

## Did Paul Accept The Apocryphon of Jannes And Jambres As Scripture?

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In his second epistle to Timothy, Paul writes: “Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith.” (2 Tim. 3:8). The names “Jannes and Jambres” are not listed in Exodus. Since they are connected with the false teachers Paul discusses in 2 Timothy 3, their mention raises a number of questions. Who were Jannes and Jambres? What exactly did they do in opposing Moses? The discovery of The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres leads one to ask, did Paul accept this document as Scripture?

### *Who were Jannes and Jambres?*

In the past, some scholars suggested that Jannes and Jambres were Egyptian sorcerers who opposed Moses in Exodus 7:11, 22; 8:7, 18; and 9:11. Typical is Spain’s comment that they were “two magicians who opposed Moses.”<sup>1</sup> Thompson adds, “Ancient Jewish tradition gave these names to the anonymous Egyptian magicians in Exodus.”<sup>2</sup> Rabbinical tradition, as is normally the case, adds much speculation but little substance as to the identity of the two mentioned by Paul, though Pliny the Elder “knew Jannes as a *Jewish* sorcerer.”<sup>3</sup> The *Damascus Document* (CD), c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., is the earliest reference to the pair: “For in ancient times Moses and

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<sup>1</sup>Carl Spain, *The Letters of Paul to Timothy and Titus* (Austin: Sweet, 1970), 143.

<sup>2</sup>James W. Thompson, “2 Timothy,” *The Transforming Word*. Mark W. Hamilton, ed. (Abilene: ACU Press, 2009), 999.

<sup>3</sup>Johannes Tromp, “Jannes and Jambres (2 Timothy 3, 8-9),” *Moses in Biblical and Extra-Biblical Traditions*. Axel Graupner and Michael Wolter, eds. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 212.

Aaron arose by the hand of the Prince of Lights, and Belial raised Jannes [yhn] and his brother by his evil device, when Israel was delivered for the first time.”<sup>4</sup> Pietersma comments that the passage “is now known as well from Cave 6 of Qumran, albeit in fragmentary form and possible also from Cave 4.”<sup>5</sup> Pliny the Elder (1<sup>st</sup> century A. D.), Apuleius (2<sup>nd</sup> century A. D.), and Numenius (2<sup>nd</sup> century A. D.) mention Jannes and Jambres by name.<sup>6</sup> Henry, in examining the text of Chester Beatty XVI (about which more will be said below), writes: “The statement at 3a+i 2-3 that their mother risked her life in giving birth to the brothers suggests that they are twins. It is tempting to suppose the usual risks associated with childbirth lies behind this claim. Perhaps the particular were specified when the birth of the brothers was narrated earlier.”<sup>7</sup> Grabbe comments:

Already by the second half of the 1st century A.D. both individuals have names as 2 Timothy shows. The fact that at least one of the names is already known by Pliny in the 1st century indicates either that the legend developed from Exodus was widespread or that a famous magician by the name of Jannes (Yohana), who was otherwise known, had simply been appropriated by the tradition in its development.<sup>8</sup>

Pietersma posits a strong case that the name “Jannes” has a Semitic origin; consequently, he adds “there can be no doubt that the chief magician who opposed Moses (and Aaron) before Pharaoh bore a uniquely Jewish name.”<sup>9</sup> This would add a compelling layer to the Exodus narrative, in addition to the high drama of the contest between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the gods of Egypt. If Moses and Aaron were aware that Jannes and Jambres were apostate Israelites, then the tension would be off the charts. In commenting on the *CD* reference, Pietersma asserts

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<sup>4</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin, 1997), 131.

<sup>5</sup> Albert Pietersma, *The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres the Magicians* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 12.

<sup>6</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, “The Jannes/Jambres Tradition in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and its Date,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98/3 (1979), 395.

<sup>7</sup> W. B. Henry, “Notes on ‘Jannes and Jambres’ (Chester Beatty XVI),” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* Bd. 198 (2016), 62.

<sup>8</sup> Grabbe, 399.

