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On Biblical Forgeries and Imagined Communities—A Critical Analysis of Recent Criticism

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The Bible and Interpretation

News and Interpretations on the Bible and Ancient Near East History.

“On Biblical Forgeries and Imagined Communities—A Critical Analysis of Recent Criticism”

A Response to “Everyone’s Favorite Gospel Is a Forgery
(<https://www.thedailybeast.com/everyones-favorite-gospel-the-gospel-of-john-is-a-forgery-according-to-new-research?ref=scroll>.)”

The alarm sounded by Professor Moss may shock lay readers of John, but for those working in the field, these issues are no surprise. It is fair to say that there may be more disagreement over the five Johannine writings (the Gospel, Epistles, and Apocalypse of John) than any other sector of the New Testament.

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Several weeks ago, I was contacted by several biblical scholars, asking what I thought of the article by Hugo Méndez in the *Journal of New Testament Studies*,^[1] as well as its treatment in the *Daily Beast* by the leading religion commentator, Candida Moss.^[2] I like and respect Professors Moss and Méndez, so I was of course interested in the issues they were engaging. I also had lunch with Bart Ehrman in Marburg last August, at the international Society of New Testament Studies meetings, so I was curious to see what Hugo might have done with Bart’s work on early Christian pseudepigraphal (false-authorship) writings.^[3] As Johannine scholarship has been a lifelong pursuit for me,

keeping up on the latest is always of interest.[4] I then received an invitation by Mark Elliott, editor of *Bible and Interpretation*, to write a response. I said I was tempted but was facing a few other deadlines. When he later shared that he was hoping I might yield to that temptation, I agreed to write a response, so here it is.

On one hand, the alarm sounded by Professor Moss may shock lay readers of John, but for those working in the field, these issues are no surprise. It is fair to say that there may be more disagreement over the five Johannine writings (the Gospel, Epistles, and Apocalypse of John) than any other sector of the New Testament. But this is understandable. Consider, for instance, John's *theological tensions*—the humanity and divinity of Jesus; the Son's equal and subordinate relation to the Father; the Spirit's proceeding from the Father and the Son; tensions over eschatology, miracles, salvation, Judaism, and ecclesiology, to name a few. And, how about John's *historical conundrums*—tensions between the mundane and the transcendent; John's omissions of synoptic material and synoptic omissions of Johannine material; differences in chronology and topography between John and the Synoptics; John's Jesus not speaking in parables, and the synoptic Jesus not uttering "I-am" sayings; John's Jesus (and the Baptist) speaking in the language of the narrator? Further, consider John's *literary perplexities*—the language and poetic form of John 1:1-18 is closer to 1 John 1:1-4 than the rest of the Gospel; sometimes events are announced before they're narrated; Jesus says, "Let us depart" in 14:31, but the disciples don't reach the garden until 18:1; John 20:31 declares the purpose for having written, but chapter 21 appears to have been added later; references to the eyewitness (19:34-35) and the author (21:20-24) appear to be made by another hand. These are just some of John's puzzling riddles that scholars work vigorously to address, to which Professor Moss alludes, and explanations of which Professor Méndez engages.[5]

Connecting a number of literary, historical, and theological issues, Hugo Méndez raises important questions about differing visions of Christianity according to John.[6] Was it one community, or was it several? Was it sectarian, or was it cosmopolitan? Did it even involve a particular community, or is such a product of scholarly imaginations without evidence? Were the Johannine writings produced by one person, or by several, and did any of them possess first-hand memories of Jesus, as some texts claim? And, given

questions about who wrote the Johannine Gospel and Epistles, do questions of authorship imply forged or false authorship claims being at work? These are important subjects, and these essays do well to bring them to our attention. Whether they actually “overturn much of what we know about everyone’s favorite biography of Jesus,” though, might yet be up for grabs. In that sense, the general reader is helped by Professor Moss alerting us to a provocative contribution, which her interview with Professor Harold Attridge reminds us will surely be engaged within the guild.

That being the case, an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of Méndez’s arguments may help elucidate our thinking about such matters, whether or not all of his points are equally compelling. First, though, the tying of pseudepigraphy to anonymity deserves a critical look.

I. Critical Problems with Assuming Pseudepigraphy from Anonymity

As a means of walking into a critique of the last half century of Johannine scholarship’s view of “the Johannine community” (using Raymond Brown’s language), Méndez yokes research into pseudepigraphy with the Johannine riddles related to authorship, composition, and situation, but this combination doesn’t quite work for several reasons.

1. First, *understandings of ancient Jewish and Christian pseudepigraphy do not entirely overlap with the language of “forgery”* as used by Bart Ehrman to address questions of biblical authorship.[7] That language appeals more to sensationalism than it does well to represent the ancient phenomenon of yoking a known authority to one’s writing in order to lend it gravitas. Put otherwise, are all ancient claims to authorship pseudepigraphal; and, should we apply the same measure to all modern claims of authorship? If not the latter, why the former? Indeed, the writings attributed to John are among the most contested of biblical texts, and ways of addressing the Johannine riddles are numerous.[8] However, applying parallels of Gnostic pseudepigraphy as a panacea for explaining John’s distinctiveness over and against the Synoptics and differences between the Johannine writings doesn’t quite work. The mid-second century Gospels of Peter, Thomas, Philip, Judas, and Mary certainly qualify as pseudepigrapha,

but they likely built on the authority of canonical Gospels rather than other way around. Jewish pseudepigraphal writings abounded in the intertestamental era, but the canonical gospels and epistles are more like each other than noncanonical texts. John's authorship issues are also different from those related to writings attributed to Paul and Peter.

In particular, in contrast to the Pastoral Letters attributed to Paul and 2 Peter, the Johannine Gospel and Epistles don't actually claim a named author. The Beloved Disciple is not named, even though he is attributed authorship after his apparent death by the compiler (John 21:20-24), and the Elder's name is not given (2 John 1; 3 John 1). Revelation claims authorship by "John" four times (Revelation 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), and these could be thus investigated as pseudepigraphal references, but neither John the Apostle nor John the Elder is directly claimed as an author within the four texts targeted by Méndez. Names were connected with the writings later, by others, but not by the gospel or epistle writers, themselves. Thus, they can be questioned, but they cannot be considered "pseudepigraphal" in the same ways the second-century Gnostic gospels are, as no proper names are claimed within the documents themselves. If authors or editors wanted to make explicit name-claims in the texts—for themselves or for others—they could have done so, but they did not. Nonetheless, identifying oneself as an author (2 John and 3 John) or attributing authorship to another (the compiler's claim that someone else authored the Gospel) does not in itself discredit authorial claims as a forgery, either in ancient or modern times.

2. Second, *the two critical bases claimed by Méndez for his judgments thus deserve critical appraisal*, as their appropriation for judging ancient documents is profoundly questionable. In Méndez's view (345):

My argument is simple: if all four Johannine works fall into a single literary lineage, and if false authorial claims pervade that lineage, then it is not safe to reconstruct a Johannine community from these texts.

