

# Why Did Michael and the Devil Dispute Over Moses' Body?

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*Without question, one of the strangest verses in the Bible is Jude 1:9: “But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you!’” Questions have long swirled around this verse, and the death and burial of Moses in general.*

The Biblical record of the death and burial of Moses is shrouded in mystery in Deuteronomy 34. The scriptures say, “So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD... And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor: *but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day.*” (v.5-6). After seeing the Promised land shown to him by God, Moses died *alone* in God’s presence. It says that “He” buried Moses. This “He” is “Jehovah buried Moses. Said of no other” (Bullinger’s Companion Bible). The Hebrew has “And he buried” (וַיִּקְבֹּר), which only makes *grammatical* sense as the LORD being the One who buried Moses.

There was no funeral or ceremony, God buried him in a *secret grave* in a valley in the land of Moab. Nothing in this chapter mentions the devil, Michael, or a dispute about Moses’ body. **This was later revealed to Jude by the Holy Spirit!**

## **The Assumption of Moses?**

Many claim that Jude quoted a source called “The Assumption of Moses,” also known as the “Testament of Moses” (Hebrew מִשֶּׁה עֲלִיית מֹשֶׁה Aliyah Mosheh) a 1st-century Jewish apocryphal work. Apparently it contains secret prophecies Moses revealed to Joshua before passing leadership of the Israelites to him. It is characterized as a “testament,” meaning the final speech of a dying person, Moses. Did Jude quote this source?

First, Jude does *not* say, “The book the Assumption of Moses says...” It says, “Yet Michael the archangel...” He is *not* quoting an *uninspired* source! Three early church fathers say that Jude 9 refers to the *Assumption of Moses*.

The early church father Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 155–220) says that Jude referred to the Assumption of Moses when he wrote these words, “When Michael, the archangel, disputing with the devil, debated about the body of Moses. Here he confirms the assumption of Moses” (*Clement of Alexandria, “Fragments of Clemens Alexandrinus,” in Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire), ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. William Wilson, vol. 2, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 573*).

Another early church father, Origen (A.D. 185—254), writes this about Jude’s statement in his *De Principiis*, “And in the first place, in the book of Genesis, the serpent is described as having seduced Eve; regarding whom, in the work entitled **The Ascension of Moses** (a little treatise, of which the Apostle Jude makes mention in his Epistle), the archangel Michael, when disputing with the devil regarding the body of Moses, says that the serpent, being inspired by the devil, was the cause of Adam and Eve’s transgression” (*Origen, “De Principiis,” in Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Frederick Crombie, vol. 4, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 328*). Notice that Origen refers to the book as the “*Ascension of Moses*” and not the “*Assumption of Moses*.” It does appear, however, that these two names refer to the same book.

According to Edwin A. Blum, the early church father Didymus of Alexandria (A.D. 309/314–398) also states that Jude 9 referred to the *Assumption of Moses* in his book “*In epistolas canonicas brevis enarratio*.” However, this author does *not* have access to the reference. (Edwin A. Blum. Jude. *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 12. p. 391).

So three early church fathers state that Jude 9 and the Assumption of Moses refer to the same event. But it is important to notice that they wrote about *one hundred years after Jude was written*. Therefore, *how* did they conclude that Jude quoted the *Assumption of Moses*? Why not the *Assumption of Moses* quoted Jude? **Which one came first? No reason or explanation is given.** Barnes Notes writes, “...there can be no reasonable doubt that such a book as Origen refers to, under the title of ‘the Assumption of Moses,’ was extant in ‘his’ time, *but that does not prove by any*

means that it was extant in the time of Jude, or that he quoted it.” (emphasis added).

Additionally, we do *not* know if the early church fathers had *personally* read the *Assumption of Moses* or had even heard about it. The reason for this last statement is that the only edition today of the *Assumption of Moses* is *missing any reference* similar to Jude 9.

Jude’s inclusion of this story about Michael and the devil is historically reliable since the *Spirit of God moved Jude to include it in the New Testament as a historical account*. The way it is worded in Jude is exactly as the Spirit wanted it to be articulated so that we have a *true description of what happened!* “This contention, which is nowhere else mentioned in holy writ, *was originally known by revelation...*” (George Haydock Catholic Bible Commentary, emphasis added).