<sup>9</sup> Pietersma, *The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres the Magicians*, 42.

that “surely the minimum requirement is that the wicked pair be accorded an Israelite following, and there is good reason to suggest that, as well, they themselves were perceived as apostate Israelites.”<sup>10</sup> Did Moses and Aaron know Jannes and Jambres before their confrontation? While nothing is stated in Scripture that would indicate such, it is almost inconceivable that the sorcerer brothers would have been unknown to Moses and Aaron. If Jannes and Jambres were of the same age (or older) than Moses, then it is quite possible that Moses knew them—as well as their abilities. At any rate, Paul draws a comparison in 2 Timothy 3 between Jannes and Jambres and the apostates who would lead brethren astray. That fact alone would seem to suggest that the pair had departed from the way of Jehovah, and were the leaders of those who opposed Moses and Aaron. Pietersma also says that “by the time the second epistle to Timothy was written, the names of both magicians have already been Hellenized...abbreviated to *ιαννης* and both names had been given Greek inflections.”<sup>11</sup>

### ***What did Jannes and Jambres do in opposing Moses?***

Exodus indicates what the magicians did, as well as their failure. If Jannes and Jambres were heading up the opposition, this would include them as well. The text states,

So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs (Exod. 7:10-12).

After Moses and Aaron had turned the Nile River into blood, the magicians again were able to duplicate it: “But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts” (Exod. 7:22).

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<sup>10</sup> Pietersma, *The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres the Magicians*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Pietersma, *The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres the Magicians*, 39.

Likewise, they mimicked the second plague of frogs: “But the magicians did the same by their secret arts and made frogs come up on the land of Egypt” (Exod. 8:7). Only at the third plague of gnats were the magicians unable to duplicate what God did through Moses and Aaron: “The magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast. Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, ‘This is the finger of God’” (Exod. 8:18-19). The magicians are absent from the text through the fourth and fifth plagues, but make their reappearance at the sixth plague of boils: “And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils came upon the magicians and upon all the Egyptians” (Exod. 9:11). From that point on, the magicians are nowhere to be found.

Based on the Exodus text, where did the magicians (including Jannes and Jambres) receive the ability to duplicate what God did through Moses and Aaron? Many are quick to dismiss the magicians’ ability as mere parlor tricks, or deception. Typical of this is Woods, who states: “(I)t appears more likely the magicians merely practiced deception...they merely faked the miracle and deceived Pharaoh.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, the text does not clearly indicate that. Could it have been the case that the magicians had some sort of demonic ability? As seen earlier, *CD* adds an intriguing detail: “For in ancient times Moses and Aaron arose by the hand of the Prince of Lights, and Belial raised Jannes [yhn] and his brother by his evil device, when Israel was delivered for the first time.”<sup>13</sup> If Jannes and Jambres were apostate Israelites, the possibility increases. Perhaps the pair was demon possessed and able to incorporate their limited abilities in deceiving Pharaoh. There would come a point at which demonic powers could not duplicate the power of God, and

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<sup>12</sup> Clyde M. Woods, People’s Old Testament Notes, Volume 1 Genesis-Exodus (Henderson, TN: Woods Publications, 1972), 141-42.

<sup>13</sup> Vermes, The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English, 131.

would collapse as a result. Even if Jannes and Jambres did not have demonic powers, the fact remains that their “secret arts” were able for a time to keep Pharaoh from seeing the truth.

Although Moses does not record what was said by the magicians, it is possible that they verbally castigated Moses and Aaron; such is implied by Paul’s statement, “so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men” (2 Tim. 3:8-9). The limit of the ability of the magicians became clear for everyone to see. Bailey’s insight is on point:

Significantly, the magicians duplicated (but did not reverse) the plague, indicating the supreme power of Jehovah. The irony is obvious. Imagine! A country is invaded and its citizens systematically help the invader destroy the country for the sole purpose of proving they are as powerful as he!<sup>14</sup>

It seems that the boils of the sixth plague struck them down; it is feasible that the final plague against the firstborn finished them off. Paul’s mention of Jannes and Jambres in connection with the false teachers who would arise opens a window into their character. These men had no business in leading individuals spiritually. They were false in their teaching and their conduct. Moses and Aaron were able to expose them for who they really were.