On the first basis for his judgment, *claiming inauthenticity on the basis of similarity* between the Johannine writings runs in the opposite direction as those who have questioned their authorship over the years. In 1820, Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider wrote a provocative work (in Latin—especially for scholars) challenging the common authorship of the Johannine writings based upon their differences.[9] He called John “the concocted Gospel,” and distanced its highly interpretive presentation of Jesus from historical memory. Differences with Apocalypse, of course, make common authorship more problematic, and an apostle would not have called himself “the Elder,” in his view. In more recent scholarship, Judith Lieu and Udo Schnelle have also distinguished the authors of the Johannine Gospel and Epistles on the basis of their differences,[10] but Méndez argues for inauthentic authorship on exactly the opposite criteria. Thus, claiming disparities of authorship on the basis of the writings’ *similarities*—reflecting their imitating each other demonstrates their authorial incompatibility—is the opposite of views challenging authorial coherence over the last couple of centuries. Both approaches cannot be right.

Méndez rightly shows a number of verbal and thematic similarities between 1 John and the Fourth Gospel, as well as similarities between 1 John and 2 John, and some (though fewer) with 3 John, but these similarities are not necessarily indicative of authorial alterity. They do suggest that the Epistles echo the Gospel, and each other, but does that betray their authorial inauthenticity? And, do the questioned writings attributed to Paul serve as proof of Johannine non-authorship? The fact that Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians (and especially the Pastoral Epistles) are made to sound like Paul’s unquestioned writings proves that they are “deutero-Pauline” forgeries, according to some critical scholars. Paul would not have written letters that sound like himself, while diverging in some other ways, so these scholars claim. Others, though, might see differences as factors of addressing different audiences with differing needs. Therefore, the similarities between these four Johannine-attributed writings proves they cannot have been written by the same person, and certainly not from the same sector or community within early Christianity, so the argument goes. However, is this measure critically compelling? Not all scholars would agree. Rather, doubting earlier views of authorship seems to assume a given answer, whatever the evidence might be, diminishing the perceived objectivity of the inquiry.

The second problem with criteria for determining inauthenticity by Méndez regarding Johannine “false authorial claims” is the fact that *the author of Fourth Gospel is not named*. He (or she) is simply referred to in a third-person way as “the disciple Jesus loved.” Nor is John the Apostle mentioned in the Gospel attributed to him (although “those of Zebedee” are mentioned in John 21:2). Thus, he cannot have been the author, so critics claim. And, because the author of 2 John and 3 John calls himself “the Elder,” that seems to be a different person than the Beloved Disciple. Since eyewitness and first-hand memory claims are made in John 19:34-35; 21:20-24; and 1 John 1:1-3, this proves that none of these writers can have been an eye-witnesses, assuming pseudepigraphy. They’re simply being purported by others or self-proclaimed to have been first-hand witnesses to the ministry of Jesus, so that proves their claims are forged. Thus, if the first-hand witness claims of in the Johannine Gospel and first Epistle are specious, the claims of second and third John to have been written by “the Elder” must also have been false. Pointedly, since claiming to have been in contact with Jesus is mentioned only in the Johannine writings, this is evidence of a pseudepigraphal (false-author) forgery designed to bolster the authority of the writings, and nothing more. The fact that this feature was used in the middle-to-late second century by Gnostic writers proves that the writings attributed to John (either the Apostle or the Elder) are also forgeries, according to Méndez. One doubts, however, that all critical scholars would agree.

3. Third, *the false authorship claims of later pseudepigraphal writings are really quite different from Johannine authorship problems*. More likely is that later pseudepigraphers followed first century associations of earlier texts with apostolic figures and their companions. Of course, Jewish pseudepigraphal writings were in abundance before this time, but the canonical writings were all associated closely enough with the apostolic and sub-apostolic generations that they were felt to be authoritative, if not authentic. [11] Later canonical debates over whether to include the Pastoral Letters and Second and Third John had to do primarily with whether letters to individuals should be included for all readers. Good point, though; they were finally included on the basis of apostolic associations, whether or not they were written by Paul or by John. Nonetheless, although the authorship of Johannine writings was questioned in the

second and third centuries, debating whether they were written by John the Apostle or John the Elder, they were never alleged to have been pseudepigraphal. Those disparaging the Johannine Apocalypse (due to speculative interpretations) in the middle second century were accused of being *Alogoi* (illogical, or worse, denying the *Logos* of the Johannine Gospel), but pseudepigraphy was not the charge. Not being Johannine enough was. Conversely, the middle-to-late second-century apocryphal writings were clearly deemed such, from the beginning.

A further fallacy, however, involves assuming that *Johannine anonymity negates the possibility of John the Apostle having anything to do with the Johannine tradition*. After all, “the mother of Jesus” is also left anonymous in the Fourth Gospel (John 2:1, 3; 19:25), but does this prove or imply that she cannot have been Mary? If anonymity in John proves a person cannot have been the traditionally associated figure, one must also infer that “the mother of Jesus” in John cannot have been Mary, wife of Joseph. Interestingly, Méndez does not make this move. However, if the non-named mother of Jesus provides a clue to the non-named disciple Jesus loved, other factors might be instructive. First, everyone knew who she was—Mary. Second, she was highly respected and revered—the mother of the Lord. Third, there were other “Marys” in the tradition (Mary wife of Cleopas, Mary sister of Lazarus, Mary Magdalene), so, rather than having to clarify “which Mary” was being alluded to, an anonymous reference was serviceable for practical reasons.

If these mundane and practical bases for Johannine anonymity are applied to “the Beloved Disciple,” rather than distancing the son of Zebedee from the list of options, they might actually bolster his being the understood association. Given that the sons of Zebedee have been directly referenced some twenty verses earlier, and that everyone knew who John the Apostle was, the connection may have been simply understood. Second, especially if he has recently died, he is remembered within Johannine Christianity as perhaps the last of the living Apostles—the dearly beloved follower of Jesus—who was remembered as having a close relationship with Jesus (corroborated by his being one of the three insiders in the Synoptics: Peter, James, and John). Third, there were several other Johns in the narrative (and in the situation): John the baptizer, Simon son of John, John the Elder. Therefore, “the Beloved Disciple” was arguably a means of

both referencing the patriarchal leader within Johannine Christianity, whatever its features or configuration might have been. It also served to distinguish that John from John the Elder, who served as a presbyter-leader within Johannine Christianity, traditionally understood to be the disciple of John the Apostle. Given these likelihoods, inferring Johannine pseudepigraphy from Johannine anonymity or authorship attribution is critically unwarranted.

As Harry Attridge points out, the restless quest for the Beloved Disciple is certainly fraught with perplexities, but so is the relentless disparagement of John the Apostle and John the Elder, seeking to address a number of the perplexing Johannine riddles by assuming whom a Johannine author cannot have been.[12] In the light of these facts, the thesis of Méndez may be entirely correct—that there was no actual Johannine community whence the Johannine writings emerged—but the bases for his arguments are terribly flawed both in terms of critical rationale and compelling evidence. Nonetheless, Professor Méndez does address several inadequacies of Johannine community theories over the last several decades, which I and others have also addressed[13]—not that all Johannine scholars have a singular view—so let me affirm his critique, noting what I believe to be strengths and weaknesses of his arguments.

II. Strengths of Méndez's Argument

Despite the inadequacy of the bases for determining ancient and contemporary pseudepigraphy as argued by Méndez, his argument does have several strengths to it.

