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## Letter of Jude

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### *Content and message of the the Letter of Jude*

In this lecture I will explain first the content of the writing and then its theological message.

### *1. Analysis of the Content*

Various authors have proposed a literary structure or a division of the letter of Jude based on different literary or thematic indications.

The proposals, nevertheless, do not agree on the major divisions but only in the minor ones. This is a sufficiently clear fact. It is significant that a rigid literary structure does not correspond to the nature of the text. Hence it is advisable to abandon such an attempt; we will rather make use of

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different proposals as much as they help us to describe the Letter.

## Description of the Content

Here we shall limit ourselves to describing the content of the Letter, dividing it in a series of eight sections, plus a concluding formula of praise and thanksgiving (doxology).

### (1) *Jude 1-2: Address and Greetings*

The first section is constituted by the address of the letter and the greetings. The author, Jude by name, presents himself as a servant of Lord Jesus Christ and brother of James and wishes mercy, peace and love in abundance to his readers. They are described as “those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ”.

### (2) *Jude 3-4: Argument, Occasion and Scope*

In this second section, vv. 3-4, Jude expounds argument, occasion, and scope of the Letter. First of all he says that as he was eager to write on the theme of the common salvation (v. 3a), he found himself in the necessity of exhorting them to fight for the faith (v. 3b). This faith, he specifies, has been delivered to the saints, i. e. the believers, once and for all (v. 3c). Afterwards, Jude indicates the reason for sending the Letter, namely that among his readers there have infiltrated some ungodly persons who are already destined for condemnation. The first characteristic of those infiltrators is that they transform the grace of God in licentiousness and deny the only Sovereign and Lord, Jesus Christ; that is to say, they take the grace of God as a pretext of libertinism.

### (3) *Jude 5-7: Three Examples to show that those who deny the Lord and abandon themselves to lewdness are destined to condemnation*

The third section of the discourse (vv. 5-7) contains three examples that the author quotes from the Scripture to show that those who deny the Lord and abandon themselves to lust are destined to condemnation. He begins by saying that he wants to remind the readers things which they already know (v. 5a) and then presents the three examples.

God destroyed those whom He had saved from Egypt but who did not want to believe (v. 5b). He holds in eternal chains the angels who did not keep their own dignity (v. 6). Sodom and Gomorra stand as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire (v. 7); that is to say, their total destruction manifests their eternal condemnation because their inhabitants went after others' bodies, i. e. they abandoned themselves to impurity.

### (4) *Jude 8-10: The false teachers follow their dreams and are distinguished by three characteristics*

In the fourth section of vv. 8-10 Jude speaks once again about the ungodly persons infiltrated among his readers and draws the consequences from the examples cited. As they behave in the same way, they are destined to the same fate.

Having affirmed that they go after their dreams, he qualifies them with three signs: they contaminate their own bodies; they despise the Lord; they revile the glorious beings (v. 8). Then he brings the example of Michael, who did not accuse the devil while disputing with him concerning the body of Moses but limited himself to saying to him: “The Lord rebuke you!” (v. 9). He opposes this attitude with that of the ungodly. On the one hand, they revile what they ignore; on the other, they are corrupted in whatever they understand physically, or materially, like irrational animals (v. 10).

### (5) *Jude 11-13*

In the fifth section, vv. 11-13, James continues to describe the conduct of the ungodly with ever always more negative traits. He begins by launching a threat, “Woe to them!”. Then he gives three motives for the threat.

The conduct of the false teachers is like that of Cain, which is characterized by the betrayal of his brother and violence against him (v. 11a).

For the sake of gain they abandon themselves to the errors of Balaam. In other words, for the desire of money they use the grace of prophecy to say things that please the hearers but which do not conform to the will of God (v. 11b).

They perish in the rebellion of Korah who rebelled against the authority of Moses and of Aaron (cf. Num 16); that is to say, they also rebelled against the authority of the apostles.

Hence he describes their moral and religious corruption through the images, but in a clear way. They sit together at a table without restraint; they spoil the “agape” (common meals) of the community, while they feed themselves in them (v. 12a); that is to say, “besides contaminating such banquets with their greediness... they take advantages of them in order to explain their erroneous doctrines, their deceit” (P. De Ambroggi, *Le epistole cattoliche di Giacomo, Pietro, Giovanni and Giuda*, Torino 1947, 279).

