Here my colleague Hugo Mendez wraps up his discussion of the writings of “John” — the Gospel of John, 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John — and he does so with a BANG. I hope you can see both the quality and significance of these conclusions. This is very serious and persuasive scholarship put at a level that even non-scholars can understand, with huge implications for understanding four of the important writings of the New Testament but also for rethinking questions of authorship of the early Christian writings and the history of our earliest Christian communities. It’s easy for scholars to see these implications (mainly because the conclusions he reaches are contrary to what most critical scholars actually teach their students all the time), which is why Hugo has stirred up a bit of a hornets’ nest. I hope it’s possible for you to both appreciate and enjoy the argument as well.

There is only one point on which he and I probably disagree, and it has to do with the authorship of the Gospel of John: Is it a forgery by someone intentionally trying to make his readers think he is someone other than he is? He thinks yes, I think no. Hugo and I may have a back-and-forth on the question on the blog, just for the heck of it, so you can see the young guy take the old fellow down.....

Please Note: I’ve made this post available to the public. Most posts are available only to blog members. But it can’t be easier to join: we have free memberships for a while longer, during our crisis, and anyone who would like a more permanent membership only needs to pay a small fee. Every last drachma of it goes to charities to help the needy. So in either event, join!

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The Authors of the Johannine Forgeries

Most scholars believe the authors of John, 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John were all members of a single network of ancient churches: the “Johannine Community.” They imagine that these authors probably knew one another and even collaborated on literary works.

In a recent article, however, I argue that the Gospel and Epistles of John may be a series of literary forgeries. If this is true, this changes how we think of the Johannine authors and their relationship with one another. Forgery was typically an individual, secretive enterprise in the ancient world—one in which writers took pains to conceal their identity and activities from others. In this case, it’s likely the Johannine authors didn’t directly know one another except as they read (and imitated) one another’s literary works. They might also have lived in different contexts or settings.

So who were these authors? In the closing section of my paper, I offer a different vision of Johannine origins—one that I think makes better sense of the authors as forgers. In this post, I’d like to walk you through that alternative.

That alternative unfolds in two stages.

Stage 1: The Gospel

Sometime around the end of the first century CE, someone drafted (most of) the Gospel of
John we know today. We don’t know much about this author, except that he was educated, probably male, and that he spoke Greek.

There’s good evidence this writer drew on a variety of materials at his disposal when constructing his gospel—perhaps oral traditions or a written source like the hypothetical “Signs Source.” Over the past decade, an increasing number of scholars have concluded that the author probably knew one or more Synoptic gospels as well (at least Mark, but possibly also Matthew and/or Luke). But our author was also creative, inventing large amounts of his material (dialogues, scenes, individual details, etc.).

The gospel he produced has various seams and gaps (aporias). These may reflect the difficulty the author faced reconciling his various sources, or they may indicate that he wrote his text over an extended period of time in several passes, writing, rewriting, editing, and reediting a draft until he forgot to tie up loose ends (“editorial fatigue”).

So why did this author write a gospel? As John 20:31 suggests, he wrote to persuade his readers that they can receive “eternal life” now—an experience he compares to a spiritual resurrection (e.g., 3.36; 5.24-25). The idea of a spiritual resurrection was a controversial one in early Christianity. It appears in two forgeries in Paul’s name (Col. 3.1-3; Eph. 2.1-7), but it’s condemned in other works (2 Tim. 2.17-18; possibly 1 Cor. 15.12). Our author hoped to advance the idea by placing it on the lips of Jesus—a technique later used by the authors of Thomas, Mary, and Judas.

We don’t know where this author lived, though his text contains some possible clues. For instance, he seems to know the geography of Jerusalem (5:2) and he’s also aware that some Christians were being expelled from synagogues (16:2). (Just because a “Johannine Christianity” didn’t exist doesn’t mean we can’t make educated guesses about the author’s actual social context from the same details.) It’s certainly safe to assume that our author was connected to a Christian house-church, but we have no way of knowing how typical his views were within that church. Perhaps his ideas were held only by a smaller circle within the church. Or perhaps these views were unique to him—shaped by his private reading or his contact with other educated elites. Given how controversial his views were, it’s entirely possible his views were the focus of debate in his social circles (near or far, friends or family, church, or other groups).