1. First, Méndez does well in *questioning the view that there was only a singular Johannine community responsible for the Johannine Gospel and Epistles*. I think this is the main value of his essay, and I agree overall. Raymond Brown did give us a fresh window offering new perspectives on early Christianity, suggesting that the Johannine community might have been the smaller, fledgling group of believers, following a church split (1 John 2:18-25), rather than a majority or dominant group in the area. The evidence seems stronger to infer that there were likely several communities of believers in the area (and Brown would have agreed). Thus, the views of Wayne Meeks and John Ashton,

associating the community of the Beloved Disciple with Qumranian sectarianism are probably unrealistic within a Diaspora setting.[14] If anything, I would see Johannine Christianity as *cosmopolitan* rather than sectarian. One can only imagine how trying to retain core elements of Jewish faith and practice within Greco-Roman society was one of the main tensions within John's community, especially if the schismatics were being drawn back into the local synagogue.[15] Thus, a critique of the single-community Johannine paradigm is worthy; things were more variegated in this third-generation Jesus-movement situation, deserving a fresh analysis.[16] This is some of the work that Méndez helps us do.

2. Second, *Richard Bauckham's critique of Gospels written for particular communities is worth taking to heart*. His argument that the Gospels were at least finalized and circulated for all Christians (not just local settings) is compelling overall, and Méndez takes that thesis seriously. That being the case, Bauckham's seeing John's story of Jesus as originally having been crafted for hearers and readers of Mark makes a good deal of sense. Along these lines, the monograph of Ian Mackay actually changed my judgment on John's independence.[17] While I still agree with Moody Smith, Rudolf Bultmann, and C. H. Dodd, that John's story of Jesus is not dependent on Mark or the other Synoptics for its content, it is better described as *autonomous* rather than independent. With and against P. Gardner-Smith, John's presentation of Jesus in his ministry seems to depart from Mark at nearly every turn; but this, in my view, suggests John's familiarity with Mark, rather than ignorance of it.[18] John thus provides an alternative story of Jesus designed to augment, and, to some degree set the record straight, alongside Mark's. I see the first edition of John as the second gospel, though it was likely finalized last. Nonetheless, as does Mark, the Johannine Gospel translates Aramaic and terms into Greek and explains Jewish customs for a Hellenistic audience. So, even if not written narrowly *for* a community, it was indeed written *from* a community, reflecting both Jewish and Gentile grounded interests.[19]

3. A third strength of the approach taken by Méndez *challenges the view of Martyn that a narrowly single community concern involved tensions with the local Jewish leaders* resulting from synagogue expulsion and feelings of disparagement by Jewish family and Friends. Yes, tensions with local Jewish communities in Asia Minor or elsewhere were real, but

they were not the only socio-religious issues faced by Johannine Jesus adherents. Within an earlier pre-70 CE Palestinian context, tensions are apparent with Judean religious leaders and followers of John the Baptist (with Brown). Following the move to a Diaspora setting, in addition to Jewish-Johannine dialectics, tensions with the local Roman presence, with docetizing traveling ministers, and with proto-Ignatian Christian leaders like Diotrefes are also apparent. In fact, one of the reasons C. K. Barrett opposed the Johannine-community hypothesis is that he felt the most acute set of situational tensions were coming from hierarchical bishops such as Diotrefes in 3 John 9-10 (with von Harnack and Käsemann), rather than with local Jewish leaders. Again, while tensions with local Jewish leaders in Asia Minor or elsewhere were likely real, they were in no way the *only* centrifugal battles faced by Johannine believers. John's situation was far more dialectical than a monofaceted imagining of Martyn's synagogue-only paradigm would suggest. If tensions with other synoptic traditions were also taken into consideration from the earliest to the latest stages of the Johannine tradition are to be considered, I find evidence for at least seven crises over seven decades within Johannine Christianity, not merely one. So, on these matters, the work of Méndez is well received.

III. Weaknesses of Méndez's Argument

Despite the merits of Méndez's critiques of a narrow Johannine community paradigm, however, his analysis also suffers from several weaknesses.

1. First, a severe weakness with claiming to overturn a half century of Johannine scholarship by Méndez is his claim that *John's "disguised authorship is a core and consistent feature of the Johannine corpus—one that contaminates its entire witness to a 'Johannine community'"* (360). This line of reasoning actually goes against the most plausible alternative to traditional views of authorship. If, for instance, the Gospels of Matthew and John were not written by apostles, at least they were produced by leaders within Jesus-adherent communities. While Mark has gathered an amalgam of preaching material about Jesus, and Luke constructs a virtuous presentation of Jesus for

Theophilus, Matthew and John convey teachings related to such community issues as welcoming outsiders and appeals to love one another—community concerns—whoever their tradents, narrators, and editors might have been.

First published in 1954, Krister Stendahl's monograph on "the school of St. Matthew"[20] argued that the *Sitz im Leben* from which the Gospel of Matthew was produced shows signs of crafting passages from Jewish Scripture for training in Christian discipleship. This implies a school or community of believers, engaging Jewish audiences, seeking to witness to their belief that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. This is especially important if the authorship of Matthew is a question. The greatest problem with the First Gospel being attributed to an eyewitness and apostle, Matthew, is that it follows Mark so closely. Over 90% of Mark is included in Matthew, much of it word for word.

Thus, if Matthew was not written by an apostle, and the evidence seems against it, at least it was produced by a rabbi, or a Christian leader of a community, seeking convey the story and teachings of Jesus to other believers in ways that inform and inspire the making of disciples. If Matthew's authorship is questioned, though, does this prove there was no Matthean community, either in Jerusalem before 70 CE—echoing the Epistle of James, or in Antioch—connected with the later ministry of Ignatius? Does questioning Matthew's authorship prove there was never a communal situation, whence the Matthean didactic material emerged? No, the converse is more plausible, critically. Even if the particulars of authorship are questioned, at least we have a gospel that emerged within a communal situation, wherein teachings about Jesus—supported by Scripture-fulfillment texts—shows at least something about the communal Matthean situation.

Likewise, the monograph of R. Alan Culpepper on "the Johannine school" builds upon the examples of a number of Hellenistic and Jewish schools a robust case for something similar within Johannine Christianity.[21] Given questions about who the Johannine evangelist might have been, as well as differences with the Epistles, a more plausible theory over and against a single author being responsible for the Johannine writings is

the thesis that several leaders within Johannine Christianity were involved in writing and editing—thus a communal approach to understanding the development and production of the Johannine writings. At this point, hypothesizing at least one Johannine community (although there were likely several within the larger situation) is more empirically attested than a Matthean community, as the Gospel is accompanied by the three Epistles, and more distantly, the Johannine Apocalypse.

Given the fact that neither the Johannine Gospel nor the Epistles claims a name, though, this diminishes the likelihood that they were forged. Further, to imagine that multiple forgeries were conducted by different persons not involved in a particular community—nor writing to or for intended audiences—stretches imaginations beyond the breaking point. If traditional views of authorship fail to convince, inferring corporate situations (communities) in which leaders taught, and whose teachings and ministries were recorded in written form by themselves and others, still seems like the most compelling alternative view. Put otherwise, even if these gospels were not written by apostolic figures, the most plausible alternative is assuming that they were written by other leaders within their communities of faith, not that they were written as forgeries by persons in isolation, disengaged from communities of faith, consumed only by texts and not interested in other individuals or groups. There were likely very few Jesus adherents in the late first century CE that were totally isolated from other believers; such is a fiction and critically implausible.

