

Notes on a Letter of Judah

Authorship and Date

The author calls himself Judah, and the only information given internally that provides us with a clue to his identity is that he was the brother of someone called Jacob (v. 1). Since there were several Jacob's mentioned in the New Testament, Judah may have been brother to any one of them. Was he a brother to Jacob and Johannes, the sons of Zebediah? Probably not, because the NT appears to take it for granted that Jacob and Johannes were his only sons. Was he Jesus' brother? Possibly, although he mentions only Jacob as his brother. Was he Judah, one of the Twelve? Possibly, although he does not refer to himself as one of the Twelve.

The topics of discussion place the time of writing somewhat later, prior to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans but after the last of Paulus' letters. Its similarity to 2 Peter would tend to date the two letters near one another in time. A date prior to Paulus' death is required by 2 Peter (3:15-6), which mentions Paulus without any indication of his demise, and so the letter of Judah is probably to be dated to c. 61-62 CE.

Commentary

*Judah, a slave of Anointed Jesus but Jacob's brother
To those who are beloved in Father God; that is, called ones, preserved by Anointed Jesus.*

May mercy and peace and love be multiplied to you.

The author introduces himself as "Jacob's brother." Apart from speculation, there is no accurate identification of this particular Jacob, and several people by that name are mentioned in the New Testament. It is quite possible that he was "Judah, not the Iscariot," who was also called Thaddeus (Lk 6:16) and whose father was also called Jacob, although some people prefer that this Judah was one of Jesus' own brothers.

Beloved, in making all haste to write to you about our common salvation, I had a necessity to write to you, advising you to agonize for the trust that was delivered over to the holy ones once. For certain people have secretly crept in, who from ancient times were previously written about for this judgment: impious people, changing God's generosity into debauchery, and denying the only Sovereign and denying Anointed Jesus our Lord.

Judah's introduction is short, with the author immediately disclosing the reason for writing and referring to his reason as "a necessity."

"The trust that was delivered" was the knowledge that the principles of the Torah were summed up by the spiritual teachings of trust and love. That is, anyone who lives a life of trust and love (in recognition of God) is following the true spiritual instruction. However, some of the readers' group of associates had taken the freedom from legalism to its greatest possible extreme. Now, they were no longer guided by the Torah at all, instead doing whatever they felt like doing, even when they knew that God was against such behavior. God had been "generous" in freeing them from the written Torah, but they were turning that freedom into a license for "debauchery." In so doing, they denied God's sovereignty and were making a mockery of the coming of the Messiah.

But I want to remind you -- you knew all these things: that Yahweh once saved a people from the land of Egypt and secondly destroyed those who did not trust. And those messengers who did not keep their beginning but who left behind their own habitation have been kept for a great day's judgment, with eternal chains, under thick darkness: like Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them. In a way similar to these people, they sinned sexually and went away, following behind another's flesh. They were laid out as a public spectacle, undergoing the justice of eternal fire.

Judah reminds his readers that the same deity who brought such freedom from slavery to the Israelites also destroyed those people who did not live by trust. The implication is that, similarly, those readers who do not live by trust will be destroyed.

The messengers to whom he refers are normally considered to be the "sons of the gods" in Genesis 6. These divine beings were having sex with human women -- an act that appears to have created the Titans. God saw this as the "straw that broke the camel's back" -- the final act which brought on the judgment of humanity and ensuing Great Flood.

Some of the readers' group were engaged in improper sex, just as both the messengers mentioned above and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were known to do. According to the book of Enoch, those messengers had been imprisoned in anticipation of a future judgment. Similarly, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah had already been judged -- they were consumed in the fires of destruction. The author intimates that a similar judgment awaits those readers who greedily pursue their physical desires.

Similarly indeed, these dreamers are also polluting the flesh. Now they despise lordships; they speak evil of glorious beings. But Micha-El the chief messenger, when discerning with the Accuser, discussed Moses' body. He did not dare to pass a judgment of evil speaking on him! But he said, "May Yahweh censure you."

