Escaping Death By Canon: The History of the Epistle of Jude

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Περίληψη: Αυτό το άρθρο διερευνά τη σχέση της Επιστολής Ιούδα, ενός έργου που συντάχθηκε στα τέλη του πρώτου μεταχριστιανικού αιώνα ή στις αρχές του δεύτερου και που αποτελεί μέρος της Καινής Διαθήκης, με την Εβραϊκή απόκρυφη παράδοση. Η σχέση αυτή οδήγησε πολλούς χριστιανούς πατέρες σε μεγάλο προβληματισμό.

Summary: In this paper an attempt is made to explore the connection of the canonical Epistle of Jude, a work written around the late first century or early second century CE, with apocryphal Jewish Scripture, which led it to become one of the disputed books of the Biblical Canon.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: απόκρυφα κείμενα, Επιστολή Ιούδα, Εβραϊκός Κανόνας, Χριστιανικός Κανόνας

Key words: apocryphal texts, the Epistle of Jude, the formation of the Hebrew Canon, the formation of the Christian Canon

The Epistle of Jude packs a lot of content into one chapter of twenty five verses. The work, written from the perspective of the apostle Jude, contains two notable mentions of apocryphal Jewish scripture: a quote from the Book of Enoch, and an allusion to the events of the Assumption of Moses. Although using these particular books as source material posed no problem for the author of the Epistle, it unintentionally invited derision and skepticism in the centuries to come. As the Christian Canon solidified, the Epistle of Jude's interrelation with other religious texts both cast doubt upon its authenticity and secured it a spot within the New Testament.

Based on the style of the Greek, scholars believe that the Epistle of Jude was written around the late first century or early second century CE[1]. This date places its composition within the window of 200 BCE to 200 CE, during which "ancient and fluid traditions swirled around, even buoyed up the authors, compilers, and redactors of the Jewish writing."[2] The modern notion that every writing which never entered into a mainstream religious Canon was only practiced by fringe groups, or was considered unimportant by the writers and thinkers of its day, is fundamentally flawed. Instead of governing a largely unified religion with minor ideological discrepancies, "two fundamental tenets" bound together the various Jewish traditions of the first

[1] González Justo L. *The Story of Christianity*. Vol. 1, HarperOne, 2010.
[2] Charlesworth, James H. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha & the New Testament*. Trinity Press International, 1998.

and second centuries - "ethical monotheism and eschatological hope."[3] As long as an author conceded that there was a singular, active God, and that Israel would someday rise under the guidance of a Messiah, the specifics of his work could manifest in any number of ways. The author of the Epistle could therefore select from an expansive array of sources, and although he would undoubtedly hold some in higher esteem than others, he could definitively categorize none of them as 'good' or 'bad,' 'real' or 'fake.' The Book of Enoch and the Assumption of Moses were as viable as any other sources.

In the centuries following its composition, the lack of a set Canon allowed for the Epistle of Jude to endear itself to scholars and embed itself into the common tradition. Origen, who lived in the late second and early third centuries, praised the Epistle as being "filled with the healthful words of heavenly grace," and showed just as much respect for the source material as he did for the work itself.[4] He especially favored the Assumption of Moses, which was still known by scholars of his time despite not having maintained the popularity of other works. While describing the eviction of humanity from the Garden of Eden, Origen asserts that "in the work entitled The [Assumption] of Moses (a little treatise, of which the Apostle Jude makes mention in his Epistle), the archangel Michael... says that the serpent, being inspired by the devil, was the cause of Adam and Eve's transgression."[5] Notably, Origen specifically recognizes the Assumption as valuable through its relation to the Epistle of Jude. His need to bolster the Assumption's credibility through its connection with the Epistle betrays that his audience may not recognize the text otherwise; however, he only needs this qualifier to render the source credible, implying that the divide between widely-recognized and obscure texts did not necessarily segregate the credible from the incredible.

In possibly one of the first instances of delineation between Canon and non-Canon Christian texts, the Muratorian fragment still raises no objections towards the veracity of the Epistle of Jude. Given that "scholars have traditionally assigned the Muratorian fragment to the end of the second century or the beginning of the third," the Muratorian fragment is one of the first surviving lists of which religious sources should or should not be considered credible.[6] Notably, the author of the fragment does not merely list the sources he views as divinely inspired –the Epistle included– and remain silent on those he does not. Instead, he actively speaks out against the Apocalypses of Peter and Paul and The Shepherd of Hermas.[7] Furthermore, he mentions that certain members of the community had barred the Apocalypse of Peter from being read in the Church, meaning that the author of the fragment is not the creator of the Canonical mindset, but a messenger.[8] People had begun to mobilize against texts which they viewed as untrustworthy as of the time of the fragment's composition, but the Canonical mindset had not solidified to the point where the Epistle's use of apocrypha would be an issue.

