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THE BACKGROUND STORIES OF JUDE

Though his work is a mere 25 verses in length, Jude draws upon a large, primarily Jewish tradition that adds great depth to his work. To bolster his polemic against “godless men” who have infiltrated the churches, he makes several references to outside texts or stories. Some of these texts are from canonized Scripture while others are not, and all of these stories involve certain interpretations by Jude and his Jewish contemporaries that are unfamiliar to most readers today. An awareness of these background stories enriches our understanding and appreciation of the book of Jude.

Examples of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire (Verses 5-7)

The well-known story of the Exodus is from Exodus 1-18, but Jude's focus is on Numbers 14 and the Jewish traditions that further interpreted it. The Israelites were at the border of the Promised Land and sent twelve spies to investigate. Only two spies, Joshua and Caleb, recommended going into the land while the other ten argued against it, afraid of its inhabitants. Upon hearing this report, the Israelites grumbled against God and decided to choose a leader to take them back to Egypt—a rebellion against God, Moses, and Aaron. In response, God says all of the Israelites over the age of 20 will die rather than enter the Promised Land, except for Joshua and Caleb. Jewish tradition emphasizes their desire to deny their God and turn to idolatry and their resultant

destruction—comparing them to the pre-flood civilization that was destroyed.¹

The angels bound with chains are from chapters 6-10 of an extra-biblical Jewish text (dating from the third century B.C.²) called 1 Enoch, which is in turn an elaboration of Genesis 6. Certain angels lusted after human woman and made a pact among themselves to take human wives and father children. They also taught the humans how to make weapons, armor, and cosmetics and trained them in the arts of enchantments, spells, seduction, and astrology. Their wives gave birth to giants who devoured the humans' food and supplies. God punished these errant angels by chaining them up in dark prisons, awaiting judgment.

According to Genesis 19, the residents of Sodom attempted to gang rape two angels sent to investigate Sodom's sin. After helping Lot's family to escape Sodom, God destroyed Sodom and its sister city Gomorrah with fire and sulfur from the sky. Sodom and Gomorrah was a popular motif in Jewish tradition for divine judgment, but the sins believed to have brought about that judgment could vary—arrogance, pride, lack of social justice, poor hospitality, and sexual immorality, among others. Jude emphasizes the sexual immorality aspect: their “unnatural lust” is probably a reference to the Sodomites' desire to rape the angels. The smoking landscape at the southern end of the Dead Sea, believed to be Sodom and Gomorrah's remains, was a visual reminder of their disastrous demise to many in the first century.³

All three of the stories in Jude, verses 5-7 are about destruction of the rebellious. The first two stories feature rebellion against God, and the second and third stories feature rebellion

1 Thomas Wolthuis, “Jude and Jewish traditions,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 22, no. 1 (April 1, 1987): 22-23.

2 James C. VanderKam, *Enoch, a Man for All Generations* (Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament; Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1995), 25-26.

3 Robert L. Webb, “The use of 'story' in the Letter of Jude: rhetorical strategies of Jude's narrative episodes,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31, no. 1 (September 1, 2008): 58.

against nature—angels lusting after humans and humans lusting after angels. Jude is accusing the “godless ones” in the church as sharing the qualities of rebellion and unnatural lust with those in these stories, and therefore also expects them to share in the destruction of those who had those qualities.

Michael and the Devil (Verse 9)

Canonized Scripture says little about the burial of Moses other than God buried him and his body was never found (Deuteronomy 34:5-6); however, the scene between Michael and the Devil arguing over Moses is reminiscent of the angel of the Lord arguing with Satan over Joshua the priest in Zechariah 3:1-2. The story of Michael and the Devil is believed to be part of a first-century work called *The Testament of Moses* or *The Assumption of Moses*. While much of this work has been preserved, the actual text describing this story has been lost. In Jewish lore, Michael became the guardian angel of Israel,⁴ and in 1 Enoch 10, Michael is the one charged with throwing the angels in prison who had married human women.

