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The Book of Jude and Eternal Security

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Introduction

The book in the Bible written by Jude (Ἰούδας, v. 1; can also be translated “Judas”) should never have needed to be written. It was certainly not the letter Jude intended to write, as he himself says: “Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people. For certain individuals ... have secretly slipped in among you” (vv. 3-4).¹ In other words, rather than writing a letter of encouragement to God’s holy people, Jude feels compelled to write a letter of warning against apostasy. Those people who had “slipped in” were “ungodly people, who were perverting the grace of our God into a license for

¹ While this translation is from the NIV, often throughout this article I will use my own translation, especially after quoting the Greek.

immorality and denying Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (v. 5).

That these people had at one time been thoroughly integrated into the Christian community seems clear. After all, they had attended the “love feasts” (v. 12), the community meal that often preceded the Lord’s Supper (cf. 1 Cor 11:20-21).² Moreover, Jude uses the verb “to shepherd” (ποιμαίνω) in referring to them in Jude 12, which suggests that they had some leadership position in the community (see the use of this verb in John 21:16; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2; also the cognate noun, ποιμήν, in Eph 4:11). In addition, through their activities among the believers to whom Jude is writing, these imposters had been able to “divide” (ἀποδιορίζω) the church (Jude 19); only people with influence are able to do that.

It is perhaps for this reason that I. Howard Marshall argues that the book of Jude clearly demonstrates that it is possible for those who are true believers to lapse from their faith and fall into eternal damnation.³ He concludes this particularly from the historical examples that are cited in Jude 5-7, 11, which he believes is intended “to warn the false teachers about the judgment which faces those who lapse from the faith.”⁴ Thus, Marshall understands that the main purpose of the letter of Jude is “to warn [his readers] against falling into the errors of the false teachers ... with consequent spiritual disaster.”⁵ In other words, apostasy is a real danger for any true believer, and it can only be averted if believers “take care to continue in the faith with all of the help that God gives them.”⁶ Yes, divine help is available, but when all is said and done, “perseverance depends upon specific *acts* of Christian discipline and devotion [faith, prayer, remaining in God’s love, etc., as stated in vv. 20-23]; a person who bestirs himself to do these things will not fall.”⁷

Nevertheless, while I certainly acknowledge that such “acts of Christian discipline and devotion” are essential for a believer, when

² See BDAG, sub “ἀγάπη”

³ See I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Bethany, 1969), 162-68.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 167 (italics in original).

one looks at the overall rhetorical structure of the letter of Jude, it seems to me that Jude did not abandon his original goal of seeking to encourage the believers whom he is addressing, though he does so in a more subtle manner. That is, the letter of Jude is not exclusively a letter of warning to persevere or face the consequences; rather, its deeper structure assures his audience that in the power and will of God, they have eternal security. Put otherwise, Jude does, in fact, encourage his audience *περὶ τῆς κοινῆς ἡμῶν σωτηρίας* (“concerning our common salvation”).⁸

I. Overall Structure of Jude

The letter of Jude begins and ends with a stress on the absolute sovereignty of God. Jude is writing to people who are “the called” (*τοῖς ... κλητοῖς*, v. 1). In general in the NT letters, the *κλητοῖς* are those whom God “has already elected and appointed out of their bondage to this world, so that he may justify and sanctify them (Rom. 8:28-29) and bring them into his service.”⁹ On this feature of Jude 1 Doug Moo writes: “‘Call’ does not mean ... ‘invite’ — as if God were asking people to a party and they can either accept or decline. It means ‘choose’ or ‘select,’ and God’s ‘choosing’ — because it is he, the sovereign Lord, who is doing it — is effective.”¹⁰

That this is the definition Jude is working with is clear from the two adjectival participles that are placed between the article *τοῖς* and the adjective *κλητοῖς*: his addressees are those who “have been loved [*ἠγαπημένοις*] by God the Father and have been kept [*τετρατημένοις*] by [or ‘for’] Jesus Christ.” These participles are both perfect passive participles, which indicate a past action that remains true in the present lives of Jude’s audience. They fit the category of divine passives — God (and perhaps Jesus)¹¹ is the agent here of the action.

