

**Hey Jude**  
Jude  
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Let me begin today with the opening lines of the Letter of Jude:

Jude, a servant 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: May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.

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. 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 may be the strangest book in the New Testament.

For one thing, we know almost nothing about its context and details. Duane Watson writes “Nothing definite can be said about the author, origin, or date of the Epistle of Jude.” We aren’t much better when it comes to what it teaches. William Countryman concludes, “It is not easy to discern what Jude’s own theological principles are.” So there is no scholarly consensus about who wrote the book, to whom it was written, or even really what the book is all about.

There isn’t even much agreement about its language and style. One commentary described the letter as “pure invective” and a “string of insults.” Bart Ehrman simply calls it “nasty.” While Duane Watson describes the “rich vocabulary,” and Willis Barnstone calls the letter “a Dantesque visionary work.” Barnstone clearly admires the letter; he writes, “With a firm hand, Jude gathers image and word to produce an intellectual dream and spiritual wandering unique in religious literature.”

Just listen to verses 12 and 13. In describing his opponents, the author writes, “They are waterless clouds carried along by the winds; autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the deepest darkness has been reserved forever.” Wow! That’s amazing writing.

As William Countryman writes, “Jude is relatively marginal to the canon.” Other than the fact that 2 Peter quotes from it extensively, the letter has generally been ignored in the history of Christianity. It never even entered the New Testament canon of the East Syrian Christians. And Martin Luther “consigned it to the appendix of his German [New] Testament.”

So, given all of this confusion and disagreement and ignoring, what should a preacher make of Jude?

On Tuesday I texted a church member, “Today I have fallen down a rabbit hole studying the Letter of Jude. Didn’t expect this to be so fun.”

This is *not* going to be a sermon that tells you “what the text means.” Fortunately, last weekend I finished reading a book that said sermons shouldn’t do that anyway. In *Time and the Word* Ephraim Radner wrote,

Our goal is not to give a definitive or certainly final meaning to the text—a simple “message” or application. Rather, our figural goal is to lead and go with our people into a *realm* of meanings, and trace out its parameters and interiors. It should be a realm in which, of course, we do not leave our listeners as disoriented wanderers, but as creatures taken by the scriptural forms themselves, so as to lead them further, or into a clearing, or back out again, in some posture of transformed wonder.

So, what world do we enter when we read the Letter of Jude? Will we experience “transformed wonder?” Let’s see.

“Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James.” Jude is really Judas. A common name in ancient Palestine. This isn’t Judas Iscariot, who of course took his own life after betraying Jesus. But in order to avoid confusion, the King James Version only called Judas Iscariot “Judas” and instead called this author “Jude.” That decision stuck.

This Jude is the brother of James. Which James? Well, the famous James in the early church was James the Bishop of Jerusalem, who was a brother of Jesus. We know from the Gospels that Jesus also had a brother Judas. So, is the author of this letter one of the brothers of Jesus? That seems to be implied and is what even ancient historians understood. This author uses his family connections as the source of his authority.

But is it really Jude the brother of Jesus or some later author claiming to be such? On that you’ll find no agreement. Even among contemporary, critical scholars. One of the most liberal commentaries I read placed the origin of the book in the lifetime of the historical Jude, while another of the most liberal commentaries I read concluded that there is no way Jesus’ brother could have written the letter, meaning that the author was intentionally deceiving people.

What is the letter about then? The author is concerned with false teachers who have infiltrated the church and are leading people astray with their immorality. He encourages those reading the letter to stand firm in the faith. That much is relatively clear and straightforward, but beyond that the meaning is murky.

For one thing, this short letter is full of many allusions. There are references to angels, to Sodom and Gomorrah, to arch-villains of the Old Testament—Cain, Balaam, and Korah. And then the author quotes from two books that aren’t in the Bible—*The Assumption of Moses* and *First Enoch*. Complete copies of these books have not survived into the twenty-first century. The first one, *The Assumption of Moses*, tells a story of Satan fighting with the Archangel Michael over the body of Moses. While *First Enoch* supposedly records the visions of Enoch, who was one of the descendants of Adam listed in the genealogies of Genesis. The book is a

wild apocalypse full of mystical visions and stories of the cosmic battle between good and evil. It also influenced the writer of the Book of Revelation.

