

Authorship of Jude

The short letter of Jude says that it is written by “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James.” Although other possibilities have been explored, most interpreters concur that this attribution refers to the “Jude” who is identified in the Gospels as one of four brothers of Jesus (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3) and who, therefore, would also have been a brother of James—the more famous brother of Jesus who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem (see Acts 12:17; 15:13–21; 1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 1:19; 2:9).

Could Jude Have Actually Written the Letter?

In the past, the letter was often identified as a pseudepigraphical writing simply because the author’s command of Greek surpasses what scholars have thought a Palestinian peasant would have been capable of producing. In recent years, however, there has been increased appreciation for the level of sophistication that such persons may have attained if they were actively engaged with the Roman world, as Jesus’s disciples and siblings appear to have been. There has also been an increased awareness of the role that professional scribes sometimes played in the composition of letters. Thus most contemporary scholars would grant that this letter could have been written by Jude the brother of Jesus if he had the help of an amanuensis.

But this is not the end of the matter . . . many scholars (probably the majority) view the letter as pseudepigraphical—written by some second or third generation Christian who thought he could gain a better hearing for his ideas if he attributed them to a representative of the Holy Family.

Factors Contending against Pseudepigraphical Composition

The authorship of this letter appears to have gone unquestioned in the early church, even by those who had some problems with its contents. Given its polemical character and citations of nonbiblical material, it would never have been included in the canon if there had been any hint or suspicion that it had not actually been written by the brother of Jesus (especially since the main arguments could all be found elsewhere, in a letter attributed to Peter).

Also, a pseudonymous writer would have invoked a more prominent name: Why not write a pseudigraphical letter attributed to James? At the very least, he would have identified himself clearly as the “brother of Jesus” rather than simply as “a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James” (v. 1).

Factors Indicating a Pseudepigraphical Composition

- The author refers to “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (v. 3), suggesting a body of tradition that can be passed from one generation to the next.

- The author urges his readers to “remember the predictions of the apostles” (v. 17), which suggests that he is looking back on the apostolic age as a bygone era.
- The troublemakers who are attacked in the letter appear to have had much in common with second-century gnosticism.

Based on these observations, many scholars think that the Letter of Jude belongs to second- or third-generation Christianity and should be assigned to a time period too late for composition by one of the earthly brothers of Jesus. Those who take the letter to be pseudepigraphical typically date it to a time around 80–120 CE.

Why These Points Might Not Be Decisive

- Paul talks about a body of tradition that he received from others and is handing on to his readers (1 Cor. 15:3), and he does so in a time period when James the brother of Jesus was still alive and active.
- When Jude urges his readers to remember the predictions of the apostles, he is referring to something that “they (the apostles) said to you (the readers).” Thus the assumption is that the readers heard the apostles firsthand, something that would have occurred during the lifetime of the brothers of Jesus.
- We don’t know enough about “incipient gnosticism” to know when gnostic-like ideas began to take hold in early Christian

communities; many of the faults attributed to Jude's opponents are ones addressed in the undisputed letters of Paul, which were all written before 64 CE.

Thus some scholars insist that there is no sure reason for dating this letter to a period after the time when Jude the brother of Jesus could have written it. Indeed, these scholars point to other factors that suggest a relatively early date:

- Allusions to Scripture in the letter reflect knowledge of Hebrew manuscripts rather than dependence on the Greek Septuagint, and the Hebrew Bible was used most prominently in Palestine (where the brothers of Jesus lived) prior to 70.
- The author draws on nonbiblical Jewish traditions (vv. 6, 9, 14–15), the relevance of which would decline for believers as the Christian church continued to develop.
- The author believes he is living in the last days (v. 18), a perspective that became less prominent among Christians as time passed.

Scholars who argue that the letter is not pseudepigraphical, but an authentic composition by Jude the brother of Jesus, usually view it as contemporaneous with Paul's letters in the 50s and early 60s.

We may also note that a few scholars maintain the date of the letter's composition has little bearing on the question of authorship: if

Jude was one of Jesus's younger brothers (he is listed last in Matt. 13:55 and third in Mark 6:3), he could realistically have lived until the end of the first century.