

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 436

The Epistle of Jude, Part 5

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Episode Summary

One of the oddest verses in the short epistle of Jude is Jude 9, which describes some sort of struggle between Michael the archangel and the Devil (Satan). Many commentators see an allusion to Zechariah 3, but in this episode we take a different perspective about the meaning of this verse. Rather than Zechariah 3, certain features of Old Testament cosmic geography are a better backdrop to this odd passage.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 436: The Epistle of Jude, Part 5. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! What's going on?

MH: Well, not a whole lot. I'm ready to jump back into the book of Jude here. People seem to like it.

TS: Yeah, mm-hmm, yeah, and especially this episode. I mean, we've got some weird stuff going on in Jude.

MH: Yeah, all the archangel Michael stuff. That's part of what people know Jude for.

TS: Yeah, fighting over Moses with the devil. I mean, who would not want an episode on this?

MH: Yeah, it's almost like a *Stranger Things* episode.

5:00 Well, let's jump in here. I'm going to read Jude 8-10. Our focus for this part, this episode on Jude, is going to be verses 9 and 10, but 8 gives us a little bit more of the context. So let me read that. And I'm reading from ESV.

⁸Yet in like manner these people also [MH: he's referring to false teachers], relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones. ⁹But 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.”¹⁰ But these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively.

So that’s kind of weird. I mean, the first issue that you have to kind of get over the hump for is that the source for this idea (this conflict between Michael and the devil) is not found in the Old Testament, and most commentators are going to point that out. So they’re going to sort of end the story right there. But my view is, okay, the Old Testament isn’t the source for the conflict (for the reference here), but it is the inspiration for it. So that little bit (that little sort of transition) is going to separate what you’re going to hear here from what you would get in the commentaries, because I think commentators (typically New Testament scholars) are missing some things here that really help shed a light on what’s going on here with this conflict and why it would even be here and what its meaning is. Let me give you a “for instance” here. Gene Green in his commentary on Jude writes this:

The story of the dispute between Michael the archangel and the devil over the body of Moses is not part of the Old Testament narrative, as diligent readers of scripture know. Instead of appealing to the Old Testament, Jude’s “text” is a book called *The Assumption of Moses*. Considerable confusion has existed from ancient times regarding whether or not this is the same book referred to as *The Testament of Moses*. Were these “two distinct works, a single work consisting of two sections, or two separate works which were subsequently joint together?”

And he is quoting *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, J.F. Priest. Then Green continues:

Whatever their relationship, the source Jude depended on was known by Clement of Alexandria as well as Gelasius Cyzicenus as the Assumption or Testament of Moses of the Ascension of Moses. Quarreling between good and evil supernatural powers over the fate of a human being also has its antecedent in 4Q’Amram [MH: that’s a Dead Sea Scroll also known as 4Q543-548], where the text records a dispute over Amram.

Amram was Moses’ father in the Old Testament story. And here’s what the text says:

And behold, two were quarreling over me and they said: [text missing] and they entered into a great debate over me. And I asked them: You, why are you [text missing] over me? And they replied and said: We have received control and control all the sons of Adam.

So that's that Dead Sea Scroll fragment. Green continues and says:

This particular text may or may not have been the source of the notion of a dispute over Moses' body. But Jude is embedded in a tapestry of tradition that weaves in Zechariah 3:1-2 as well. Jude's quotation of *The Assumption* or the *Testament of Moses* includes a very clear echo of Zechariah's account of a dispute between the Lord and the devil.

And I'm actually going to disagree with that, but Green continues with his notion that Zechariah's account is a dispute between the Lord and the devil and in this case over Joshua, the high priest.

The Septuagint version of Zechariah 3:2 reads, "And the Lord said to the devil, 'The Lord rebuke you, devil, even the Lord who chose Jerusalem rebuke you.'"

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Now, where does this Zechariah 3 idea come from? Well, it comes from the Septuagint. Green just told us how the Septuagint handles Zechariah 3, where we have the *satan* in the divine council and he is accusing Joshua, the high priest, in that scene. (And also the angel of the Lord is there. You can go back and read Zechariah 3 if you like.) But we know from Hebrew... We have the *satan* here, but the word "*satan*" is prefixed with a definitive article—*ha satan*—which means it's not a proper personal name. So it's not the devil of later New Testament or even intertestamental literature. But again, Green either does not know that or somehow disputes it or whatever, but he is going with the Septuagint anyway. The Septuagint translator uses the word "devil" there and so that's where it comes from. So could Jude be referring to that? Well, again, maybe, but I tend to doubt it because I think (again, under inspiration) that the New Testament writers are going to know what's going on in the Old Testament a little bit better than that. Most commentators, though, will wind up saying something about Zechariah 3 here, again, where we have *ha satan* accusing Joshua, the high priest. Bauckham, for instance... His thoughts are representative. He writes in his commentary on the Jude passage:

The devil in his ancient role as accuser tried to establish Moses' guilt in order to prove him unworthy of honorable burial and to claim the body for himself.

