

“Certain Men Crept in Unawares”

A Postcolonial Reading of the Epistle of Jude

Jackson T. Reinhardt, Vanderbilt Divinity School

Abstract

The Epistle of Jude exists at the margins of the New Testament canon and has received limited scholarly treatment, particularly with regard to new critical hermeneutical methods. This article analyses Jude through a postcolonial optic, which seeks to critique both the implicit and overt means by which biblical texts and writers’ legitimate colonial modes of domination. I contend that the author of Jude mimics colonial power structures in order to solidify his position as leader of the early Christian assembly to which he writes. Jesus is depicted as a cosmic slave master, who demands complete and total obedience by the elect he has ransomed, while the author presents himself as the earthly vicegerent to Christ, thereby perpetuating a self-serving hierarchy. Jude thus normalizes colonial ideology and discourse, as empire itself has been rhetorically reinscribed upon the cosmos, the congregation, and the individual members of the assembly.

Keywords

Postcolonialism, imperial criticism, Jude, slavery

Introduction

The Epistle of Jude is frequently denoted as the most neglected text in the New Testament corpus.¹ Situated canonically between the Johannine Letters and Revelation, this short epistle—only 2 and 3 John are shorter—is primarily studied for either its use of apocryphal material, such as 1 Enoch (Jude 14-15),² or its influence on the textual and rhetorical construction of 2 Peter (see Callan 2004). The author writes to his “beloved” community because it appears that outsiders have infiltrated the congregation and are promoting intolerable behaviour—in both body and mind. There are “certain individuals” (cf. NRSV “certain *intruders*”) who have “secretly slipped in among [the assembly]” (Jude 4).³ Jude does not hesitate to defame these congregants: “They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord”

¹ There is even a well-known article bearing almost this exact wording (Rowston 1975).

² Also, Jude 9 supposedly alludes to a scene from the now-lost Second Temple text *The Assumption (or Testament) of Moses*.

³ I will use the New International Version (NIV) translation unless otherwise noted.

(Jude 4).⁴ Jude’s epistle is thus a warning against these dangerous outsiders, who pose an existential threat to the continuity of the congregation. Jude utilizes rich biblical and non-canonical typology and metaphors to describe the punishment that will fall on those—within and outside the assembly—who dare to preach or act against the “most holy faith” (Jude 20).

While textually brief and under-researched, a postcolonial interrogation of Jude is still possible, if not *necessary*, in light of the text’s scholarly and confessional disuse. I argue that Jude⁵ mimics colonial modes of domination in order to reinscribe empire within the *ecclesia* rather than the *polis*: Christ becomes a cosmic slave master, who is to be accorded complete obedience at all times, while Jude himself functions as the earthly vicegerent (*qua* pastor), whose occupational operations include the perpetuation of hierarchical power relations within the assembly—with the author situated at the top.

Yet the question remains: is postcolonial biblical criticism relevant to a text that is so apocalyptically and typologically focused—and which does not even use the word “empire”? Regardless of whether or not Jude explicitly mentions his (Roman) imperial milieu, the community from which the text arose was completely ingratiated in this vast political network of empire. As Jeremy Punt puts it, “all first-century people were negotiating empire” (2012, 192). Empires are not merely systems of physical domination, but “[imposed] political force ... by generating ways of thinking and being” (Punt 2012, 193). Punt notes that “colonialism’s power is maintained by colonial forms of knowledge” (2012, 193). Postcolonial criticism involves a “critique of the ideology of colonizing discourse, since texts always have vested interests. Such analysis can expose the overt self-interest and ... covert forms of justification for the dominant” (Punt 2012, 196). Yet postcolonial criticism also inspects how the colonized—which Jude’s congregation is very much a part of—appropriate and augment colonial discourse for ambivalent and ambiguous demonstrations of *mimicry*. Jude, it appears, does not endorse the Roman empire, but nonetheless mimics imperial forms and methods of power and obedience in support of his cosmic imperial schema. Thus, to analyse Jude from a postcolonial perspective is completely valid—the letter, obviously or not, is wholly conditioned by its imperial surroundings. By applying postcolonial criticism to the letter, one can therefore better understand the means by which the author of Jude interacts with these political presuppositions for their own ends.⁶

⁴ It is beyond the scope of this paper to positively identify these supposed ungodly figures, although I am persuaded to think of them as radical antinomian egalitarians. The important thing to note is that Jude finds their way of being in opposition to the lifestyle and theology of the Jesus movement.