This quoting from non-canonical sources as if they speak authoritative divine truth has always bothered some people. Some commentators write it off as Jude simply quoting from popular books his audience would have read. While the feminist scholar Sharon Ringe is encouraged by what she describes as “openness to witnesses from outside” which she thinks “offers a helpful model to those of us who work in a world marked by religious pluralism.”

Many contemporary scholars believe that this letter was written in the second century by someone claiming to be Jude who wasn't, and that his concern is defending orthodoxy against heretics. These heretics seem to believe that they are now free from any law and therefore can do whatever they want, even engage in licentious behavior. Jude's worry is that Christians believe the correct things as a matter of doctrine, for believing the right things has an effect upon one's ethical behavior. His opponents then aren't “real Christians.” Bart Ehrman writes, “It is not too hard to imagine that they [the opponents] would say the same thing about him.”

If this is what the Letter is about, then it should raise some serious concerns for us. I found those concerns best articulated by Sharon Ringe in a series of questions that she suggests this letter should elicit in us:

Who decides what is an acceptable formulation of the faith or what values conform to the gospel when interpreting it for new times and places? According to what criteria are those decisions reached? Who benefits by those decisions, and who is harmed and rejected?

These are the very questions currently dividing the United Methodist Church, as they grapple not just with very different views on the status of LGBTQ people, but more fundamental questions of interpretation, truth, and authority.

But not every scholar thinks the Letter of Jude is about defending orthodox belief.

Duane Watson believes the letter is not an attack on heresy overall, but is clearly written to one specific church, even if we don't know which one, to advise them how to deal with some people who have infiltrated their community. Watson claims that “Jude provides us with a model for dealing positively with demoralizing situations in the church.” And the way to positively deal with the opponents is to ourselves live a more vital faith. Watson writes that Jude doesn't want his readers to simply denounce their opponents but to “fortify personal and community holiness and promote spiritual growth.”

William Countryman, in his commentary that appears in the book *The Queer Bible Commentary*, thinks all of these other scholars have gotten Jude wrong. He writes, “Jude's goal is at least partly that of protecting the simplicity of the Christian faith” against a group of teachers who are trying to set up “a new religious elite.” According to Countryman the opponents are a sort of early Gnostics who taught that beyond the grace of God there were other levels of salvation to be achieved through our own effort. In this particular case that came about through “controlling a multiplicity of supernatural powers,” thus all the references to angels in this letter. Jude, then, is a defender of the earliest, simplest, most egalitarian form

of Christianity, one that taught that “there are no additional requirements [to stand in God’s presence]. We already stand there.”

Countryman acknowledges that Jude’s style of harsh insults and bullying gets in the way of our interpreting the letter properly. But what Jude is doing is reminding churches that they must make judgments about these things.

Do we as an open, welcoming, inclusive church ever make judgments that certain ideas are forbidden here? Let’s imagine one scenario, and it’s a real life one. A few years ago I was talking with one of our rural pastors about a situation that arose in their congregation. An avowed white supremacist moved to town and came to the UCC church since they publicly welcomed everyone. He sought to join the church, and the church decided they had to discuss it. Of course they were uncomfortable with the very idea of discussing it. And they ultimately decided that the man wasn’t welcome as long as he continued to publicly espouse and advocate for white supremacy. Making that decision was a real struggle for the congregation.

But it is precisely a moment like this when the Letter to Jude might come in handy.

Maybe the best answer to what this Letter is about was the simple statement I read by Andrew S. Jacobs in a Jewish commentary on the New Testament—Jude has an “overall concern for authority, morality, and truth.”

