Purge the Old Leaven:
Aspects of Church Discipline in the Bible, Theology, and Culture

The Problem of the Others in 2 Peter and Jude

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KEY WORDS

False Teachers | Epicurianism | Greco-Roman Ethic | Eschatological Judgment | Rescue not Judgment | Eschatological Hope

ABSTRACT

While in Jude the "others" appear to be individuals who have entered the community with a Greco-Roman ethic that was dangerous to the "beloved," in 2 Peter one is dealing with teachers who are influenced by an Epicurean-like ethic focused on pleasure. Jude instructs the "beloved" to "rescue" the "others" rather than expel them. 2 Peter joins Jude in urging the faithful to strengthen their faith/ethic, but rather than hold out hope for the "false teachers" he focuses on God's ability to rescue the faithful while judging others. This means ultimate salvation for the faithful, if they remain faithful, and doom for the "false teachers." Still, 2 Peter leaves judgment to God and does not instruct the faithful to expel the "false teachers."

INTRODUCTION

Both 2 Peter and Jude are concerned with individuals who believe that they are part of the church, but whose behavior is not viewed as appropriate. That behavior is even viewed as a danger to others in the believing community. Thus, because of the need to set boundaries and to protect those referred to as the "beloved" in 2 Peter 3 and Jude, the situation could be called a need of church discipline. But it is there that the similarities end.[1] That is, while 2 Peter borrows from Jude, he is using Jude for his own purposes and making it speak to his own situation. Therefore, one has to be careful about reading the situation and practices of 2 Peter into Jude and vice versa. Because of this, this chapter will look at the two works in reverse order, trying to understand what each of them contributes to the concept of church discipline (in the sense of dealing with those whom one believes to be a danger to the community) in the first century.

JUDE

The situation in Jude is that, in contrast to the "beloved," admission into the community "has been gained secretly"[2] by some "ungodly"

1 There is another major similarity in that the Greek of the two works is similar and is also very dissimilar to that of 1 Peter. Both Jude and 2 Peter use a lot of participles and few relative clauses, for instance; both are also written in the more bombastic Asiatic rhetorical style, rather than the more restrained Attic rhetorical style. This must be taken into account when interpreting the rhetoric, just as a Southern Baptist pastor and a Catholic pastor might both take a pro-life stance, but the rhetoric of one would not be the rhetoric of the other. They would sound different saying the same thing.

2 This is sometimes viewed as rhetorical vituperation – "they snuck in" rather than came in properly. Yet while there is rhetorical force to the language, the issue is probably that they were not recognized for what they were at the time of their acceptance into the community,

persons. These "others"[3] are never designated as teachers, so calling them "false teachers" would go beyond our evidence. Furthermore, there is no "false teaching" that is mentioned.[4] These "others" are also not heretics in the technical sense in that they are portrayed more as a corrupting influence than one that is drawing part the community into a sectarian stance. The reader is told only two things about these "others": they "pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness[5] and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."[6]

The first charge seems on the face of it clear, but then one asks, "In which society is this behavior socially unacceptable?" As one looks at the list of behaviors mentioned by Jude, it is clear that some version of most, if not all, of them would have been perfectly acceptable in at least parts of Greco-Roman society. However, the early Jesus movement, while living within Greco-Roman society, had an ethic that came from its Jewish heritage. Furthermore, its ethic had been sharpened and focused by the teaching of Jesus as passed down in the tradition. One does not have to argue that this community had the full Sermon on the Mount/Plain tradition to realize that there was an ethical tradition attributed to Jesus (a "Q" tradition, one could say) that interpreted the ethic of the Hebrew Scriptures for the various communities of Jesus' followers.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that the denial of Jesus was a verbal rejection of his being the Anointed One (Christ) or even the exalted Lord. First, we know of no type of followers of Jesus in the first century who would do this. After all, Paul in Rom 10:8-10 makes it clear that it is precisely the acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord that makes one a member of the community of the "rescued" or "saved." Second the choice of the term *despotēs* (master of a slave, owner) to pair with "lord" (which also implied authority, even absolute authority in the phrase "Caesar is lord") along with the accusations listed make it clear that denial is a denial of the authority of Jesus to control their behavior. In other words, the apostasy is ethical apostasy. This is born out in the list of offenses that follows.