They are like waterless clouds, carried along by wind (v. 12b), i.e. they are inconsistent and unstable in their thoughts and their will; they are like fruitless trees in late autumn (v. 12c), that is to



say, they will not produce any more good. They are twice dead (v. 12d), in as much as they were dead before coming to the faith; and now they are again dead because they return to sin after their conversion; or alternatively because they are dead due to their actual sins; and they are already destined to condemnation, which is a second death. They are “uprooted”, that is to say, without no more roots because they have abandoned the correct faith (v. 12e).

They are like wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own sham on the beach (v. 13a). In other words, just as the waves bring the dirt of the sea on the beach, thus the conduct of the ungodly will reveal the evil in their soul. They are like wandering stars (v. 13b), that is, they have neither a point of reference any more, nor a precise goal because they live their lives in the power of the “caso”; to them is reserved the eternal darkness (v. 13c), i.e. they are destined to condemnation.

#### (6) *Jude 14-16*

In the sixth section, vv. 14-16, Jude affirms that the Lord will judge the ungodly of their conduct according to the word of Enoch. In vv. 14-15 the author enunciates the certainty of the coming judgment by referring to some affirmations from the book of Enoch, an apocryphal book, which is not included in our Scripture.

From the prophecy of Henoch, the seventh patriarch after Adam, one obtains confirmation that there will be a universal judgment from the part of the Lord. In this judgment he will condemn everyone who has committed evil acts and also the ungodly sinners for the insults that they have uttered against him.

Then the author speaks again about the conduct of the ungodly to show that they merit condemnation in judgment from the Lord: they are grumblers, dissatisfied with their own condition (v. 16a); they walk according to their own passions (v. 16b), speak with pride (v. 16c), flatter people to gain advantage (16d).

#### (7) *Jude 17-19*

The seventh narrative section consists of vv. 17-19; the author invites his readers to remember that the apostles had predicted the appearance of these deceivers. In v. 8 he quotes the words of the apostles and in v. 19 he defines them as provoking divisions, worldly persons, devoid of the Spirit of God.

#### (8) *Jude 20-23*

The eighth section in vv. 20-23 has altogether a different tone. As already said, it constitutes on the one hand a programme of Christian life as opposed to the evil conduct of the ungodly infiltrators, on the other hand, it is also a proclamation of the Trinitarian mystery; here in fact, God, the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ are mentioned.

The first exhortation concerns faith, the foundation of the spiritual life. Jude exhorts his addressees as follows: “build yourselves up on the foundation of your faith” (v. 20a). With these simple words the author evokes the theme of the life of the faithful as an edifice to be constructed, probably an image to indicate an honest and holy life.

The second exhortation concerns prayer: “pray in the Holy Spirit” (v. 20b), that is to say, through the Holy Spirit.

The third exhortation reads: “keep yourselves in the love of God” (v. 21a), meaning in that love that God has for us.

With the fourth exhortation, which invites the readers to wait for the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ in order to obtain eternal life (v. 21b), the author perhaps alludes to the forgiveness of sins, which is obtained through the mercy of Jesus Christ.

From the personal level of the spiritual life the author shifts then to the communitarian level by specifying the attitudes to be held with three categories of people in moral danger. He invites his readers to have mercy and to convince those who are in doubt (v. 22), that is who are unstable in their faith.

He also invites them to save others by snatching them out of fire (v. 23a), that is to say, to lead to the right path those who already deserve eternal punishment because of their perverse conduct so that they obtain salvation. Finally he invites the readers to “have mercy with fair” on others, while hating even the garment of their flesh (v. 23c), i. e. to have pity on the sinner, but hate his sin and keep away from it.

#### (9) *Jude 24-25: Doxology*

The writing of Jude, which begins in the typical epistolary style, does not end with salutations as in the letters, but with a thanksgiving or a benediction of God.

The prayer of praise begins by referring to Him who has the capacity to keep the believers from falling into sin in this world and to make them appear without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing (v. 24). The author then specifies that he refers to the only God and Saviour through Jesus Christ (v. 25a); to him alone belong glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen! (v. 25b).