See why I told you that I wasn’t going to be able to tell you definitively what this text means? Instead all I can do is invite you into a “realm of meanings” to engage all of these questions, ideas, images, and possibilities. And invite you to experience the wonder of this text. What will you take away from it?

And with all of that then as a form of introduction, why don’t we finally actually listen to the letter?

I also had to puzzle over which translation to use. My favourite is Willis Barnstone’s. He’s the critic who thinks this letter is great literature akin to Dante. However, I’m going to make one set of changes to Barnstone’s translation. He likes to leave all the Biblical names in their original Hebrew forms instead of the common ways we know them from most English translations. I do like that, but it can be confusing for listeners who aren’t sure who the people are by their Hebrew names.

Are we ready then?

Hear now, the Word of the Lord from the Letter of Jude:

Jude a slave of Jesus the Messiah  
And brother of James, to those of you  
Chosen ones who are loved in God the father  
And kept safe in Jesus the Messiah.  
May mercy, peace, and love abound in you.

My loves, I’m writing hastily to you  
Concerning our salvation that we share.  
I am in need of writing you to plead  
With you to contend for the faith that was,  
Once and for all, handed down to the saints.

Some men have secreted in among you,  
Men who were long ago marked down in writings  
For condemnation, who were judged the ungodly,  
Who twist the grace of God into depravity,  
And who deny the being of our one master  
And lord who is Jesus the Messiah.

I want you to remember, though you know  
All of these things, that once the lord rescued  
His people out of Egypt. Later he  
Destroyed all those who lacked belief. And angels  
Failing to obey in their dominion, leaving  
Their proper residence, he locked them in  
Eternal chains under a deepest darkness  
To wait for judgment on the giant day.  
Just like Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities  
Around them, like the fornicating angels  
Who fell into unnatural sex, they all  
Serve as examples as they undergo  
The punishment of everlasting fire.

Likewise those dreamers who defile the flesh  
Deny authority and they blaspheme  
The glorious beings, and yet the archangel  
Michael, when he was matched against the devil,  
Contending over the body of Moses,  
He lacked the audacity to retort  
With a slandering insult, but he said,  
May the lord punish you!  
These people slander what they do not know,  
And like the unreasoning beasts they know  
Things naturally and in them are corrupted.  
A plague on them! They go the way of Cain  
And lose themselves in the error of Balaam,  
Driven by gold, and die rebelling like Korah.

They are reefs and stains in your love feasts.  
They come into your banquets shamelessly,  
Caring only for themselves, rainless clouds  
Driven by gales that uproot autumn trees  
And leave them fruitless and twice dead; wild waves  
Of the sea foaming their own shame, and stars  
Wandering to blackest aeons saved for them.

Enoch, seventh from Adam, prophesied,  
Saying, "Look, the lord comes amid his myriads  
Of holy ones to pass judgement on all  
And to convict each soul of the ungodly,  
For each harsh thing ungodly sinners spoke  
Against him." They are grumblers and complainers,  
Walking around in search of flesh, their mouths  
Talking loud, flattering to gain a victory.

My loves, remember the words of prophecy  
Said earlier by messengers of our lord  
Jesus the Messiah. They told you,  
"In final days there will be scoffers walking  
Around, ungodly ones in search of flesh."  
They cause divisions, these sensual men,  
And in them there is no spirit at all.

My loves, be strong. Build on the holy faith  
And pray in holy spirit. Keep to love  
Of God. Keep looking forward to the mercy  
Of our lord Jesus the Messiah, who leads  
Us to eternal life. Pity some who waver.  
Save them by snatching them from the fire,  
And pity others who are afraid, but hate  
Even their garment which is stained by flesh.

To him who has the power of guarding you,  
To keep you from a fall, to set you blameless,  
Exulting in the presence of his glory,  
To the only God our savior through Jesus  
The Messiah, our lord, glory and majesty,  
Dominion and authority before  
All aeons, now and into all the aeons.  
Amen.

For the Word of God in scripture,  
For the Word of God among us,  
For the Word of God within us,  
**Thanks be to God.**