Two things stand out in this list. First, both the example of the angels from 1 Enoch (Jude 6) and the Sodom and Gomorrah example in Jude 7 refer to the sexual crossing of the species boundary (angels having sex with human women or human beings attempting the rape of those who were in fact angels). It is clear that these individuals were viewed by the author as transgressing sexual boundaries. Second, in each of the three cases mentioned God rather than human beings brings about the punishment. If human beings are involved at all (in either 1 Enoch or the Hebrew Scriptures) they are trying to mitigate the divine punishment; they are not agents of it.

The same divine judgment is true of second triplet (Jude 11), for while Cain in Second Temple literature taught human beings evil, his judgment came from God (Testament of Benjamin 7.3; Jubilees 4.4). Balaam was

whether that acceptance was as a convert or as a believer who moved into the area from another community.

3 This designation was first used by Ruth Ann Reese, *2 Peter & Jude* (Two Horizons NTC; Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 2007) 24-25, to designate these people without calling them something that the text does not call them.

4 Even their slandering the glorious angels is an action and attitude, but without content. One can guess, but cannot know for sure, why they slandered them and about what.

5 That is, into a "lack of self-constraint which involves one in conduct that violates all bounds of what is socially acceptable." BDAG ἀσέλγεια p. 141.

6 Much of the exegesis in this chapter is from Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude* (Pillar; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006). See also the relevant sections of Peter H. Davids, *A Biblical Theology of James, Peter, and Jude* (BTNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

responsible for teaching Israel sexual evil connected to idolatry (for his own personal gain), and, while he dies in battle, it is viewed as a divine punishment without reference to the human agent.[7] And, of course, Korah rebelled against God's order and died by a divine act. In none of the cases are they punished by human authorities.

Between the two triplets stands what may be a clue about the thinking of these individuals. The reviling of angelic beings (Jude 8) coupled with sexual sin and rejecting authority connects the two triads. In the first triad the angel-human sexual barrier is crossed (or attempted to be crossed) twice. In the second triad Korah is spoken of as rebelling (against Mosaic and therefore divine authority). It is possible that the issue at hand is an issue of culture/ethics, namely that the "others" felt that the ethic of the Torah (which was said in Jewish tradition to have been given through angelic mediation) had been foisted upon human beings and that in slandering these beings they were showing their freedom from the (Jewish) law. That fits with the description in Jude 12 that the "others" are "blemishes on your love feasts" in that they "boldly feast together" with the "beloved." In the first century the Eucharist was a meal following the Greco-Roman pattern: main meal, time of devotion to the gods, and then the drinking party, the *symposium*. It was this latter meal that was the Eucharistic celebration. For that reason, even though in a Greco-Roman meal wives of the male participants and other honorable women withdrew before the *symposium* (if they were present at all), in the communities of the followers of Jesus they remained for it was the main religious event. In a Greco-Roman context that would be a signal that those women were free to be seduced, and attempts to stop this (or to stop others from indulging in too much drink) might well seem as attempts to put a repressive Jewish rule on the freedom they felt in Jesus. That stance would be ample reason to slander, even curse, the angels who foisted these rules on human beings and also ample reason to flout their own freedom.

Whether or not this was the reasoning of the "others," it is clear that Jude does not ask the "beloved" to take action, but rather gives them the example of Michael the Archangel. In the *Testament of Moses*, Michael does not curse or otherwise judge the devil (i.e. the slanderer) himself when the latter disputes Michael's right to carry out the Lord's command and give the body of Moses honorable burial. Instead he hands the matter over to the Lord: judgment, rebuke is the Lord's matter. If that is true in so blatant and obvious a case, when one protagonist is holy and the other as evil as they get, how much more in the human situation involving the "beloved?"

