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The ascension of Elijah and the beginning of the ministry of Elisha. Jude warns about false teachers.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 Kings 2. Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. And Elijah said to Elisha, Please stay here, for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel. But Elisha said, As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.

So they went down to Bethel. And the sons of the prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, Do you know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you? And he said, Yes, I know it. Keep quiet.

Elijah said to him, Elisha, please stay here, for the Lord has sent me to Jericho. But he said, As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you. So they came to Jericho.

The sons of the prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha and said to him, Do you know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you? And he answered, Yes, I know it. Keep quiet. Then Elijah said to him, Please stay here, for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.

But he said, As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you. So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the sons of the prophets also went and stood at some distance from them as they were both standing by the Jordan.

Then Elijah took his cloak and rolled it up and struck the water. And the water was parted to the one side and to the other, till the two of them could go over on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you.

And Elisha said, Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me. And he said, You have asked a hard thing. Yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you.

But if you do not see me, it shall not be so. And as they still went on and talked, behold chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

And Elisha saw it and he cried, My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen. And he saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

And he took up the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. Then he took the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and struck the water, saying, Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? And when he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other. And Elisha went over.

Now when the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho saw him opposite them, they said, The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha. And they came to meet him, and bowed to the ground before him. And they said to him, Behold now, there are with your servants fifty strong men.

Please let them go and seek your master. It may be that the spirit of the Lord has caught him up and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley. And he said, You shall not send.

But when they urged him till he was ashamed, he said, Send. They sent there for fifty men, and for three days they sought him but did not find him. And they came back to him while he was staying at Jericho.

And he said to them, Did I not say to you, Do not go? Now the men of the city said to

Elisha, Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord sees. But the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful. He said, Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it.

So they brought it to him. Then he went to the spring of water and threw salt in it, and said, Thus says the Lord, I have healed this water. From now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it.

So the water has been healed to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke. He went up from there to Bethel, and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, Go up, you baldhead, go up, you baldhead. And he turned around, and when he saw them he cursed them in the name of the Lord.

And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys. From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and from there he returned to Samaria. 2 Kings chapter 2 describes the transition from the ministry of Elijah to that of Elisha.

Elisha was called back in 1 Kings chapter 19 verses 19-21, but he hasn't really appeared again until this point. Elijah, Elisha and the sons of the prophets all seem to know that Elijah is going to be taken up. Elisha is asked three times by Elijah to stay, as he is going to Bethel, as he is going to Jericho, and then on to the Jordan.

On each of these occasions Elisha insists on following him. Sandwiched between these requests from Elijah, Elisha is also asked by both the sons of the prophets at Bethel and those at Jericho if he is aware that the Lord is going to take his master from over him. The repetition develops a rising sense of anticipation.

Some significant transition is about to occur. The presence of the sons of the prophets at this point might be surprising to us. As we've read through the story of Elijah, he seems to be largely alone, and he laments that he alone is left.

However, here we seem to have communities of faithful prophets at various parts of the country. These figures will be a lot more prominent in the story of Elisha. Whereas Elijah is an isolated and struggling prophet in the wilderness, Elisha's work occurs in large measure in the context of remnant communities that are being established within the land.

The journey that they take, from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan River, is significant. The itinerary might surprise us, they almost double back on themselves, and each of these places is closely associated with Joshua's conquest of the land. It is as if Elijah is tracing back through the conquest narrative of Joshua, a narrative that will later be replayed as Elisha enters into the land.

Elisha insists on going with Elijah. All these opportunities that he is given to go back, he insists on going on at each point. This story has two aspects to it.

On the one hand, it's the story of Elijah's ascension, and on the other hand, it's the story of Elisha's Pentecost. Elisha will receive the firstborn portion of Elijah's spirit, the double portion. He will be identified with Elijah, and he will complete the ministry that Elijah had started.

Elijah never completed the ministry that he was given in chapter 19. He was given the task of anointing Hazael king of Syria, of anointing Jehu, and of anointing Elisha as his successor. He had anointed Elisha as his successor, but he never anointed Hazael or Jehu.

And now Elisha will complete what Elijah had started. Their ministries are one ministry, a two-part ministry in two persons. As we will later see, this has resemblances with the story of Moses and Joshua.

The condition for Elisha to receive the double portion of his master's spirit is that he see him when he is being taken up. He must have the perception to perceive this visionary event. At a number of points in the story of Elisha, there are visionary phenomena that can only be perceived by those who have their eyes opened.