The term "dreamers" is unusual. Some suggest that it is a negative term, referring to the wishful thinking on the part of certain members of the group. Others posit that the dreamers were claiming divine revelation as the basis for their improper behavior. At this point the author makes the direct comparison: the dreamers, too, are "polluting the flesh" sexually, and in so doing, their actions are opposing the very notion of divine lordship. Knowing that others were judged for similar behavior, their continuing resistance to the teachings of the Torah shows that these dreamers placed themselves beyond such judgment, as though they were superior to the messengers ("glories") and even to God.

By comparison, even the most well-known of the chief messengers, Micha-El, did not "dare to pass judgment" the way that the dreamers were doing. The tradition mentioned here comes from the *Ascension (or Assumption) of Moses*, a lost apocryphal work. According to the tradition, the Accuser claimed that Moses' body was not worthy of burial since he was a murderer. Micha-El did not claim superior knowledge, but still he knew that Moses was God's servant, and so he referred judgment to God: "May Yahweh censure you."

But these people indeed speak evil of as many things as they do not know, but what they are familiar with naturally as irrational living animals. They are corrupted in these things.

By contrast, the dreamers did not understand many things about the Torah, and yet they spoke against those who opposed them. And clearly they did not understand what part of the good message they did know, for they were behaving according to instinct ("naturally") and not knowledge. They were acting like animals, following their own physical desires.

Woe to them, because they are going by Kain's path and have poured themselves out into the reward of Balaam's straying, and they have destroyed themselves with Korah's opposition.

These are three references to the Hebrew Bible. In all three cases, the person involved had a message from God that should have told them what to do, but they ignored God's guidance.

Kain knew to love his brother, and yet he allowed jealousy and hatred to overtake him. God told him directly that if his attitude was right, then his offerings to God would be accepted (Gen 4:6-7). God instructed him in what to do, but he ignored God's instruction and followed his own desires in murdering his brother (Gen 4:8).

As for Balaam, he was a prophet to whom God spoke. God told him to go with Balak's men if and only if Balak sent his men again to call him. Instead, Balaam got up the next morning and went with Balak -- against what God had said to him. The implication in the account (Num 22) is that Balaam wanted to support Barak against the Israelites. After God's destroying messenger confronted him, Balaam did well in blessing the people of Israel instead of cursing them. The Torah says, though, that if Balaam's donkey had not caused him to realize his error, God would have had him executed for opposing him (Num 23:32-3).

Korah and certain other Levites stood against Moses, questioning God's decision that the Levites would not be priests but instead would support the priesthood. While God did not directly speak to Korah as he had spoken to Kain and to Balaam, they had Moses to listen to, but they stubbornly refused to work with him (Num 16:8-14). Like the others, they allowed their own desires to get in the way of what God wanted. Korah's judgment was swift: God caused an earthquake to swallow up all of the rebellious Levites, their families, and all of their possessions (Num 16:31-2, 35).

Thus, the message here is that those who follow their own physical desires instead of pursuing God's will are going to be judged, for Yahweh is a god of justice as well as a god of mercy.

These people are the ones who are spots among your love feasts, feasting together with you fearlessly, feeding themselves, waterless clouds that are carried along by winds, fruitless trees of autumn that have died twice and been uprooted, wild sea waves that foam out their shame, wandering stars. For them the gloom of the darkness has been kept for an age.

The "dreamers" who were following their own desires were still recognized as part of the Christian group. They still participated in the "love" (feast), or "loving meal" -- the regularly-shared Christian dinner. Living by one's own convictions is proper, but intentionally ignoring God's teachings is another thing. In the Torah, it was improper to offer a blemished sacrifice. Anything dedicated to God had to be spotless -- clean. But these dreamers, writes Judah, are "spots." The term "fearlessly" indicates their lack of respect for God. Instead of eating as part of a communal meal of love for one another, these people (on the contrary) were "feeding themselves." They were there hungrily gorging themselves.