⁵ There is no scholarly consensus on whether the author of the epistle is actually named Jude (let alone if he was a brother of Jesus). But for ease, I will refer to the author as Jude.

⁶ This paper will focus on Jude and not discuss any postcolonial similarities or variations with the theologically and textually close 2 Peter. As Peter H. Davids notes, while “there is documentary commonality and a similar situation, the two letters address different

Christ as Slave-Master

In verse 4, Jude offers an unusual title for Christ that is particular to the epistle: *despotēn kai kyrion* (“master and Lord”).⁷ The term *despotēs* is, in many cases, synonymous with *kyrios*—both words signify either human or supernatural sources of singular authority. Yet *despotēs* appears in less than a dozen instances within the New Testament and is only coupled with *kurios* in Jude—it is frequently used “to describe human slave owners in relation to slaves” (Aichele 2012, 28). The slave/slave-owner relationship between congregant and Christ is further emphasized in Jude 1, where the author introduces himself as a “slave [*doulos*] of Jesus Christ.” The NIV translates *doulos* here as “servant,” but this is a common mistranslation—*doulos* more accurately means “slave,” for this is the exact word Paul utilizes in his famous ode to egalitarianism in Gal. 3:28 (“neither slave [*doulos*] nor free”).

George Aichele persuasively notes that Jude’s language in his titular description of himself and Christ should not be seen as a highly symbolic demonstration of spiritual piety; rather, “this language tells the reader something quite important about the addressed community, and ... does so less vaguely than much of Jude’s other language ... [the assembly would thus] regard these words as *non-metaphorical*” (2012, 30; emphasis added). Jude is thus purposefully blunt with his language: he is a slave and so are all the members of the assembly. Aichele elaborates how Jude’s use of apocryphal material from *The Assumption (or Testament) of Moses*⁸ further points to this notion of Christ as slave master, one who owns the body and blood of his followers:

[When Jude] describes the archangel Michael contending with the devil over the body of Moses ... Michael says, “the Lord rebuke you.” In this reading, the Lord Jesus Christ owns the body of his slave Moses and Michael, as Christ’s agent does not reveal the devil on his own behalf but acts, as himself, an obedient slave, only in the Lord’s name. (Aichele 2012, 31).

Thus, Jude makes clear that the assembly of slaves is in physical bondage to their owner Christ.

As to the question of how Christ came in possession of his followers, Jude does not elucidate—it is implicitly recognized as a fact. In all likelihood,

perceived threats and arrive at different solutions” (2004, 207). Thus, to utilize 2 Peter retroactively to explicate Jude would be chronologically and thematically inappropriate. Yet, there is a long tradition of intertextually examining the two epistles. See Hultin (2004).

⁷ The NIV translation reads “Sovereign and Lord,” possibly an attempt to lessen the legitimate association of Jesus with a slave owner.

⁸ Jude references a scene found nowhere within the canonical text: “But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not himself dare to condemn him for slander but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you!’” (Jude 9).

Jude affirms a ransom theory of atonement (cf. Matt. 20:27-28, 2 Tim. 2:5-6). Christ, via his crucifixion, paid the debt to Satan to liberate humanity from the slavery of sin. Humanity, through that transaction, becomes beholden to Christ. This notion of ransom was pervasive in the ancient Roman slave trade, where the ransom served as “the price of emancipation ... after which the one freed belonged to the one who paid the price” (Baker and Green 2000, 58). The passage in Jude 9 acts as a typological demonstration of the effect of Christ’s atonement: Michael forcibly takes the body of Moses from Satan. Thus, the slaves of Satan have now become the slaves of Christ, whether they agree or not.

Throughout the epistle, Jude is most concerned with the potential for rejecting authority and engaging in spiritual rebellion. He employs several Judaic examples to demonstrate the devastating consequences for those who rebel: Sodom and Gomorrah were utterly destroyed (Jude 7), Korah and his followers annihilated (Jude 11), and the angels who disobeyed God and slept with the daughters of men have been “kept in darkness [and] bound with everlasting chains” (Jude 6). These examples serve as an obvious warning: if the *ecclesia* falls for the wickedness of the intruders, Christ will be utterly remorseless in his punishment. Christ will accept no insolence or disobedience on behalf of his property. The members of the assembly shall be completely loyal in thought and practice to the faith, lest swift and severe punishment befalls them. As Aichele (2012, 32) points out, Jude sees “slavery to Christ as salvation ... [and] vice versa” (cf. Jude 3: “the salvation we share”). Through their encouragement of disobedient behaviour, the intruders “threaten the entire community’s well-being as slaves” (Aichele 2012, 32).

