

## Contending for the Faith and Keeping in the Love of God: An Exegetical Study of Jude 20–23

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### Abstract

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As a response to false teaching among Christians in the first century, the book of Jude provides a biblical framework for defending against the invasion of false teachers. As churches grow in identifying false teaching, they must also develop firm defenses. Through historical-grammatical study, this study examines the climactic verses of Jude (verses 20–23) and explores its application. Jude 20–23 instructs believers to defend themselves from becoming corrupted by false teachers (verses 20–21) and issues instructions for proactive mercy to the false teachers themselves (verses 22–23). The “defensive” instructions center around the imperative τηρήσατε (keep), with the three accompanying participles describing *how* believers are to keep themselves in God’s love. Finally, Jude’s close literary connections with Zechariah 3 support a call to show mercy to the false teachers.

**Key Terms:** False teachers, Disputers; Jude, Contending for the Faith, Snatching from Fire

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### Introduction

False teaching has continually been a threat to the church, including modern-day churches in Africa.<sup>1</sup> As competing teachings rise, Christians and surrounding communities get confused about the authentic gospel message.<sup>2</sup> Thus, there is a need for churches and individual Christians to be trained in identifying false teachings.<sup>3</sup> Christians must both defend themselves against turning to false teaching and proactively fight against the false teaching around them.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip W. Barnes et al., *The Abandoned Gospel: Confronting Neo-Pentecostalism and the Prosperity Gospel in Sub-Saharan Africa* (AB316, 2021), Foreword, x.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Deacon and Gabrielle Lynch, "Allowing Satan In? Moving Toward a Political Economy of Neo-Pentecostalism in Kenya," *Journal of Religion in Africa* (2013): 123.

<sup>3</sup> See Barnes et al. *The Abandoned Gospel: Confronting Neo-Pentecostalism and the Prosperity Gospel in Sub-Saharan*; Ligonier Ministries *A Field Guide on False Teaching* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2020); Michael Otieno Maura et al., *Prosperity? Seeking the True Gospel* (Nairobi: African Christian Textbooks, 2015).



The book of Jude offers valuable instruction to modern-day churches seeking to respond to the rise of false teaching. This article uses the historical-grammatical method to examine Jude 20–23. The article begins with a summary of the text-critical issues in verses 22–23 and follows with a close historical and grammatical analysis of verses 20–23. The article concludes with suggestions on how churches can apply the message today.

### Background Issues

The author of Jude identifies himself as Judas, a servant of Christ Jesus, and a brother of James (Ἰούδας Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δοῦλος, ἀδελφὸς δὲ Ἰακώβου). Although six men are named “Judas” in the New Testament,<sup>4</sup> the author is most likely the brother of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Commentators like Bauckham, Schreiner, and Tamfu concur with the same assertion.<sup>6</sup> A small minority of commentators disagree with this authorship view.<sup>7</sup>

Jude addresses his audience as “those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ” (Jude 1b) (τοῖς ἐν θεῷ πατρὶ ἠγαπημένοις καὶ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ τετηρημένοις κλητοῖς). This address does not give us many clues as to the location of the church(es) Jude is writing to. Given the assumed familiarity with Jewish literature and traditions, it seems likely that the audience was primarily Jewish Christians.<sup>8</sup> Beyond this, any attempts to definitively claim a specific audience for Jude’s letter must rest mainly on speculation.

The book of Jude is written to exhort early believers to “contend for the faith.” He writes this purpose plainly in verse 3. As becomes clear later in the letter, a group of false teachers – whose lives are morally corrupt – had invaded this body of believers. Jude spends the bulk of the letter (verses 5–19) drawing out the impending judgment of these false teachers to convince his audience to stand against their teaching. This serves as a forceful background for the instructions he gives to the believers in verses 20–23 – the focal point of the letter. In these verses, Jude returns to his original purpose: an appeal for believers to contend for the faith.

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<sup>4</sup> We can be certain that the author is not Judas Iscariot. Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37), Judas Barsabbas (Acts 15:22, 27, 32), and Judas (with whom Paul stayed, Acts 9:7–12) are all likely too obscure to carry any authority.

<sup>5</sup> Dieudonné Tamfu, *2 Peter and Jude* (Bukuru, Nigeria: African Christian Textbooks, 2018), 85.

<sup>6</sup> Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 50 (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 3.; Thomas R. Schreiner, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 484.; Tamfu, *2 Peter and Jude*, 86.

<sup>7</sup> See Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 23 for a lengthier discussion of commentators with a dissenting view, as well as reasons those positions are extremely unlikely.

<sup>8</sup> Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 16.



Scholars remain divided on whether the original text of Jude 22–23 contained two clauses or three. Osburn wrote that Jude 22–23a is “undoubtedly one of the most corrupt passages in New Testament literature.”<sup>9</sup> Allen echoed this sentiment by writing, “Jude is probably the most textually corrupt book of the NT and vv. 22-3 contain its most ticklish corruption.”<sup>10</sup> Birdsall described the verses as “long a *crux criticorum*” (a complex problem for critics).

While there was an original version of this text, it no longer exists. Interpreters today must rely on various early manuscripts and versions to deduce the original. Unfortunately, there is a puzzling variance in the manuscripts and versions of these verses. Variance in early manuscripts is not necessarily unusual. However, the original text can often be concluded through reasonable processes. The differences in the early manuscripts of Jude 22–23, do not readily offer a simple answer. The UBS gives verses 22–23 a “C” rating, indicating a high degree of difficulty in discerning the original text.<sup>11</sup> The issue must be addressed, however, because the content of the original text has significant implications for interpreting the meaning of the text. While making no presumption to end the discussion between the textual options, this section will briefly describe the textual choice made for this article.