2. A second weakness with the argument of Méndez is that it *fails to take seriously the multivalent features of the Johannine community in Raymond Brown's paradigm in dismissing it*. Brown, of course, said he would be happy if 60% of his views were found acceptable to scholars; does Méndez disagree with all of them? To argue that there were no Johannine believers, or that there were no communities of Jesus adherents from which, to which, and for which these writings were produced, is unimaginable. If there were no persons involved, why would a gospel narrative and three epistles be written? Ambiguity regarding the particulars of audiences and authors is one thing; claiming that authors and audiences are fictions in order to further pseudepigraphal speculation is another. Even pseudepigraphal writings had authors, communities, and audiences in play; such realities motivated their work. So, even if it were demonstrated that the

Johannine Epistles were clearly pseudepigraphal—which I believe falls far short of compelling, critically—questions of the community, situation, and rhetorical interests of the pseudepigrapher(s) remain.

The difficulty, though, of saying there was no group of people within the larger Johannine situation, is exacerbated by the fact of communal language in 1 John:

- “We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us...we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.” (NRSV 1:3-4)
- “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.” (2:1)
- “They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us.” (2:19)
- “We should love one another..., and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (3:11, 16-17)
- “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world.” (4:1-3)
- “Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.” (v. 4)
- “They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” (vv. 5-6)
- “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” (4:20)
- “If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one—to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin

that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that.... Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” (5:16, 21)

These direct-audience references make it impossible to assume that the first Johannine epistle was not written as a circular to the churches and communities in the region, as most Johannine scholars—traditional and critical alike—have rightly assumed. Why fabricate audience references if this letter did not have an audience or set of audiences in mind? Even if first-person plural language were co-opted by an interloper, this would not discount the likelihood of that person’s community involvement. Likewise problematic are the assumptions that 2 John was not written to a community (“the chosen lady and her children”) from a community (“the children of your elect sister send you their greetings”), and that 3 John was not written to an individual (Gaius) by a church leader (“the Elder”). Whether “the Elder” is the author of these epistles or someone claiming to be the author, the distinction is without a difference. It was probably written by a church leader, whoever he or she might have been, either in reality or in aspiration. Note these context-particular references in 2 John:

- “The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth, and not only I but also all who know the truth, because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever: Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, in truth and love.” (vv. 1-3)
- “I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father.” (v. 5)
- “But now, dear lady, I ask you...let us love one another.” (v. 6)
- “Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist!” (v. 7)
- “Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching; for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person.” (vv. 10-11)
- “Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink; instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete. The children of your elect sister send you their greetings.” (vv. 12-13)

Thus, I side with Lieu and all the other authors in the state-of-the-art collection of essays on the contested Johannine situation.[22] These letters suggest a number of grounded, community engagements—rather than none—so the question is what they might have been like, not whether they existed. Further, consider the even more blatantly contextual issues referenced in the Elder’s letter to Gaius in 3 John:

- “The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.” (v. 1)
- “Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul. I was overjoyed when some of the friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely how you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth.” (vv. 2-4)
- “Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth.” (vv. 5-8)
- “I have written something to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority.” (v. 9)
- “So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing in spreading false charges against us. And not content with those charges, he refuses to welcome the friends, and even prevents those who want to do so and expels them from the church.” (v. 10)
- “Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.” (v. 11)
- “Everyone has testified favorably about Demetrius, and so has the truth itself. We also testify for him, and you know that our testimony is true.” (v. 12)
- “I have much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink; instead I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face.” (vv. 13-14)
- “Peace to you. The friends send you their greetings. Greet the friends there, each by name.” (v. 15)

There is virtually nothing in the second and third Johannine Epistles that is not addressed directly to particular, known, contextual issues faced by the addressees, filling them in also on what the author has been dealing with, in his own context. These represent community realities, factually. Claim it is totally fictive, but even if the authorial claims were inauthentic, or “forged,” they would have also been rooted in a situational context from which pseudepigraphal claims were made. So, claiming “the Elder” was not who he or she claimed to be offers no real advance for interpreting the content of the Johannine Epistles. The identity and communal context of the inferred pseudepigrapher would thus need to be investigated, based upon the same evidence. Thus, the clues as to what that person’s or persons’ situation or situations would have been like depend largely, if not entirely, on the contextual references in the Johannine Epistles, themselves. Likewise, the corporate references in the Johannine Gospel, echoed also in the Epistles, corroborate such corporate realities.

- Followers of Jesus testify to what they have seen and heard (John 1:14; 4:42; 15:27 20:18, 25; 21:24; 1 John 1:1-3; 4:14; 3 John 12)
- The commandment to “love one another” is the culminative appeal of Jesus to his followers (John 13:34-35; 15:12, 17; 1 John 3:11-23; 4:7-12; 2 John 5)
- They attest that his/their testimony is true (John 3:32-33; 19:34-35; 21:24; 3 John 12)
- Followers of Jesus confess that they have believed (John 6:69; 16:30; 1 John 3:23; 4:16)
- While some of his followers depart and abandon fellowship (John 6:66; 1 John 2:19), Jesus prays that his followers would be one (John 17:11, 21-23), and he invites them to abide with him and his fellowship (John 1:39; 6:56; 11:54; 15:4-10; 21:22-23; 1 John 2:6, 14, 24-28; 4:13-16; 2 John 9)

Therefore, not only are communal features replete throughout the Johannine Epistles; they are also shared between the Gospel and the Epistles. This is a literary fact. So, while one might question (and rightly so) the view that only a single community was in play—not that this was ever Brown’s view—claiming that all contextual issues were forged, as well as the authorial claims of 2 and 3 John, is as unfathomable as it is inconsequential for critical scholarship. Add the fact that the Johannine Apocalypse—whoever its author

might have been—is addressed to seven church communities in Asia Minor (Revelation 2-3—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea), and claiming there was no Johannine community rings as hollow as it is unimaginable.

3. A third weakness with the thesis that there is no historical evidence of Johannine leaders having lived or ministered within Johannine Christianity (and thus, communities of faith) in didactic or written form is the fact that *the near entirety of early Christian memories pervasively attests to the opposite*. One could claim that the near-unanimous associations of John the Apostle and John the Elder with Ephesus and the churches of Asia Minor from the second through fourth centuries are false. One cannot claim that they did not exist. Put bluntly, there is no sector of post-70 CE Christianity that is more broadly attested over the next three centuries, in the entirety of ancient literature, than that Johannine Christianity was centered in Asia Minor, which must have involved communities of faith and leaders within them. In addition to second- and third- century witnesses, note the references to John the Apostle (also referenced as the disciple) and John the Elder (or the Presbyter) by Eusebius, who wrote the most authoritative history of the early church (ca. 325 CE). Even if Eusebius was wrong, claiming that neither of these two leaders named “John” had anything to say or write, despite numerous witnesses from the second century forward, goes against virtually all of the earliest Christian memories. Here is a digest of what Eusebius says about John the Apostle/Disciple/Evangelist and John the Elder/Presbyter.[23]

- Citing Clement, after the ascension of Jesus, Peter, James and *John* [the Apostle] did not claim preeminence in church leadership, but they chose James the brother of Jesus to be the head of the Jerusalem church (*Hist. Eccles.* 2.1). Paul had even referenced James, Kephas, and John (Gal. 2:9) as pillars of the church.
- After the destruction of Jerusalem and Palestine by the Romans (66–70 CE), apostles and disciples of Jesus were assigned to different sectors of the Christian movement, and *John* [the Apostle] was assigned to Asia, where he remained until his death at Ephesus (*Hist. Eccles.* 3.1).
- During the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE), John the apostle and evangelist was sentenced to confinement on the island of Patmos, where he wrote the Apocalypse (according to Irenaeus, *Hist. Eccles.* 3.18, 21), and he returned to Ephesus after the death of Domitian.