The fact that Elisha can see these things is a sign that he is a suitable successor for Elijah who has gone before him. We might think of a similar event in the New Testament in the baptism of Jesus. The heavens being opened and the spirit descending upon Christ in the form of a dove is not something that everyone would have seen.

Rather, it's something that John the Baptist and Jesus saw. These were visionary phenomena that you needed spiritual perception to perceive. Chariots of fire and horses of fire separate the two of them, and Elijah ascends into heaven in a whirlwind.

We might have recognized allusions to the story of Jacob at Bethel back in chapter 19 with the angel coming to Elijah while he slept on his journey. Now, however, it is as if Elijah is ascending Jacob's ladder. He is going to enter into the heavenly place itself.

As a prophet, he was one who participated in the divine council, being part of the deliberations of the Lord's court, and now he is ascending to that throne room. Elisha proclaims, My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen. There will be a similar statement made in the context of the death of Elisha in 2 Kings 13, verse 14.

The ascent of Elijah in fire also naturally contrasts with what we saw in the previous chapter as fire came down from heaven and consumed the two fifties. God's fire destroys the wicked, but it is the means by which the righteous are raised up to his throne. Peter Lighthouse observes, The story of Elijah's departure into heaven follows the sequence of a sacrificial rite.

By their mutual journey around the land, Elijah and Elisha form a unit, a two of them. They cross the Jordan as parts of a sacrificial animal will be washed before being placed

on the altar. Fire descends from heaven, dividing them in two, one ascending in fire to God as the altar portions of the animal ascend in smoke to heaven.

In the ascension, or holy burnt offering, the skin of the sacrificial animal is given to the priest, and the mantle skin of Elijah, the hairy garment of the bale of hair, is left for Elisha. Through this human sacrifice, Elisha becomes a successor to Elijah, and a new phase of prophetic history begins. The fact that fifty sons of the prophets stand at a distance, opposite the Jordan, as Elijah and Elisha cross, Elijah ascends, and then Elisha returns, might fill out something of the sacrificial image that's playing out here.

There are two water crossings, which might remind us of Moses' water crossing leading the people out of Egypt, and Joshua's leading the people into the promised land. In the crossing of the Red Sea, it is Moses' rod that is the key thing that affects the crossing. In the case of the crossing of the Jordan, in the entrance to the land, it's the feet of the Levites carrying the Ark of the Covenant.

Here, it is the mantle of Elijah that is the means by which the waters are crossed. Perhaps we are to see Elijah as a sort of human rod, as one who bears God's presence in a more personal way. In bearing the Ark of the Covenant, the Levites were bearing a symbol of God's throne.

But here, there seems to be a more intimate involvement between God's presence and a person. The mantle isn't just something that Elisha will carry, it is something that he will wear. As a miracle-working prophet, Elisha will bear the presence of God with him into the land.

The Lord will act in and through him. There are natural comparisons to be drawn between Elijah and Moses. Both have strange deaths or departures, as we see in Deuteronomy 34, verses 5-6.

So Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord, and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth Peel, but no one knows the place of his burial to this day. Both Elisha and Joshua are closely associated with the spirit of their master, and have a father-son relationship with the one that preceded them, something that we see in Numbers 27, verses 18-23 and Deuteronomy 34, verse 9. In Numbers 13, verse 16, Moses renamed Hoshea Joshua. The name Joshua means the Lord is salvation.

The name Elisha means God is salvation. Moses and Joshua share a single two-stage mission. The same can be seen with Elijah and Elisha.

Elijah is the prophet of the wilderness, and Elisha is the prophet of the land. Moses is the one who leads them through the wilderness, and Joshua is the one who leads them into the promised land. Elijah performs eight miracles, Elisha performs sixteen.

It would seem to be a very natural thing for one who holds the double portion of his father's spirit to do. After Elisha takes the mantle of Elijah, he calls upon the name of the Lord and repeats the miraculous crossing by which Elijah had led them over when they had first crossed. There is a natural relationship between chapters 1 and 2, as 50 strong men seek after Elijah for three days.

The preceding chapter had three sets of 50 men seeking Elijah. The men in chapter 1 had sought to bring down the prophet that had gone up, and in this chapter they are looking to see whether the prophet who has been caught up has been set down by the Lord. The chapter ends with further demonstrations of the connection between Elijah and Elisha, demonstrating that Elisha is the proper successor of Elijah.