Whether or not the logic of the argument above holds, there is another contrast towards the end of the letter. First, quoting the only writing referred to in the whole letter, Jude cites 1 Enoch 1:9 in Jude 14-15, in which "the Lord" comes and executes judgment on such individuals. While 1 Enoch was probably referring to YHWH, Jude, in the light of the early Christian expectation of the return of

7 In Num 3:8 Balaam comes at the end of a list of the kings of Midian, all of whom were slain in battle ("with the sword"), a battle that was commanded by God to punish Midian as a whole. The account is interesting in that earlier in Numbers it was Moab, not Midian, that wanted Balaam to curse Israel, and Moab which precipitated the sin of Ba'al-Pe'or. In this later passage there is divine revenge in which all the males are put under the ban and only women who have not had sexual intercourse are spared as captives. So the reference to Balaam is preliminary to listing all of the booty taken and then discussing why Moses ordered the women who had experienced sexual intercourse and the male children to be executed. That Balaam died in a divinely ordered war is of interest to the author, but he is by no means the focus of the narrative nor is there any description of his death, other than indicating that it was in battle.

Jesus as ruler and judge, is probably referring the quotation to Jesus. Thus, as in the case of the two triads cited before, it is the divine figure that executes judgment.

What, then, are the "beloved" to do? First, rather than be unsettled by the appearance of these interlopers, they are to "build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life." This is a "steady as she goes" counsel. The "Lord Jesus the Anointed One" is in control, for he prophesied this. So they are to continue in their obedience to him in the light of his coming that will bring them mercy. Their "faith" is their commitment to him (assuming that the noun is read as shorthand for *pisteuō* with Jesus as the implied dative object); the Holy Spirit is their communication with him; their faithful obedience is keeping themselves in God's love; and their future hope is Jesus himself.

Second, there are the "others" to be reckoned with. However, Jude's response is not one of judgment, but of mercy. The first response is apologetic, convincing or having mercy on those who are wondering who is correct. The second response[8] seems more aggressive, but no less merciful: "rescue them, snatching them out of the fire," as if the fires of hell or the fires of desire were leaping up around them. There is no instruction about how one is to do this. But there is a warning: "Have mercy with fear, hating even the garment that is stained by the flesh." The reference is to the undergarment, the *chiton*, of the two garments that a person wore. If a garment was stained by bodily fluids, it would not be the outer poncho-like garment, but the inner one. So the warning is to watch out in one's rescue efforts, for one might be drawn in to their defilement rather than drawing them out. Thus one is to avoid the least compromise or defilement out of an abundance of caution.

How, then, can one summarize what Jude has to say on our topic? First, he is apparently dealing with those who have entered the community without shedding their Greco-Roman ethical assumptions and lifestyle. They have sworn allegiance to Jesus as Lord, as their exalted master, but their lifestyle contradicts his teaching. Thus they are viewed as apostate, but in an ethical rather than a doctrinal sense. The closest they come to doctrinal deviation is in their slandering of the angelic beings, presumably those who brought the law.[9] Thus Jude is dealing with a cultural clash, the type of cultural clash that occurs when a movement like the Jesus movement with its assumption of a limited ethical dualism crosses into another culture, which does not accept its definitions of good and evil, and starts to gain adherents from that culture.[10]

Second, Jude goes to great length to point out that God or the Lord will judge and punish such people. In all of his examples it is God who does the judging, even in the one example in which human beings actually kill the person. Jude goes so far in terms of non-judgment that even the devil is not judged by a holy angel, who rather refers the matter under dispute to God.

Third, Jude does see fit to describe these "others" is rhetorically vivid language. He names their failings, perhaps using some stock

8 Probably, with Ruth Ann Reese, *2 Peter & Jude*, 66-72, one should see two groups here, not three.

9 This could be a step towards the later Marcionite heresy, but there is no program of dejudaization that Jude refers to and there is no reference to a lesser deity having given the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, while there may be some Marcionite-leaning tendencies, we are a long way before Marcion both temporally and conceptually.