Jude's purpose in telling this story is fairly simple. If Michael the Archangel would not slander the Devil, then humans shouldn't, either. If humans should not slander the Devil, then it should be obvious they should not slander “glorious ones”, or angels. Jude accuses them of deriding spiritual things they did not understand, which included angels. In slandering angels, the “godless ones” were rejecting divine authority.⁵

4 Wolthuis, 31.

5 Duane F. Watson, “The Letter of Jude: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in Vol. 12 of *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abington, 1998), 490.

The triple folly (Verse 11)

In Genesis 4, Cain murders his brother Abel because Abel's sacrifice had been accepted by God while Cain's sacrifice had been rejected. In later Jewish tradition, however, Cain morphed from a murderer into a “cynical, materialistic character who defies God and despises man.”⁶ Cain became like a king of sinners, belonging to the Devil. (1 John 3:12) Josephus described Cain as one who “indulged in every bodily pleasure” and was an “instructor in wicked practices.”⁷ Cain's descendants were described as prone to bestiality and other kinds of sexual immorality.⁸

Likewise, the story of Balaam is also embellished by tradition. Balaam was a diviner who lived by the Euphrates. King Balak of Moab offered him payment to curse the Israelites, but Balaam was unable to curse them and blessed them instead. (Numbers 22-24) Balaam was also part of a scheme to entice Israelites into Baal-worship through Moabite women who would seduce them. (Numbers 25; 31:16) Jewish tradition viewed Balaam as a “for-hire” prophet who misused his power and was driven by the prospect of financial gain. He was thought of as one who encouraged everyone to give up morality and practice sexual immorality. One Jewish Mishnah says, “The disciples of Balaam the wicked inherit Gehenna and go down to the pit of destruction.”⁹

The story of Korah is from Numbers 16. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram gathered 250 other Levites and confronted Moses. They wanted to be priests. Moses reminded them of their high standing as Levites and warned them that their real rebellion was against God's order. Korah and

6 Michael Green, quoted in Wolthuis, 32.

7 Webb, 60.

8 Wolthuis, 32.

9 *Ibid*, 34-36.

the others continued to resist. A crack in the earth opened up to swallow Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their families, then closed shut. Holy fire consumed the other 250.

Jude sees the “godless men” to embody traits of Cain, Balaam, and Korah. They are leaders who abuse their authority, teach evil things, are greedy, encourage sexual immorality, reject God's authority, and are overly ambitious.

Crimes against nature (Verses 12-13)

Clouds without water, carried along by winds;
 Autumn leaves without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots;
 Wild waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame;
 Wandering stars, for whom the blackness of darkness hath been reserved for ever.
 (Jude 12b-13, ASV)

Though there are allusions to biblical texts here (for example, Proverbs 25:34, Isaiah 57:20), this section most strongly recalls passages in 1 Enoch. 1 Enoch 2-5 describes how heaven and earth were intended to be:

Contemplate all the events in heaven, how the lights in heaven do not change their courses, how each rises and sets in order, each at its proper time, and they do not transgress their law... Consider the summer and the winter, how the whole earth is full of water, and clouds and dew and rain rest upon it... Contemplate how the trees are covered with green leaves, and bear fruit.¹⁰

1 Enoch 80:2-8 describes the effects of the leaders who have gone astray:

And the rain shall be kept back
 And the heaven shall withhold (it)...
 And the fruits of the trees shall be withheld in their time...
 And many chiefs of the stars shall transgress the order (prescribed).
 And these shall alter their orbits and tasks,
 And not appear at the seasons prescribed to them.¹¹

¹⁰ Translated by M. A. Knibb in Mitchell G. Reddish, ed, *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader* (Nashville: Abington, 1990), 147.

