such arrogance.

**<sup>11</sup>Woe to them! For they go the way of Cain,**

**and abandon themselves to Balaam's error for the sake of gain,**

**and perish in Korah's rebellion.**

**<sup>12</sup>These are blemishes on your love-feasts, while they feast with you without fear, feeding themselves.**

**They are waterless clouds carried along by the winds;**

**autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, uprooted;**

**<sup>13</sup>wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame;**

**wandering stars, for whom the deepest darkness has been reserved forever.**

**<sup>14</sup>It was also about these that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, "See, the Lord is coming with ten thousands of his holy ones, <sup>15</sup>to execute judgment on all, and to convict everyone of all the 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."**

**<sup>16</sup>These are grumblers and malcontents; they indulge their own lusts; they are bombastic in speech, flattering people to their own advantage.**

Though the Torah and prophetic scrolls were well defined at this time, Jude's contemporaries did not work from a fixed canon of scripture as regards the other writings. In any case there was wide respect for the inspiration of writings, including 1 Enoch which did not eventually get listed in the canon. Here Jude quotes from 1 Enoch 1:9 which has come down to us in various versions. The book of Genesis concludes his life in the following enigmatic way: 'Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him' (Genesis 5:24). This led to the notion that Enoch was taken into heaven (see Sirach 44:16; 49:14; also Hebrews 11:5), with the result that he was privy to the secrets of the afterlife. He of all people knew about God's judgment, which makes his prophecy all the more significant. Those intruding their way into the community are foolish to deny the parousia of the Lord and the consequent judgment.

In verse eighteen, Jude once again describes the troublemakers. In referring to them as 'grumblers', he is using one of the favourite expressions of the Torah to describe those who grumbled against God and against Moses in the wilderness (see Exodus 16-17).



Jude's exhortation is to live a life in complete contrast to the sinful lives of those whom he is castigating. The scoffers reject tradition; those whom he has already described as 'those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ' (verse 1) are to honour tradition and remember the teaching of the apostles who handed on the teaching of Jesus Christ (verses 17-18): 'False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect' (Mark 13:22).

The scoffers create division; those Jude is addressing are to 'build up' the household of God (verse 20).

The scoffers go the way of their godless desires; they, on the contrary, are to keep themselves in God's love (verse 21).

The scoffers are 'worldly' (Greek: *psuchikos*), 'devoid of the Spirit'. This is the same distinction made by Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians 15:44-46. Their thoughts and desires are limited to what the human psyche can imagine or understand; they are not open to the mysteries revealed by God's Spirit. The Christian community must 'contend for the faith' (verse 3) by going beyond the human psyche and relying 'on your most holy faith'. They must 'pray in the Spirit'. It is the Spirit of Jesus who will keep them in the truth (compare John 14:26; 15:26; 16:14). Jude is insisting that claims to spiritual experience need to be tested against the lifestyle of those making the claims.

The scoffers will not avoid God's judgment. Those to whom Jude is writing are to 'look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life'.

P<sup>72</sup> has a simpler text in verses 22-23, which reads: 'Snatch some from the fire and have mercy with fear on those who waver'. Jude began by praying that they would receive 'mercy in abundance' (verse 2). They are to deal mercifully as a community with those who have been tempted by the teaching of the scoffers and have found themselves wavering in their faith.

Whatever happens it is of the utmost importance that the community protect itself against the corrupting influence of error. Clothing that touches pollution can cause infection to spread. They must protect themselves against anything touched by the intruders.

**<sup>17</sup>But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ;**

**<sup>18</sup>for they said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts."**

**<sup>19</sup>It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions.**

**<sup>20</sup>But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit;**

**<sup>21</sup>keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.**

**<sup>22</sup>And have mercy on some who are wavering;**

**<sup>23</sup>save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.**

Prayer of praise

**<sup>24</sup>Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing,**

**<sup>25</sup>to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever.**

**Amen.**

A comparison with similar doxologies in Romans 16:25-27, Ephesians 3:20-21 and 2Peter 3:18, shows that what is distinctive here is the accent on God as being 'able to keep you from falling'. Jude began by assuring his readers that they were being 'kept safe for Jesus Christ'(verse 1). He went on to stress the importance of their 'keeping in the love of God'(verse 21). This is not something which they are expected to do or are able to do by their own power or determination. They are 'called', they are 'beloved', they are 'graced'. The same God who will assuredly judge the blasphemers according to the truth of who they are and what they have done, this same God will keep them from falling. They are to renew their faith in God