The options for the text of Jude 22–23a can be divided into two groups: two-clause and three-clause, with many variations within these groups. A key difference between these two groups is the number of “have mercy” verbs present (ἐλεᾶτε/ἐλεεῖτε). It is present twice in the first and third clauses of the three-clause format but only in the second clause of the two-clause format. There is also the debate of how many groups or classes of people Jude is addressing in these verses. The two-clause more clearly supports two groups, while the three-clause format leaves the matter less clear.

The two-clause format is most clearly supported by p<sup>72</sup>:<sup>12</sup>

οὓς μὲν ἐκ πυρὸς ἀρπάσατε

διακρινομένους δὲ ἐλεεῖτε ἐν φόβῳ

“Snatch some from the fire

Having mercy on the disputers, with fear.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> C.D. Osburn, “The Text of Jude 22–23,” *Zeitschrift für die deutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 63, (1972): 139.

<sup>10</sup> Joel S. Allen, “A New Possibility for the Three-Clause Format of Jude 22-3,” *New Testament Studies* 44 (1998): 133.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (UBS5) with Critical Apparatus* (Stuttgart, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014), 803.

<sup>12</sup> This manuscript from the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century contains the entire text of 1–2 Peter and Jude. It is the earliest known manuscript of these epistles. It was discovered in the 1950’s. (See: Tommy Wasserman, “Papyrus 72 and the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex,” *New Testament Studies* 51, no. 1 (2005): 137–154. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688505000081>)



Not only is  $\rho^{72}$  the oldest known source, but it also has widespread and early attestation in it<sup>t</sup>, cop<sup>sa</sup>, sy<sup>ph</sup>, Clement [Strom. 6.8.65], with numerous other variations in other sources.<sup>14</sup> Osburn further argues that  $\rho^{72}$  can best explain the other readings – viewing the  $\aleph$  reading as arising from dittography and another expansion to create a “neatly balanced three-clause text.”<sup>15</sup> Bauckham adds his support to this reading based on its suitability to Jude’s context.<sup>16</sup> In his view, the two clauses cohere better with the two classes of people that Jude addresses.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, the three-clause format as found in  $\aleph$  reads:

οὓς μὲν ἐλεᾶτε διακρινομένους

οὓς δὲ σώζετε ἐκ πυρὸς ἀρπάζοντες

οὓς δὲ ἐλεᾶτε ἐν φοβῷ

“And have mercy on those who are disputing<sup>18</sup>;

save them, seizing them from the fire;

have mercy on them with fear.”<sup>19</sup>

Although fewer manuscripts support this reading, it is not without convincing evidence. The three-clause reading gives a better explanation for all other readings.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, as some scholars propose, it is more logical that the text was shortened for clarification rather than expanded.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the three-clause reading is more difficult than the two-clause reading.<sup>22</sup> The two-clause reading removes the difficulty of identifying a mysterious third “group” and smooths over the question of the repeated use of ἐλεᾶτε. It is more convincing that the two-clause reading arose as an attempt to smooth over the difficulties contained in the three-clause reading of Jude 22–23.<sup>23</sup> The view of this article is to

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<sup>13</sup> My translation.

<sup>14</sup> Sakae Kubo, “Jude 22–3: Two-division form or Three?” In *New Testament Textual Criticism: Its Significance for Exegesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 239-240.

<sup>15</sup> Osburn, “The Text of Jude 22–23,” 142.

<sup>16</sup> Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 110.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>18</sup> The translation of διακρινομένους is difficult and contested – often translated as “doubt” or “waver.” However, for reasons explained elsewhere in this work, “disputing” is the preferred translation.

<sup>19</sup> My translation.

<sup>20</sup> Kubo, “Jude 22–3: Two-division form or Three,” 250. Kubo includes a detailed explanation of the possible textual transmission and logical reasoning for the changes made.; Tommy Wasserman, *The Epistle of Jude: Its Text and Transmission* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2006), 324.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 40.

<sup>22</sup> Eldon Jay Epp, *Perspectives on New Testament Textual Criticism: Collected Essays, 1962-2004* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 158.

<sup>23</sup> See Kubo “Jude 22–3: Two-division form or Three” for an excellent and thorough explanation for how the two-division reading could have arisen from the three-division form.



use the three-clause reading found in **8**, in agreement with both the UBS 4<sup>th</sup> edition and Nestle-Aland 28<sup>th</sup> edition.<sup>24</sup>

### ***The Greek Text***

20 ὑμεῖς δέ, ἀγαπητοί, ἐποικοδομοῦντες ἑαυτοὺς τῇ ἀγιωτάτῃ ὑμῶν πίστει, ἐν πνεύματι ἀγίῳ προσευχόμενοι, 21 ἑαυτοὺς ἐν ἀγάπῃ θεοῦ τηρήσατε, προσδεχόμενοι τὸ ἔλεος τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον. 22 καὶ οὓς μὲν ἐλεᾶτε διακρινομένους, 23 οὓς δὲ σώζετε ἐκ πυρὸς ἀρπάζοντες, οὓς δὲ ἐλεᾶτε ἐν φόβῳ, μισοῦντες καὶ τὸν ἀπὸ τῆς σαρκὸς ἐσπιλωμένον χιτῶνα.