### ***What of The Apocryphon Of Jannes And Jambres?***

In the first century, Pliny the Elder wrote the following: “There is yet another branch of magic, derived from Moses, Jannes, Lotapes, and the Jews, but living many thousand years after Zoroastrem.”<sup>15</sup> Other early authors, such as Apuleius and Origen, also mention Jannes and Jambres.<sup>16</sup> Yet, there is evidence that a book about Jannes and Jambres was known very early. It is certain that Origen, who wrote in the third century, mentions its existence; Numenius of

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<sup>14</sup> Randall C. Bailey, *Exodus* (Joplin: College Press, 2007), 119.

<sup>15</sup> Pietersma, *The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres the Magicians*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Pietersma, *The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres the Magicians*, 24.

Apamea in the second century was acquainted with it as well. Pietersma says of The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres the Magicians: “All in all, then, it is likely that our book originated no later than ii AD and a date in i AD is quite plausible.”<sup>17</sup> Much of the content of the book is fortunately preserved, primarily in Chester Beatty XVI, which dates to the fourth century.<sup>18</sup>

The manuscript consists of a total of 100 fragments, originally part of a codex of 24 pages.<sup>19</sup>

Pietersma has done a remarkable job in translating and organizing the text that is available.

Indeed, since the publication of his work, there have been two more fragments discovered (from Vienna, labeled P.Vindob. G 00180↓ and G 28249↓), which according to Pietersma date to the early third century AD.<sup>20</sup> That being said, Biggs and Hall nevertheless highlight an issue: “The problem of interpreting these fragments, however, is complicated by a bewildering array of references to the two in various languages, which results from both the importance of Exodus Jews and Christians, and the connection of the brothers to magic.”<sup>21</sup>

The book’s content focuses on the two brothers—primarily, Jannes. It opens by recounting a dream by their mother concerning a person who trespasses a garden of the sons’ house and then cuts down a cypress tree. She tells Jannes her dream, and he builds a wall around the garden to protect it. However, later on the tree is cut down by God in front of Jannes and all the magicians by means of an earthquake, thunder and lightning. Jannes and Jambres then have a discussion concerning the institution of monogamous marriage, which they both reject. They then use a

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<sup>17</sup> Pietersma, The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres the Magicians, 58.

<sup>18</sup> See the images of Chester Beatty XVI at the end of the article.

<sup>19</sup> Pietersma, The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres the Magicians, 48-49.

<sup>20</sup> Pietersma, “Two More Fragments of the Vienna Jannes and Jambres,” *The Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* Vol. 49 (2012), 21.

<sup>21</sup> Frederick M. Biggs & Thomas N. Hall, “Traditions concerning Jannes and Jambres in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Anglo-Saxon England* vol. 25 (1996), 69.

book of magic and conclude that falling leaves from the trees is a bad omen for Egypt. At this point divine beings—among them perhaps Moses and Aaron—warn Jannes that he will be eternally condemned. Two of the angels, though, grant Jannes a temporary reprieve. The scene then shifts to a marriage celebration at Pharaoh's court, where the Egyptian ruler orders the magicians to oppose Moses. Jannes does as he is ordered; but as he engages with Moses, Jannes becomes leprous. Returning home, he sends word to Pharaoh that Moses' miracles are of divine origin. An omen against Egypt comes to Jannes, and to him is revealed his own death. Jannes then leaves his mother, brother, and other magicians—but not before warning them to disengage from Pharaoh and cease attacking the Hebrews, else disaster will come. Jannes's warnings come to pass; he dies, and then his mother also passes. After a period of time Jambres uses the book of magic to summon the spirit of Jannes. To Jambres, Jannes confesses his sin in opposing God; he also describes the state of the dead, and tells Jambres that he still has time to repent. Jambres is then warned about idolatry—among other sins—as well as staying faithful in marriage.