### **Zechariah 3:1?**

Some have also supposed that the reference is to the passage in Zechariah, 3:1, “And he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to resist him. And the Lord said unto Satan, The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan,” But the objections to this are very obvious:

- (1) There is *no similarity* between the two, except the expression, “the Lord rebuke thee.”
- (2) The name Michael does *not* occur at all in the passage in Zechariah.
- (3) There is *no mention* made of the “body of Moses” there, and no allusion to it whatever.
- (4) There is no intimation that there was any such contention about his body. There is a mere mention that Satan resisted the angel of the Lord, as seen in the vision, but no intimation that the controversy had “any” reference to Moses *in any way*.
- (5) The reason of the resistance which Satan offered to the angel in the vision as seen by Zechariah is stated. It was in regard to the consecration of Joshua to the office of high priest implying a return of prosperity to Jerusalem, and the restoration of the worship of God there in its purity; see (Zec 3:2). To this Satan was of course opposed, and the vision represents him as resisting the

angel in his purpose thus to set him apart to that office. *These reasons seem to me to make it clear that Jude did not refer to the passage in Zechariah, nor is there any other place in the Old Testament to which it can be supposed he had reference. (Quotes are from Barnes's Notes)*

### **Michael the Archangel**

The scripture first begins with, “*When* Michael the archangel,” (Douay-Rheims version). Notice Jude starts with “*When*.” So this event actually took place in *history*. After God buried Moses the Devil came to claim his body. Michael then arrived, the great Archangel to stop the devil from doing so.

The Bible shows that Michael is “*the* archangel.” “The archangel — This word occurs but once more in the sacred writings, namely, 1Thess 4:16.... Michael is called *one of the chief princes*, Dan 10:13, and *the great* prince, Dan 12:1; And, because it is said, (Rev 12:7,) that Michael and his angels fought against the dragon and his angels, Estius conjectures that Michael is the chief or prince of all the angels.” (Joseph Benson Commentary on Old & New Test, emphasis his).

And, “Let it be observed that the word archangel is *never found in the plural number* in the sacred writings. There can be properly only one archangel, *one chief or head of all the angelic host*.” (Clarke's Commentary, emphasis added). Michael is called “one of the chief princes” *however* is really should read, “the first of the chief Princes.” (Gill's Commentary). The Literal Standard Version says, “Michael, *first of the chief heads*.” So Michael is the Archangel above all angels in the heavenly angelic host!

### **The Dispute over the Body of Moses**

So God buried Moses then the Devil wanted to claim his body. Michael was sent to put a stop to this. “This dispute must have taken place ***after*** the death of Moses *and* [after] his burial by Jehovah” (Bullinger's Companion Bible, emphasis added).

Why this dispute? Why did the Devil want his body? “when contending with the devil he [Michael] *disputed about the body of Moses*,” (Jude 1:9). Let me quickly point out that the dispute was “about the *body* of Moses” and ***not*** about any supposed surviving immortal soul as some contend! This is “his literal body... the literal body is evidently here meant...*literally of the fleshly and natural body of*

*Moses*, buried by the Lord himself, partly out of respect to him;” (The JFB Commentary and Gill’s Commentary, emphasis added).

But why the body? Look at the context, “when *contending* with the devil he *disputed* about the body of Moses” He was “contending” with the devil and “disputed” about the body of Moses.” The two Greek words are “diakrinō” (Strong’s #1252) and “dialegomai” (Strong’s #1256). “...the Greek words Jude employs speak of a *legal battle*. The devil was laying *legal claim to Moses based on Moses’ sin*.” (Article: Why Did Michael and the Devil Dispute Over Moses’ Body? by Robb Brunansky).

Richard Bauckham argues that the devil disputed with Michael about the body *because Moses was a sinner*. Furthermore, Moses was not just any sinner, but he was a murderer. In Exodus 2:12, Moses killed an Egyptian for beating one of the Hebrews. The devil therefore laid claim to Moses’ body because Satan has the power of death (Heb 2:14) and that he should **not** be in the RESURRECTION TO ETERNAL LIFE! *Because* Moses had so flagrantly violated the law of God, he stood condemned.

This explanation agrees well with what we know of the devil who is also called the “accuser of the brethren” in Revelation 12:10; just as he accused everyone from Job (1:10-11; 2:5-6) to Joshua the priest (Zech. 3:1).

Many do not realize that there is a *heavenly* court trial that takes place. The devil is in heaven, “...for the *accuser of our brethren* is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.” (Rev 12:10). Satan acts like a prosecuting attorney, constantly indicting, charging, blaming, and accusing God’s people! When we sin, Satan saucily sneers about us to God, accusing us!