It is God who provides rain, and so the dreamers are described as "waterless clouds," for although they seem to provide rain, they are unable. Similarly, the author describes them as "fruitless trees of autumn." These diseased trees blossom in spring but wind up yielding no fruit. Since such trees are recognized as diseased, they are uprooted in order to provide space for trees that will produce fruit. In effect, having produced no fruit, the trees are already dead, but in their uprooting they "die" twice. In the same way, Judah promises that the dreamers will be "twice dead," for already they are dead in their sins, and they will cease to exist at the time of their natural demise.

"Wild sea waves" are the waves of a storm. Isa 57:20 seems to have been the source for this metaphor. There, the wicked are described as a restless sea, with its waters dredging up dirt and grime from the ocean floor. In the same way, disgusting things are "foamed up" by the dreamers, who are also "wandering stars." The term "stars" was often used in Jewish writings of messengers. The dreamers, while human, are messengers of their own message of self-centeredness, but they are not "fixed stars." Instead, they "wander." That term denotes straying from the path, and in the metaphor it indicates the shooting star, which eventually plummets to the earth. They belong in the "gloom of darkness," for they themselves have decided on that destination.

Now also, Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these people, saying, "Look, Yahweh came with tens of thousands of his holy ones to make judgment against all people and to reprove every soul about all of their impious deeds, in which they were impious, and about all of the hard things, which the impious sinners spoke against him."

The quotation is from the *Book of Enoch*, preserved for us as 1 Enoch (or Ethiopic Enoch). First Enoch was written and attributed to Enoch perhaps as early as the III century BCE, although some sections were written later, with the book completed perhaps in the I century BCE. The original language of the book was Aramaic, and fragments exist in that language from the scrolls found in cave 4 at Qumran (i.e., the "Dead Sea Scrolls"). The Aramaic book appears to have been translated first into Greek and then into other languages. The complete book appears in an Ethiopic manuscript -- copied much later but discovered in the 18th century.

In the book, Enoch is taken up into the "seven heavens" prior to the Great Flood, where he observes several things. One central theme of 1 Enoch concerns the divine messengers who produced giants (titans) by mating with human women (based on Genesis 6). Enoch (more properly Henoch) was given a charge to herald a message to them about their judgment. This legend reappears in both Petrine letters and here in the letter of Judah.

The section quoted here is from the beginning of the book, which concerns Henoch's travels through the heavens. It is possible that this section was written during the II century BCE, when the Jewish people were in danger of losing their temple permanently (under the rulership of Antiochus IV). The first chapter introduces a harsh judgment, coming soon to those who were unjust (1:7). Although God would make peace with those who were right (1:8), tens of thousands of messengers were coming with him to eradicate the impious (1:9, quoted). Judah quotes the passage in order to point out that the dreamers were going to face a harsh judgment for their own actions.

A great number of things have been written regarding Judah's use of 1 Enoch, including the fact that he attributes the quote to Henoch himself. Rather than making a statement about "canonicity," the author was merely applying the well-known saying to the "dreamers" among his readers' group. Everyone knew that Henoch had not actually made such a prophecy, but Judah quotes the book, in which such statements are attributed to Henoch. In making such a quote, he means no more than to indicate that the Book of Enoch says that the saying was Enochian in nature. Since Henoch was regarded so highly (as a mysterious figure who lived by trust), a judgment from Henoch was a strong one indeed, for Henoch had proven that someone could "walk with God." Just as Judah knew that the author had been writing about his own time and not about the people of the I century CE, he also knew that Henoch was not the actual author -- a fact that was common knowledge. Rather than affirming or denying canon to 1 Enoch, the author was simply quoting a well-known written work and applying the saying to the present situation (in a fashion similar to that used by Paulus in Ti 1:12).