### ***Translation***

20 But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, 21 keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that [leads] to eternal life. 22 And have mercy on those who are disputing; 23 save them, seizing them out of the fire; and have mercy on them with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.

## **Exegesis of Jude 20–23**

In Jude 3, the author indicates his intended purpose for the letter: ἐπαγωνίζεσθαι τῇ ἀπαξ παραδοθείσῃ τοῖς ἀγίοις πίστει (“contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints,” ESV). Jude 20–23, then, is the climax of the letter in which Jude exhorts his audience to do just that: contend for the faith. Through these four verses, Jude encourages his audience to build up their faith inwardly and outwardly to show mercy.

The preceding verses (17–19) stand as a conclusion to the background of Jude’s argument. Jude reminds his audience that the apostles warned them that false teachers would come. They would be devoid of the Holy Spirit, ungodly in their behavior, and would threaten to divide the church.<sup>25</sup> After this lengthy focus on the false teachers and their promised condemnation, Jude changes his focus to his audience.

### ***Verses 20–21***

Like verse 17, verse 20 begins with ὑμεῖς δέ (but you). This word combination indicates both a contrast with the previous section and a renewed call for the audience’s attention. In verse 17, the transition is from Old Testament types and prophecies to apostolic prophecies that the

<sup>24</sup> However, the UBS gives verses 22–23 a “C” rating, indicating a high degree of difficulty in discerning the original text.

<sup>25</sup> Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 106.



audience would have heard for themselves.<sup>26</sup> In verse 20, however, Jude is marking a more significant contrast. He moves from a large section focused on the intrusion of false teachers to the book's focal point: the exhortation to action for his audience.<sup>27</sup>

In verses 20–21, there is one imperative (τηρήσατε) and three participles (ἐποικοδομοῦντες, προσευχόμενοι, προσδεχόμενοι). The first of these participles is ἐποικοδομοῦντες (building up). Harrington notes that “[t]he verb *epoikodomein* means to ‘build something on something already built’ (BDAG 387).<sup>28</sup> This metaphor of believers as a building (sometimes specified as a temple, as in 1 Cor 3:16 and Eph 2:21) is frequently used in New Testament epistles.<sup>29</sup> In Jude 3 and 17, Jude acknowledges the apostles’ teaching, which laid the foundation for these believers.

The phrase τῇ ἁγιωτάτῃ ὑμῶν πίστει (your most holy faith) points to something that is not conjured up from within an individual believer but something that is received. In this context, it refers to the teachings and doctrine that are the core of Christianity.<sup>30</sup> The locative dative phrase τῇ ἁγιωτάτῃ...πίστει indicates that faith is the foundation upon which they are to build.<sup>31</sup> The faith is most holy (ἁγιωτάτῃ) because it comes from God. It also marks the difference between the ungodliness of the false teachers and the holy lives true believers ought to live. The πίστις was what they received when the gospel was preached to them (verse 3).<sup>32</sup> Barclay describes a “chain of transmission” to Jude’s original readers and to us today: “The faith came from Jesus to the apostles; it came from the apostles to the church; and it comes from the church to us.”<sup>33</sup>

It is of note that ἑαυτοὺς is plural (yourselves); therefore, “building up yourselves” does not simply mean the individual growth of each believer but rather the spiritual growth of the whole community of believers – to which each individual contributes.<sup>34</sup> The community of faith is to encourage one another to remember the apostle’s teaching and live in a way consistent with that truth.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>27</sup> Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 582.

<sup>28</sup> Harrington, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 220.; Frederick William Danker, ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 387.

<sup>29</sup> See: 1 Cor. 3:9–15; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5

<sup>30</sup> D. J. Moo, *2 Peter, Jude* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 284.

<sup>31</sup> Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 108.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>33</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1976), 202.

<sup>34</sup> Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 112.

<sup>35</sup> D.J. Moo, *2 Peter, Jude* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 6.



The second participial phrase ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ προσευχόμενοι can be translated as “praying in the Holy Spirit.” This raises the question of what “in the Holy Spirit” could mean. Bauckham believes this phrase describes “charismatic prayer in which words are given by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>36</sup> Estrada includes all types of charismatic experiences, such as visions, dreams, prophetic words, and speaking in tongues.<sup>37</sup> Green concludes that while praying in the Spirit includes speaking in tongues, it should not be confined to that meaning. Moo similarly argues that all true prayer is “stimulated by, guided by, and infused by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore, “praying in the Spirit” does not need to imply praying in tongues. While there is significant overlap in these interpretations, they are clearly not the same.

While doing things “in” or “by the Spirit” occurs numerous times in the Bible, the only other passage with a parallel instruction to “pray in the Spirit” occurs in Ephesians 6:18. In this passage, Paul instructs the Ephesians to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests (NIV).” Paul states that this type of prayer should occur on *all* occasions; it seems unlikely that he speaks in tongues specifically. Furthermore, it helps to see Jude’s own instruction as standing opposite the false teachers who do not have the Holy Spirit (v. 19). These false teachers claimed to have charismatic experiences (such as the dreams referred to in verse 8). However, their lives did not reflect the Holy Spirit’s control and influence. Therefore, while praying in tongues or other charismatic experiences may be included in Jude’s instruction, he likely does not only mean those things. Instead, Jude urges his audience to be guided by the Spirit in their prayers and actively submit to the Spirit’s leading.