⁸ Note what J. Daryl Charles, *Literary Strategy in the Epistle of Jude* (Scranton: Scranton University Press, 1993), 49, says: “In contrast to the bulk of commentators who see in Jude only denunciation and invective, we are quick to point out that the epistle was written with a view of exhorting the faithful to press on.”

⁹ Verlyn D. Verbrugge, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology: Abridged Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 286. This stands in contrast to the way the word is used in Matt. 22:14, “For many are invited [*κλητοῖς*], but few are chosen.”

¹⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter, Jude* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 222.

¹¹ Peter Davids calls Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ “a dative of advantage.... These believers are being guarded (perhaps by the Father) for Jesus, so that they remain loyal to Jesus as their ruler” (*II Peter and Jude: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 2. By contrast, Thomas R. [Footnote continued on next page ...]

As far as Jude is concerned regarding the people he is addressing, they have been surrounded by God’s amazing love and are being kept as his chosen and called ones by the power of the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, even before Jude goes into his letter of warning, he has already assured his audience of the power of the triune God, who continues to hold them fast in his love.

It is this same divine love and power that Jude refers to as he concludes his letter in verses 24-25: “To him who has the ability [δυναμένω] to guard [φυλάξαι, a synonym of τηρέω, used in v. 1]¹² you without stumbling and to present you faultless before his glory, with great joy — to the only God our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all ages and now and forevermore!” Because of the persistent emphasis in these two verses on the power of God from the beginning of the world to its very end, I would be willing to go so far as to argue that the δυναμένω is not simply the nondescript “is able,” but carries some of the strength of δύναμις: God has the power to keep us from stumbling; he alone has the “power” (κράτος) and “authority” (ἐξουσία) to do that, and he will surely do so for the addressees of this letter, the κλητοί of verse 1. “The theme of ‘keeping’ has been prominent in the letter. Positively, it refers to God’s preservation of Christians in his love (vv. 1 and 21); negatively, to God’s securing sinners for judgment (vv. 6 and 13). Jude now sends the positive note one more time.”¹³

These two units — verse 1 and verses 24-25 — serve as the bookends of the letter of Jude and form its interpretive framework. While we cannot deny there are hints from the historical examples that Jude refers to (e.g., Israel in v. 5) that God’s people can fall away from the faith if they do not choose to persevere in the faith, Jude frames this message in the overarching power of the triune God, who will not allow his κλητοί to fall away but will guard and keep them for all eternity by the power of his hand.

Schreiner argues strongly for a dative of agency after the passive participle (*1, 2 Peter, Jude* [NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003], 431), i.e., that Jesus is the one keeping us. Both are possible.

¹² Daryl Charles calls this a clear word play with τηρέω in v. 1 (*Literary Strategy*, 51, 167, and esp. fn. 197 on p. 186): “In this play on the verb ‘to keep’ (*terein*), Jude closes the epistle in doxology by saying that God is able to ‘guard as securely as a prison’ (*phylassein*) the faithful (v 24).”

¹³ Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, 300.

It is not only these two bookends that offer that message, but there are also subtle hints throughout the intervening verses (vv. 4-19) that the falling away of the apostates was not without the knowledge and (do I dare say it?) the foreordination of God. Three times in these verses Jude uses a προ- word to indicate God's full awareness, long before the apostates fell away, that this would take place. The first one is in verse 4, where Jude writes about these individuals, "whose judgment was written about long ago [οἱ πάλαι προγεγραμμένοι]."14 Here is once again a perfect participle passive in an attributive adjectival position. Granted, Jude does not clarify here who these earlier writers are, but we can be sure of one thing: God was behind those earlier writings. In his second letter,15 Peter probably clarifies Jude's intent when he writes: "no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:20-21 NIV). It is important to note that Jude is not saying that God condemned men *of an earlier age* through these prophetic writings; rather, God knew about and condemned, long ago, the ungodly people *of Jude's time*. Schreiner writes: "the association of *palai* with the verb *progegrammenon* suggests prophecies from long ago were being fulfilled in Jude's day (cf. Isa 37:26; 48:5, 7; Matt 11:21; Heb 11:1)."16

Jude's second προ- word is the word προφητεύω, which occurs in verse 14: "Enoch ... prophesied about them." The verb προφητεύω is a combination of πρό plus φημί ("to speak"). Admittedly, προφητεύω is the word commonly translated in the Scriptures for "to prophesy." It is significant, however, that Jude chooses this πρό word, instead of a word like εἶπον, to describe Enoch's writings. The πρό prefix can either have the nuance of a locative or temporal function ("to say before someone" or "to say beforehand");17 in classical Greek it was

14 Note here the NIV text note with an alternate translation: "individuals who were marked out for condemnation" long ago, which states this concept in even stronger language.

