This thread of posts we have been having by Hugo Mendez on the writings of “John” in the New Testament has been unusually stimulating and in the world of scholarship, controversial. If you haven’t followed the thread, just look at the four that have already been posted starting two weeks ago. If he were to argue that 1 Timothy was not really written by Paul, but someone claiming to be Paul (i.e., that it was a “forgery”), not a single New Testament scholar in the country would raise an eyebrow. But to claim the letters of John are forgeries? Yikes — now *that* is something you don’t hear every day. But can the claim be sustained? Here Hugo answers some of the objections others might raise.

What do you think? Convinced?

NOTE: most posts on the blog are for members only. This one is open to anyone who wants to see it. Wanna see this kind of post five times each and every week, going back eight years? Join the blog! Free memberships are available! And if you are willing to pay the small, regular membership fee, even better: every nickel of your fee will go to charities dealing with hunger and homelessness. So what’s the downside???

Common Questions about the Johannines as Literary Forgeries

In my last post, I argued that the Gospel and Epistles of John may be a chain of literary forgeries. As I see it, these texts cast and recast a single invented character—an eyewitness to Jesus’ life—as the mouthpiece of different theological views.

This thesis has caused a bit of a stir in the field over the past two months, and it’s invited its share of questions and objections.

In this post, I’d like to address some of the most common questions I hear.

Question 1: Can these texts be “forgeries” when they don’t actually claim a name?

When people encounter my work, they’re often confused by the claim that the Gospel and Epistles of John are “forgeries,” since these texts are essentially anonymous. (John credits itself to an unnamed eyewitness “disciple whom Jesus loved”; 1 John never names its author other than suggesting he is an eyewitness, and the author of 2 and 3 John identifies himself only as “the Elder.” They’re much more used to forgeries like 2 Timothy or 2 Peter, which actually claim the name of “Peter” or “Paul.”

When presented with this question, I encourage people to set the Johannine texts beside a broader sampling of literature than merely the New Testament. As New Testament scholars, we work with an admittedly narrow set of materials—one that limits our knowledge of a phenomenon as broad and varied as pseudepigraphy. That’s where Bart’s Forgery and Counterforgery (2012) is so valuable as a nearly encyclopedic survey of the practice.

When we survey a broader sweep of ancient texts, we find many examples of what I call “anonymous/nameless” or “implicit” forgeries (Bart uses the term “non-pseudepigraphic forgeries”). These works “set forth clear, but false, authorial claims without actually naming
an author” (Ehrman 2012: 35). They’re anonymous, but they present their implied authors in a false mold.

This type is so well represented in ancient literature that several examples appear in the Bible—among them, Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth) and (in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles) the Wisdom of Solomon. Both of these texts are anonymous, but each strongly suggests that its author might have been Solomon. Ecclesiastes references its author only as “Qoheleth/the Teacher”—a title as opaque as “the Elder” of 2 and 3 John—but tantalizingly calls this author “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” and describes him as “very wise” person, who “set in order many proverbs” (Eccl 1:1, 12:9; cf. 1 Kings 4:32). The Book of Wisdom also never names its author, but several chapters in, its anonymous speaker writes: “you have chosen me to be king of your people... you have commanded the building of a temple on your holy mountain” (Wisdom 9:7–8). The implication is clear: the author is Solomon, who built the First Temple in Jerusalem.

In a recent book, Clare Rothschild has argued that Hebrews gestures at Pauline authorship in the same, indirect way. The book never claims to be written by Paul, but in the end, it offers a farewell that smacks of Paul:

“I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you.... Those from Italy send you their greetings.” (Heb. 13:22–24)

**Question 2: Is it plausible that a forger would take up an invented identity rather than use an established name (e.g., Peter, Paul)?**

Other forgeries in the New Testament take up the name of well-known historical persons—figures like Paul, Peter, James, and Jude. For this reason, some scholars ask me whether it makes sense that the author of John merely invented his eyewitness.