*The SBF is today a Roman Catholic Faculty of biblical and archaeological studies in the Holy Land sponsored by the Franciscan Custody of Terrasanta. It is located in the Old City of Jerusalem, in the Flagellation friary at the II<sup>nd</sup> Station of the Via Dolorosa.*

## 2. Theological Aspects

*As a research center, the SBF has been actively involved in rediscovering the sacred sites of the NT and early Christianity. Thus it expands and updates the histories of various Christian shrines. There is a special focus on the primitive Church in the Holy Land by making use of Jewish and Christian literary sources as well as the diaries and travel journals of pilgrims down through the centuries.*

*The SBF is also responsible for the courses of theological formation at the "Studium Theologicum Jerosolymitanum" in the Franciscan Monastery of St. Saviour.*



The quick journey that we have just made through the letter of Jude has shown us that its author holds above all a sharp polemic against the individuals "infiltrated" among the brothers, who pollute the authentic faith and Christian behaviour. Hence he gives his readers the exhortation to fight for keeping the correct faith and not to let themselves to be deceived and misled. Nevertheless, this does not prevent the author from touching upon some fundamentals of faith and Christian life. Among these we can mention: the unity and the trinity of God, the person and function of Jesus Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, the doctrine on the angels, the apostolic faith, the judgment, the programme of Christian life based on stability and perseverance in faith, prayer and love. In this respect, the letter of Jude testifies to the theological and ethical patrimony common to the authors of the New Testament. Concerning the theological message of the Letter we shall spend some time on three points on which the Letter provides its own elements not devoid of interest.

Origen said that "Jude has written a very brief letter, but wholly penetrated by divine wisdom" (*In Matth.* 10,17; *PG* 13,877). Contemporary commentators bring to light various doctrinal aspects of the Letter, such as the Trinitarian aspects, the doctrine on angels, the Christian life, judgment and retribution.

As a matter of fact in the Letter of James, we are dealing here with an hortatory writing; therefore the principles of faith are not discussed for their own sake, but to base exhortations and to motivate them.

In this presentation I shall try first of all to clarify the affirmations of Jude on the universal and particular judgments. Then I shall focuss my attention on two specially obscure and characteristic verses of the Letter concerning good and bad angels.

### a. Jude 14-15: The Universal Judgment

The theological message regarding judgment is found in vv. 14-15, where we read: "It was of these also that Enoch in the seventh generation from Adam prophesied, saying, 'Behold, the Lord came with his holy myriads, to execute judgment on all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness which they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against him'".

The author quotes some affirmations taken from the apocryphal book of 1 Enoch. From the start needs to be said that the content of these books substantially correspond to that which we believe about the universal judgment. There is some discussion among scholars whether Jude used the Aramaic or the Greek version of the apocryphon. In any case a comparison with the Greek text shows that Jude has adapted the citation. The most important element in such an adaptation is the fact that in the text of Enoch it is God who has come to make the judgment, while in that of Jude Jesus Christ is named as "Lord".

The theological affirmations of this text on the theme of judgment are basically the following: (a) The judgment will happen at the coming of the Lord with his angels; (b) the judgment will be for all, i.e. it will be universal; (c) in such a judgment the Lord will convict all the ungodly of all their bad deeds which they have committed, and of all the insults which ungodly sinners have spoken against him.

From other passages of the Letter we can obtain further elements to characterize the reality of the judgment. Those whom God will convict, accusing them of being evil doers, will undergo a judgment of condemnation, as the author has already said previously in v. 4. In what consists this condemnation can be deduced from v. 13c, where the author says that to the ungodly "the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved for ever", and from v. 23c, where he evokes the fire of final punishment against those who are not saved.

The obscurity of darkness evokes the absence or privation of light and of the warmth that accompanies life. The temporal connotation "for eternity" indicates that it refers to a definitive and irreversible situation. With this figurative language the author of the letter shows that the condemnation consists in the privation of divine life.

A confirmation of this interpretation is found in Mt 8, 12; 22, 13 and 25, 30, where the punishment respectively of the unbelieving Jews, of the wedding guest without his wedding garment, and of the lazy servant, is described as being "thrown out into the darkness".

The reality of fire by its nature is destruction. Hence the saying that the ungodly are destined to the fire indicates the way in which the condemned will experience in himself the privation of the life of God, from whom he has abandoned. The text deals with painful and eternal consumption, as privation of life and light is eternal.