But Jesus Christ, our High Priest, is like the counsel for the defense. Turning to God the Father, he points out our tears; our broken-hearted repentance, and asks His Father to forgive us! Jesus is called, “...an *advocate* with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous:” (1 John 2:1). The word “advocate” is “paraklētos” (Strong’s #3875) meaning, “one who pleads another’s cause before a judge, a pleader, *counsel for defense*, legal assistant, an advocate” (Thayer’s Greek Definitions, emphasis added).

We see something similar in Zechariah 3:1 as noted. Joshua the High Priest of Israel is standing before the angel of the Lord and Satan stands at the right hand of

Joshua to *accuse Joshua of sin* before the Lord. This accusation was not unfounded, for Zechariah 3:3 tells us that Joshua was standing before the Lord in filthy garments, representative of his sin and guilt before the Lord. Satan's claim appeared to be legally valid at first because Joshua was indeed a sinner who deserved condemnation. God, however, provided Joshua with festal robes, replacing his guilt with the *Lord's own justifying righteousness*.

In a similar fashion, the devil is making a *legal claim against Moses* that Moses deserves to be *condemned* for his sin *not* given eternal life in the resurrection. Such an accusation against the servant of the Lord demands *a clear response*. Michael gave that response to the devil is this dispute. "From the word 'disputed,' or *debated in controversy*, it is plain it was a judicial contest." (JFB Commentary, emphasis theirs). Michael told the devil this was under God's authority and judgment not his.

Then Jude says, "durst not ["Did not dare"] bring against him [Satan] a railing accusation," This should read, "(krisin blasphemias). "Charge of blasphemy" (Robertson's Word Pictures) or a "*judgment of blasphemy*," (JFB). Michael did not pass judgment on the Devil-because Michael is not the Judge, God is; and it is God that passes the judgment on Angels *and* people: "Given the *legal context of this verse*, Jude means that Michael *did not issue a legal condemnation against the devil*. Certainly, the devil stands condemned before God, but Michael did not presume to step into God's role as the one who judges the wicked. Although he was the archangel with so much power among the hosts of heaven, *Michael recognized God had prescribed limits to his authority, limits that he must respect for the honor and glory of the Lord.*" ((Article: Why Did Michael and the Devil Dispute Over Moses' Body? by Robb Brunansky).

Instead Michael said, "The Lord rebuke thee." Again, these words occur in Zechariah 3:1-10 where the angel of the Lord replies to the charges of Satan. Michael here is calling upon the "*Lord to render His righteous judgment in the legal dispute over Moses' body. Michael is asking the Lord both to vindicate His servant Moses and to condemn the accuser of the brethren, the devil.* Michael's response models a true and proper faith in God's justice. The one who believes God will judge righteously need not condemn the wicked, not even the devil, nor does he need to vindicate himself. Instead, he can rest, *knowing the Lord Himself will vindicate His people and condemn the wicked.*" (ibid, emphasis added).

And God *did* vindicate Moses. As we see in the “vision” of the end time, (Matthew 17:9); in the Kingdom of God we see Moses in the *transfiguration* standing with Jesus and on the other side of Jesus stands Elijah. Moses is in the kingdom of God as a resurrected saint and given eternal life. Many of the prophets and patriarchs in the Old Testament are *justified* because of the work of Salvation done by Christ as the book of Hebrews testifies, “How much more shall *the blood of Christ*, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

“*And for this cause* he is the mediator of the New Testament, that by means of death, *for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.*” (Heb 9:14-15). Jesus Christ now has the “keys” to unlock people from the grip of death and sin, “*I am* he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; *and have the keys of hell and of death.*” (Rev 1:18); and Moses will be resurrected and given eternal life!

Here these passages stand as a warning, but *also* hope. The warning is not to use our *own* judgments when it comes to people and their salvation, but to trust in *God’s judgment* and justice and to submit to God’s standard of righteousness.

And in the *hope* of the coming resurrection *from* the dead. Even though the devil will accuse us of sin and guilt, our Lord has overcome our sin and guilt at the cross, so that none of Satan’s accusations against us will stand. We have been clothed with Christ’s righteousness, and all our filthy garments were buried in a grave ***no one will ever find***, “These are they which came out of great tribulation, and *have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*...Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready.

“And to her was granted that *she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.*” (Rev 7:14; 19:7-8).