Now there are, as I've already hinted at, problems with this, and I'm going to give you three of them. And these are problems with any trajectory that has Zechariah 3 as the backdrop to Jude 9 (which, again, no matter what academic commentary you pick up on Jude, they're going to mention Zechariah 3). The first problem is the text of Jude never says any of it. The text never has the devil accusing Moses of anything. If you go back and look at Jude (we read it at the beginning of the episode—Jude 8-10), it only says the devil was contending with Michael over the body of Moses. It does not say Moses is accused of anything. It just isn't there. So that sort of ruins any parallel with Zechariah 3.

Secondly, there is absolutely no comment about Moses' guilt. Again, that's absent from the text of Jude. So the analogy to *ha satan* in Zechariah 3 and Joshua the high priest is flawed. The reasoning is that Michael, as an archangel, is an opponent of Satan. Well, okay, I understand that reasoning. And Satan seeks to accuse the brethren. Again, that's understandable as well. It's all well and good, but the passage says nothing about Mosaic guilt. Again, that's just read into it by New Testament commentators.

The third problem is the one I've already mentioned. The idea is also untenable because associating Zechariah 3 with the devil depends on violating Hebrew grammar. The *satan* of Zechariah 3 is not the devil, and so all such appeals to Zechariah 3 are misguided. However, I think it's possible that Jude could have been thinking of the devil—not because of Zechariah 3 though, but because of cosmic geography. And this is where I'm going to depart here. I'm going to explain this as we go on. I take *ha satan* in Zechariah 3 as an unidentified spiritual adversary rather than the devil of the later literature, but by the time of Jude a struggle between Michael and the devil was part of the Jewish tradition. So if it didn't come from Zechariah 3, where did it come from?

Again, remember, Moses isn't blamed for anything in Jude 9. There is no accusation in the text. And again, I repeat this because that absence makes an identification with Zechariah 3 really unlikely. A better suggestion (as I've already suggested) is that the tradition arises from cosmic geography. And I think the key to understanding what is going on here and with the tradition more generally is where Moses dies and where he is buried by God. And that is in the Transjordan—the territory on the other side of the Jordan. It is not in Canaan. And I wrote about this passage in both my *Angels* and my *Demons* books, so I'm going to go back there and dip into that.

I think to understand this, we need to recognize a couple of terms. And again, if you want a written summary of this, you can go to the *Angels* book or the *Demons* book and get it there. But I'm going to quote at length from the *Angels* book and try to capture this here for the episode on the podcast. You need to understand a couple of terms going into it. One is the Old Testament place name *Oboth*. It's a place name and it's also a term for "underworld spirits"—the *oboth*. *Oboth* and *oboth*. It's spelled the same way. Same spelling. Same written material, but it can be either a place name or a term for "underworld spirits." The other is *Abarim* or *ōberim*. This is a place name and a term that means "those who cross over." And the question is, into what? I mean, what does it mean to cross over? So *ōberim* in the Old Testament... If we looked it up in Hebrew, it's actually spelled with an "o" in *ōberim*. And if you translate that literally into Hebrew, it's "those who cross over." So both of these places in the Transjordan were known for underworld spirits and something crossing over into this territory, the Transjordan. In certain contexts, those who cross over into the Transjordan,

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it's actually a reference to the realm of the dead. *Öberim* would be to the realm of the dead.

Now from *Angels*, let me try to unpack this. I'm going to quote myself here. And in the process, I'm going to quote another scholar named Spronk (last name Spronk). Let's just jump in here.

According to Deuteronomy 34:6, God buried Moses "in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-Peor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this day."

So we're given a general location.

