EXEMPLARY student essay for final exam (developed through two pages)

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Below is an essay that Dr. Oakman would consider an 'A'. With clear introduction and conclusion, and six logically connected paragraphs, each unified and coherent, the essay presents a compelling interpretation of main themes in 1 John.

Notice a good introduction that indicates how the essay will develop in order to show the tensions in 1 John. Immediately, the essay writer indicates some main themes of the epistle ("fellowship with us" "antichrists"). The writer is right on target! The tension between love and truth is immediately identified in the writer’s own words.

The second paragraph spells out the problem addressed in the letter and refers significantly to Docetism. The third paragraph identifies the problematic "forgiveness" theme. The paradox of "not sinning" and "sinning" is discussed.

The concluding paragraphs end on a quizzical hermeneutical note, but the essay never leaves behind the primary task of historical interpretation.

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[Term paper excerpts further below]
ESSAY: PROMPT 3: 1 JOHN

"God is love," says 1 John. "We want to love you, have fellowship with you" (my paraph.) the writer insists, but then immediately slams the "antichrists" (who preach False Teaching) with eternal damnation.

The letter proceeds in a series of discords: love & forgiveness vs. condemnation, over & over again. Careful analysis of outline of the epistle indicates that the intertwining, opposing threads are actually a carefully-chosen rhetorical device. What sort of device? The question remains: what purpose did the author serve by selecting this rhetorical pattern?

The main thesis of 1 John is summed up in its first few verses, where the author indicates that his community wants to have fellowship with another community of Christianity, but this 2nd community is in danger of being dissuaded by a different theology, which historians have determined is probably Docetism. This seems to be the impetus of the letter, as opposed to a generalized desire to proclaim love.

Because of this goal, the writer's scathing stance against the "antichrists" makes a lot of sense. Being a 3rd generation writer, the author believes in a Catholic faith, from which the "antichrists" have strayed. The author, additionally, does not want the recipients to stray as well, so it behooves him to make the "antichrists" as unattractive as possible. Rather than making their teachings *direct* threats, he frames them as a threat: these teachings are so egregious that there will be serious (read: hellfire) consequences for them; & you don't want any part of them, do you? (again, my paraph.) The recipients, the author hopes, will be scared enough to act.

However, even in our modern day, doomsday prophets are perceived as belligerent, annoying, and/or scary. To counteract this, the writer makes a shreded move by presenting a softer side. And rather than presenting the sweetness of the literal side by side one after the other, the writer further dilutes this fiery message by intertwining the two threads, rather like a version of 20th century flavored multivitamins.

*We don't know the gender, but I've not seen any evidence that 1 John was written by a woman.*
The author insists that "there is love & forgiveness in fellowship." (para.4) making the proto-Orthodox community seem sweet and attractive, a place anyone would want to stay. After pulling his readers with a sense of love & community, he lashes out against the "antichrists;" before coming back saying essentially, "But you'd never join them, right? This creates an "us vs. them" dictionary where to be "them" is a fate worse than death, but the "us" don't have to worry about it if only they stay faithful. And if you're afraid that you're not good enough for the community, why, you needn't worry, because we & God make a forgiving bunch!

However, it is precisely at the issue of forgiveness where 1 John becomes paradoxical. The epistle states in one verse that there is no forgiveness for the antichrists, then in only a few verses over states "if we confess our sins, God is faithful & just to forgive our sins & cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The letter of contradictions itself, at face value. This tension has been fertile ground for interpretations; some I've heard are "there is forgiveness for all sins, but only if we acknowledge we are sinful, the Decetists did not," or "the unforgivable antichrists are really evil spirits; the people themselves are forgivable," or "this letter is plain inconsistent & unreasonable." Sadly, there is no extant explanation of my letter for confused 21st Century Biblical Interpreters appended to 1 John, so we are left with our own interpretations. We may research, consult the original Greek, dig through the Mediterranean world, to find a better manuscript, but in the end, we will never know.

The important thing, though, is to take the letter as a whole. We cannot cherry-pick the love bits to preach fuzzy, happy sermons that probably include kittens & puppies. Neither can we choose only on the angry bits to preach hatred. We must, however, use this letter, remain true to its puzzling & careful rhetorical scheme.
EXCERPTS from an exemplary term paper

The following Religion 212 paper exemplifies what Dr. Oakman considers 'A' work for a lower-division biblical studies paper. The example is used with the permission of the student author.