Jude’s understanding of a slave-masters’ expectations of his property likely arose from the slave-owning milieu of ancient Rome. As Sandra R. Joshel notes, the paradigmatic “good slave” in the Roman world was one who obediently aligned their interests with their masters’ (Joshel 2010, 115). To a Roman slaveholder, “loyalty meant slaves acted to fulfill slaveholders’ ends; slaves’ words expressed their submission to their owners’ will; and slaves wanted what their owners desired” (Joshel 2010, 116). Jude calls upon the anonymous congregation to act as good Roman slaves to their master. The assembly expresses active fidelity to Christ by “contend[ing] for the faith that was ... entrusted to God’s holy people” (Jude 3); they express words of submission by “building [themselves] up in ... [the] most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit” (Jude 20); they desire what their master desires by “keep[ing]...in God’s love as [they] wait for the mercy of ... Lord Jesus Christ to bring you eternal life” (Jude 21). Jude thus instructs his congregation, not only to recognize that Christ is their master, but also to avoid all forms of disobedience and embody the socially conditioned notions of the good Roman slave. Jude has reinscribed the machinations of empires’ most dehumanizing and pervasive practices, applying them as a means of instilling religious obedience during a time of congregational conflict and controversy.

Betsy Bauman-Martin contends that attributing the role of slave-owner to Christ goes beyond the textual evidence. Instead, she remarks that Jude “enforces imperial notions of lordship as represented by God and Christ” (2008, 73). In her analysis, she sees Jude as having constructed a parallel imperial hierarchy within the assembly itself. Idiomatic phraseology, concerning both the titles of Christ and the dangers associated with disobedience, demonstrates that Jude held onto “ideas of authority that are intrinsically connected with imperial and/or monarchical power” (2008, 74). According to Bauman-Martin, Jude reinscribes the “role, power, and status” of the empire onto the assembly—cosmically and organizationally (2008, 73).

While Bauman-Martin’s argument is strong and informative, it is too narrow. She does not address the obvious usage of slave-owning language attributed to Christ, nor does she note how Jude’s argumentation and rhetoric mimic or expand on Roman understandings of slave ownership. She need not exclude the notion of Christ as cosmic slave owner to emphasize his role as cosmic imperial lord: for Jude, he can be, *and is most likely*, both! The epistle affirms that Christ is sovereign lord over the entirety of the cosmos but performs the function of slave owner specifically to the elect. As Rohun Park notes, the term *despotēs* was occasionally applied analogously to “state rulers who held unlimited power over their subjects” (2009, 430). Park’s point emphasizes the terminological and conceptual imbrication between political power and slave ownership in ancient Rome, which Bauman-Martin misses. In other words, Caesar is already a slave owner to all those who reside in the realm. Any discussion of the monarchical conceptualization in Jude must take into account the epistle’s use of slave-ownership language. Nonetheless, Bauman-Martin makes a necessary point: that Jude internalizes and weaponizes Roman concepts of socio-political hierarchy to legitimize his own role within the assembly as Christ’s earthly vicegerent, tasked with eliminating and/or reforming congregational ne’er-do-wells.

Jude: Christ’s Vicegerent

Jude writes as Christ’s vicegerent who demands discipline and obedience in Christ’s physical absence until his upcoming eschatological return.⁹ While Jude describes himself as a slave like everyone else in the assembly—for there is only *one* master to obey—he nonetheless writes with an authority over the rest of the congregation.¹⁰ That is, he writes (implicitly) as an

⁹ The epistle is apocalyptic insofar as it expects Jesus to return immediately. Jude quotes apocalyptic material such as 1 Enoch and, rather explicitly, remarks that the assembly is living “In the last times” (Jude 18).