- John [the Apostle] remained at Ephesus until Trajan's time (98 CE), as a true witness of what the apostles taught; and stories developed about his pastoral care, loving concern for the flock, the challenging of heretics such as Cerinthus, and his raising of a dead man at Ephesus (*Hist. Eccles.* 3.23, 29; 4.14; 5.18).
- As the Gospels of Matthew and John [the Apostle] were alone considered memoirs of the ministry of Jesus, John's Gospel had the benefit of the other three, complementing the others by including reports of the early ministry of Jesus (the events *before* John had been thrown into prison, versus Mark 1:14; John 3:23-24), by providing an alternative to the single-year-of-ministry presentation of the Synoptics, and by converting oral tradition into a written one. Whereas Matthew and Luke had produced human genealogies of Jesus, John produced the spiritual (pre-existent) genealogy of Jesus as the greatest of the four Gospels (*Hist. Eccles.* 3.24).
- From Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, John [the Apostle] is said to be the one who leaned against the Lord's breast. He also argues that John became a sacrificing priest, a witness and a teacher, and he also refers to him as sleeping (buried) in Ephesus (*Hist. Eccles.* 3.31; 5.24).
- From Papias' five volumes (*The Sayings of the Lord Explained*), he claims to have listened to John and to have been a companion of Polycarp. Papias lists John the apostle and John the presbyter as disciples of the Lord (*Hist. Eccles.* 3.39), explaining also that this testimony addressed the fact that the two tombs in Ephesus bearing the same name belonged to different persons: John the disciple and John the presbyter—the latter of which is claimed to have been his personal tutor. Papias also claims to have reproduced the teachings of both in his writings, although these are unavailable (*Hist. Eccles.* 3.39).
- According to the presbyter John, Mark, who had never heard or met Jesus, served as Peter's interpreter, writing down Peter's stories, but not in the correct order. Peter had adapted his teaching according to the needs of the church without making a systematic ordering of them, so Mark was justified in preserving everything he had heard and representing it faithfully as he had received it, taking care to not leave anything out (*Hist. Eccles.* 3.39).
- Irenaeus claims personal contact with Polycarp, who claims to have had personal contact with the Apostle John and others who had seen the Lord, and Polycarp is reported to have recited their words about the Lord, his teachings and miracles, and things that had been heard from "eyewitnesses of the Word of Life" (*Hist. Eccles.* 5.20). Irenaeus also declares that the Johannine teachings of Polycarp were "in

complete harmony in Scripture,” and he comments with appreciation on the Presbyter’s having written to neighboring churches and individual Christians, implying authorship of the Johannine Epistles.

- The authority of John [the Apostle] who leaned against the breast of the Lord is garnered as one of the leading bishops of Asia (according to Polycrates’ letter to Victor and the Roman church) with reference to keeping the 14th of Nissan as the beginning of the Paschal festival (the churches of Asia Minor had begun to celebrate Easter on the 14th of Nissan regardless of the day of the week; see John 12:1, 12). Upon citing the Petrine logion of Acts 4:19 and 5:29, however (“We must obey God rather than men’), Victor of Rome responded by attempting to cut off all the bishops of Asia Minor (*Hist. Eccles.* 5:24).

From this overview of Eusebius, it is clear that John the Apostle was associated with the Beloved Disciple, who leaned against the breast of Jesus, so the anonymity of the Beloved Disciple certainly did not lead Papias, Polycarp, Polycrates, and others to think that his name was forged. Moreover, traditions claimed that John the Apostle was the mentor of John the Elder, Papias, and Polycarp, although the particulars are contested in each case. Note that Irenaeus affirms John’s leadership and authorship and asserts that John the Elder wrote to churches in the area. This could have referenced his having written the Epistles, and Eusebius thought he might have written the Apocalypse. While critical scholars have made an industry of challenging the above historical records as well as all of the other traditional claims to Johannine leadership and authorship, it cannot be said that there is no historical record of who the Johannine evangelist and author of the epistles might have been. More accurate would be the statement that despite near unanimous attestation that two leaders named John—the Disciple/Apostle/Evangelist and the Elder/Presbyter—were Christian leaders, who were buried in Ephesus, Méndez believes they were not. Rather, he believes that the identities of John Apostle and John the Elder were forged, assuming they performed no public ministry that made it into written form, either by themselves or others. Or, if they did have public ministries, they were in no way connected with the writings attributed to their memory in the near entirety of early Christianity.

That claim may be true, but demonstrating its veracity falls flat. For one thing, when you visit Ephesus, the great Basilica of Saint John, built by Justinian in the sixth century (548-565 CE) celebrates the historic memory of John's leadership in that setting. The huge church was built over the fourth century edifice built by Theodosius, and in both constructions, the altar rests over the tomb of Saint John and three others, attesting the second century memories of the two Johns buried there. The third Ecumenical Council was also held at Ephesus in 431 CE, as the site celebrated the memory of John's leadership there, so it cannot be said that there is no historical memory of either the Johannine Apostle or the Johannine Elder. According to J. B. Lightfoot's recently discovered commentary on John and his other essays on internal and external evidences of John's apostolic authorship, he asserts that the direct or indirect memory of ten sectors of the early Christian movement unanimously affirm John's apostolic authorship: [24]

1. The Churches of Asia Minor (including 4 or 5 Elders, Polycarp, Ignatius, Papias, Melito, Claudius Apollinaris, Polycrates of Ephesus, Montanus and his followers)
2. The Churches of Gaul
3. The Church of Antioch (Ignatius, Theophilus)
4. The Churches of Palestine (Justin Martyr, Tatian)
5. The Church of Alexandria (Epistle of Barnabas, Clement of Alexandria)
6. The Churches of Greece and Macedonia (Dionysius, Athenagoras)
7. The Church of Rome (the Shepherd of Hermas, Muratorian Canon—problems with its dating, of course)
8. The Churches of Africa (Tertullian and others)
9. The Churches of Syria
10. The Testimony of Heretical Writers (Simon Magnus, Naassenes, Peratae, Ophites, Justinus, Pistis Sophia, Basilides, Valentinus—two schools, Marcion, Docetae, Judaizing Christians, Clementine Homilies, Ebionites, *Alogoi*)

Again, Lightfoot may be wrong, but demonstrating so is another matter. His newly published commentary requires renewed critical attention, as he was undoubtedly the leading expert on early Christianity a century ago. Thus, Eusebius and the entirety of early Christianity may also be wrong, and neither John the Apostle nor John the Elder may have done any preaching, teaching, writing, or editing during their decades of service in Asia Minor. However, despite the facts that legends arose around these figures, especially John the Apostle,[25] this does that prove that all of their attributed

writings were forgeries? If so, who was or were the forger or forgers? Were they also devoid of communal relationships? If not, what was/were the community/ies of “the beloved forger/s” like? Do we have empirical ancient historical evidence of forgers with no communities? If not, claims of forgery and absence of a Johannine community pale even further.