The original mark-ups are left to show that a paper need not be formally perfect to garner an 'A'. The Chicago Author-Date basics do need to be implemented as precisely as possible.

The most important matter is the scholarly quality (substance) of the paper. After an excellent two paragraph introduction--through which the author brings the subject of the paper immediately to the reader's mind and situates the paper topic within the field of biblical studies scholarship--the question of historical meaning is raised. The author acknowledges the difficulty of ascertaining original meaning with so little to go on for historical context.

**Notice the highly desired argumentative quality of the paper.** This does not mean a tendentious argument about the author's prejudices, but an argument engaging problems of historical interpretation along with relevant scholarly opinions. The author of this paper keeps his/her discussion foremost, not simply giving a report on scholarly opinions. S/he carefully analyzes texts from Jude (primary evidence) while appealing to relevant scholarship and various kinds of reasoning. The paper flows logically from a consideration of authorship and background to an examination of the information that can be inferred from Jude's text. Coherent and logical paper structure always aids the argument.

The green markings on p. 9 below show how the paper's author finally comes to some conclusions after examining a range of scholarly opinions and evidence. This "point-last" type of argument is well done here. But if not well done, it can lose the reader or the reader's interest.

Usually more effective is a "point-first" thesis, of the sort "I am going to show you A, B, C." The paper then will go on to arguments and evidence supporting A + B + C.

A conclusion should sum up what has been shown through the analytic discussion and argument (i.e., A + B + C) and relate the importance of the case for interpretation or understanding.

The author of this paper gives a model conclusion, stating not only the importance of the paper analysis for historical understanding of Jude but also a possible hermeneutical significance for the Christian tradition.

For more on argument, see the MEAL Plan link elsewhere on my Paper Helps webpage.

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Short, polemical, using Greek words found nowhere else in the New Testament and referencing lost and/or apocryphal works of prophecy, the book of Jude occupies a unique place in the New Testament canon. It teeters on the edge of canonicity; Syriac churches did not accept it until the fourth century CE (Coogan 2010, 2149). Origen of Alexandria, on the other hand, lived in the late 2nd Century and early 3rd Century CE (Ehrman 1999, 82), and referenced Jude in his commentaries as authoritative, though he did acknowledge the canonical dispute (Moore 2013, 511). At the time of the Reformation Jude’s canonicity again fell into dispute (Coogan 2010, 2149). A quick glance at any Bible’s table of contents will show that Jude once again holds canonical status for the majority of Christians, although its reference to apocryphal works such as The Assumption of Moses (no longer extant) (Neyrey 1993, 65) and 1 Enoch (Moore 2013, 498) continue to influence theological tangles, as well as its blatant similarity to 2 Peter, generally held to be its derivative (Sakenfeld 2008, 441).

In modern times, Jude has become easily adaptable to any intra- or interecclesiastical squabble—the letter pleads urgently that its readers “contend for the faith that once for all entrusted to the saints” (3 RSV) which is in danger from “certain intruders . . . who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (4). These harsh words are as specific as the letter gets—the “intruders” are never identified, so the letter, unexamined, stands like a Mad-Libs blank in the Bible: insert theological opponent here. For this reason alone it is imperative to seek an answer to the Biblical scholar’s age-old question: “What did this letter mean for its original author? Its original audience?”
The difficulty in asking this question about Jude is that we know so little about the book’s origin and authorship, and what we do know is held in dispute by scholars. Possible dates range from the 50s CE to the mid-second century (Keck 1998, 474), and most scholars hold to one or the other side of a dichotomy, either the book was written in the apostolic age (mid-first century CE) or in the mid-second century (Keck 1998, 474), at which time the proto-orthodox church became more organized and institutionalized, and eschatological expectations (i.e., the belief that the End Times were imminent) were fading (Freedman 1992, 1100; Keck 1998, 476). Of course, this difference of a hundred years or more creates strikingly different implications for the book’s authorship and social context, creating more ambiguity as to the identity of the “intruders” (Jude 4).