The location has significance for Israelite cosmology and religion. This location is part of the geographical area that includes *Oboth* and *Abarim* (Numbers 21:10-11, Numbers 33:43-48). Mount Nebo, the mountain atop which Moses viewed the promised land before God laid him to rest (Deuteronomy 34:1), is in fact explicitly linked to *Abarim* in Deuteronomy 32:49. These locations were associated with the underworld and the ancient cults of the dead. Consequently, the "valley" mentioned in Deuteronomy 34:6 may very well be the valley of the *oberim* mentioned in Ezekiel 39:11. Spronk discusses the place names:

The participle *Qal* plural 'ōbērîm of the verb 'br, 'to pass from one side to the other' seems to have a special meaning in the context of the cult of the dead, denoting the spirits of the dead crossing the border between the land of the living and the world of the dead. It can be interpreted as a divine name in Ezek 39:11, 14, which may have also been preserved in the geographical name Abarim (Num 21:10–11; 27:12; 33:44, 47–48; Deut 32:49; and Jer 22:20). Its Ugaritic cognate, then, would be 'brm in *KTU* 1.22 i:15. [MH: So it shows up in Ugaritic texts.]

In the Ugaritic text *KTU* 1.22 describing a necromantic session, the king invokes the spirits of the dead (Rephaim) and celebrates a feast, probably the New Year Festival, with them. It is told that they came over traveling by horse-drawn chariots. As they are taking part in the meal served for them they are explicitly called 'those who came over' [MH: or 'those who crossed over].

The valley of the 'ōbērîm is located 'east of the sea' (v 11), which is probably the Dead Sea. So it was part of Transjordan. This is a region which shows many traces of ancient cults of the dead, such as the megalithic monuments called dolmens and place names referring to the dead and the netherworld, viz. Obot, Peor, and Abarim.

That's the end of my material from the *Angels* book. Let me go to the *Demons* book and I have a little bit more to say about this here. So I wrote this as follows:

Some of the terminology for these fearful spirits derives from place names.

So this is in the context of talking about spirits of the dead and evil spirits in the *Demons* book.

For example, the geographical area that includes Oboth and Abarim in the Transjordan (Num 21:10–11; 33:43–48) was associated with ancient cults of the dead. These two place names mean, respectively, “spirits of the dead” and “those who have passed over [to the Netherworld].”

The geographical associations with *’ōbērîm* are evident in Ezekiel 39:11, which indicates (ESV) the “Valley of the Travelers [*’ōbērîm*]” is “east of the sea” (ESV). According to Spronk, the sea “is probably the Dead Sea. So it was part of Transjordan. This is a region which shows many traces of ancient cults of the dead, such as the megalithic monuments called dolmens and place names referring to the dead and the netherworld, viz. Obot, Peor, and Abarim.”

The Hebrew term “Oboth” (*’ōbôt*) likewise has an otherworldly overtone and is associated with the spirits of the dead and those who worked to communicate with those departed spirits. Tropper explains that *’ôb* [MH: the singular] is now more commonly understood to refer to the spirits of the dead, deriving the meaning from the Arabic cognate *’âba*, “return.” Other possible etymologies suggest interpreting *’ôb* “as ‘hostile’ (a derivation of the root *’yb* ‘to be an enemy’); or as ‘ancestral.’” According to Tropper, those who argue for the meaning “ancestral”...

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...assume an etymological connection between *’ôb* and *’âb* “father, ancestor”. The meaning “ancestral spirit” for *’ôb* is based on a number of considerations. In the ancient Orient, necromancy was part of the Cult of the Ancestors. This essentially involved the invocation and interrogation of the dead patriarch from whom a family could seek advice and assistance. Several times in the OT, the Heb term *’âbôt* “fathers”, similar to *’ôbôt*, designates dead ancestors.

That was quoting Tropper. Back to what I wrote:

Certain places removed from Canaan, the Holy Land...

Again, think of what Canaan was. Canaan was Yahweh’s turf, the Holy Land.

Certain places removed from Canaan, the Holy Land, like Oboth and Abarim [MH: since they were on the other side], were deemed the destination of those who have passed over to the realm of the dead. The reference to the “cult of the dead” or “ancestor cults” is an important aspect of an Old Testament theology of evil spirits. The realm of the dead was filled with the spirits of the human wicked and other evil supernatural spirits. In addition to *'ôb* (“spirit”; pl: *'ôbôt*) and *'ôbêrîm* (“those who have passed over”), members of that fearful, motley assembly went by various terms associated with ongoing contact with the living.

And that’s the end of what I have in the *Demons* book.