10 See Peter H. Davids, "Are the Others too Other? The Issue of the Others in Jude and 2 Peter" in Eric F. Mason and Troy W. Martin, eds., *Reading 1 — 2 Peter and Jude* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014) 201 – 213.

phrases in the vituperative rhetorical tradition, but being clear enough that the "beloved" would recognize which type of people he intended. He does not, however, name names and give concrete examples of the behavior he is calling evil.

Fourth, Jude calls on two responses from the community the he refers to as "beloved." The first is to remain faithful, living in eschatological expectation that Jesus would come and reward them. This will appear again in 2 Peter. The second is to be merciful towards the "others," rescuing them from their self-destructive, rebellious behavior. Jude is aware of the dangers involved and warns his readers about such dangers, but still this is the one action that he commands towards these people. Mercy – rescue (salvation) – but with care are his terms of reference for this mission.

2 PETER

The vast majority of scholars believe that 2 Peter has used Jude, but an examination of this usage (principally in 2 Peter 2) shows that he is using it for his own purposes, weaving it into his argument rather than just quoting it.[11] That particular way of using it is because he is facing a different situation and simply quoting Jude as a whole work would not answer the questions that 2 Peter is facing. There are several aspects to this difference.

First, the "others" whom 2 Peter is dealing with are not simply individuals who have entered the church and are never said to be teachers, as in Jude, but people who were part of the community, whom 2 Peter describes as "false teachers" analogous to the "false prophets" in Israel (2 Pet 2:1).[12] They are those who have escaped from the corruption in the world through the knowledge of "the Lord and Savior Jesus the Anointed One" (2 Pet 2:20). This is precisely how 2 Peter describes God's salvation in 2 Pet 1:3-4, what this present author has previously called "epignostic salvation," salvation or rescue through the knowledge of God or Jesus the Anointed One.[13] Thus he views them as members of the believing community. But they are members who, rather than going on into greater holiness (2 Pet 1:5-8) or divinization (2 Pet 1:4, "partakers of the divine nature"), have turned back (2 Pet 2:21-22) and are now again entangled by the power of evil (2 Pet 2:21). They are, in short, apostates. And it would have been better for them never to have been evangelized in the first place than to get involves in such apostasy (2 Pet 2:21). Second Peter does not hold out any hope of rescue for these apostate teachers, much as Mark 3 does not hold out hope for those who slander the Holy Spirit. It is not that they do not know enough, but as teachers they know too much and have rejected what they know.

Second, these teachers, like the "others" in Jude, have committed apostasy primarily by knowingly rejecting the rule of Jesus in their practices, i.e. "denying the Master who bought

11 This use is the rhetorical technique of *aemulatio*, which is described by John Kloppenborg in "The Reception of the Jesus Tradition in James" in J. Schlosser, ed., *The Catholic Epistles and the Tradition* (BETL; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004) 93-141. That is the reason that 2 Peter follows the order of Jude and uses forms of key terms in Jude, but rarely uses whole phrases. He is making a recognizable Jude an integral part of his own argument.

12 With most scholars we are reading the future in 2 Pet 2:1 and 3:3 as a description of an actual situation. Followers of Jesus of Nazareth believed that they were already in "the last days" since the advent of Jesus, so "in the last days" refers to the present period. Likewise the vivid description of the "false teachers" indicates that they are already functioning, although from the epistolary point of view the coming of the letter and thus the Petrine interaction with the situation is future.

