

29.10

Who Were the Troublemakers Denounced by Jude?

The Letter of Jude was written to denounce people referred to as “intruders” who “have stolen in among” the faithful believers (v. 4). But who were these people? What did they teach—or what did they do that was so offensive?

How the Troublemakers Are Described

Here is how the troublemakers are described within the letter:

- “intruders” (v. 4)
- “people who long ago were designated for this condemnation” (v. 4)
- “pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness” (v. 4)
- “deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (v. 4)
- “dreamers” (v. 8)
- “defile the flesh” (v. 8)
- “reject authority” (v. 8)
- “slander the glorious ones” (v. 8)
- “slander whatever they do not understand” (v. 10)
- “destroyed by those things that, like irrational animals, they know by instinct” (v. 10)

- “go the way of Cain” (v. 11)
- “abandon themselves to Balaam’s error for the sake of gain”
(v. 11)
- “perish in Korah’s rebellion” (v. 11)
- “blemishes on your love-feasts, while they feast with you
without fear, feeding themselves” (v. 12)
- “waterless clouds carried along by the winds” (v. 12)
- “autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, uprooted” (v. 12)
- “wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own
shame” (v. 13)
- “wandering stars, for whom the deepest darkness has been
reserved forever” (v. 13)
- “ungodly sinners” (v. 15)
- “grumblers and malcontents” (v. 16)
- “indulge their own lusts” (v. 16)
- “bombastic in speech” (v. 16)
- “flattering people to their own advantage” (v. 16)
- “scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts” (v. 18)
- “worldly people” (v. 19)
- “devoid of the Spirit” (v. 19)
- “causing divisions” (v. 19)

Wow! That's a lot of problems! Do we know of any group that might have been described by a Christian writer in all of these ways?

Some of the descriptors are so generic that they don't offer much help, but interpreters have seized on other points to hazard a few guesses. The problem is that, thus far, no one explanation accounts for more than a few of the attributes (while failing to account for others).

Some Suggestions

False Christians (Not Unbelievers)

Jude calls the troublemakers "intruders" (v. 4) and says that they participate in the love-feasts of the church (v. 12). Thus it is usually thought that these troublemakers would have claimed to be Christians, a claim Jude may have contested. Jude says that they deny Jesus Christ (v. 4) but probably means that they do so through their ungodly behavior rather than overtly.

Libertine Christians

Jude says that the troublemakers "pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness" (v. 4). Thus they might be libertine Christians who confuse forgiveness with permissiveness and adopt an attitude similar to what Paul caricatures as continuing in sin "in order that grace may abound" (Rom. 6:1; cf. 3:8; 6:15; 1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23; Gal. 5:13). They follow their own animal instincts (Jude 10) and yield willingly to lusts of the flesh (vv. 8, 18; cf. 7, 16). If this is the case, then the specific problem with their participation in community meals

could be that they behaved as they would at a pagan banquet or secular association.

Hyperspiritual Christians

Jude also refers to the troublemakers as “dreamers” (v. 8) who reject authority (v. 8) and slander what they do not understand (v. 10). This might mean that they are hyperspiritual Christians who place more value on their own ecstatic and visionary experiences than they do on other sources of religious authority (e.g., Scripture, apostolic tradition, community consensus, decisions of elders). If so, then Jude’s description of them as worldly people who are devoid of the Spirit (v. 19) is ironic: they are the opposite of what they claim to be (cf. Col. 2:18).

Semiconverted Gentiles

Jude’s extensive use of Jewish traditions suggests that he is writing to Jewish Christians. If this is the case, then the “intruders” could be gentiles who have been only partially converted from paganism, accepting certain elements of the Christian gospel but rejecting Jewish morality and, perhaps, retaining pagan notions of revelation and enlightenment.

Incipient Gnostic Christians

New Testament scholars have often sought to identify the troublemakers with followers of gnosticism, a variant expression of

Christianity that held sway in the second, third, and fourth centuries.

Such an identification, however, requires a fairly late date for the letter, later than most scholars are willing to allow. In recent years, the tendency has been to identify the troublemakers with a more unofficial and undeveloped form of “incipient gnosticism”: they espoused some of the same ideas that would be part of the gnostic religion some decades later.

Conclusion

A few scholars have abandoned the quest to identify the troublemakers in Jude, asserting that they must have been some localized group whose actual attributes can never be reconstructed from the letter’s polemical rhetoric. Others have even claimed that the troublemakers are a mythical group: the point of the letter is not to oppose a specific heresy but to warn believers against all manner of false teachers and evildoers who might appear in the last days.

Most interpreters, however, hold that the people denounced by Jude were actual historical persons troubling a particular congregation at a specific place and time. The suggestions above give strong clues to their identity and are not all mutually exclusive.

A fairly safe assessment would indicate that the troublemakers were gentiles who had been attracted to Christianity and become part of a Jewish Christian community. They indulged heavily in what they took to be “Christian spirituality” but rejected Jewish moral codes and espoused a version of the faith that struck Jude as a slightly

Christianized form of paganism. Further, they actively propagated this version of the faith, presumably with some success. Although they could not know it, many of their ideas would find even more success in the near future, when gnostic versions of the Christian religion took hold and spread throughout the empire.