This interpretation also finds a confirmation in the language of the Gospel of Matthew. In Mt 13,42 explaining the meaning of the parable of the weeds, Jesus says that the doers of iniquity will be gathered at the end of the world by angels in order to be thrown "into the furnace of fire"; according to Mt 25,41 the Son of Man, in the last judgment, will say to those who have done no works of mercy: "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"; eternal fire is explained in Mt 25,46 as "eternal punishment".

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**b. Jude 9: The Individual Judgment**

Judgment is a favorite theme of the letter of Jude. Besides the universal judgment, it also deals with the individual judgment. To this most probably refers a mysterious episode mentioned in v. 9.

According to common opinion, the author took this text from an apocryphal book intitled *Ascension or Assumption of Moses*. Jude 9 reads as follow: “But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you’ ”.

The expression “contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses” lets us think that the dispute between Michael and the devil was judicial and occurred at the moment of the death of Moses. We are lead to think that this symbolic episode refers to the individual judgment, not to the general or universal. The individual judgment is that which every human individual faces at the moment of death and on which depends also his eternal destiny.

The dispute that takes place between the two angelic beings who are at the service of God, i. e. the archangel Michael and the devil, seems to indicate that such individual judgment at the moment of death is not automatic, but is subjected to the divine sieve. This means that the actions of man are not the ultimate word for his eternal destiny, and that God reserves to himself, to his justice and mercy, the judgment that decides salvation or condemnation.

This is confirmed by the exhortation that is addressed to the readers in Jude 21 which reads: “keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life”.

The fact that the dispute concerns the body of Moses, who is dead, and not his soul, might mean that precisely the body is the means with which man will undergo the judgment according to the good or bad actions that he has done.

A confirmation of this can be seen in Jude 10 in which, according to a literal translation, the author says: “But these men revile whatever they do not understand, and as for those things that they know by instinct as irrational animals do, in them they are corrupted”. From this affirmation it could be deduced that the author foresees the physical corruption of the ungodly, i. e. of their body, as a punishment for their blasphemy against the spiritual beings whom they ignore, as well for their presumption because they deny and do not recognize the lordship of God, as Jude 8 says.

Hence the corruption, which by death is the destiny of every creature, may not leave for them any hope of salvation, but only eternal condemnation, which is in Jude 7 indicated with the image of eternal fire. In this text the author recalls Sodom and Gomorrah, as well as the other cities as an example as they underwent the punishment of eternal fire.

To this eternal fire probably we have to add the eternal obscurity, as we deduced from Jude 13, in which the author says that to the ungodly “the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved for ever”.

It is clear that both fire and darkness are images that indicate eternal condemnation and punishment, i. e. images of an eternal destruction, which men are deprived of life and divine light.

However, according to the author, the believers could save from fire those who are destined to it because they deviate from faith and from the right moral conduct. They can do this by showing persuasion and mercy. Such is the meaning of Jude 22-23. This very difficult text which according to modern editions of the Bible, could be read in the following way: “have pity on (or persuade) the doubtful; save others, by snatching them out of the fire; still others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment contaminated by the flesh”.

These enigmatic expressions might mean that as long as there is life, the believers by mercy and persuasion can save those who would deserve condemnation of fire and darkness because of their evil conduct. Hence, despite the severity that the author uses against the sinners because they deviate from faith with an evil moral conduct, he does not lose hope of their salvation. In fact he is convinced that the others who believe can lead them back to the right path.

In summary, in the light of the letter of Jude, we can make the following affirmations on the individual judgment after death: (a) before the universal judgment there will be the individual one, which ever human being faces at the moment of his death and on which also the universal judgment depends; (b) the individual judgment is not automatic as a necessary sanction of the actions done; God reserves to himself, to his justice and mercy, the judgment of salvation or condemnation.

**c. Jude 6.8-9: The good angels and the sinful angels**

The episode of the contest between the archangel Michael and the devil (v. 9) can be useful also for knowing the thought of the author on angels. In v. 8 he blames the ungodly among other things, as follows: “Yet in like manner these men in their dreamings defile the flesh, reject authority, and revile the glorious ones”. Together with this verse it is useful to read again v. 9, commented previously, where the author says: “When the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you’ ”.