So what would all of this mean for Jude 9? I am going to go back to my *Angels* book on one more paragraph and read this:

In view of these data, it seems reasonable to conclude that Moses would have been buried in the place associated with the realm of the dead and unfavorable cosmic geography — turf that was not part of Yahweh’s covenantal land. It is in turn quite understandable if a Second Temple Jewish tradition arose about the body of Moses—arguably the central figure in Israelite history—being contested by the lord of the dead, Satan, by the time of that period [MH: 2nd temple period]. Michael was Israel’s prince, the guardian of Yahweh’s portion according to Daniel 10:21 and 12:1, so he would be the logical candidate to claim the body of Moses for the eschatological land of promise, or the domain of Yahweh in the afterlife.

Here’s how the tradition works, viewed from the perspective of cosmic geography, not Zechariah 3. Again, Moses isn’t guilty of anything. Jude never says that. There’s no accusation against him. So Moses dies in a place later associated with the realm of the dead—the bad realm of the dead, the place where evil spirits are (because of these terms *Oberim* and *Oboth*). He is not on Yahweh’s covenantal turf. Moses was not buried with his fathers. Remember that old patriarchal phrase from the Old Testament. He wasn’t buried with his fathers in a marked grave in Yahweh’s land. Now interestingly enough, here’s the actual passage from the *Testament of Moses*, which I think supports what I’m saying here. So this is *Testament of Moses* 11:1-8:

11 ¹And when Joshua heard the words of Moses, so written in his testament, all the things which he had said, he tore his garments and fell at Moses’ feet. ²And Moses, though he wept with him, encouraged him, ³and Joshua replied to him, saying, ⁴“Why do you console me, master Moses, and in what way may I be consoled concerning that bitter message spoken, which has gone forth from your mouth, a message full of tears and sobbings? Because you are departing from this people [five to seven letters are lost] ⁵What place will receive you⁶ or where will be the marker of your sepulcher? ⁷Or who as a man will dare to move your body from place to place? ⁸For all who die, there are appropriately their sepulchers in

the earth, but your sepulcher is from the rising to the setting of the sun, and from the South to the limits of the North, the whole world is your sepulcher.

That's the end of the section. So in the *Testament of Moses*, Joshua is concerned about where Moses' body is ending up. Again, it's not marked in the Old Testament. He's just on this other side. He says,

What place will receive you or where will be the marker of her sepulcher? Or who as a man will dare to move your body from place to place?

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So apparently there was this sense of Moses' body needing to be moved at some point. They need to find it and move it. Well, where would they move it? Well, of course they would move it to Yahweh's territory where it properly belongs. So I think Joshua, again, is upset as Moses dies and is not buried with his fathers or among his own people in the land. That thought would lead to, "Well, if he's in this other bad place..." (this other unfavorable cosmic geographical location) "...then the lord of the dead is going to want to keep the body of Moses in his own turf, robbing Moses of salvation, rest, or afterlife deliverance from the realm of the dead." And of course, in later tradition in the Second Temple Period (going on riffing from the book of Daniel)... If you believe Daniel was written late, that's in the Second Temple Period. If you believe it was written earlier, it's still precedent. But Michael had charge over God's covenantal claim, God's turf, the Lord's portion: Israel, Canaan. Michael is charged, therefore, with contending for Moses' body to remove it to Yahweh's domain, for he is the guardian of Yahweh's domain. So therefore, logically, if you're thinking these thoughts, it would be Michael versus Satan for Moses' body.

So what is Jude's point in all this? Why bring it up? Again, I think the tradition is understandable—it's parsable—if you're looking at it from the perspective of cosmic geography instead of Zechariah 3. But again, what's Jude's point? I think it's that when contending with the devil, Michael refused to rebuke the devil personally. I think this is what Jude wants his readers to see because he's talking about the false teachers and how they blaspheme the glorious ones. Then he brings up the example of Michael and says, "Look, even Michael didn't do this." Then he refers to the tradition of Michael contending with Satan over the body of Moses.

So when contending with the devil, Michael refused to rebuke the devil personally. He would not utter a word against one of the glorious ones, thereby committing blasphemy, because the devil is still a member of the divine council in the sense that he is an *elohim*. He's one of these created beings. Now, he's no longer in God's employ; he's in a state of rebellion against God. But he's still an *elohim*. I mean, you could say (to be technically accurate here) all spiritual beings are *elohim*. Again, if you've read my work, if you've read *Unseen Realm*, if you've listened to me often enough, you know this is familiar territory to you. But he's

still one of this class and Michael refuses to blaspheme or speak against another member of, really, his own lot—these spiritual beings. As we've covered in the last two installments of Jude, the glorious ones were these members of the divine council—members of the heavenly host—and these false teachers were speaking words against them, blaspheming them.