15 It is obvious that there is much similarity of language especially between Jude and 2 Peter 2. See additional comments in ft. 29, below.

16 Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 437.

17 See Murray Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 187-88.

used to describe the oracle-speaking woman at Delphi.¹⁸ Jude here relates the “speech beforehand” to a saying of Enoch found in the pseudepigraphal *I Enoch* 1.9. As with the “prophets” mentioned in Jude 4, Enoch’s words are “actually about them” (καὶ τουτοῖς), that is, the apostates in Jude’s day, who are being judged and convicted “because of their deeds of impiety” (περὶ πάντων τῶν ἔργων ἀσεβείας).¹⁹

Jude’s final προ- word occurs in verse 17, where the word προλέγω occurs (“to speak beforehand”). In this case, it is “the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ” who are doing the speaking, and their prophetic speech is recorded in verse 18: “In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.” Some examples of New Testament passages that contain this theme are Acts 20:29; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 3:1-5. But once again, Jude views these prior speeches not generically, but as referring specifically to “those dividers [among them] ... who do not have the Spirit.”

The overall structure of this letter, therefore, endorses the view that God, by his powerful hand, will not allow his chosen ones to fall away from the faith. The Lord whom they serve is faithful to his promises.

II. Jude’s Exhortations

Nevertheless, we cannot deny that Jude does fill his letter with warnings against apostasy and exhortations to the ἀγαπητοί (vv. 3, 17, 20) to build themselves up “in their most holy faith,” to “pray in the Spirit,” and to keep themselves “in the love of God” as they await the conclusion of their faith, eternal life (vv. 20-21). These warnings and exhortations have to mean something, and it will be our task in the remaining part of this article to explore what that is.

First, it is significant that Jude uses the verb τηρέω as he exhorts the believers to “keep yourselves in the love of God” (v. 21). This is the same verb Jude had used in the perfect participle passive in verse 1 to assure his readers, as God’s “chosen,” that they have been and are

¹⁸ See Verbrugge, *New International Dictionary*, 499.

¹⁹ Note how the verb προφητεύω is used of people were not canonical writers, such as Caiaphas (John 11:51) and women believers in the church (1 Cor 11:4-5; cf. Acts 19:6; Rev 11:3. “A prophecy may derive from God and still not be part of canonical Scripture” (Schreiner, *I, 2 Peter, Jude*, 470).

being kept by Jesus Christ (see above discussion).²⁰ In other words, there is a reciprocal relationship between the “keeping” activity of God and the “keeping” activity of the κλητοί. Just as Jesus Christ has kept them and is keeping them by the power of his hand (perfect tense), so the believers are able to keep themselves in God’s love. This is not the synergism of equals, of course; rather, the chosen believers are responding to the power and love of the triune God at work in their lives. As Gene Green states on this passage, “In the NT, the imperative of ethical action is rooted within the indicative of God’s act and is part of God’s gracious act.”²¹

But what about the references to historical examples that Jude gives as he warns the believers to stand firm? Do these not indicate that it is possible for a true believer in God to lapse from one’s faith and thus fall into eternal damnation (the position noted above as that I. Howard Marshall)? Jude offers several specific historical examples to flesh out his warnings: in verses 5-7 the Israelites who had been delivered from Egypt, angels who did not keep their proper positions of authority, and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and in verse 11, Cain, Balaam, and Korah. Unfortunately, Jude does not exegete these examples in detail; he merely states them and expects his readers to understand why he uses take these examples and how he interprets them.

We need to explore briefly these examples. I must begin with two introductory comments. First, Jude’s allusions to these historical examples are directed toward those in the church he is addressing who have committed apostasy, in order to help the believers in that community to understand what has been happening. These examples are not there in order to warn the addressees.