The clause that begins verse 21 contains the lone imperative amongst the four instructions to the believers. Harrington notes that it is not unusual for participles to take on the sense of an imperative in a hortatory (or exhortative) context in the New Testament.<sup>39</sup> In one sense, it would be possible to simply add these three participles to the imperative τηρήσατε as a list of four instructions for the believers. However, given Jude’s seemingly intentional choice to differentiate the imperative from the participles surrounding it, the three participles can be understood in a modal sense – they describe how the believers keep themselves in God’s love.

The imperative τηρήσατε serves as the focus for Jude’s instructions to the believers for their own walk of faith. As an aorist active imperative, the focus of τηρήσατε is on the

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<sup>36</sup> Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 113.

<sup>37</sup> Rodolfo Galvan Estrada III, “The Spirit in Jude 19–20,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 25 (2016): 55.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, *Jude and 2 Peter* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 220.



action happening rather than on the timing of when it happens. The word τηρήσατε is also one of Jude’s many “catchwords” – words repeated multiple times throughout the letter. It is used in verse 1 (τετηρημένοις), verse 6 twice (μὴ τηρήσαντας; τετήρηκεν), and verse 13 (τετήρηται). Skaggs notes that the urge for believers to “keep themselves” (ἑαυτοῦς...τηρήσατε) in verse 21 stands in stark contrast to the angels in verse 6 who did “not keep” (μὴ τηρήσαντας).<sup>40</sup> Since the angels did not “keep” the position God ordained for them, he now “keeps” them in chains.<sup>41</sup>

The full meaning of the clause ἑαυτοῦς ἐν ἀγάπῃ θεοῦ τηρήσατε can be understood as “keep yourselves in the love of God.” The genitive θεοῦ (of God) begs the question of whether it is subjective or objective. Is Jude urging believers to continue in God’s love for them or their love for God? In verse 1, believers are “beloved in God” and “kept” by him (τοῖς ἐν θεῷ πατρὶ ἠγαπημένοις καὶ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ τετηρημένοις κλητοῖς). In verse 24, it is again God who “keeps” (this time using a synonym, φυλάξαι, which can mean “keep,” “guard,” or “protect”). God is the active agent in “keeping.” However, in verse 20, Jude directs the imperative τηρήσατε at his audience; he is hitting on a persistent tension in the Christian faith – God’s sovereign action in preserving his people and individual responsibility. Jesus’ words in John 15:10 can be considered: “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love (ESV).” While both God’s love for his people *and* their love for him are at work, this specific clause emphasizes action on the part of the believers.

This key clause – containing the lone imperative of verses 20–21 – urges Jude’s readers to “keep yourselves in the love of God.” This clause begins with the fronted reflexive pronoun ἑαυτοῦς (yourselves). The placement of ἑαυτοῦς at the beginning of the clause can be understood as a point of departure involving renewal.<sup>42</sup> Authors in the New Testament can indicate a change in focus by fronting the element that is now in focus.<sup>43</sup> The focus of Jude 5–19 has been on the intruders – the false teachers that Jude has described as “ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ (ESV).” However, Jude has turned the focus to his audience in verse 17 and again in 20. The phrase Jude uses to introduce the section – Ὑμεῖς δέ (but you) – is consistent with its common use to “oppose persons to persons or things previously mentioned or thought of.”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Rebecca Skaggs, *The Pentecostal Commentary on 1 Peter, 2 Peter, Jude* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 171.

<sup>41</sup> Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek: A Coursebook on the Information Structure of New Testament Greek* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2000), 12.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Henry Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI:





In this case, in verse 20, Jude uses it to distinguish clearly between the intruders and his audience. The fronting of ἑαυτοῦς in verse 21, then, is a renewal of this focus on his audience.

Jude’s chief concern for the lives of this group of believers is “keeping yourselves in God’s love.” Yet, taken on its own, this clause is somewhat opaque about what the readers should do. The surrounding context allows the reader to understand Jude’s meaning quite clearly. In Jude’s familiar use of triads, three participial phrases express *how* these believers should enact the imperative to “keep” themselves in the love of God.<sup>45</sup>

The final participle of the descriptive triplet follows the focus “τηρήσατε” and comes in verse 21: προσδεχόμενοι (waiting). The verb προσδέχομαι is used 14 times in the New Testament.<sup>46</sup> Most of these occurrences – including here in Jude – take on the meaning of “expect” (or wait/ look for).<sup>47</sup> Yet, it remains connected with its other meanings of “receive” and “accept,” as people often wait because they are expecting to receive something. When used in the context of Jude 21, it aligns with an eschatological waiting – waiting for Christ’s return. In this call to “waiting,” Jude calls for waiting for mercy. The noun ἔλεος first appeared in Jude 2: ἔλεος ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη καὶ ἀγάπη πληθυνθείη (May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you). This noun, ἔλεος, and its connected verb ἐλεέω is not simply an emotion felt when seeing another experience affliction but also an action that results from seeing that affliction.<sup>48</sup> It is consistent with the Old Testament idea of רַחֻם (kindness).<sup>49</sup> Jesus illustrates the concept of mercy in the famous parable in Luke 10 of the Samaritan, who takes concrete action to aid a Jew who had been robbed and beaten.