So Jude's point is, "Look, even Michael didn't do this." And you'd think Michael would have the authority to do it, but even he doesn't. He says "the Lord rebuke you." So he appeals to the Lord's authority. Even in Satan's rebel status, Michael won't rebuke him personally. He has respect for the status of the sons of God in that way. Instead, he appeals to God's own authority, the Lord himself. And this is especially appropriate because the devil or Satan is lord of the dead. I mean, after all, that is his new domain of authority because of his fall, because of his rebellion. He becomes the lord of the dead. So Michael does not assume the authority to rebuke him personally. He appeals to God. But the false teachers (again, Jude's point) lacked this humility and sense of propriety. They therefore blaspheme what they do not understand. This is another way of rejecting authority on their part. God has made Satan lord of the dead because humanity followed suit in rebellion. This is why we have an underworld, because of the fall and Satan is cast down to the earth or under the earth; he is cast down to *eritz*, which is another word for *Sheol*—the grave under the earth (again, the realm of the dead). This is where he has his authority now. And his authority is the result of the fall, yes, but instead of annihilating him, God grants him this because God is a respecter of freewill because we're created as imagers. So those who fall or those who reject God's salvation, this is where they're going to end up permanently. Those who accept the Lord's salvation are going to be removed from *Sheol*. So the Lord does have the authority to remove those who are righteous from the underworld, and this is the authority to which Michael is going to be appealing.

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God has made Satan lord of the dead because humanity followed suit in rebellion. Humans are sinners, and in the absence of Eden, all die and go to that realm. But Michael, again, charged with Moses' deliverance—the deliverance of the body to get him (eschatologically speaking, to get his body in the proper place) appeals to the Lord's authority to do this. So he depends on God's authority. Once again, the false teachers... If Jude is bringing this is up sort of as an object lesson, the false teachers are again portrayed as arrogant, spiritual idiots. This is why Jude does it.

Now there's a happy ending to this. Moses was present with Jesus at the Transfiguration. So Moses is with the Lord. Again, with this whole set of circumstances, you can see how the ideas would arise and how they would sort of hold together and how they would make sense on their own terms. And then ultimately, Moses is with the Lord. So it fills in the ending for the earlier writer of the Testament of Moses. He's writing before Christ, before the time of Jesus,

before New Testament theology is laid out, before you have something like the Transfiguration.

So this is the answer to the question raised in the Testament of Moses. Where does Moses end up? He ends up with the Lord. But you get there by appealing to cosmic geography tradition—Michael tradition, Satan as the devil as the lord of the dead—that whole tradition. Again, all of these traditions have their roots in the Old Testament and in cosmic geography and they make sense. Since all of the component pieces come from the Old Testament, you can see how they would've come together in these ideas that Jude references and picks up on for his teaching. And the whole purpose of his teaching is to say, "The false teachers are just spiritual idiots. I mean, even Michael doesn't speak against personally other members of the heavenly hosts. He doesn't do that. Even the ones who are in rebellion, the ones who are no longer on the payroll like the devil... He won't do it. But these false teachers, they just do it willy-nilly because they don't know anything." And Jude doesn't want his readers (those who come into contact with his epistle)... He doesn't want them following these false teachers because they're going to be misled. They're wrong in their theology and Jude is contending for the faith once delivered to the believing community. And part of his message is to get people to turn away from the false teachers. He has used various Old Testament examples, archetypal examples, to get them to do this. He used the sins of the sons of God in Genesis 6. He used Sodom and Gomorrah (again, the last few parts of Jude that we've gone through in the podcast). Jude is trying to persuade his listeners to turn away from the false teachers, and this is another example that he uses to illustrate the badness of them—in other words, how misguided they are and how unworthy of being followed they are.

Now the next time we get together for an episode of the podcast, we're going to be looking at more Old Testament archetypal sinners. It's going to be Cain, Balaam, and Korah because Jude's going to just keep pouring it on, comparing the false teachers to all these bad examples in the Old Testament that have these deep Old Testament roots, in an effort to get people to turn away from false teaching.

TS: I'm loving the Jude Bible study and I'm looking forward to part, what is it, 6? Jude's turning out to be quite a handful of parts. There's probably going to be 30 parts in Jude. Who would've thought that, you know?

MH: I don't think we'll get that many.

TS: Alright, well, the more the merrier. Alright. Don't forget to go visit our sponsor at Logos.com/nakedbible and now's the time to support them and us if you don't mind. If you haven't made the plunge yet, we'd appreciate it. We look

forward to Part 6 next week, Mike, and with that I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God bless.