While the thrust of Méndez’s argument has some strengths to it, its weaknesses make it hard to accept critically, overall. Good points in challenging the view that Johannine Christianity involved a singular sectarian community to which the Gospel was written, in dialogue exclusively with the local Jewish synagogue. Things were far more variable and dialectical than that, and I would say that Johannine Christianity involved several communities that were *cosmopolitan*—not sectarian—engaging several crises over several decades, from which the Johannine witness to the churches was launched. However, the claims that there is no historical basis for identifying the Johannine tradent and compiler, that the Epistles reflect no community settings or interests, and that questioning the authorship of the Gospel proves there was no plurality of Johannine leaders within a Johannine school all fall way short, critically. Nonetheless, some of the points made by Méndez are worth building on, and some cohere with my own overall Johannine theory, John’s Dialogical Autonomy.

IV. Elements of a New Overall Johannine Theory: John’s Dialogical Autonomy

While the particulars of Johannine authorship cannot be solved in the present essay, the wisdom of Alan Culpepper stands: it is best to proceed with analyzing the Johannine texts as we have them, whoever the author(s) might have been. And, to this I would add, whoever the author(s) might *not* have been. That being the case, inferring the Johannine situation might be best conducted without narrowing the particulars too closely. This may well be the main value of the essay by Méndez. Defining the Johannine community too narrowly fails to account for the multiplicity of features and issues that surround the Johannine writings within the late first-century situation. Thus, inferring a larger set of relationships and engagements within the dialectical Johannine situation, involving several crises over several decades, and several communities instead of one, is

a more plausible way to proceed. On this primary point, Méndez and I agree. And, in terms of authorship, claiming agnosticism on the particulars may be a safer way to go than asserting particulars of authorship, non-authorship, or even pseudepigraphy.[26]

That being the case, rather than simply review the work engaged, a more constructive note on which to conclude might involve suggesting some of the ways the work of Méndez overlaps with my own understandings of Johannine Christianity as a means of building on previous models while also constructing new paradigms for the future. While the case for each of the following points has been made elsewhere and cannot be laid out here, I agree with Méndez that the Johannine situation (better language, I think) was much broader than a particular community. And, contra Martyn, engagements with the local synagogue would have involved one set of relationships, but not the only one. Further, I see Johannine Christianity as radically Jewish, arguing for the heart of Judaism, as Paul had debated the perimeter.[27] Thus, I see the first edition of John claiming that Jesus was indeed the Jewish Messiah/Christ (the five Signs of Jesus = the five Books of Moses), inviting hearers and readers to believe in his name (John 20:30-31). Tensions with Judean leaders thus reflect the conflict between religion and revelation as an intra-Jewish challenge rather than an inter-faith debate. Having been distanced from local synagogues, some of the departing schismatics (1 John 2:18-25) likely returned to the synagogue, scandalized by Gentile believers and their assimilative idolatry (1 John 4:1-3; 5:21).[28]

Therefore, Johannine Christianity was probably less sectarian than its neighboring Jewish family and friends. This is why Jesus is remembered as praying that the Father will keep his followers in the world but not of the world (John 17). Within this Hellenistic setting, the Roman presence under Domitian increased expectations of Emperor worship, and Jesus adherents who were distanced from the synagogue would undoubtedly have felt pressures to assimilate and to participate in local festivities.[29] This is why the traveling docetizing ministers were problematic. If some Gentile believers traveling in ministry were not convinced that maintaining Jewish standards of faith and practice were all that essential, given that grace was availed by faith—not Jewish works of the Law—they might have been more prone to cultural assimilation than John's Jewish leadership would have affirmed. Indeed, the last verse of 1 John

(5:21) is the first verse, overall: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols!”[30] To engage in emperor worship and idolatrous festivities would have been the death-producing sin (1 John 5:16-18), and claiming to be “without sin” was not a factor of proto-gnostic perfectionism (1 John 1:5-10). Rather, it reflects a contested disagreement between Jewish and Gentile believers as to what was sinful and what was not. The liberties of the traveling ministers might even have offended Jewish community members causing their defection back into the security of Jewish faith and practice.

Finally, tensions with rising institutionalism within the Johannine situation apparently called forth a corrective response in the name a more egalitarian and spirit-based approach to church governance. With Käsemann, Harnack, and others, Johannine Christianity might not have been on the periphery of the Great Church, and that is why it faced an additional set of tensions in the proto-Ignatian era.[31] In fact, the reason C.K. Barrett never really signed onto the Johannine community hypothesis is that he believed that the primary partner in dialogue within the Johannine situation was Diotrephes and his kin.[32] In Harnack’s view, Diotrephes might not have been the first monepiscopal leader in the early church, but he was the first one we know by name.[33] Thus, Barrett saw the Johannine leadership as not only struggling to maintain unity within the community of faith,[34] but also harmony among the churches, as they moved toward rising institutionalism in the late first century situation. In my view, that would explain John’s egalitarian emphasis on women in relation to Jesus and its emphasis on spirit-based and informal ecclesiology. The Johannine witness found itself pushing back against patriarchy and hierarchy in the name of an alternative apostolic memory; thus, “his” and “our” testimony being “true” had a distinctively ideological ring to it. The church of Christ is to be more organic and relational—like the flock is to the shepherd and the branch is to the vine—over and against more petrified alternatives. Luther derived his theology of the priesthood of all believers from John 20:21-23, and this was a part of the Johannine primitivistic thrust even as the fourth among the canonical gospels.

While I imagine there might not be a total overlap between my understanding of Johannine Christianity and that of Méndez, in my judgment and within my overall theory of John’s dialogical autonomy, some of these soundings are as follows.

1. While the identity of the Johannine evangelist and the Beloved Disciple and the Elder remains elusive, the complexities involved do not establish pseudonymity in themselves. Thus, certainties regarding Johannine non-authorship are as critically problematic as inferences of authorship, and perhaps even more so. Anonymity does not imply pseudonymity.

2. With Méndez, similarities between the vocabulary and strophic features of the Johannine Prologue and the first Epistle suggest (in my view) the composing of the Johannine Christ-hymn by the author of the Epistles, who has crafted it around the witness of John the Baptist in John 1:6-8, 15, 19ff. The three verses of the Johannine Christ-hymn developed first as a communal response to hearing the Beloved Disciple's narrations about Jesus and his ministry, and it was added by the compiler as an experientially engaging introduction to John's story of Jesus, as it was prepared for circulation among the churches.[35]

3. If the beginning of John's story of Jesus actually began with the witness of the Baptist (1:6-8, etc.), it can be seen as being developed for reception alongside Mark—not dependent on Mark for its content, but crafted in a complementary and corrective way, for hearers of Mark, being prepared as the second gospel. John's first edition thus augments Mark with two early signs (before Mark 1) and three southern signs (ca. 80-85 CE).36]

4. Whoever wrote the Johannine Epistles, 1 John appears to have been a circular epistle, likely distributed and read (perhaps like Revelation 2-3) among the churches of the region; 2 John appears to be addressed from one church community to another (the Chosen Lady and her children); and 3 John appears written to a church leader (Gaius) regarding Diotrophes, who has excluded traveling Johannine Christians from his church and has threatened to expel any of his own church members who take them in.

5. Following the death of the Beloved Disciple (the Johannine tradent who has paraphrased the teachings and ministry in his own language), the author of the Epistles (the Elder, whoever he was) adds such material as the Christ-hymn (John 1:1-5, 9-14, 16-18), chapters 6, 15-17, 21, and the eyewitness reference of 19:34-35. These passages share a good number of features with the Epistles, ranging from attestations of first-hand witness and veracity, concerns for unity, appeals to love one another, and antidocetic thrusts.