In Jude 21, the phrase εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον alerts the reader to what action this mercy from Jesus will be. Previously, Jude 14–15 also spoke of the Lord’s return. In these verses, Jesus is bringing judgment and conviction against the ungodly. However, in verse 21, Jesus’ return leads to eternal life. The difference is ἔλεος (mercy). Only Jesus’ mercy can save anyone from judgment. Jesus’ death and resurrection were his mercy in action. Believers experience that mercy in part as they come to faith, but they don’t yet experience its effects in full because Jesus has not returned to usher in the end of sin, death, and Satan. False teaching, sin, and confusion run rampant around them. His mercy will be fully displayed at Christ’s return as believers are rescued from the judgment they deserve. At the same time, they will be

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Zondervan, 1977): 125.

<sup>45</sup> Wasserman, *The Epistle of Jude*, 328.

<sup>46</sup> Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 162.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 430.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 430.



undeservedly resurrected to live with Jesus for eternity. For Jude’s audience, believers must wait expectantly for the effects of mercy to be consummated as it ushers them into eternal life.

In the phrase τὸ ἔλεος τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ), the Lord Jesus Christ is the one who enacts his mercy. This mercy leads to eternal life. The title of the Lord (τοῦ κυρίου) attached to Jesus Christ is significant in bringing to the present time what is expected for the future. In other words, this title reminds the believers that Christ is Lord of the universe – including their present lives – even now. Unlike the false teachers whose lives were marked by rebellion against God’s authority in their ungodly behavior (verse 4), these believers submit to his lordship in living holy lives. Their waiting for Jesus’ return is marked by active obedience to him.

In verses 5–19, Jude has systematically argued for the coming judgment against the false teachers. In verse 21, he points believers towards a different expectation instead of God’s coming judgment: mercy. The mercy Jude has in view refers to the salvation the Lord Jesus Christ has secured for his people through his death and resurrection.<sup>50</sup> Believers have secure hope and can wait expectantly for the day of Christ’s return.

The placement of this third participle after the imperative is an intentional link to the ensuing section. In this way, it hinges between Jude’s inward and outward-looking exhortations. It allows Jude to closely connect his call for believers to wait for Jesus’ mercy with a call to mercy from the believers. As Jude calls them to wait for the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ in verse 21, he calls them to enact mercy towards others in verses 22–23. While these verses have caused no end to debate in analysis and application, the context, grammar, and vocabulary provide helpful evidence for a clear interpretation.

### Verses 22–23

Jude 22–23 hang on the grammatical skeleton of οὐκ μὲν... οὐκ δὲ... οὐκ δὲ. Originally, the construct was used to express contrastive clauses.<sup>51</sup> Thayer nuances the possible uses of μὲν followed by δὲ in saying that μὲν is used to “point out the first member, to which a second, marked by an adversative particle, is added or opposed.”<sup>52</sup> As another option, Runge states that μὲν is “anticipatory in nature”;<sup>53</sup> it serves as a marker to help the reader identify the

<sup>50</sup> Harrington, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 221.

<sup>51</sup> G.B. Winer, *A Treatise on the Grammar of New Testament Greek: Regarded as a Sure Basis for New Testament Exegesis* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1882), 551.

<sup>52</sup> Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 397.

<sup>53</sup> Steven Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010), 74.



priority between clauses – the first (marked by μὲν) of secondary importance to the second (marked by δὲ).<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, this construction of μὲν... δὲ, is not always contrastive. The BDAG explains that the construction can separate one thought from another in a series – to distinguish between them clearly.<sup>55</sup> For example, in Hebrews 7:2: “He is first (μὲν), by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then (δὲ) he is also king of Salem...(ESV).” Both μὲν and δὲ refer to Abraham, but in this case, the construction helps to highlight his identity as both the king of righteousness and Salem. The verses emphasize two distinct identities of the same person. The construction works similarly in Matthew 13:8 and 13:23 (an explanation of the parable in 13:8) to connect the three numerical options of fruitfulness. Verse 8 reads: “Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, (ὃ μὲν) a hundredfold, (ὃ δὲ) sixty, (ὃ δὲ) thirty (ESV).” While the numbers are distinct, the construct does not contrast them against one another. Therefore, the οὗς μὲν... οὗς δὲ... οὗς δὲ construction gives a few possibilities for interpretation.

With these grammatical principles in mind, it is possible to begin evaluating how the three clauses found in verses 22–23 relate to one another. Some, such as the translators of the NASV, consider the οὗς μὲν... οὗς δὲ... οὗς δὲ construction to be understood as creating three distinct groups.<sup>56</sup> The trouble with this translation is identifying who these three groups could be. Thus far in the letter, Jude has only made clear two groups – his audience of believers and the intruders. Furthermore, there are no identifying markers in the clauses themselves.

Despite the lack of explicit identifiers of who the three groups could be, many commentators have attempted to describe them. Skaggs identifies the three as (1) those who doubt but haven’t committed themselves to the false teaching, (2) those who are close to becoming committed to the false teaching, and (3) possibly the false teachers themselves.<sup>57</sup> Wiersbe categorizes the groups as (1) “the doubting” (those wavering from the true gospel), (2) “the burning” (those who are part of the apostate group), and (3) “the dangerous” (unstable believers captured by false doctrine).<sup>58</sup> While it is possible to make helpful

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<sup>54</sup> Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek*, 170.

<sup>55</sup> Frederick William Danker, ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 630.

<sup>56</sup> “And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh.”

<sup>57</sup> Skaggs, *The Pentecostal Commentary*, 171.

<sup>58</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Alert: Beware of the Religious Imposters!* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1984), 163–165.



applications from these types of groupings, it is not easy to justify them based on the textual evidence found in Jude.