¹¹ Translation by R. H. Charles, ed. *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), n.p. [Cited 11 Apr. 2010]. Online:

Notice that the sea metaphor is missing from 1 Enoch 80—Jude may have been working from an alternate version of the text that contained the sea metaphor.¹² The churning sea and its connection to the condemned ones' judgment does show up in our existing texts in 1 Enoch 67:5b-7:

I saw that valley in which there was a great convulsion and a convulsion of the waters... And through its valleys proceed streams of fire, where these angels are punished who had led astray those who dwell upon the earth.¹³

Throughout 1 Enoch, the errant angels are often referred to using “wandering star” imagery. (“Wandering stars” is also a term used for planets. In ancient astrology, planets were thought of as stars that did not follow the same paths as other stars and instead “wandered” through the sky. This made them useful metaphors for angels who refused to follow the rules, particularly since angels were associated with heavenly bodies.) These angels are often referred to in 1 Enoch as having been bound in darkness.

By borrowing imagery from 1 Enoch, Jude is drawing a direct correlation between angels marked for destruction and the “godless ones” marked for destruction.

Two prophecies (Verses 14-15, 18)

Enoch's prophecy is a direct quote of 1 Enoch 1:9, but it does not exactly match our existing versions of the text. Jude may have translated it himself from Aramaic into Greek and modified it

http://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/enoch/ENOCH_1.HTM.

¹² Carroll D. Osburn, “1 Enoch 80:2-8 (67:5-7) and Jude 12-13,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (April 1, 1985): 298.

¹³ Charles, n.p.

to suit his purposes.¹⁴ The first chapter of 1 Enoch is a psalm describing a future Judgment Day where God's elect are blessed and errant angels (called Watchers) are destroyed. Jude turns this passage into a description of Christ's return (parousia) and indicates the “godless men” will share the fate reserved for the errant angels.

The apostles' prophecy is from an unknown source, but it echoes similar statements in the New Testament (for example, Matthew 24:11; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 3:1-7, 4:3). It appears to be an oral tradition handed down from the apostles, and Jude likely considered this prophecy to be his most powerful argument.¹⁵ (The best argument was often reserved for the end.) From here, Jude will call upon his faithful readers to act upon what they now know and understand to be true concerning these “godless men”.

Implications of non-canonical sources

More of Jude's arguments come from 1 Enoch than any other source—over 20% of the Book of Jude is directly or indirectly alluding to 1 Enoch. His use of stories outside of the biblical canonical text can be considered troublesome. How should we approach outside traditions? If a canonical text quotes non-canonical texts, does that make it less canonical? Does it make the non-canonical texts more canonical? Do the stories have to be “true” (in any sense of the term) in order to be useful? Jude would not have had a concept of “canon” like we do; however, his extensive quoting of 1 Enoch shows his high regard for the work and he likely considered 1 Enoch to be Scripture.

The early church fathers debated on this subject. In his work *On the Dress of Women*,

14 Webb, 62.

15 Watson, 496.

Tertullian argued that Jude's use of 1 Enoch indicated that it should be included among Christian Scriptures. Bede argued that 1 Enoch should be included in the Apocrypha because it was not written by Enoch and included things that were “clearly lies,” but he considered the part used by Jude “not in itself apocryphal or dubious.” Augustine had concerns about accepting 1 Enoch because neither Christians nor Jews had ever considered it an authoritative work.¹⁶

If we view Jude's use of outside traditions as drawing on popular apocalyptic symbology, then we can evade such questions. His use of 1 Enoch indicates he had a strong apocalyptic perspective, for 1 Enoch is an apocalyptic work. No one in Jude's day considered apocalyptic literature to be literally true. Apocalyptic literature is rife with symbology intended to point the reader towards a transcendent, supernatural reality. In this reality, God is in control of human history, he will soon intervene to bring an end to evil, and his justice will prevail—all of which are ideas espoused by Jude. It may be useful for the modern reader to approach these stories in terms of example, metaphor, or typology. It is also useful to remember that Jude's purpose is to persuade us that these “godless men” are dangerous and to call us to act on that information.

The very richness of Jude's work makes it engaging on the one hand and possibly difficult to follow on the other. However, this richness also makes the effort worthwhile.

16 Gerald Bray, ed, “The Epistle of Jude,” in Vol 11 of *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 254-255.

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