¹⁰ Jude’s role as both slave and vice-regent mirrors the same rhetorical tactic of Paul in the Corinthian epistles. As argued by Dale B. Martin, “Paul’s slavery to Christ did not connote humility but rather established his authority as Christ’s agent and spokesperson” (1990, 147). Yet, Martin notes that Paul’s “model of leadership... [was a] leader exerc[isng] power by stepping down to the social level of those whom he was to lead” (1990, 147). Jude’s authorial ambiguity, with regards to social position, and the epistle’s short length

“apostle” (Jude 17) in order to “remind” them (Jude 5) about the consequences of disobedience. The presence of ungodly intruders (Jude 4) threatens the assembly’s well-being and their hope of salvation through enslavement to Christ; it also jeopardizes Jude’s own pastoral authority over the “beloved” to whom he writes (Jude 3, see NRSV). Davids remarks that Jude “never [accuses the intruders] of theological derivation,” but they do, as per Jude 4, “pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality” (2012, 208). The intruders encourage spiritual rebellion and, in turn, rebellion against the spiritual leadership of the assembly. As Jude 16 warns, the outsiders “follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage.” Aichele sees this verse as an indication of the intruders’ general radicality: “the language strongly implies that ... [the intruders] not only deny that Christ owns them, but they recognize no slave owners at all. They obey no masters but themselves” (2012, 31).

In order to completely delegitimize these intruders, Jude rhetorically paints them as a danger to the community and insists that there should be no spiritual or intellectual tolerance of their thoughts and actions. Jude’s rhetorical and metaphorical strategies, emphasizing the horrific violence that falls upon those who do not obey, “function,” according to Aichele, “entirely to reinforce ... pastoral power” (2012, 36). S. J. Joubert remarks that Jude does not allow “any freedom of choice ... to decide whether the presence of the [intruders is] ... legitimate or not, since that decision has already been made for [the assembly]” (1990, 346-347). These intruders present a serious threat to the entire hierarchical structure—congregational and cosmo-theological—that Jude affirms and relies on in order to utilize and dispense power. There is to be no democratic decision making within the assembly, for Jude is the vicegerent of Christ and thus carries that authority—*what he says is to be followed*. Jude, as Ruth Anne Reese (2000) indicates, may be polemicizing against a congregational contingent that is only considered dangerous by the author himself. In the epistle, Jude rhetorically fashions himself threefold as a “hero who will announce ... the threat of ‘these’ [intruders] ... [adopting] a ‘savior’ role by rescuing [them] from blindness ... [as well as] the role of judge as he points out the error of ‘these’ [intruders]” (Reese 2000, 68). Reese’s explication demonstrates how far Jude undertakes the role of vicegerent: like Christ, he is hero, saviour, and judge. While Christ performs these prerogatives cosmically, Jude undertakes them within his ecclesial domain. Regardless of which master the intruders choose to obey, Jude’s literary presentation of himself equivocates obedience to Christ with obedience to him.

Jude is able to further assert his authority textually by the employment of common first-century CE rhetorical tools used within

potentially limits a more thorough investigative comparison with Paul’s understanding of slavery and leadership. Rather, future research might examine how pseudo- and non-Pauline authors understand slavery and its political significance within the life of the *ecclesia*.

epistolography: stereotyping and vilification. As Punt (2008) argues, Jude's connection of the intruders to various rebellious figures within Israelite history, both terrestrial and celestial, allows for the author to formulate a legitimated identity from that tradition. The various Old Testament and Second Temple narratives "become complicit in the author's construction of identity and therefore implicate authors in power but ... also reflect their power: particularly in the case where such interpretations and identity constructions are accepted" (Punt 2008, 153). The associations, Punt states, between the "wrongdoers of the past and opponents of [Jude] ... rested largely on stereotypical images" (2008, 153). Stereotyping and vilification have an important social function within collective groups, which extends beyond mere individualist prejudices and generalizations. Such tactics, as social psychologist John Turner remarks, "provided group members with positively valued intergroup differences ... enhanced their social identity ... and justified intergroup relations" (quoted in Punt 2008, 154). Jude's utilization of stereotypical rebellious figures (such as Cain and Balaam, v. 11) and behaviours (sexual licentiousness and debauchery, v. 19) thus functions beyond merely discrediting the intruders. Rather, it validates the cosmic-congregational political make-up that the author wishes to protect. It presents a stark difference between the beloved on the "inside" and the soon-to-be-damned on the "outside."