The RSV attempts to solve the problem by diminishing the contrast between the three groups: “And convince some, who doubt; save some by snatching them out of the fire; on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.” This translation creates a single group (doubters) but gives two options for how to deal with members within that group (save or have mercy). While the distinctions are flattened, no definition is given to the last two groups. Who should be snatched from the fire, and who else should be shown mercy? Furthermore, this translation does not highlight as to why the same verb (ἐλεᾶτε) should be repeated.

Grammatically, a cohesive translation is possible if the οὐς μὲν... οὐς δὲ... οὐς δὲ takes on a function separate from its contrastive usage. Watson describes this construction as an epanaphora – “a figure of speech which occurs when one and the same word forms successive beginnings for phrases expressing like and different ideas.”<sup>59</sup> Watson argues, then, that οὐς μὲν... οὐς δὲ... οὐς δὲ in Jude 22–23 “amplifies and emphasizes the exhortations.”<sup>60</sup> In describing the potential meanings of μὲν... δὲ, Blass, Debrunner, and Funk note that the structure can be “also an explanation or an intensification (‘but,’ ‘and...at that’).”<sup>61</sup> The structure of οὐς μὲν...οὐς δὲ...οὐς δὲ, then, can be understood as explaining and emphasizing actions towards the same group.

Outside of Jude, there are no New Testament passages using μὲν...δὲ...δὲ as amplification. However, there is a textual basis for understanding μὲν...δὲ...δὲ as amplification rather than contrasting. Jude 8 reads: “Yet in like manner, these men in their dreamings (μὲν) defile the flesh, (δὲ) reject authority, and (δὲ) revile the glorious ones.”<sup>62</sup> This verse would be nonsensical if we understood μὲν...δὲ... δὲ to be creating a contrast. Instead, Jude uses the form to emphasize the importance and number of the intruder’s sins.<sup>63</sup> The lack of “οὐς” preceding each part of the construction in verse 8 somewhat weakens the argument in verses 22-23. However, it does indicate a clear use of μὲν...δὲ... δὲ to separate clauses that build upon one another.

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<sup>59</sup> Duane Frederick Watson, *Invention, Arrangement, and Style: Rhetorical Criticism of Jude and 2 Peter* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), 75.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>61</sup> F. Blass and A. Debrunner, trans. Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 232.

<sup>62</sup> Revised Standard Version (1971) chosen for the clarity in conveying the grammatical point.

<sup>63</sup> Allen, “The Three Clause Format,” 137.



Jude 10 also provides some evidence against understanding μὲν...δὲ as exclusively creating a contrast. It reads: οὗτοι δὲ ὅσα μὲν οὐκ οἶδασιν βλασφημοῦσιν, ὅσα δὲ φυσικῶς ὡς τὰ ἄλογα ζῷα ἐπίστανται, ἐν τούτοις φθείρονται. The two clauses here, “they blaspheme whatever they don’t understand” and “whatever they understand, it is by instinct, like unreasonable animals,” clearly build upon one another. While this μὲν...δὲ is not in series, it again shows Jude using μὲν...δὲ as amplification.

A consideration of classical Greek further adds to an argument for reading μὲν...δὲ...δὲ as referring to a single group. Neyrey suggests that Jude’s somewhat unique use of language and grammar indicates that he was educated in classical Greek and is using classical Greek grammatical patterns.<sup>64</sup> Denniston writes of classical Greek that, “Sometimes μὲν...δὲ conveys little more than τε...καί” (which can mean: “not only...but also,” “and...and,” or “both...and”).<sup>65</sup> This is particularly the case when the same word is repeated before μὲν and δὲ (the figure of anaphora, exceedingly common throughout Greek literature, verse, and prose).<sup>66</sup> This precisely describes the situation in Jude 22–23. There is repeated use of οὗς as a figure of anaphora, referring back to διακρινομένου. If μὲν...δὲ...δὲ is read with a similar meaning to τε...καί..., the clauses are drawn even more closely together, referring to a single group.

This grammatical evidence pushes the interpreter to consider that the three clauses in Jude 22–23 are not placed in contrast to one another. The syntax does not require the reader to understand three separate groups. Rather, the three clauses build upon one another to clarify and define meaning. This can be seen even more clearly as the structure of these verses is explained.

In Jude 22–23, there are three pronouns. However, only one also contains an identifier: the present middle participle διακρινομένου (found at the end of the first clause). The remaining clauses each only contain the relative pronoun οὗς. Rather than creating new references for these two οὗς, as many commentators have attempted, it is preferable to use the identifier already given in the text (διακρινομένου). It would be redundant to have placed διακρινομένου repeatedly in the second and third clauses. Instead, both instances of οὗς refer back to the participle διακρινομένου. The second and third clauses, then, are meant to provide more information about how Jude’s audience is to interact with the διακρινομένου.

<sup>64</sup> J. H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1993), 85–86.

<sup>65</sup> G.K. Beale et al., *An Interpretive Lexicon of New Testament Greek: Analysis of Prepositions, Adverbs, Particles, Relative Pronouns, and Conjunctions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 91.

<sup>66</sup> J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1934), 370.