In fact, this isn’t unusual at all; we have other ancient examples of this practice. In a recent book, David Litwa calls attention to two examples of invented eyewitness narrators in Greek literature: Damis (Life of Apollonius) and Dictys (Diary of the Trojan War). Likewise, a text I teach in my courses on early Christian martyrdom—the Martyrdom of Marian and James—casts itself as the account of an eyewitness, but an invented one who is otherwise unknown, unnamed, and who corresponds to no known figure. This is very similar to the Johannine literature, which also takes up an anonymous, invented narrator.

**Question 3: Is it plausible that multiple authors would contribute to the same forgery chain?**

In the scenario I trace out in my article, at least two (but perhaps up to four) authors wrote under the guise of the “Johannine” eyewitness. Recently, a friend asked whether it is plausible to imagine a chain forgery like this—that is, a line of forgeries written by more than one author.

The answer, simply, is yes, and the proof is in your New Testament. Critical scholars agree that the author of 2 Timothy forged a letter in Paul’s name. That author did so partly by adapting the language of Ephesians, which he may not have realized was itself a Pauline forgery. And Ephesians, in turn, seems to have been dependent on a still older Pauline
forgery, Colossians.

So yes, multiple authors can extend the same forgery chain, often unknowingly.

**Question 4: Isn’t it a stretch to believe that [X specific detail] is merely made up?**

I get this question a lot. People cite all kinds of details in the Gospel and Epistles of John—for instance, the name “Diotrephes” or the rumor that the “beloved disciple” would never die—and argue that they are just “too realistic” or “too specific” to have been made up.

Simply put, you can’t make a good argument against forgery from this angle. The reason, as I note in my paper, is that “there is no such thing as a detail too realistic to have been fabricated” (364, no. 29). Literary fictions can contain as many made-up details as you like, and those details can be as real and lifelike as one wants them to be. The whole category of fiction novels and short stories is possible because of this. And as it stands, surviving forgeries feel pretty lifelike. Take the forged epistles of Plato. They contain all sorts of vivid and specific details that resemble real life and experience (“verisimilitudes”), but that doesn’t make them any less false. Here are a few samples from *Epistle* 13:

- “Once when you were feasting with the Locrian youths... you got up and came over to me...”
- “I have had the Apollo made and Leptines is bringing it to you.... He had at his shop a piece which was, as I thought, very artistic”
- “I shall make use of your money, as I told you previously”

**A closing thought**

It’s surprising to me how easily leading scholars cite 1, 2, and 3 John in their reconstructions without giving a first or second thought to the question of whether these texts are authentic. What makes this especially surprising is that the doubts that I’m raising about these texts are hardly unprecedented or unusual. Even ancient Christian writers questioned the authenticity of at least some of these texts. For instance, as far as we can tell from the surviving fragments of his writings, the third-century writer Origen did not accept 2 and 3 John as authentic. He speaks only of “an epistle” of John; he doesn’t cite 2 and 3 John anywhere in his writings; and in one surviving fragment of his writings, it appears he claims that “not all think [2 and 3 John] are genuine” (cited in Eusebius, HE, 6.25.10). Even as late as the fourth century, Eusebius tells us that 2 and 3 John are “disputed” among Christians (Eusebius, HE 3.25.3)—that is, texts that some considered likely to be “spurious.”

Above all, my paper calls scholars to take a long, hard look at evidence the community hypothesis marginalizes—that is, evidence of literary contact and copying between these texts, evidence of false authorial claims, evidence of the ancient debates about these texts.

The problem is that if we follow these lines of evidence to their logical end, the idea of a “Johannine Community” becomes nearly impossible to sustain, as I’ll explain why in my next post.
Did Some *One* Forge the Writings of “John”? Guest Post by Hugo Mendez
Are the Gospel and Epistles of John *Forgeries*?? Guest Post by Hugo Mendez