These people are grumblers, complainers, going according to their strong desires. And their mouths speak arrogant things, wondering at faces for the sake of financial profit.

The dreamers were "grumblers and complainers." Judah has already reported that these people did not allow God his own sovereignty, refusing to follow any precept that restrained their behavior. And so, they went their way, complaining about God and about those who followed the spiritual Torah. There are people today who complain about anyone who sets a strong moral example and who urges others to follow that example; these complainers were such people. Their whining and complaining was designed to justify their behavior, a pursuit of their own physical desires.

They flattered the wealthy people, hoping to profit financially from knowing them. As such, they were arrogant sycophants ("yes men"), telling the wealthy what they wanted to hear, pretending to be astonished ("wondering at faces") at the great things that the wealthy people were accomplishing.

But beloved, you remember those declarations that were said before by the envoys of our Lord, Anointed Jesus. Remember that they told you that, "At the last time, there will be mockers who go according to their strong desires for impious things." These are the ones who mark out boundaries -- they are animal, having no spirits.

Instead of allowing themselves to be persuaded by this new way of thinking, the readers are urged to recall what they knew to be true -- the things that the envoys had told them. Judah appeals to the envoys themselves, who had been sent by Jesus, but mentions also the Messiah himself, whom the readers knew that God had sent. The envoys had warned that "mockers" would come along -- people who claimed to live by the freedom that came from having trust and love dominate their lives, but whose lives were actually mockeries of God's principles. The envoys had predicted that such mockers would live "according to their own strong desires" -- just as the dreamers were pursuing such "impious things." The author considers it obvious that the envoys had been warning the readers about the very kind of people who were now infecting the group.

"Marking out boundaries" is an expression that signifies the separation of one school of thought from another. They decide "who is in and who is out," which is one step toward division or separation. They will not accept those people who hold views different from their own.

Animals live by instinct, but human beings are supposed to be guided by their spirits, which attune themselves to God, who is a spirit. Judah doesn't mean to say that the people really have no spirits, but the expression means that they are following physical desires and ignoring any spiritual guidance, whether that guidance would come from other people or from God.

But beloved, construct yourselves on your holiest trust, pray with holy breath, and keep yourselves in God's love, expecting the mercy of our Lord, Anointed Jesus, to the point of eternal life.

The dreamers claimed to be free, living by trust, but a true life of trust is "holy" -- dedicated to God. Judah reminds his readers to build their trust on what they know is right. They are to pray to God, with every breath being dedicated to him. They should not fail to live lives of love. Instead of facing judgment, those who live by trust and love should expect God's mercy, but the implication (from earlier in the letter) is that people who forget such things should expect a harsh judgment. Rather than being snuffed out, the faithful should expect eternal life, because they live by the teachings of the Messiah.

Indeed, snatch them out of fire. But, discerning, have mercy with fear, hating even the garment that has been spotted by the flesh.

The fires of destruction await the dreamers, and if the readers are able, they should try to help them return to a life of godliness. But anyone who tries to help the dreamers needs to beware, exercising their best discerning judgment so that they will not be dragged down into the sort of thing that pollutes the dreamers. Be merciful toward these wayward Christians, but watch out for yourselves.

Now to the one who is able to establish as spotless, blameless, and making pure in the presence of his glory, to our only God, to him be glory, might, honor, through Anointed Jesus our Lord. To him be glory and majesty both now and for all the ages. A-mein.

The only means to becoming spotless, blameless, and pure is through God. Anyone who lives by God's teachings will be forgiven mercifully, and so the author thanks God for his generosity, reminding his readers that only God provides a means to be free of sin. God's glory is first through the Messiah, who is superior ("Lord") to all Christians. Jesus brought the true freedom, and the readers should recognize and follow his teachings in trust and love.

Having dealt with the difficult issue of the judgment of what were probably some of the readers' friends, Judah concludes his letter with the positive affirmation that if the readers continue to do what they know is right, then they should remember that the only God is greater than any opposition they face.

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