Now, the critical question that must be answered is who is the διακρινομένους? It is not as simple as “just” translating the word. As the *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* explains: “The wealth of nuance in the usage of διακρίνω makes it difficult to determine its exact meaning in several passages.”<sup>67</sup> Interpreters of Jude have been divided as to whether to understand διακρινομένους in verse 22 as those who “doubt/waver” or those who “dispute.” The “doubt/waver” translation implies that we are dealing with those who may be true believers but are unsure whether to follow the intruders. The “disputer” translation would indicate the false teachers themselves.

Within the New Testament, the active form of διακρίνω appears eight times and the middle form (διακρίνωμαι) eleven. Here in Jude 22, it is a middle participle. In all but three instances of this middle form, it is translated as “hesitate,” “waver,” or “doubt.” Only Acts 11:2, James 2:4, and, significantly to this study, Jude 9, use the word differently. However, in classical/Hellenistic Greek usage outside of the New Testament, the word is usually used to mean “differentiate,” “make a distinction,” “judge/evaluate,” or “dispute.”<sup>68</sup>

While translating διακρινομένους in Jude 22 as “doubter” has merits in consistency with other New Testament usage, it is difficult to understand the sudden appearance of this category in the book of Jude. The rest of the letter has made considerable and repeated efforts to distinguish two groups: the false teachers and Jude’s audience. Jude gives no other evidence as to the creation of a “doubting” class.

Importantly, as mentioned above, Jude has used this word previously in verse 9. In this verse, the present middle participle διακρινόμενος is used to describe an interaction between the angel Michael and “the slanderer” (τῷ διαβόλῳ). In this case, διακρινόμενος means a dispute. Considering Jude’s consistent use of catchwords and lexical links within the book, διακρινομένους in Jude 22 should have a meaning in line with its use in verse 9. Therefore, διακρινομένους shall be translated as “those who dispute.” These “disputers” are the false teachers Jude described throughout his letter. They are disputing the true gospel and contending against those who hold to it.

Having established the object of all three clauses (διακρινομένους), there remains the problem of the repeated ἐλεᾶτε in both the first and third clauses. Why would Jude give the

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<sup>67</sup> Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. 1. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), 305.

<sup>68</sup> Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 231.



same instruction twice? Spitaler gives a helpful framework for solving this problem: chiasm.<sup>69</sup> He charts and translates the three clauses this way:

[A] καὶ οὐς μὲν ἐλεᾶτε διακρινομένους	[A] and have mercy on those who are disputing,
[B] οὐς δὲ σώζετε ἐκ πυρὸς ἀρπάζοντες,	[B] save them, snatching them from the fire,
[A <sup>1</sup> ] οὐς δὲ ἐλεᾶτε ἐν φόβῳ	[A <sup>1</sup> ] and have mercy on them in fear

This structure clarifies Jude’s repetition of the verb ἐλεᾶτε. This repetition would not be unexpected in a chiasm as the sections mirror one another. Spitaler explains that “...the first clause [A] clarifies to whom mercy is to be extended...the third clause [A<sup>1</sup>] clarifies how mercy ought to be extended”.<sup>70</sup> Rather than creating confusion, the repetition brings clarity. The first ἐλεᾶτε in verses 22–23 identifies the object: διακρινομένους (“those who dispute”). As noted previously, this call to mercy is not simply a passive call to pity or emotion. Instead, it is active. The second clause in this series identifies what action this call to mercy should take.

The central clause in verses 22–23 is οὐς δὲ σώζετε ἐκ πυρὸς ἀρπάζοντες directly translated; it is “them, save from fire snatching.” The fire spoken of here is a connection to verse 7, in which Jude described the punishment of eternal fire that came upon Sodom and Gomorrah for their rampant sexual sin. The participle “snatching” (ἀρπάζοντες) describes *how* the main verb “save” (σώζετε) is to be carried out.

It is helpful to connect the verb σώζετε with the previous use of σώζω in Jude 5. This verse speaks of Israel being “saved” (σώσας). In Exodus 14, God opened the Red Sea for Israel to walk across, away from the pursuing Egyptians. However, when Pharaoh – a ruler who openly and repeatedly refused to acknowledge God – tried to follow the people of Israel, God allowed the waters to return and destroy Pharaoh and his entire army. It was a moment of rescue amid judgment.

In the same way, Jude has made clear through verses 9–15 that an eternal fire of judgment is undoubtedly coming. However, there is also an opportunity for rescue. Jude is exhorting his audience to “save” the διακρινομένους from this impending judgment. While Jude doesn’t exactly clarify what “saving” looks like in this section, it can be reasonably presumed from the rest of the book.

<sup>69</sup> Peter Spitaler, “Doubt or Dispute (Jude 9 and 22–23): Rereading a Special New Testament Meaning through the Lens of Internal Evidence,” *Biblica* 87, No. 2 (2006): 216.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.



In Jude 4, the author identifies the problem as ungodly persons who 1) pervert the grace of God into licentiousness and 2) deny Jesus Christ as Lord. “Those who dispute” are facing judgment for these two interconnected sins. It is reasonable to presume that Jude is telling his audience to declare to the disputers the same message he gave them. The believers should show them in Scripture what happens to those who deny God and shamelessly indulge in ungodly behavior. They should declare the certainty of God’s judgment to come. In doing so, they then can hold out the same hope of mercy found in verse 21. The believers can have mercy on the disputers by pointing to the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The second instance of “show mercy” in these verses clarifies how this mercy should take place. First, it is done ἐν φόβῳ (in fear). The teaching and lifestyle of “those who dispute” is dangerous. Believers must engage with the disputers cautiously, avoiding falling into the same sin. Jude exhorts his audience to call these false teachers to submit to Christ’s lordship and leave their ungodly behavior. Yet, they must do it with a hypervigilant attitude, avoiding the sin and belief that placed these disputers under judgment.