13 See Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude* (Pillar; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006) 156, 169-176, and Peter H. Davids, *A Biblical Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, 233, 239-240, 246-248, 296.

them" (2 Pet 2:1). What follows is a list of sins, partly for rhetorical effect, to be sure, but since they are exclusively moral they point to a moral departure from the standards of the community which were believed to derive from Jesus. In this these teachers parallel the "others" in Jude. But those in 2 Peter are leaders, teachers, so they have gathered others to their "destructive sects,"[14] and to do so they had to explain away the doubts of their followers. The one teaching (other than their slander of angelic beings) that seems to be characteristic of this sect is that of denying future judgment (2 Pet 3:3-10). That would fit with a denial of the present or future rule of Jesus and explain why 2 Pet 1:16-18 goes through such pains to defend it by eyewitness testimony. Denying future judgement was serious, for such eternal judgment was one of the pillars of the faith (e.g. Heb 6:2), part of basic Christian catechesis.

This particular connection of ethical looseness with the denial of future judgment is what led Jerome Neyrey to designate them as Epicurean or, better, Epicurean-influenced.[15] Certainly Epicurean thought was common around the Mediterranean, including in Palestine, even if contemporary readers are more familiar with the Stoic concepts with which Paul interacts. When something is "in the air," one does not need to be a card-carrying Stoic or Epicurean to pick up the basic ideas. The core idea in Epicurean thought was that the world is made of atoms and will dissolve back into atoms and that there is therefore nothing beyond death other than the similar dissolution of the whole universe. In other words, at death the person dissolves back to atoms and eventually the whole universe will do the same. And "That's it, folks." If there is no future life and certainly no resurrection, then this life is all that one has to live for, so the goal is to maximize pleasure in this life. Now in Epicurean thought this was a thoughtful maximization of pleasure, for such teachers realized that too much eating and too much drinking and the like caused pain. Thus the ideal was to indulge in just the right amount so that one maximized pleasure without causing negative after-effects. But this is calculated without any eschatology, since there is none. Without eternal judgment that includes the "promise of his coming" (2 Pet 3:4), there is no reason for present suffering, no reason for restraint, and no reason for generosity, which are so common in the New Testament, for there is no future reward. Without eschatological reward, there is no basis for a *Christian* ethic, and that is the basic complaint of 2 Peter: the "false teachers" were living and teaching a hedonistic ethic (even if moderated by reason: "Do not go too far, for that will not maximize pleasure."). And they were criticizing what they perceived as the sources of the Christian ethic of deferred pleasure: the angels (who had mediated the Torah, which was the basis of Jesus' ethic) and the promise of Jesus' return to judge the living and the dead. The apparent delay of the Parousia made their arguments seem plausible.

Second Peter has two lines of attack on this seemingly-plausible teaching, which was being lived out (as in Jude) at the Eucharist, which they had turned into a time of carousing and dissipation (2 Pet 2:13). First, he brackets the

14 The term hairesis (ἄιρεσις) primarily means a sect or faction, not a doctrinal deviation. Thus in the New Testament both the Sadducees and the Pharisees are designated by this term (Acts 5:17; 15:5) as is the Jesus movement (Acts 24:5, 14 – note some inconsistency as to what to call the Jesus sect, which shows that it does not yet have a fixed name). Factions within the believing community are also designated by this term (1 Cor 11:19; Gal 5:20). Any sect or party has some reason for being, some teaching or practice that they are characterized by. Second Peter does not tell us what that is, but he does characterize these sects as "destructive."

15 Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude: A New Transation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 122-129.

whole letter with (1) the purpose of salvation, namely freedom from desire, growing holiness, and ultimate divinization ("sharing in the divine nature") and (2) the certainty of judgment, including pointing out that the Deluge gave the lie to the argument that the world was steady-state since its creation (an argument that sounds deistic). Thus the letter is sprinkled with warnings of judgment and observations that the "false teachers" are in fact prisoners of their desires, their vaunted freedom being simply a cover for slavery.

Second, he edits Jude's material to show that the Lord can bring judgment while *at the same time* saving the righteous (2 Pet 2:9). Thus Noah is the "herald of righteousness" and Lot is "righteous" and tormented by the evil around him. This sets up the trope of the righteous sufferer who is derided by and even disadvantaged by the wicked who seem to the prospering. Certainly the "false teachers" are viewed as, "in their greed," exploiting the "beloved;" the least bad result for the "beloved" is that the "way of truth" will be "reviled" by the culture around them.[16] But that is now, and not the future. In the end God, it is argued, can destroy these wicked while at the same time saving the righteous. Could it be that an argument not mentioned in the letter was that if God were to judge he could only destroy everyone, righteous and well as wicked? If so, 2 Peter's editing makes it clear that this is definitely not the case. God is quite discriminatory.