Within the text, the letter is ascribed to “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James” (1). James, most scholars agree, was a prominent figure in the Jerusalem church (Joseph 2013, 469), the brother of Jesus (Freedman 1992, 1101). Taken at face value, this makes the author Jesus’ brother—and indeed, a brother of Jesus named Jude is mentioned in Matthew (13:55) and Mark (6:3). If Jude the brother of James and Jesus is indeed the author, this puts the date of the letter closer to 50 CE and the location in Syria or Palestine (Neyrey 1993, 29). However, continuing to attribute this letter to Jesus’ and James’ brother Jude is problematic because of the ancient tendency to ascribe writings to famous historical figures in order to make the work sound authoritative. Although Jude (the person) seems at first blush largely obscure in early Christianity, all Jesus’ relatives held a great deal of prominence in Palestinian churches until the mid-second century (Freedman 1992, 1101). Thus the attribution alone allows us to temporarily place the letter anywhere from 50 CE to ca. 150 CE, assuming the letter was written in Palestine—and even that is disputed (Neyrey 1993, 29). It is necessary, therefore, to look to extrinsic evidence not merely to confirm the letter’s attribution, but
rather to determine the very social context of the letter.

In order to find the original meaning of the letter, I first argue that Jude was written closer to 50 CE than to 150 CE, probably in Palestine, although I find no compelling evidence that it was or was not written by Jude, the brother of James and Jesus—and indeed, this detail is most likely irrelevant for our purposes. Most scholars are in agreement that Jude’s original audience was a Jewish Christian community; specifically, Jude’s use of the Moses tradition and *1 Enoch* (Jewish tradition and writings) points to a community that would have held them authoritative, much more likely for a Jewish community than a Gentile one (Neyrey 1993, 30). The thought patterns throughout the letter are uniquely Jewish (Neyrey 1993, 30). For example, the crux of Jude’s argument is that “In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging in their own deadly lusts” (18) and these prophesied scoffers are the current “intruders” (4) against whom the author wishes to warn his audience. This “last time” some commentators (Joseph 2013, 473; Keck 1998, 476) associate with the *parousia* of God. *Parousia* can be translated as “coming” or “presence,” “a being alongside” (Young n.d., 83, 170, 188). It is not found in Jude, but it is often used to describe an apocalyptic return of God to earth. The word found in Jude, *eschatos*, is used 15 other times in the New Testament to refer to the return of God to earth (Young n.d. 589), and it is clear from the context that this is what is meant in Jude. The strongly stated reference to the *parousia* of God, combined with the use of apocalyptic Jewish tradition, align this letter to Jewish apocalyptic writings (Freedman 1992, 1100; Keck 1998, 476; Joseph 2013, 464-5). Finally, scholars have argued that Jude’s use of *1 Enoch* indicates a use of the Aramaic version of this work (Joseph 2013, 472), which indicates a Jewish background for the writer and possibly his audience. It also points to a community in Palestine or Syria as opposed to Alexandria, where the Jewish population was more

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1 Most scholars refer to the author of Jude as male; Neyrey (2013) specifically cites intrinsic and extrinsic evidence for the author’s gender (34).
Pages 5-6 removed
alt. Translation “angels” (Coogan 2010, 2150) (8). For them, the author claims, “deepest darkness has been reserved forever.” (13). The author spends the body of the letter (5–16) describing characters in the Hebrew Bible and noncanonical Jewish material with whom he compares these “malcontents” (16).

As investigators into these opponents’ identity, we tend to take the author’s words and analysis at face value (Thurén 1997, 455). We assume that these “dreamers” (8) are “licentiou[s]” (4) and indulge in sexual activity outside of the realms of what the author considered moral. For this reason, many scholars associate the faceless opponents with Gnostics (Freedman 1992, 1100), who would have held heterodox beliefs about the final judgment (which could be implied when the author accuses them of “deny[ing]” Jesus (4) and “reject[ing] authority” (8)), and who viewed the body as irrelevant and evil, thus causing some groups to live a lifestyle that could be described as libertinism (Neyrey 1993, 32). This is a very reasonable solution to the historical mystery, and it could fit with our presumed authorship and date, as discoveries in Nag Hammadi in the 20th Century show evidence for a similar dualism in the pre-Christian Essenes (Robinson 1977, 7). This also fits many scholars’ (Neyrey 1993, 51; Joseph 2013, 465) description of traveling prophets or “itinerant charismatics” (Freedman 1992, 1100), who have “stolen in” (4) to the church. However, Neyrey (1993, 31) argues that the “intruders” are actually within the group of disciples and do not formally deny “the faith” (Jude 3). If so, these intruders are less likely to have such dramatic differences in belief as that between proto-orthodox Christianity and Gnosticism.