While Aichele (2012, 37) argues that Jude desires to "abolish difference" in the *ecclesia* by eliminating the presence—physical or ideational—of the intruders, this position goes too far beyond the text. Not only does Jude's usage of apocryphal materials denote the author is working within a broad theological tradition (see Callan 2004), but he is also pastorally in charge of an ethnically, occupationally, and religiously diverse congregation (if one assumes Paul's letters may also reflect Jude's community). I argue, therefore, that Jude wishes to abolish any indication of insubordination within the assembly. The intruders, as mentioned, do not preach a different gospel or heretical theology, but rather act and preach as anti-authoritarians.¹¹

Yet the intruders are not hopelessly lost, according to the epistle. While God gave no mercy to Sodom and Gomorrah, Jude's opponents have a chance to escape from the fires of Hades. The author implores the assembly to be "merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh" (Jude 22-23). The intruders are not irrevocably damned. If the assembly, by building up their faith in God (Jude 20-21), is able to reform the intruders and bring them back into obedience to Christ, they will be saved from the same fate of Cain, the fallen Angels, and Korah. Aichele remarks that the intruders' threat to Jude's "pastoral power ... requires the

¹¹ This description as "anti-authoritarian," if not antinomian, is justifiable as Jude never applies terms associated with leadership to the intruders: they are not called false prophets, or false teachers, apostles, etc. Truly, this group must have been a band of radical egalitarians.

full participation of the beloved community in the elimination of the ungodly ‘blemishes’” (2012, 32). Yet, this does not appear to be the author’s intent. While he wants the intruders gone, he actively encourages the rest of the assembly to fight for these interlopers’ re-enslavement, and thus their salvation. It seems that Jude’s desire for the congregation to mobilize towards conversion is the *end* rather than the *means*. If the assembly acts as evangelists, they are internalizing and externally perpetuating the cosmic and ecclesial hierarchy of the author. What better way to ensure the loyalty of the assembly than to have the beloved proselytizing on Jude’s behalf? These slaves of Christ are more than just converting intruders for the pastor; importantly, they are also fighting for the very imperial structure that Jude has reinscribed onto the assembly—the hierarchy which places them in complete subjugation to Christ *and* his worldly representative Jude.

Further, Jude’s discourse of reinscription and discursive authority propagates the normalization of imperialized systems of power and oppression outside the *ecclesia*. For the sake of “rescuing the text,” anti-imperial readings of the New Testament can tend to put aside the variety of means by which imperial systems of power and oppression influence the subaltern—those of the colonized class far outside the mechanisms of ruling political power. In the case of Jude, we see a member of a subaltern religious community adopting an imperial, hierarchical modality of rhetoric and authority as a means of legitimizing leadership. Postcolonialism, in contrast, has long recognized that the subaltern exists within a state of nuanced mimicry and/or hybridity, by which the various cultural, religious, political, and other aspects of the colonizer are adopted, consciously or not, by the colonized (Young 2003, 22-23). As previously stated, while Jude does not explicitly endorse the Roman empire (instead merely mimicking its structure for his own machinations), such discourse entails the acceptance and political normativity of an/the empire itself: Rome is simply mirroring the divine political structure of the cosmos. Thus, the epistle not only exemplifies the re-inscription of imperial power within an ecclesiastical setting, it also demonstrates the means by which such power can be indirectly legitimated beyond the *ecclesia*. Jude does not validate Rome, yet he normalizes how Rome rules.

Conclusion

Even in the brief letter of Jude, *empire* is more than visible. By using a postcolonial optic to examine the author’s language and rhetoric, we see how the hierarchical nature of imperial systems has been reinscribed onto the cosmos, the congregation, and the individual. Christ is not merely the Lord, but the slave master who owns the flesh and blood of the elect. Jude is not merely a pastor, but Christ’s vicegerent who expects the same obedience and recognition of authority as does Christ. Roman (and general) imperial notions of slavery, hierarchy, and authority have been utilized by Jude to

forward his own political and theological ends: to protect his position of power over the beloved.

Jude's rhetorical machinations are not irrelevant to our contemporary global church. Religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities are frequently derided as "intruders" who pervert the grace of God for their own sordid ends and persuade "holy ones" to perform all manner of ethical atrocities. Church hierarchies regularly implore their flock to actively resist any ecclesial and cultural acceptance of these minorities, instead hoping to evangelize them (if possible) to "the true faith": in other words, to save them from the fire, or in political terms, to *civilize* them. As Todd Penner and Davina Lopez (2012) remark, rhetoric has and will always shape the very social and individual context of our lived experiences. To perform a critical analysis of rhetoric (however ancient) "empowers us to map our own systems of rhetoric and ideology, to delineate the outlines of persuasive systems in which we are always ... involved and complicit" (Penner and Lopez 2012, 50). Thus, a postcolonial interrogation of Jude and the rhetoric employed in this epistle unveils to us the means by which religious authorities can exercise *imperial* power within *ecclesial* contexts.

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