We can’t assume that this author first introduced his text to his local congregation. As it stands, ancient forgeries could surface in a variety of locations and ways. Our author could have sent his gospel under false pretenses to one or more individuals able to copy it in a distant city, perhaps claiming he found it in a library or was given it as a gift (see the case of Salvian and Timothei ad Ecclesiam). Or he could have deposited his text in a literary collection or library and waited for it to be discovered (this is probably how the false letters of Plato first emerged).

What does seem clear is that our author envisioned a primarily gentile audience for his work, at least at first. Why else would he feel a need to explain to his readers that “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans” (4:9)? And why else would he gloss “the Passover” as a “festival of the Jews” (6:4)? And yet, he probably assumed his text would circulate even beyond this audience, through secondary copying and sharing. Mark, a template for his project, was already in wide circulation, as were Matthew and Luke. To ensure his gospel would compete with these gospels—none of which claims to have been written by an eyewitness (see, e.g., Luke 1:1-3)—our author presented his text as the
memoir of a disciple of Jesus.

The author’s strategy worked. Ancient readers bought the idea that the “disciple whom Jesus loved” was a real person, and the text became popular with a growing number of readers.

Stage 2: The Epistles

As it turns out, the text’s popularity had an unintended—if unsurprising—consequence. Once people began accepting the eyewitness disciple of John as a real if unknown person, he became a viable mask for other forgers. Again, literary forgery was rampant in this period. Writers wanting to advance their views often co-opted the identities of Jesus’ earliest followers and wrote letters in their names. And so, we find letters falsely written under Peter’s name (2 Peter, Gospel of Peter, Apocalypse of Peter), Thomas’ name (Gospel of Thomas), Paul’s name (e.g., 1 Timothy). It was only a matter of time before forgers turned their attention to the invented eyewitness of John.

Enter 1, 2, and 3 John.

Some scholars (including Bart) think these texts were written by the same author. I suspect there’s more than one author here, but it’s hard to tell since the texts are so short. What is clear is that the author(s) lived in communities that were hotly debating an important question—namely, whether Jesus had actually “come in the flesh” (1 John 4:2; 2 John 1:7). We know from other writers (e.g., Ignatius) that many Christian churches of the period were being torn apart by this issue. It seems the author(s) of 1, 2, and 3 John decided the best way to intervene was to falsify a letter by the eyewitness disciple of John settling the matter once and for all. Who better than an eyewitness to Jesus’ life, who “touched him with [his] hands,” to verify that he was indeed flesh? In these texts, that eyewitness warns his audience—to beware of anyone who claims that Jesus did not come in the flesh.

The subtle differences between these the Gospel and Epistles confirm they were written by different hands. They also suggest that these texts were written in different locations or settings. Nevertheless, by imitating the Gospel’s style and language as closely as possible, the texts convinced readers they were by the same author, at least eventually (as we saw, 2 and 3 John were a tougher sell, perhaps because they were written much later).

Not a “community”

So who were the Johannine authors? They were a chain of forgers, no more closely related than the various pens who composed Colossians, Ephesians, the Pastoral epistles, the letters of Paul and Seneca, 3 Corinthians, and the letter to the Laodiceans.

It doesn’t make sense to call them a “community,” “circle,” or “school”—language that suggests interpersonal relationships or the authorization to write. Since they concealed their identities, these authors probably never met, or never met as such.

So no, I don’t think a single, close-knit “Johannine Community” existed. But this doesn’t have to be the end of the “contextual method” in Johannine studies. It can be the beginning
of a new, more productive use of the method...

...a search for the multiple Johannine authors and their elusive contexts (plural).

Did Judas Really Betray Jesus? Readers’ Mailbag
Problems with Thinking the “Letters of John” in the NT are Forgeries? Guest Post: Hugo Mendez