The story of Elijah began immediately after the description of the rebuilding of the city of Jericho and the death of two sons. Now Elisha comes to Jericho, and he begins by healing waters there. The waters are healed from death and miscarriage.

Jericho, that had been a place of death, is now made a place where life is found. The manner of the healing might recall the events of Mara in the wilderness, where the bitter waters were healed immediately after the crossing of the Red Sea. It is important to read the miracles of Elisha against the backdrop of the miracles and actions of Elijah.

For example, the raising of the son of the widow of Zarephath becomes the raising of the Shunammite son in chapter 4. Elijah's ministry began by pronouncing a lack of water, and here Elisha's ministry begins by healing waters. Elisha, God is salvation, is also replaying the story of Joshua in various ways. Joshua meaning the Lord is salvation.

Joshua crossed over the Jordan and entered into the land and fought against Jericho. Now Elisha enters into the land, crossing the Jordan, and then heals the waters of Jericho. Whereas Elijah's ministry had been chiefly characterised by conflict, the ministry of Elisha is predominantly characterised by healing and provision of life.

However, this chapter does end with a judgement story. The story of the 42 lads of Bethel and the she-bears needs to be read carefully in its context. Peter Lighthouse has some very helpful remarks.

He observes that the sons of the prophets, earlier in the same chapter in verses 3 and 5, speak of the Lord taking Elisha's master from over his head. Lighthouse comments, The word in question can be seen elsewhere, used to refer to characters in their late teens, or young men who are old enough to fight. In Genesis chapter 48 it is used to refer to Ephraim and Manasseh, who by that point were in their early twenties.

Lighthouse goes on, A Joshua-like attack on a centre of idolatry. We should note that Elisha has just crossed the Jordan into the land. Lighthouse observes that there is a chiasmic, or there and back again, structure to the narrative.

It begins with removing the head, the fact that Elijah is going to be taken from Elisha. Then there are 50 men mentioned. Then they cross the Jordan with Elijah dividing the waters.

Then Elisha requests the spirit of Elijah. A chariot separates them. Then Elijah is taken up by a whirlwind into heaven.

Then back again, Elisha sees and calls to the chariot and tears his clothes. Then the mantle is received, as Elisha had requested the spirit earlier. Then Elisha divides the waters, as Elijah had divided them earlier.

Then 50 men are mentioned again. And finally at the end of the chapter we have the reference to the bald head, that corresponds to the removing of the head at the beginning. Lighthouse proceeds, the young men mark Elijah because his hairy head, his bale of hair, mentioned in verse 8 of chapter 1, is taken from him.

Perhaps he literally shaves his head in mourning over Elijah's departure. But it is also possible that they are marking Elisha because they assume he is unprotected without Elijah. Their taunt to Elisha to ascend also points back to Elijah.

You know where you can go, Elisha. Elisha again demonstrates that he bears the spirit of Elijah, which is the spirit of Yahweh. For he can call out bears from the forest as readily as Elijah can call out fire from heaven to consume the soldiers of Ahaziah.

If we look back at chapter 1 we should be able to see some of the parallels between these two events. In his commentary on 2 Kings, T.R. Hobbes notes that there are similarities between the story of the bears and the story of the fire coming down from heaven. We can think about the way that the bears correspond with the two times that the fire comes down from heaven.

In both there is a challenge offered to the status of the prophet. In chapter 1 the king orders Elijah to come down. In chapter 2 the young men order Elisha to go up.

In chapter 1 the men describe Elisha as a hairy man. In chapter 2 Elisha is described as bald-headed. Hobbes also observes the similarities in the syntax between the two events of judgment.

In chapter 1 verse 10, And came down fire from the skies and consumed. In chapter 2 verse 24, And came out two she-bears from the forest and devoured. Perhaps in the movement from the hairy prophet to the bald-headed prophet we should also see a completion of a Nazirite vow.

Elijah has been engaged in a sort of zealous warfare for the Lord. And now that the vow has been completed, according to the ritual of chapter 6 of Numbers, his head is shaved and the hair is burnt up. Elisha's ministry will take a very different form after this.

The fact that it is 42 of the lads that are killed might again be significant. In chapter 10 verse 14 of the book, Jehu will kill 42 relatives of Ahaz of Judah, persons who come to visit the royal princes and the sons of the queen mother. Elisha's judgment upon the 42 lads foreshadows the judgment upon the Amorite dynasty of Ahab and upon all who are associated with it.