From the comparison of the two verses we understand that archangel Michael, in his dealings with the devil is adopted as an example of respect for his angelic dignity. This episode is remembered in order to blame and condemn the behaviour of those men about whom he said that “they despise the Lord and insult the glorious ones”. Hence their guilt is serious because “they revile whatever they do

*The SBF has been involved in Archaeological excavations in various areas of the Holy Land: Bethany, Bethlehem (Church of the Nativity and Shepherd's Field), Beth-phage, Cana, Capernaum, Ein Karem, Emmaus (el-Qubeibeh), Jerusalem (Ascension, Dominus Flevit, Gethsemane, Holy Sepulchre, Tomb of Mary), Herodion, Machaerus, Magdala, Nazareth, Nebo, Tabgha and Tabor. Reports on the excavations are published annually in the review Liber Annuus, and in the Collectio Maior and Collectio Minor series; biblical and patristic studies are published in the Analecta series; collections of the museum are illustrated in the Museum series.*

not understand”, as v. 10a says. The motive of this ignorance is said to lie in the fact that they “know the things in material way as animals without reason”, as we read in v. 10b.

From this series of affirmations it results that for the author devil is a spiritual being, and not material, and belongs to the angelic category, whom he calls the “glories”. Hence he is also an angel. In authority he is certainly inferior to Michael, who is called “archangel”, i. e. “chief angel”; but he seems equal to him in dignity because Michael does not dare to treat him in an offensive way, and leaves to God the judgment on his behaviour. In any case, he is one of his rivals because he is with him that he holds his dispute, evidently for the possession of Moses’ body. Since God’s judgment is manifested in this dispute, it is probable that the author respects the devil as an angelic being, certainly an adversary of God, but also one at the service of God himself, as is archangel Michael.

One could also think that for his activity of an adversary he deserves the reproof or the condemnation of God because the author lets Michael say these words: “The Lord rebuke you!” But it is clear that the devil’s work serves divine justice. Hence the blame seems to be directed at the arrogance with which the devil contests with Michael the decision of divine mercy, rather than at the function that he exercises, i. e. to vindicate until the end the punishment of the evil human conduct. Evidently, Moses also had some guilt (probably the homicide of the Egyptian about which Ex 2,11-15 narrates), which according to the devil, had to be punished with condemnation.

In any case the words of Michael let us foresee that also the devil, who now operates as the persecutor of those who are wrong before the law of God, will be destined to judgment and to punishment from God, because Michael says: “The Lord rebuke you!”

To the same judgment are destined the angels, whom God has already punished for their sins. It can be deduced from what Jude 6 says: “And the angels that did not keep their own position but left their proper dwelling have been kept by him in eternal chains in the nether gloom until the judgment of the great day”. What is their sin can be inferred from the affirmation: “they did not keep their own position but left their dwelling”.

The position that they did not keep probably indicates the function which had been assigned to them by God in the governing of the world, which they did not respect. Consequently their sin could be classified in a general way as an act of disobedience and non-recognition of the divine authority. Hence their sin would be similar in nature to the sin of those who Jude denounces because “they despise the Lord” (literally, deny the lordship, i. e. the power of the Lord).

This could refer to the event narrated in Gen 6,1-2 which says that “the sons of God”, which the Jewish tradition considered as angels, abandoned their position, which they had in heaven, to join the daughters of men who lived on the earth, because they were beautiful. But it could also refer to the reproach that God addresses to those who are called “gods” in Ps 82 (LXX: 81) because they did not let justice prevail on the earth.

The relation between the sin of these angels and that of the devil (satan), well-known from the other texts of the New Testament (1Jn 3,8; Jn 8,14), is not clear. But it is evident that it is of the same nature, i. e. disobedience and rebellion against divine will, non-recognition of the authority of God himself. The punishment that this sin deserves is indicated with the sentence “he keeps them in eternal chains in the nether gloom until the judgment of the great day”. This certainly alludes to the final judgment while the condition in which they are presently held leads us to foretell their eternal condemnation.

Summarizing the theme we can say the following things: (first) the moderation of archangel Michael in his dispute with the devil is an example of respect for the angelic dignity; (second) the devil also is destined to the judgment of condemnation and punishment from God; (third) to the same judgment are destined the angels whom God has already punished for not having kept their dignity; (and fourth) the sin of the devil and that of the angels is of the same nature, i. e. disobedience and rebellion against the will of God.