6. Parallel to the Letters of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (90-115 CE), three divisive crises among the churches of Asia Minor—Judaizers, Docetists, and Roman imperial pressures, to which he institutes a monepiscopal and hierarchical system of church governance—are also addressed directly in the Johannine Epistles, and indirectly in the Johannine Gospel and Apocalypse. While Ignatius makes no comment about the Johannine leadership, he demonstrates familiarity with Johannine themes, such as “living water” (John 4:10 and 7:38; Romans 7.2) and the importance of the “flesh and blood” of Jesus (John 6:53-58; Smyrneans 12), reflecting at least some situational similarity.

7. With Méndez, Johannine Christianity cannot be limited to a singular, sectarian community, but rather (in my view), it reflects: dialectical engagements with local Jewish communities; tensions with pagan culture exacerbated by the institution of Roman imperial cult under Domitian (81-96 CE); resulting in disagreements with traveling Gentile docetizing ministers teaching cultural assimilation, legitimated by a non-suffering Jesus; followed by the exclusion of Johannine believers by a local monepiscopal bishop (Diotrephes).

8. The Johannine Gospel is thus finalized and prepared to engage the mainstream Christian movement, forwarding an egalitarian and familial model of church governance, circulated as a primitivistic and corrective response to rising institutionalism and male leadership in the proto-Ignatian situation. That being the case, Peter’s affirming Jesus as the one whose words are alone the source of life, presents him as “returning the keys of the kingdom” back to Jesus, clearing the ground for the leadership of the Holy Spirit, accessible to all believers, not just a hierarchical few.[37]

While the first edition of John augments Mark with five distinctive signs and sets the record straight in a number of ways, the later Johannine material functions to harmonize the Johannine witness with all three of the Synoptics, as the Fourth Gospel is finalized around 100 CE.

The Gospel of John has been described as a stream in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim, and if it indeed is to be seen as “everyone’s favorite biography of Jesus,” the above discussion is bound to turn some waders into swimmers. With appreciation for the good work of Professors Moss, Méndez, and Ehrman, what the present engagement reflects is the conviction that the burden of proof rests on critical scholarship as well as traditional scholarship, and that’s where Second Criticality comes in. Ricoeur’s “second *naïveté*” is not enough, as though critical views are the last word in the reflective dialectic between traditional and critical reasonings. The fact is that critical scholars also disagree with each other (as Méndez illustrates), so it’s not enough to simply see criticism over and against tradition. Critical analysis must also be applied to critical methodologies and inferences, as well as traditional ones.[38] Nonetheless, as the quarter of the New Testament that consists of the Johannine literature is understood more fully, perhaps early Christianity itself will become better known, challenging also our modern and postmodern understandings of the movement. And to that end, I hope this modest response furthers the critical dialogue among colleagues, as we all seek to make sense of those pesky Johannine riddles in our common quests for liberating truth.

[1] Hugo Méndez, “Did the Johannine Community Exist?” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42.3 (2020): 350-74. Published March 2, 2020.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0142064X19890490>

(<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0142064X19890490>)

[2] Candida Moss, “New Research is Poised to Overturn Much of What We Know About Everyone’s Favorite Biography of Jesus.” <https://www.thedailybeast.com/everyones-favorite-gospel-the-gospel-of-john-is-a-forgery-according-to-new-research?ref=scroll> (<https://www.thedailybeast.com/everyones-favorite-gospel-the-gospel-of-john-is-a-forgery-according-to-new-research?ref=scroll>) March 9, 2020.

[3] Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible’s Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

[4] For over a hundred of my published essays and books on the Johannine literature, see my Johannine bibliography as of 2020:

https://www.academia.edu/28983118/Johannine_Bibliography.2020.docx
(https://www.academia.edu/28983118/Johannine_Bibliography.2020.docx)

[5] For thirty-six of these riddles, see Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 25-93.

[6] For an earlier and somewhat forgotten approach to the subject, see W. F. Howard, *Christianity According to St. John* (London: Duckworth, 1943). Interestingly, given that Howard's approach is primarily thematic and text oriented, it bears some similarities to Méndez's approach to interpreting John without claiming to know particulars about the Johannine situation.

[7] Then again, there were many forms of ancient pseudepigraphy; cf. *Splendide Mendax: Rethinking Fakes and Forgeries in Classical, Late Antique, and Early Christian Literature*, Edmund P. Cueva and Javier Martínez, eds. (Groningen: Barkhuis, 2016); Lorenzo DiTommaso, *A Bibliography of Pseudepigrapha Research 1850–1999*, Library of Second Temple Studies 39 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001). And, Bruce Metzger reminds us of honorific authorship attribution (forgeries) among canonical and deuterocanonical texts, being presented in any number of forms (historical narrative, wisdom or poetic collections, letters, apocalypses, etc.): Metzger, "Literary Forgeries and Canonical Pseudepigrapha," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91.1 (1972): 3-24.

[8] See, for instance, Harold W. Attridge, "Genre Bending in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121.1 (2002): 3-21; Paul N. Anderson, "Beyond the Shade of the Oak Tree: Recent Growth in Johannine Studies," *Expository Times* 119.8 (2008): 365–73. On critical analyses of a dozen approaches to solving the Johannine riddles and a new overall Johannine theory (John's Dialogical Autonomy), including the epistemological origins of each of them, see Anderson, *Riddles*, 95-173.

[9] Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider, *Probabilia de Evangelii et Epistolarum Joannis Apostoli indole et origine eruditorium iudiciis modeste subiecit* (Leipzig: J.A. Barth, 1820).

[10] Judith M. Lieu, *The Second and Third Epistles of John: History and Background* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986); Udo Schnelle, *Die Johannesbriefe*, Theologischer Handkommentar Zum Neuen Testament 17 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2010). In my view, differences between the three Johannine Epistles may simply reflect differences of audience and purpose, not differences of authorship. 1 John appears to be crafted for circulation among local churches in the region—a circular; 2 John is written to a particular church community—an epistle; 3 John is written to an individual—a letter.

On the basis of their similarities, I see them as written by the same person, the Johannine Elder. Paul N. Anderson, *From Crisis to Christ: A Contextual Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), 339-62.

[11] See the treatment of canonization history by Lee M. MacDonald, *The Formation of the Biblical Canon: 2 Volumes* (London: T&T Clark, 2017).

[12] Harold W. Attridge, "The Restless Quest for the Beloved Disciple," *Early Christian Voices in Texts, Traditions and Symbols. Essays in Honor of François Bovon*, David H. Warren, Ann Graham Brock, and David W. Pao., eds., Biblical Interpretation Series 66 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003), 71-80. Among twelve overall theories of Johannine authorship and composition, a third are based upon whom the evangelist must have been, a third are based upon assuming whom the author cannot have been, and a third are based upon the literary features themselves, regardless of authorship inferences. Anderson, *Riddles*, 95-124. A strengths-weaknesses analysis of those twelve approaches to the origin and character of the Johannine tradition are therein laid out; no need to repeat them here.

[13] See, for instance, my own analytical engagement of Brown's overall theory (including that of Martyn), Paul N. Anderson, "The Community that Raymond Brown Left Behind—Reflections on the Dialectical Johannine Situation," *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*, Paul N. Anderson and R. Alan Culpepper, eds., *Early Christianity and its Literature* 13 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 47-93; also published in *The Bible and Interpretation* (September 2013)

<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2013/09/and378030.shtml>

(<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2013/09/and378030.shtml>)

[14] John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (1991, 2nd edition 2007; Oxford: Clarendon); Wayne A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91.1 (1972): 44-72; also published in *Interpreting the Fourth Gospel*, John Ashton, ed. (London: SPCK, 1986), 141-73.