Such a parallel should not surprise us given the relationship between Elisha and Jehu in 1 Kings chapter 19 verses 16 to 17. Beyond the parallels between Elijah and Elisha and Moses and Joshua already mentioned, there are parallels to be seen between Elijah and John the Baptist and Jesus and Elisha. In Mark's gospel chapter 1 verse 6, John the Baptist is described being clothed in much the same way as Elijah is described in chapter 1 verse 8 of this book.

The dynamics between Elijah and Jezebel and Ahab remind us of the relationship between John the Baptist and Herodias and Herod. John the Baptist, like Elijah, is a desert prophet, a forerunner of a prophet whose work will mostly be in the land. In the gospels we are told that John the Baptist will come in the spirit and power of Elijah and that he is the Elijah to come prophesied in the book of Malachi.

As with Moses and Joshua and Elijah and Elisha, there is a transition on the banks of the Jordan. John the Baptist baptises Jesus, as in the story of Elijah and Elisha, there are visionary phenomena, and Jesus' ministry begins. Jesus' name, of course, is related to Joshua.

The Lord is salvation. Once again connecting with Elisha, God is salvation. We might also see, later in the story of the gospels and of Acts, ways in which Jesus is like Elijah.

His ascension in Acts chapter 1 is the church's Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. The leader ascends into heaven and his spirit descends upon his followers. Further interesting details might be noted on this front. As already pointed out, chapters 1 and 2 of the book of 2 Kings belong together.

In chapter 1, three sets of 50 soldiers and their captains are sent to capture Elijah. Doing the maths, this is 50 plus 1, three times over, 153. As James Bajon points out, in the final narrative of the gospel of John, as Jesus' ministry transitions to that of his disciples, 153 fish are caught.

Perhaps a call back to the transition that we see between Elijah and Elisha in chapters 1 and 2 of 2 Kings. A question to consider. How might recognising these parallels between the story of Elijah and Elisha, and the stories of John the Baptist, Jesus, and Jesus' disciples, help us to understand the ministry of Jesus and his disciples more fully? The book of Jude.

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James. To those who are called, beloved in

God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ. May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you.

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation. Ungodly people who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord Jesus Christ.

Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe, and the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day. Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire. Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority and blaspheme the glorious ones.

But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, The Lord rebuke you. But these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively. Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error, and perished in Korah's rebellion.

These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves, waterless clouds swept along by winds, fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted, wild waves of the sea casting up the foam of their own shame, wandering stars for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever. It was about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him. These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires.

They are loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage. But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.

It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on those who doubt.

Save others by snatching them out of the fire. To others show mercy with fear, hating even the garments stained by the flesh. Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority before all time and now and forever.

Amen. The similarities between the book of Jude and 2 Peter are quite obvious, especially between their respective cause, Jude 4-18 and 2 Peter 2-1-3-3. The similarities are so pronounced that either one of them must be presumed to have used the other, or they both used a common source.

Of these, by far the most likely position is that there was no common source, but that Jude came first and 2 Peter incorporated and developed much of its material. For instance, in 2 Peter we see the thread of God's preservation of the righteous being introduced alongside the theme of the destruction of the wicked. The epistle seems to have come from a time when the ministry of the apostles had ended, at least among those to whom it is addressed, as verse 17 implies.

However, their ministry is well remembered. Indeed, the purpose of the epistle is in large measure that of stirring up its readers to remember what they had been taught earlier at a critical moment. I suspect that we should date the epistle to the final years of the 60s AD.

The most probable author of the epistle was Jude the brother of Jesus, referred to in Mark 6, verse 3. James, another brother of Jesus, was an early leader of the church in Jerusalem and the most likely author of the epistle of James. His introduction of himself as a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James is interesting. The James to whom he refers was clearly very well known.

James the brother of John had been killed back in Acts chapter 12. The next most famous James was James the brother of Jesus. He is described as a slave of Jesus Christ, servant is a bit too soft, but the brother of James.

This contrast between the relationships that he has with his two brothers is noteworthy. He doesn't appeal to some brotherly privilege relative to Christ. The addressees are beloved in God the Father, upheld by his love, which preserves them for his son Jesus Christ.

Jude wishes his hearers mercy, peace and love. This is the only occasion that love is mentioned at the beginning of such an epistle. He had wanted to write a more general treatment of the salvation that they had received and which they awaited, but as false teachers arose he needed to speak to that situation more urgently.