In the end 2 Peter differs from Jude in his advice to the "beloved." In Jude the "beloved" were to rescue the "others." There is not a word of that in 2 Peter. It may be that the "false teachers" were already too much in control of the situation. It may be that as teachers their arguments were too overwhelming for the "beloved."[17] What is clear is that he does not hold out one ounce of hope for these individuals, but rather emphasizes over and over the certainty of their judgment, made all the worse because they were once freed from their desires and did know the truth.

What 2 Peter does say to the "beloved" is that they should strengthen their own commitment. Because of this commitment they should pursue virtue. They should reinforce their commitment by realizing that the earth is not steady-state, but headed for a cataclysm that is every bit as traumatic and dramatic as that of the Deluge. However, while the firmament (the "heavens") and the heavenly bodies (the meaning of "elements" in a context of "heavens") associated with the firmament will be destroyed, the earth will only be "exposed."[18] This exposure is for the purpose of judgment – all deeds good and evil will be seen and judged accordingly. Thus the "beloved" are to fortify their conviction that there is a future for the righteous, a good future,

16 In other words, if the "beloved" escape being exploited by the "false teachers," they at least suffer from the society around them deriding them either for the excesses of the "false teachers" that go beyond what the surrounding society finds acceptable or the contradiction between the Christian teaching that the society had heard and the behavior of the "false teachers."

17 The "false teachers" in 2 Peter appear to be doing more than the "others" in Jude. There the "others" appear to be making cultural assumptions that Jude views as disastrous; they may have attributed the "conservative ethic" that Jude espouses to Judaism (an ethic brought by angels). Thus there is a culture clash, at least in the eyes of the "others." The "false teachers" in 2 Peter appear to be more evangelistic in drawing others into their sect, even if in 2 Peter's view they are doing so simply to exploit them in their greed. They also appear to be more thoughtful, having realized that to support their behavior they had to take on the return-of-Jesus eschatology and its concomitant eternal judgment. Their behavior may have been driven by their perceptions of cultural suitability and personal pleasure and gain, but no thoughtful person could pursue such a course without realizing that they had to do something with the Parousia/final judgment, which were pillars of each Christian catechesis.

18 The exegesis behind this argument is laid out in the relevant parts of Peter H. Davids, *Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, especially 256 – 297, and, in lesser detail, in Peter H. Davids, *A Biblical Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, especially 226 – 229, 240-241.

in a renewed earth with a new heaven. What will be new about the earth? Righteousness will dwell in it.

So they are to realize that there is delay in the coming of Jesus, but it is a purposeful delay to rescue all whom God can rescue. The extent of the delay is not revealed to anyone, so it could end at any moment. Using a phrase from Jesus' teaching, 2 Peter argues that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief," i.e. unexpectedly, suddenly. It will be present before one can discern any "signs." The only proper response to such teaching is, as also in the teaching of Jesus, to be ready for his coming at any time.

The call, then, is not to leave the community (How can one leave the one community that Jesus founded?) or to convert the "false teachers" (Were not their minds already made up?) or to kick the "false teachers" out of the community (Is it possible to expel "leading lights" without fracturing the community, even if these leaders were not yet in total control?) but to focus on their own stability (2 Pet 3:17). They could yet get swept away by the arguments of these "false teachers," for their arguments seem plausible and the resulting behavior seemed pleasurable and culturally acceptable. Thus the conclusion of the letter is a focus on (1) the "beloved" keeping their own stability and (2) their growing "in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Anointed One." In other words, the letter ends where it began, with growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, for that which freed them in the beginning will take them further on towards participation in the divine nature.

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