[15] This was my view, even back in my Glasgow thesis over thirty years ago, featured in chapter 10 in *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6*, WUNT 2.78 (1996, third edition, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 221-50. See also idem, "The Having-Sent-Me Father—Aspects of Irony, Agency, and Encounter in the Johannine Father-Son Relationship," *Semeia* 85, Adele Reinhartz, ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 1999), 33–57; idem, "Antichristic Errors—Flawed Interpretations Regarding the Johannine Antichrists," and "Antichristic Crises: Proselytization Back into Jewish

Religious Certainty—The Threat of Schismatic Abandonment,” *Text and Community: Essays in Commemoration of Bruce M. Metzger*, Vol. 1, J. Harold Ellens, ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 196–216 and 217–40.

[16] Performing with John 6 what J. Louis Martyn did with John 9, an identification of four or five engagements with different targets within the later Johannine situation in Paul N. Anderson, “The *Sitz im Leben* of the Johannine Bread of Life Discourse and Its Evolving Context,” *Critical Readings of John 6*, R. Alan Culpepper, ed., Biblical Interpretation Series 22 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1007), 1-59. For at least seven groups engaged within the longitudinal Johannine situation, see Paul N. Anderson, “Bakhtin’s Dialogism and the Corrective Rhetoric of the Johannine Misunderstanding Dialogue: Exposing Seven Crises in the Johannine Situation,” *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies*, Roland Boer, ed. Semeia Studies 63 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2007), 133-59.

[17] Ian D. Mackay, *John’s Relationship with Mark: An Analysis of John 6 in the Light of Mark 6–8*, WUNT 2/182 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

[18] See Gardner-Smith, *Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938).

[19] For an overall view of Johannine composition, see Paul N. Anderson, “On ‘Seamless Robes’ and ‘Leftover Fragments’—A Theory of Johannine Composition,” Structure, Composition, and Authorship of John’s Gospel, Stanley E. Porter and Hughson Ong, eds., *The Origins of John’s Gospel*, Vol. 2 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2015), 169-218. On the adding of the Johannine Prologue as an engaging introduction to the narrative, see idem, “On Guessing Points and Naming Stars: The Epistemological Origins of John’s Christological Tensions,” *The Gospel of St. John and Christian Theology*, Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 311-45.

[20] Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew and its Use of the Old Testament* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1954; second edition Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968).

[21] R. Alan Culpepper, *The Johannine School: An Evaluation of the Johannine-School Hypothesis Based on an Investigation of Ancient Schools*, SBLDS (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975).

[22] Anderson and Culpepper, eds. *Communities in Dispute*. Within this collection an emerging consensus is evident in that the Epistles are seen as written within the history of the Gospel’s composition. In other words, the writing of 1, 2, and 3, John likely followed the first edition(s) of the Gospel, and the final edition (in the views of some) was finalized and circulated by the Johannine Elder following the death of the Beloved Disciple, around 100 CE.

[23] Modified from Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered*, LNTS 321 (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 13-15. Here I distinguish John the Apostle (even if called the disciple or evangelist) from John the Elder (another word for Presbyter).

[24] J. B. Lightfoot, *The Gospel of John: A Newly Discovered Commentary* (The Lightfoot Legacy Set, Book 2), Ben Witherington III and Todd D. Still, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015).

[25] See the monographs by James H. Charlesworth, *The Beloved Disciple: Whose Witness Validates the Gospel of John?* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995); and R. Alan Culpepper, *John, The Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (2nd edn., Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

[26] And, I make this claim despite having discovered an overlooked first-century clue to John's authorship, first noted in *Christology* 274-77. See also Paul N. Anderson, "Acts 4:19-20—An Overlooked First-Century Clue to Johannine Authorship and Luke's Dependence upon the Johannine Tradition," *Bible and Interpretation* (September 2010) <http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/acts357920.shtml>
(<http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/acts357920.shtml>)

[27] Paul N. Anderson, "Anti-Semitism and Religious Violence as Flawed Interpretations of the Gospel of John," *John and Judaism: A Contested Relationship in Context*, R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson, eds., *Resources for Biblical Study* 87 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 265-311; a longer edition published on *The Bible and Interpretation* (October 2017) <https://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2017/10/and418017.shtml>
(<https://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2017/10/and418017.shtml>)

[28] I see the *Birkat haminim* as a codification of local discipline concerns rather than a launchpad for excommunication; I also see Jewish associates of Johannine believers being proselytized back into the synagogue, as referenced by 1 John 2:18-25. The treat faced by the Docetists in 1 John 4:1-3 and 2 John 7 is an invasion by Gentile traveling ministers, not a schism. Cf. Anderson, *Christology* 221-50; "The Having-Sent-Me Father;" "Sitz im Leben;" "Bakhtin's Dialogism."

[29] Richard J. Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective: Christology and the Realities of Roman Power*, Johannine Monograph Series 3 (1992, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

[30] Unpublished paper: Paul N. Anderson, "'Little Children, Stay Away from Idols!'—The Last Word as the First Word in the Johannine Situation: 1 John 5:21 and the Roman Imperial Cult" (presented at SBL San Diego, November 2019).

- [31] Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus*, Johannine Monograph Series 6, Gerhard Krodel, trans. (1968, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017).
- [32] C. K. Barrett, "Johanneisches Christentum," *Die Anfänge des Christentums*, Jürgen Becker, ed. (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer GmbH, 1987), 255-78.
- [33] Adolf von Harnack, "Über den dritten Johannesbrief," *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* 15.3 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1897), 3-27.
- [34] Paul N. Anderson, "Identity and Congruence—The Ethics of Integrity in the Johannine Epistles," *Biblical Ethics and Application: Purview, Validity, and Relevance of Biblical Texts in Ethical Discourse; Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik (Contexts and Norms of New Testament Ethics)* 9, Ruben Zimmermann and Stephan Joubert, eds., WUNT 1/384 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 331-51.
- [35] Anderson, "On Guessing Point;" idem, "The Johannine Logos-Hymn: A Cross-Cultural Celebration of God's Creative-Redemptive Work" *Creation Stories in Dialogue: The Bible, Science, and Folk Traditions* (Radboud Prestige Lecture Series by Alan Culpepper), R. Alan Culpepper and Jan van der Watt, eds., Biblical Interpretation Series 139 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2016), 219-42.
- [36] Paul N. Anderson, "Mark and John—the *Bi-Optic* Gospels," *Jesus in Johannine Tradition*, Robert T. Fortna and Tom Thatcher, eds. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), 175-88.
- [37] Paul N. Anderson, "'You Have the Words of Eternal Life!' Is Peter Presented as Returning the Keys of the Kingdom to Jesus in John 6:68?" *Neotestamentica* 41:1 (2007): 6-41.
- [38] This is the sort of biblical scholarship that has the most integrity; cf. Paul N. Anderson, "Second Criticality—An Interdisciplinary Approach to the New Testament and its Contexts," *The Bible and Interpretation* (May 2015), <https://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2015/05/and398019.shtml> (<https://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2015/05/and398019.shtml>) Adapted from Paul N. Anderson, *From Crisis to Christ: A Contextual Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), x-xii