At stake is the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. The church has received

a deposit of truth and must jealously guard it from pollution with error. There are persons within the church who have crept in.

They are seeming members of the church but they do not share its spirit. No one noticed the sowing of the tares, but now that they are growing they have become unavoidably apparent and active. However the rise of such false teachers is not a surprise to God.

Their rise was determined long beforehand and occurs according to prophecy in precedent. Jesus had foretold the rise of such false teachers in the Olivet Discourse and then there was Old Testament prophecy and typology. They are distinguished by their ungodliness, their licentiousness and their denial of the lordship of Jesus.

They live without reference to God. Their lives are characterized by debauchery and by sexual immorality and excess. They denied the lordship of Christ, most probably practically in resisting his authoritative claim over their lives, but perhaps also in a denial of his divinity.

They perverted grace into license, twisting the teaching of the gospel into an excuse for sin. He presents his readers with three Old Testament types for their situation. The exodus from Egypt, the fall of the angelic sons of God prior to the flood, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

And the use of these particular examples finds plenty of precedent in Jewish extra-canonical works. In the book of Sirach, chapter 16, verses 7-10, He did not forgive the ancient giants who revolted in their might. He did not spare the neighbors of Lot, whom he loathed on account of their arrogance.

He showed no pity on the doomed nation, on those dispossessed because of their sins, or on the six hundred thousand foot soldiers who assembled in their stubbornness. In the book of Jubilees, chapter 20, verses 5-6, And he told them of the judgment of the giants, and the judgment of the Sodomites, how they had been judged on account of their wickedness, and had died on account of their fornication and uncleanness, and mutual corruption through fornication. And guard yourself from all fornication and uncleanness, and from all pollution of sin, lest ye make our name a curse, and your whole life a hissing, and all your sons to be destroyed by the sword, and ye become a curse like Sodom, and all your remnant as the sons of Gomorrah.

Particularly important when reading Jude is to recognize that while it is inspired and non-canonical works are not, the New Testament should not be hermetically sealed off from the world of first century Judaism. The scriptures were not written in a vacuum, in detachment from the world into which they were delivered. To understand books like Jude, it really matters that we have some awareness of wider Jewish writings.

Many of the New Testament writings would primarily have been heard within such a

world of texts and thought. This also matters when interpreting the book of Jude. When we appreciate that the story of the Watchers and the Giants was a key evidence for God's judgment in other Jewish texts of the time, in association with the wilderness generation and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, it starts to strain credulity that Jude isn't referring to these traditional readings of Genesis chapter 6 verses 1-4.

This is strengthened by the reference to the prophecy of Enoch a few verses later. While this can trouble some people, it is by far the most natural reading of 1 Peter chapter 3 verses 19-20, 2 Peter chapter 2 verse 4, and Jude 6. Had Peter and Jude not meant to refer to this tradition of the angelic watchers and their sin with human women, they would have been inviting all sorts of confusion in their hearers by the way that they spoke. The first of the three cautionary examples is that of Israel coming out of Egypt.

This particular example is used elsewhere and developed in far greater length in places such as Hebrews chapters 3 and 4 and 1 Corinthians chapter 10 verses 1-11. In those verses we read, Now these things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did. We must not put Christ to the test as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer.

Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. In that passage Paul wants his hearers to recognize the resemblances between themselves and the people of the wilderness generation, and Jude has something similar in mind here. Verse 5 raises textual questions as there are different versions, some with Jesus and others with Lord.

Jesus is likely the stronger of the two positions on merely textual grounds. However, it is a highly surprising reading. It identifies Jesus as the one who brought Israel out of Egypt, which isn't what we would expect, even though Paul presents Christ as being personally active in the deliverance, identifying him with the rock that followed them, and arguing that they put Christ to the test before they were destroyed by the serpents.

Perhaps we might also see some identification of Christ as the angel of the Lord that leads them out. Both textually and theologically this would be a possible reading, although it is unexpected enough to make us wonder whether the alternative reading was the original. The angels left their proper dwelling, their appointed domain.

This traditional reading of Genesis chapter 6 verses 1-4 is found in non-canonical texts, like in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, or the Book of Jubilees, or the Book of 1 Enoch. In the Testament of Naphtali, for instance, a very similar connection is drawn between the angels prior to the flood and to Sodom. Both relate the sin of Sodom and the sin of the watchers.

