



“What does Jude v.9 mean?”

I think that all Bible students will understand me when I say that I have come to appreciate that some questions are important because they relate to great spiritual truths on which our salvation depends, but there are others which, whilst being essentially unimportant, arouse our curiosity, mainly because they relate to events that are extra-ordinary or strange or mysterious.

It is to the latter group that the question prompted by Jude verse 9 belongs. It reads, **“But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you.’”**

Is not this a strange picture? Could you imagine a more unlikely trio than that brought together in this verse? Here we have mention of the archangel Michael, the devil and Moses, the greatest leader in Israel’s history. What is more, we learn from Jude that the occasion was a confrontation between Michael and the devil concerning the body of Moses.

When did this remarkable event occur?

Well, obviously, it must have occurred some time *after* the death of Moses which is reported in Deut. 34:5-6. In versions such as the A.V., the Revised Version, the Revised Standard Version, and certain other translations, Deut. 34:6 reads as though God *personally* buried Moses, but the verse ceases to be a problem if we understand that an action *performed at the command* of a person, is sometimes described as having been *performed by* that person. God *caused* Moses to die and to be buried, therefore He *‘buried’* Moses.

In fact, later translations, such as the New Revised Standard Version, clarify the verse by giving us, *‘and he was buried in a valley...’*, without revealing who was responsible for the burial.

But, of course, we are tempted to speculate! Was Moses buried by Joshua, his divinely appointed successor? Or was he, as a Jewish tradition claims, buried, by Michael the archangel himself? The fact is that we *do not* know; we are *not meant* to know; nor is it important that we *should* know. **“No man knows the place of his burial...”**, says Deut.34:6.

The probable reason for keeping the location hidden is that, if it had become known, it may well have become a shrine and a place of pilgrimage for the Israelites. Remember that the ‘serpent of bronze’, which Moses erected in the wilderness, centuries later had actually become an object of worship that had to be destroyed by Nehemiah, the reformer (2nd Kings 18:4). What *is* important, is that we understand that the death and burial of this great servant of God was at God’s command, and the only truly sad aspect of the event is that, after a wearisome journey lasting for almost forty years, Moses died within sight of the Promised Land, not allowed to enter because of an act of disobedience.

Why does Jude mention the dispute about the body of Moses?

This is explained in chapter 1, verse 3. Jude had intended to write a letter concerning basic Christian doctrine, but, as the result of information that had reached him, he felt it necessary, instead, to deal with problems created by false teachers who had succeeded in entering the fellowship by stealth, and who were undermining the faith of others.

He describes the character of these interlopers and exposes their motives and methods in very vivid and uncompromising language. They are arrogant, rebellious, disrespectful and thoroughly ungodly people, whose conduct, he declares, stands in stark contrast with that of Michael the archangel in his confrontation with the devil.

Jude says that, out of respect for the position of honour once occupied by the now-fallen Satan – (or to give him his original name, Lucifer) –, Michael refrained from pronouncing a reproachful judgment on him, but simply said, "*The Lord rebuke you!*" The form of this reproach is significant, because the word '*rebuke*' is a verb in the '*optative mode*', that is, in the form used to express a *wish*, and, as used here, it means, "*May the Lord rebuke you!*"

In these words Michael leaves the passing of judgment, to God Himself. This is a lesson we all may learn from Jude verse 6.

But, is there evidence that a dispute about the body of Moses actually occurred?

The Bible itself does not contain anything that corroborates the story. A single verse, here in Jude's letter, is the only place in the scriptures that mentions it. So, where did the story originate?

It is found in one of the '*apocryphal*' books. These are books that were written mainly during the Inter-testamental Period; that is, in the four hundred years between the Old and New Testaments. This was the period during which prophetic witness was silent and when as a result, literature appeared claiming to be inspired, often under the name of some genuinely inspired and well-known servant of God.

This particular book is known as "*The Assumption of Moses*", and, in common with all the other '*apocryphal*' writings, it has never been regarded as inspired or authoritative by either Jews or Christians, and was never accepted as the Word of God, and never included in the '*canon*' of either Old or New Testament scriptures. Indeed, the word '*apocryphal*' itself, means '*of questionable or doubtful authenticity*'.

The document was probably produced in the early Inter-testamental Period by an unidentified Jewish writer. Among his '*revelations*' is the claim that, like Elijah, Moses was translated directly into heaven and it is this assertion that gives the book its name, "*The Assumption of Moses*". The word '*assumption*' in the title means '*ascension*'.

You probably know already that the Church of Rome makes the same claim for Mary, the Lord's mother and speaks of '*The Assumption of Mary*'. This doctrine states that, when she died, '*her body was preserved from corruption and shortly afterwards it*

was assumed'. The Latin word 'assumere' means 'to take to' - in this case, to Heaven. The odd thing is that, according to Catholic teaching, to believe that Mary was taken bodily to Heaven is 'not an article of faith', but it is said to be 'impious and blasphemous' to deny it!

Of course, we know from Matt.17:3 that more than 1500 years later, Moses appeared with Elijah when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain. The difference between the two - Moses and Elijah - is that the scriptures tell us plainly that Moses 'died and was buried', whilst Elijah, like Enoch before him, was 'translated that he should not see death'. However, considering what we read in Heb.11:23-27, where Moses is honoured as a man of faith, if at the end of his life he had indeed been taken up into heaven, we might have expected such an important fact to have been mentioned in those verses.

Probably because Dan.12:1 seems to suggest that the archangel Michael was appointed by God to be the 'Guardian of Israel', the writer of 'The Assumption of Moses', also states that Michael was also commissioned to bury the body of Moses, and to be the guardian of his grave. But, the book declares that Satan opposed the burial of the patriarch, and claimed that the body belonged to him, on the grounds that he is the 'lord of matter'.

To this Michael is said to have replied, "The Lord rebuke thee, for it was God's Spirit that created the world and all mankind".

A Familiar Story

There is no doubt that this piece of 'primitive Jewish tradition', as Dean Alford, the very highly respected theological scholar described it, was known to those to whom Jude sent his letter. It ranks with other stories of a similar nature, such as the claim that, after predicting the Fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Captivity, the prophet Jeremiah took the Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle (!) and the Altar of Incense, and hid them in a cave on Mount Nebo, intending after the Return to retrieve and restore them. Tradition said that, after the return from Captivity, he lived on in Jerusalem for another three hundred years, and that he even appeared to Judas Maccabeus another two centuries later, as 'a man with grey hairs and exceeding glorious'.

Conclusion

It seems, then, that, in exposing those who were troubling the Church with their false teaching, their denial of the Lord Jesus and their rejection of authority, Jude makes use of a story, which, even though it lacks scriptural endorsement, is familiar to his readers.

He uses the story in order to encourage them to remember that the apostles of the Lord had warned that such men would arise, and, being aware of the danger, to build themselves up in their faith, keeping themselves in the love of God, waiting for the eternal life that comes through the mercy of the Lord Jesus.

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