However, unintended ramifications arose from the popularity of the Epistle and similar works. As new texts based on the plethora of old

[3] González Justo L. *The Story of Christianity*. Vol. 1, HarperOne, 2010.
[4] Origen. *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew*. Translated by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Red Pill Press, 2006.
[5] Origen and Rufinus. *De Principiis*. Kessinger, 2007.
[6] Hill, C. E. "The Debate Over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon," Westminster Theological Journal 57:2 (Fall 1995): 437-452.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

sources began to spread, Jewish teachers became increasingly wary of what could or could not be considered religious scripture. The growing fixation on a Messiah who had already arrived violated the second unwritten tenet of Jewish scripture, that it must propagate eschatological hope for a savior to come. Although no reliable source exists on who exactly formed the Hebrew Canon, scholars currently believe that the process "lasted into the middle of the second century with respect to individual books and that presupposes a long period of preparation reaching back into pre-Christian times."[9] In other words, the idea of gatekeeping scripture predated what would later be known as Christian literature, but was partially spurred into completion by its rise. The formation of the Jewish Canon ultimately left out both the Book of Enoch and the Assumption of Moses. The rabbis who compiled the scripture undoubtedly did so without the Epistle of Jude in mind, focusing on sources which did not profess the past arrival of the Messiah. Likewise, the Christians of that time could not agree how the formation of a Jewish Canon would affect them, if it affected them at all; while some sects chose to emphasize their relation to the older faith, others "[sought] to divorce Christianity as much as possible from Judaism."[10] Regardless of how connected individual Christians felt to this landmark decision, the omission of these two books left the Epistle of Jude in a precarious position.

In the early fourth century CE, increased regulation of Christian ideology cast significant doubt upon the Epistle of Jude. The emperor Constantine, having legalized Christianity within the Roman empire just over a decade before, called together the Council of Nicaea in 325 to create a more concrete understanding of what Christianity was. Suddenly, there was far less room for variation within the religion, and Christianity had to better define its relationship to Judaism and to its own extensive scripture. As the connection between Christianity and Judaism became a non-negotiable fixture of the religion, Christians began to wonder whether a text reliant upon non-Canonical Jewish works should be non-Canonical as well. In the same year as he attended the First Ecumenical Council, Eusebius of Caesarea categorized the Epistle among the *antilegomena,* or writings of disputed credibility, in his *Church History*. Within the work, he dismissively mentions that "the so-called epistle of James and that of Jude, [and] also the second epistle of Peter," regardless of their dubious origins, were "nevertheless recognized by many."[11] As a devotee of Constantine, Eusebius rejected Origen's relaxed approach to credibility and embraced Christianity's new focus on a defined Canon. Although modern scholars refrain from crediting Eusebius with the creation of an "official theology," both his participation in the Council of Nicaea and his compilation of accepted ideas into a singular, referenceable work indicated the homogenization of Christianity.[12]

However, the Epistle of Jude ultimately transcended skepticism and became a fixture of the New Testament Canon. Like the origins of the doubt against it, the saving grace of the Epistle of Jude lies in its interconnectedness with other texts. The Epistle of Jude falls into the group of so-called Catholic Epistles, a category which entered

[9] Hengel, Martin, et al. *The Septuagint as Christian Scripture: Its Prehistory and the Problem of Its Canon*. Baker Academic, 2004.
[10] Corrigan, John, et al. *Jews, Christians, Muslims: a Comparative Introduction to Monotheistic Religions*. ROUTLEDGE, 2017.
[11] Eusebius. *Church History of Eusebius*. Translated by Arthur Cushman McGiffert et al., Parker and Company, 1890.
[12] González Justo L. *The Story of Christianity*. Vol. 1, HarperOne, 2010.

common use in the fourth century CE. These epistles, while initially appearing to be self-contained works, relate to each other as follows:

> 2 Peter is intended as a sequel to 1 Peter and is probably dependant upon Jude; 2 and 3 John serve as appendices to 1 John; and there are striking parallels between the three major letters in the collection (James, 1 Peter, 1 John), parallels commonly explained by appeal to shared parenetic tradition.[13]

Branding the sources of the Epistle of Jude as 'uninspired' or 'apocryphal' may have provided ample reason to doubt its own inspiration; however, discounting the Canonicity would call into question the veracity of all other Catholic Epistles, some of which contain no references to known apocryphal texts. Thus, just as reasons to doubt the Epistle of Jude began to rise, so did its greatest defense.

The Epistle of Jude contains mentions of both the Book of Enoch and the Assumption of Moses, two apocryphal Jewish texts which were not viewed as such at the time of the Epistle's composition. Its relation to these texts caused much contention as to whether the Epistle could be trusted. While the source materials of the Epistle of Jude eventually fell into relative obscurity, the Epistle's interconnectedness with its fellow Catholic Epistles saved it from the same fate.

[13] Nienhuis, David R. *Not by Paul Alone: the Formation of the Catholic Epistle Collection and the Christian Canon*. Baylor University Press, 2011.

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