While Sodom is judged for other sins too, the perversity of the sexual behaviour of

Sodom is especially focused upon in Jude. This perversity has different facets to it. Both the watchers and the men of Sodom go after strange flesh.

The angelic watchers pursue relations with human women, and the men of Sodom pursue violent homosexual relations with the angelic visitors, when men should only have sexual relations with human women. The manner of their relations is violent, and the most extreme form of inhospitality. But the object of homosexual relations is itself presented as an abomination by Jude, as it is the objects of their violent intentions, not just the violent intentions themselves that he holds out as examples of their perversity.

In some way, these examples are comparable with the false teachers. They are characterised by the same sort of unbelief that characterised the Israelites in the wilderness. They are also characterised by the gross sexual perversity and rejection of station that characterised the angelic watchers and the men of Sodom.

He elaborates upon their sins in verses 8-10, connecting them with the sins of the groups previously mentioned, with in like manner. Here we discover that the false teachers seem to have appealed to dreams to justify their behaviour. The three sins he lists are sexual perversions, rejection of authority, presumably that of Christ and his servants, and blaspheming of angels.

The three groups mentioned earlier were guilty of these sins in various ways. The Israelites were guilty of rejection of the authority of God and of Moses and Aaron, and of sexual immorality. The men of Sodom were guilty of the rejection of God's authority, mistreatment of the angelic visitors, and sexual perversion.

And the angelic watchers were guilty of rejection of God's authority, of sexual sin with human women, and also of the violation of the proper relative station of angels and humans. In contrast to the preparedness of the false teachers to blaspheme the glorious ones, Jude gives the example of Michael the archangel, who in contention with the devil himself, did not revile him, but called for the Lord to rebuke him. There is a close parallel here between this account and Zechariah 3, verses 1-2.

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the Lord said to Satan, The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire? However, the particular story to which Jude refers seems to be in an apocryphal work, the Assumption of Moses. The story effectively illustrates Jude's point, whether or not he believed it to be true.

There is no reason to believe that he considered the book to be canonical, much as Paul quoted pagan poets and alluded to extra-canonical Jewish traditions, such as that of Jannes and Jambres being the opponents of Moses in 2 Timothy 3, verse 8. Jude could quote extra-canonical works without claiming that they were divinely inspired in the way

that scripture is. Non-canonical is not synonymous with false, nor is it synonymous with sinful, and the Church has long considered certain non-canonical texts to be of great value, or even in certain quarters to be penumbrally related to the canonical texts themselves. Why is blasphemy of evil angels an issue? Some people, when they see sin in authority figures, love to speak of them in a way that dishonours and reviles them, not showing the respect that is due to their office and authority.

How many people speak of politicians, for instance, or how rebellious children might speak of their parents are examples of this. Blasphemy in this context is a lower form of blasphemy than the blaspheming of God. It is extremely serious, nonetheless, as it represents a willful rejection of authority, which is ultimately from God.

To speak in a way that dishonours our political leaders, for instance, is one thing. It is quite another to speak in a way that dishonours angelic authorities. That is to play a game that is entirely out of our league, manifesting only our presumption and pride.

Jude declares woe upon the false teachers, suggesting that they are walking in the way of Cain. Cain was the first murderer, killing his brother Abel in his anger and envy. However, Cain's sin began with his presumptuous approach to God, approaching God on his own terms, and being angry when God did not accept his offering, but accepted the offering of his brother.

Balaam was a mercenary prophet who perverted the way of a prophet for the sake of money. The false teachers were likely travelling teachers who sought money from those that they taught, perverting their message to open their hearers' wallets. Korah rejected the authority of Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

He declared that all Israelites were equally holy, and that no one should be placed over others. Jude describes the character of the false teachers further. They are like hidden reefs in their congregations, people upon whom the unwary might run aground.

When they gathered together in their shared meals, presumably followed by the Lord's Supper, these individuals were brazenly participating with them. They are described as shepherds feeding themselves. Jude here alludes back to Ezekiel 34, verses 2 and 8. Thus says the Lord God, Ah shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep? And then, the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep.

By describing them as false shepherds, Jude suggests that they may have been pastors. They are waterless clouds, swept along by winds. They promise life-giving water, but they disappoint.

They are like trees that never deliver fruit, no matter how late into the season of harvest you wait. They are twice dead, not just dead in their original state of spiritual

insensitivity, but facing a second death too. This is because they are uprooted, they have no grounding in the One from whom we draw our life.