Second, four of the six examples need virtually no explanation. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah and the prophet Balaam never belonged to God’s chosen people; they were pagans from start to finish in their lives. Regarding the angels, we know so little from the

²⁰ The verb τηρέω is a key linking verb in the letter of Jude. It occurs not only in v. 1 and v. 21, but also in v. 6 (2x, about the activity of angels) and v. 13 (about the apostates). Just as believers who are kept by God are able to keep themselves in the love of God, so the apostates, who have shamelessly sought to divert the believers from the way of truth, have the blackest darkness “kept” (τετήρηται) for them. God keeps something for everyone in his almighty providence.

²¹ Gene Green, *Jude and 2 Peter* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 122.

Scriptures about their fall,²² and we know even less about how the issue of election might apply to them. Cain, we know, was cast out from the presence of the Lord (Gen 4:10--16) and, according to John, he “was of the evil one” (1 John 3:12). God passed his covenant through the line of Seth, not that of Cain. That leaves only the two examples of the Israelites who were rescued out of Egypt but rebelled against the Lord in the wilderness. Jude’s audience might wonder whether and how those examples might apply to them.

That is, don’t those two examples suggest that it is possible to be among God’s chosen people and then to fall away from him into eternal condemnation? Does not Jude perhaps hint at that as he is warning the ἀγαπητοί? Or if what I have said above about God’s powerful hand keeping his own people is true, is there perhaps an inherent contradiction in Jude’s letter — that it is both true and not true that God’s chosen people can fall away into everlasting judgment?

To discuss this issue in depth would take a book-length monograph, so I can only give a brief introduction for consideration. There are at least two other New Testament authors who explore the issue of the apostasy of some among the exodus generation in more depth than Jude does: the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 and the author of the letter to the Hebrews, especially in Hebrews 3-4 (though see also all the warning sections of Hebrews). In other words, the theological significance of the rebellion of the Israelites in the wilderness is a *topos* in the New Testament, and I believe it is appropriate to use these other apostolic texts in order to understand what Jude is implying in his short letter.

The understanding of Jude’s words here, especially in light of the observation above about the bookends of *τερεῖν* and *φυλάσσειν* in verses 1 and 24, needs to go in two directions. First, Schreiner deals specifically with the issue of the apostates and whether they were, at one time, genuine believers who then fell away. He points out how two of the main verbs used in verse 5 (*πιστεύω* and *ἀπόλλυμι*) also occur in Numbers 14:11-12: the Lord “destroyed [*ἀπόλεσεν*] those

²² It is possible that these refer to the “sons of God” (i.e., angels) in Genesis 6, who were judged in the flood (Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 445). If this is the incident being noted here, it still refers to spiritual beings about whose salvation or judgment we know very little in the canonical Scriptures.

who did not believe [τοὺς μὴ πιστεύσαντας].” Jude here pinpoints “the fundamental reason” why so many of the Israelites were judged: “they failed to ‘believe’ in God.”²³ Schreiner then goes on to argue:

The conclusion that true believers can lose their salvation is mistaken, even though it appears on first glance to be convincing ... not every circumcised member of Israel was truly circumcised in heart (Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:40)... Indeed, those who sinned in the wilderness and were then judged demonstrated that they did not truly belong to the Lord at all, that they did not have circumcised hearts in the first place.... I would contend that Jude himself promised that those whom God has called will be preserved to the end (vv. 1, 24--25). Jude preserved the tension between warnings that are necessary for perseverance until the end and God’s grace that ensures that those who belong to him will experience eschatological salvation.²⁴

But what about Jude’s warning to those who are still in the community to whom he is writing? How might the passages about Israel apply to them? Here I turn to the analysis offered by Keith Krell in his 2011 dissertation on the warning passages in 1 Corinthians.²⁵ In 1 Corinthians 10, a passage that, like Jude, deals with the exodus generation, Krell points out convincingly that “Paul envisions the Exodus generation as redeemed. If this is correct, the consequences that befell this generation were evidences of God’s temporal judgment. While God’s people sinned, they remained his children.”²⁶

Krell goes on to point out how in each instance that Paul uses as an example of the exodus generation in 1 Corinthians 10, the number who rebelled involved only “some” of the Israelites, though to be sure, those actions by the few did affect what happened to the entire nation. Krell then summarizes:

Paul’s warnings from the Exodus examples (1 Cor 10:7-10) suggest that the sin of a few in the Corinthian church and the failure of the community to deal with the sin might have consequences for the entire community. Nevertheless, the community can be assured that God is faithful to help them work through the temptation (10:13). This reinforces his implication that the failure of the church

²³ Ibid., 446.