The second clarification is μισοῦντες καὶ τὸν ἀπὸ τῆς σαρκὸς ἐσπιλωμένον χιτῶνα (hating even the garment stained by the flesh). The verb μισέω means “to have a strong aversion to, hate, detest.”<sup>71</sup> Used here in the present active participle, it further describes how mercy should be enacted. The idea of “hating” creates a strong emotional barrier to the believers falling into the sin of the disputers.

The object of this hating is a garment that is stained. The word translated as “garment” is χιτῶνα. This is a tunic or shirt that is worn next to the skin.<sup>72</sup> It has been stained by the flesh (σαρκὸς). Here, Jude is not proposing a dualistic doctrine of humanity in which the physical body is evil and the spiritual is good. Bauckham notes that Jude’s reference to ‘the flesh’ does not imply that he considers the physical body as intrinsically sinful, but rather that he is thinking primarily of the sins of the flesh in which the false teachers indulged.<sup>73</sup> Jude connects this with verse 8, describing how false teachers “defile the flesh.” This is likely connected with the sexual immorality mentioned in verse 7.

The false teacher’s immoral use of their flesh then contaminates even the garments they have worn. The word describing the garments (ἐσπιλωμένον) can refer to excrement and draws a vivid, repulsive picture that should shock the reader.<sup>74</sup> This does not need to be taken

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<sup>71</sup> Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 653.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 1085.

<sup>73</sup> Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 117.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 593.





literally, but it emphasizes the great need for caution when dealing with false teachers. The reference to a stained garment also points back to the Old Testament. In Leviticus 13:47–52, Moses directed Israel to destroy a garment that had been worn by someone found to have leprosy (a skin disease).<sup>75</sup> Leprosy is highly infectious and could spread through the camp if even the garment was not dealt with carefully. In the same way, Jude’s audience must take extreme care not to allow the infection of licentious living and rebellion against Christ’s lordship to spread through their community of faith.

Some commentators, such as Schreiner and Green, have argued that Jude could not possibly call for mercy on the false teachers because of his extended description of their sure condemnation.<sup>76</sup> This has often led to a translation of διακρινομένων that indicates some new third group apart from the false teachers and Jude’s audience. The problems with this interpretation have been discussed previously. However, it is essential to note that this reasoning ignores the heart of the gospel itself (sinners assured of condemnation saved by God’s mercy alone) and Jude’s own textual connections. Should Jude see these false teachers as beyond the possibility of redemption, he would deny the faith he urges his readers to contend for. It is a faith that waits for the appearance of an undeserved mercy. The Old Testament connections in verses 22–23 are particularly helpful in seeing this.

Jude 22–23 is almost certainly alluding to Zechariah 3:1–4. Fire, “snatching,” and filthy garments all appear in both passages. In Zechariah, the high priest Joshua stands before God. The term to describe his clothing – a symbol of the priesthood’s utter failure in their position – is “filthy.” Words connected to this are most often used to describe human excrement – creating a repulsive and disgusting image.<sup>77</sup> Joshua is unquestionably guilty.

However, Zechariah describes something somewhat unexpected in the face of certain judgment. In Zechariah 3, Joshua, the high priest, is definitively guilty. However, God rebukes the one accusing him rather than condemning Joshua and extends mercy to Joshua. God removes Joshua’s sin, removes the filthy clothing, and replaces it with clean garments. Lockett notes, “[t]he scene of Zechariah 3, where the defiled leader is restored in the face of his judging accuser, echoes through in the context of Jude’s call to show mercy.”<sup>78</sup> Like

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<sup>75</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, 205–206.

<sup>76</sup> Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 216.; Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 593.

<sup>77</sup> Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 116.

<sup>78</sup> Darian Lockett. "Objects of Mercy in Jude: The Prophetic Background of Jude 22–23." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (Catholic Biblical Association) 77, no. 2 (2015): 335.



Joshua, the false teachers in Jude are stained with sin and deserving of condemnation. Yet, Jude encourages his audience to point these “filthy” false teachers to undeserved mercy.

### Conclusion

The book of Jude was written by Jude, the brother of Jesus, to a group of believers in the early church struggling with an invasion of false teachers. Verses 20–23 serve as the climax of the book. In these verses, Jude instructs his audience both how to defend themselves from the false teachers and to extend mercy to the false teachers themselves, though carefully. The focus of defense in verses 20–21 is “keeping yourselves in the love of God.” Jude clarifies how believers are kept in God’s love in the surrounding participial phrases. They must build themselves up, pray, and wait for Jesus to return.

Although the text of verses 22–23 is disputed, the writer of this article believes that the three-clause text is most likely the original. The three-clause text is more difficult to understand and more stylistically similar to the rest of Jude. Furthermore, the writer argues that the meaning of “διακρινόμενους” is “disputers,” meaning the false teachers themselves. This can be seen most clearly through the earlier use of διακρινόμενος in Jude 9, which clearly means “dispute.” This results in a reading in which Jude calls believers to hold out mercy for the false teachers while carefully avoiding falling into the same false belief and ungodliness. This is because Jude clearly described the false teachers’ sure condemnation, and “mercy” cannot mean ignoring the false teachers’ sin. Instead, Jude’s call to mercy is for believers to plead with the false teachers to repent and submit themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ.

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