They toss around like the restless sea, incessantly casting up the foam of their wickedness. This is likely an allusion to Isaiah 57, verse 20. But the wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt.

They are wandering stars, heavenly bodies that stray off their course, and cannot be looked to for any sure direction. Their final destination is the inky blackness of God's wrath. Jude references the prophecy of Enoch here, seemingly quoting the non-canonical and pseudepigraphical book of 1 Enoch, specifically chapter 1, verse 9. Even though at first glance it might appear otherwise, in quoting the text in such a way, we need not assume that Jude believed that 1 Enoch was an inspired text, just that this particular quotation was true in some sense.

Perhaps he used it because the false teachers made use of 1 Enoch themselves. Did he believe that these were actually the words of the historical Enoch? Possibly, but by no means necessarily. Presumably it was widely known that the book was not by the actual historical Enoch, but was a fictional text that was nonetheless of theological insight, being the product of a deeply scripturally formed imagination, much as many Christians might regard a text like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Part of the challenge for scholars in such cases is working out such things as the conventions that surround genres, the ways that certain books were regarded, and how they were used. For instance, when Paul refers to Jannes and Jambres, should we read that as a claim that the historical characters that opposed Moses were named Jannes and Jambres? Or is he merely referring to a traditional elaboration of a story, much as many Christians might speak of three wise men called Melchior, Caspar and Balthasar, without assuming its historical veracity? Whatever is the case, Jude relates the judgement that Enoch, whether the historical person or his fictional portrayal, prophesied concerning the wicked to the false teachers that he is condemning. The prophecy itself is a fairly generic one, which draws upon elements found at various other points in scripture.

God's coming and judgement in the prophecy is described in a way reminiscent of Deuteronomy 33, verse 2, where God's glory at Sinai is described. He said, Similar statements are found in the New Testament, in places such as Matthew, chapter 25, verse 31. When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.

The wicked will be judged for their ungodly works and their ungodly words, which they have spoken against God. Jude describes the false teachers as grumblers and malcontents, like the Israelites in the wilderness, and rebellious characters such as Korah. They are critical people who stir up trouble.

They are driven by their sinful desires, rather than by any commitment to edifying others. They are arrogant, boastful in their rebellion, while strategically flattering others to gain a following and an advantage. The rise of such false teachers was foretold by the apostles, and before them by Christ Himself in the Olivet Discourse and elsewhere.

For instance, Paul spoke of this to the Ephesian elders in Acts, chapter 20, verses 29-30. And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. The rise of such false teachers is a characteristic feature of the last days.

Their rise will be a cause of division within the Church, as their affections are earthly, and their lives are unspiritual. Jude, however, hopes for better things in his hearers. He exhorts them to renewed vigilance and faithfulness in this situation.

There is a Trinitarian character to his exhortation. In contrast to the false teachers, who are devoid of the Spirit, they must build themselves up in the faith and pray in the Holy Spirit, drawing upon the Spirit's resources as they draw near to God in their prayer. They must keep themselves in the love of God the Father, abiding in His love by living in a way that ensures that their fellowship with Him is not broken by unrepented sin, and that they don't become alienated from Him by spiritual neglect.

They must wait for the mercy of Jesus Christ, sustaining themselves in the hope of the salvation that they await. They must be watchful over each other. Three types of persons are mentioned.

They should be merciful to those who doubt, people whose faith is uncertain. Such persons should be gently persuaded of the truth when they have been misled by false teachers. The second type seem to be more seriously affected, and more urgent and immediate action is required to snatch them from the fire.

The final group are in the most serious state of all. They must be treated with mercy, but also with a deep awareness of the gravity and danger of their condition, and how desperately contaminating it can be. In these last two cases, there might be some allusion to Zechariah chapter 3. In such a perilous climate, filled with false teachings and misled brothers and sisters, how can anyone remain faithful? Jude concludes the epistle by looking to God for this.

It is God who is able to preserve us from stumbling, shepherding us safely through the dangers of this present age, until he presents us unblemished before him, as pure sacrifices, offered up to him. He will do this with great joy. He does not wish to see us fall.

He rejoices in our overcoming, and will give us the strength that we need to endure as we look to him. To him belong all praise and authority throughout all ages. A question to

consider.

Considering the stories of the Flood, the rebellious angels and sinful humanity, and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, what might have made them stand out as the primary paradigms of divine judgement? What further lessons might we draw from them as we examine them more closely?