²⁴ Ibid., 447.

²⁵ Keith Krell, “Temporal Judgment and the Church: Paul’s Remedial Agenda in 1 Corinthians” (PhD, University of Bristol, 2011; published under the same title by Biblical Studies Press, 2012); see esp. chap. 5, “The Paradigm of Temporal Punishment (1 Cor 9:24-10:22),” pp. 139-84.

²⁶ Ibid., 168. This redemption would not apply to people like Korah, as noted above, who were not circumcised in heart.

to deal with this sin of a few (10:5-12) will have consequences for the entire community.”²⁷

The final conclusion that Krell offers regarding 1 Corinthians 9:24-10:22 regarding the purpose of Paul’s use of the Exodus examples and warnings is as follows:

The apostle ... uses the failure of the Exodus generation as an example to warn the Corinthians of what can happen when God’s people sin against him (10:1--22). His words in 10:1--22 need to be read in light of 3:16--17. The apostle is clear: God disciplines his people in time, and he will judge the Corinthian saints for their earthly lives and ministries. *The call to obedience and perseverance, therefore, is one that has consequences in this life and loss of reward in the next life.* Paul’s expectation is that the Corinthian believers will receive his warnings with the utmost of sobriety. Accordingly, these new covenant believers are called to live holy lives, persevere in their faith, and experience God’s approval in both time and eternity.²⁸

Conclusion

I suggest that even though Jude does not explain his use of the exodus generation in his warnings and encouragements to the believers to whom he is addressing his brief letter, his explanation would run along the same lines as Paul. It is significant, I believe, that Paul has the same rhetorical structure to his section as Jude does in his letter (see discussion above). Paul begins 1 Corinthians 10 by referring to the saving and redeeming power of the God of the Israelites, who were “baptized into Moses ... [and] ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink” (10:2-3). Then, after the apostle has finished his references to the rebellion of the exodus generation in the wilderness, he writes: “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it” (10:13).²⁹ With two verses as the bookends, Paul concludes by warning the Corinthians to “flee from idolatry” (10:14).

²⁷ Ibid., 172-73.

²⁸ Ibid., 184, italics added. Note that “loss of reward” is not loss of eschatological salvation, but loss of reward in the hereafter. Also helpful is Krell’s notation about the Greek verb ἀπόλλυμι — used in both 1 Cor 10:9, 10 and Jude 1:5, 11 (interestingly, both of Jude’s references are applied to the exodus generation incidents) — that it “follows the OT sense of temporal destruction” (173), not eternal destruction.

²⁹ Note, too, Paul’s closing rhetorical question in 10:22, which expects a negative answer: “Are we stronger than [the Lord]?” (μη ἰσχυρότεροι αὐτοῦ ἐσμεν;).

This helps to confirm that Jude may indeed be reflecting the same sort of exegetical analysis of the Old Testament as Paul did.³⁰ Jude readily acknowledges that those who have already left the believing community and followed the heretical leaders are destined for “the blackest darkness forever” (v. 13). But Jude is not threatening his present readers with a similar loss of eternal salvation. Rather, he is warning them that if they are not careful and if they listen to the heresy of the apostates, there will be consequences, such as temporal punishment in the here and now and the loss of reward in the hereafter. But these believers are not alone in their struggle to remain faithful; they are being kept by God who has called them, and they need to depend on his strength to get them through. We would do well to heed that same message.



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³⁰ It is difficult to ascertain whether Jude was written before 2 Peter, or 2 Peter before Jude; their language and the examples each uses manifest many parallels. Be that as it may, they were undoubtedly written about the same time. If that is so, then Jude may have been thoroughly familiar with the writings of “our dear brother Paul,” as Peter calls the apostle to the Gentiles, and, without taking the time to explain the analogy of the exodus generation, adopted and reflected Paul’s conclusion. In any case, Jude would not be among those who “distort ... the Scriptures,” as Paul wrote, “to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:15-16).