Several have proposed that if Jude is an earlier letter as opposed to a second-century catholic epistle, the opponents could have been members of the church who subscribed to the teachings of Paul of Tarsus (Freedman 1992, 1101; Joseph 2013, 466). With an early composition date, the epistle would have been written when Paul had been active for at least 20 years (Joseph 2013, 466), allowing plenty
of time for his teachings to disseminate around Palestine. The author’s characterization of his opponents as libertines, even antinomian, could reference beliefs similar to Paul’s “no one is justified before God by the law . . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law” (Gal 3:11, 13). Could this sort of teaching be behind the author of Jude’s claim that his opponents “pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness” (4)? Indeed, he only attacks them for their licentious actions and antinomianism (Freedman 1992, 1100), and there is no mention of dualistic theology characteristic of Gnostics (Keck 1998, 476).

The question remains, however, whether the author’s opponents were licentious or antinomian at all. As mentioned above, everything we know about these opponents we know from these writings against them. Certainly, the author claims that they “pervert the grace of . . . God” (4), but can we truly believe him? All we know is that the author applies his understanding of “the faith” (3) to everything and everyone—he expects all members of this community to conform to what—in his interpretation—“was once for all entrusted to the saints” (3, emphasis mine). If the opponents disagree with him, that is enough to fuel vitriol and accusations that may or may not be true. As Lauri Thurén (1997) comments, this was a common besmirching technique in antiquity, visible in many nonbiblical writings of the time period (457-8). One might think that this technique died with the ancients. A quick perusal of Facebook should suffice to correct this misconception.

The tone of the letter indicates that it was written for a specific occasion, from a specific person to a specific church with whom he has an abiding relationship (Thurén 1997, 464; Keck 1998, 475). This has caused multiple scholars to suggest that the author of Jude was a leader in the local Christian community (he takes an authoritative tone and writes a letter of stern warning and reproof). Absent for unknown reasons, he saw rivals to his authority, possibly with a different theology than his (Neyrey
1993, 51; Thurén 1997, 460; Sakenfeld 2008, 442) and wished to call the community back to his own authority. His splendid outpourings of Greek rhetoric and Hebrew allusion may seem overmuch for a petty church squabble, but in the ancient Near Eastern world, honor and shame were deeply-held social values, and a challenge to the author’s authority would have given him great shame (Neyrey 1993, 51). Additionally, since the author was “faithful to tradition” (Neyrey 1993, 38) and appears to have a high christology (4, 17, 21, 25), he could have perceived a challenge to his authority as a true denial of Jesus, as he indicates in verse 4. If his opponents are members of the Christian community, it is not just the author that would be shamed (in his perception) but Jesus himself. For this author, who considers himself “entrusted” (3) with the “once for all” (3) tradition, shaming of Jesus would be a very serious offense indeed, probably worthy of all the vitriol the author could write. I argue, based on the evidence and this scenario fits the context quite well, and is the most likely explanation. In addition, it disproves neither the Gnostic nor Pauline theories, for either theology could have influenced the Christian community in a way that the author considered harmful and heretical.

However, in the end, this is merely speculation. As shown above, myriad scenarios are possible based on deep, scholarly analysis of text, context clues, and the author’s social milieu. When we ask, of the letter of Jude, what the text meant to its original readers, we cannot truly defend any one specific answer. We may draw conclusions as to who the original readers were (though even that is disputed), but we do not know whom, in the end, the author considered a threat to these readers or why. This ambiguity has made the letter an easy tool to condemn many and various theologies and values. Those of us who use the letter in this way all too easily forget that, despite its ambiguity, it was likely written in a specific context about a specific group of people. And so, as we continue to use this letter to divide and unite over theological differences, we perpetuate a cycle that has been repeating itself since the
letter’s very inception.
References