Donoso highlights four intriguing elements in the story. First, the mother's "unusual...role against the background of a clearly patriarchal *status quo* and a hierarchy (whether in family, monastic, or political settings) that is predominantly male and tied to the father;" second, the cypress tree, "which as an evergreen tree has always had a strong symbolic value primarily in relation to life and death;" third, the iron saw, which "appears as an instrument that announces the eschatological fate awaiting those who resist the divine will;" and finally, the premonitory dream, which "serves as an eschatological warning: God will act definitively and Jannes must

choose.”<sup>22</sup> Pietersma adds, “In *Jannes and Jambres* there is evidence to suggest that the two brothers were grandsons of Petephres, the priest of Heliopolis (cf. Gen. 41:45, 50; 46:20), making it plausible that their walled, private estate (παράδεισος) was in the vicinity of Heliopolis.”<sup>23</sup>

Since the book itself was known very early, the question must be asked: was Paul familiar with it? The apostle mentions the names “Jannes and Jambres” without qualification. One would be hard pressed to think that Gamaliel, Paul’s primary teacher, would not have been familiar at the very least with oral tradition concerning the magicians. It is indeed likely that Gamaliel not only knew of their names, but also of The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres. Even if Gamaliel did not know of the brothers, Paul did. Given Paul’s occasional penchant for citing pagan authors and works (Acts 17:28; Tit. 1:12), it is not infeasible that the apostle not only knew of the magicians, but also the book concerning them. Paul’s education was very extensive; he was one of the most well read men of his day. It is no wonder that God selected him to be a “chosen instrument” (Acts 9:15).

If Paul was aware of the book, was he referring to it in 2 Timothy 3:8, and did he consider it to be scripture? To that twofold question, one must reply, “not necessarily,” and “no.” The Holy Spirit fully inspired the pen of the apostle; Jesus had promised, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak” (John 16:13). Christ through the Holy Spirit knew that both Jannes and

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<sup>22</sup> Marcos Aceituno Donoso, “Defying the Divine: Jannes and Jambres in Apocalyptic Perspective,” Dreams, Visions, Imaginations: Jewish, Christian and Gnostic Views of the World to Come. Jens Schröter, Tobias Niklas, Armand Puig i Tàrrach, eds. (Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter, 2021), 298-300.

<sup>23</sup> Pietersma, “Two More Fragments of the Vienna Jannes and Jambres,” 27.



Jambres actually existed and actually opposed Moses—and so inspired Paul to write what he did in 2 Timothy 3:8. The details of how they opposed Moses must be left in the realm of Deuteronomy 29:29: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” As interesting as the uninspired works are concerning the magicians, one must be content with what Scripture explicitly indicates. That being said, there is no indication in what Paul writes that he is referring to The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres—unlike his explicit references in other places to non-biblical works. Consequently, he is not endorsing the work. One must not forget the point that Paul is actually trying to make concerning those who would oppose the truth. Tromp’s comments are insightful:

(T)he reference to Jannes and Jambres as earlier examples of the phenomenon that the author observes in his own time, would make the most sense if Jannes and Jambres were known, not as Egyptian magicians, but as Hebrew apostates in Belial's service who were working on the destruction of God's people from within, not unlike, for instance, Dathan and Abiram...The exemplary function of Jannes and Jambres is brought out most clearly, if the author of 2 Timothy in 3,8-9 refers to a narrative tradition that considered both as apostates: people who left the Hebrew community and resisted Moses in his mission to liberate Israel.<sup>24</sup>

As one reads the passage from 2 Timothy, he is struck by how similar the description is to those of like mind in the present day. Paul’s warning to the young preacher is highly appropriate:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to

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<sup>24</sup> Johannes Tromp, “Jannes and Jambres (2 Timothy 3, 8-9),” Moses in Biblical and Extra-Biblical Traditions. Axel Garaupner & Michael Wolter, eds. (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 225.

arrive at a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men” (2 Tim. 3:1-9).

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CHESTER BEATTY XVI, XVII

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