Introduction

Most Christians are familiar with the Gospel of John, one of the most influential narratives of the life of Jesus. Far fewer have ever spent significant time examining three other works also folded into Christian Bibles: a set of three epistles, or letters, entitled "1 John," "2 John," and "3 John."[1] They might be excused for doing so. Even scholars have marginalized these works.[2] As Judith Lieu writes in the opening line of her commentary on these texts, "the Johannine Epistles have often been treated as footnotes to the Gospel, supplying supplementary resources for expositions of the latter's theology."[3] Certain scholars have even prescribed this approach. Raymond Brown, the foremost Catholic biblical scholar of the late twentieth century, insisted that "the Johannine Epistles must be understood, therefore, not by themselves but in relation to GJohn."[4]

This practice of subordinating the Epistles to the Gospel and using them primarily to interpret that larger text reflects a dominant scholarly assumption about the origins of the Epistles, one that shapes and constrains virtually all engagement with them.[5] Today, most critical scholars agree that the Gospel and Epistles of John were written by different authors, but they also insist that these authors all hailed from a single, close-knit social group: a hypothetical "Johannine Community," active across the first and early second centuries CE.[6] "Where attention has focused on" the Epistles, Lieu observes, it "has often been because of the glimpses they are believed to offer into the history of the tradition and community of which the Gospel is the most creative expression."[7]

This is not to say that certain scholars have not attempted to study the Epistles in other, independent frames. But even in these cases, the

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Community Hypothesis exerts its influence. Because scholars assume that the Gospel and Epistles of John are artifacts of the same intellectual, geographical, and/or temporal setting, they tend to read the Epistles as a set, collapsing or conflating their distinctive contributions.[8] And even in those few studies dedicated to individual texts, it is common to see an author regularly mingle in data from the other Johannine works – a practice that produces harmonizing readings of the three.

This book challenges the above paradigm and, with it, the interpretive practices commonly applied to the Epistles. Over the past century, scholars have recovered other insights that complicate existing ways of thinking about these works. In this book, I lay out the data that inform these insights: evidence of subtle linguistic differences among these texts, evidence of direct literary copying between them, and evidence of dubious authorial claims linking each. In the process, I incrementally build the case that the Epistles are a chain of falsely authored works penned by writers of different (intellectual, geographical, and temporal) extractions. The three texts share a common authorial pretense; they position themselves as works by the same narrator who supposedly penned the Gospel of John. But this pretense is false. These texts find their true matrix among the hundreds of pseudo-historical letters produced by pagans, Jews, and Christians in antiquity.

What emerges from this study is a new history of the so-called Johannine Epistles, one in which each text represents an independent project with its own origins, motivations, and distinctive contributions.[9] What also emerges is a new agenda for the study of these texts. Within this new frame, we can engage in a new kind of comparative literary analysis: a "synoptic" study of these texts that maps their relationships to one another. We can also compare these works to other letter collections from Greek antiquity and understand them in light of different literary practices. Above all, we can begin to mine these texts for clues about their distinct origins, concerns, and projects.

In the final chapters of the study, I set out on precisely that kind of open-ended study, offering radically new readings of the letters. In Chapter 5, I decisively break from prior readings of 1 John by recasting the text as an early Christian perfectionist work, one that stresses the possibility and even necessity of sinlessness in this life.[10] And in Chapter 6, I analyze 2 and 3 John as very different kinds of texts: creative expansions of the memory of John's eyewitness narrator, mirroring so many other Greek pseudo-historical letters composed in the same period. Read in these ways, the Epistles open exciting new vistas into the diversity and creativity of ancient Christian literary expression.

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1.1 TERMS AND CATEGORIES

Before engaging the Epistles, it is worth glossing several critical expressions I will use across this study. Among those that deserve special attention are the phrases "Johannine Community," "social matrix/context," and "falsely authored/pseudo-historical works."

1.1.1 "Johannine Community"

This book stands firmly in the mainstream of New Testament scholarship in its view that ancient authors were shaped within specific social contexts and that they tailored their works to address individuals in those contexts. Human beings are, after all, social creatures; they are embedded in particular social environments and groups. In fact, individuals typically belong to several social contexts simultaneously, including families, networks of friends, neighborhoods, congregations/communities of worship, workplaces, ethnic groups, and so forth. Undoubtedly, the Johannine authors were situated within local groups; they probably exchanged ideas with people they knew; their views were probably shaped by memories and texts circulating in various settings; and when writing their texts, these authors probably tailored their message to the needs of those around them. In other words, they clearly belonged to and wrote within some social circle(s). The key question is: what kind of groups – what contexts or matrices – stand behind the Gospel and Epistles of John? How many were there, and what did they look like?

1.1.1.1 Defining the "Johannine Community"

We can imagine many possible contexts behind these texts, but in recent decades, scholars have constrained or limited their options to one. They have assumed that the four texts were written within a single social group: a hypothetical entity they call the "Johannine Community" or "Johannine Christianity." As I use the phrase, the "Johannine Community" is not a catch-all title for any and every possible setting for the Gospel of John or any one of the Epistles. Instead, and consistent with the way scholars generally use it, the phrase denotes a single matrix reconstructed for all four texts – a matrix with particular characteristics. Specifically, scholars conceptualize the "Johannine Community" as a *single, definable network of ancient churches sharing a common, distinctive theological outlook, in which the Gospel and the Epistles of John were*

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produced. Each part of this definition carries important weight and should be examined carefully:

"A single, definable . . ." Today, most scholars believe that the authors of the Johannine texts were embedded within a single, coherent (intellectual/geographical/temporal) social group or context – a single "community," however broadly or narrowly its geographical scope is defined.[11] Hence, scholars speak of a singular Johannine "community" rather than plural "communities." Scholars also widely presume that the authors of the Johannine works knew one another – that they actually interfaced with one another – within that social group.

"network of ancient churches" In turn, many scholars conceptualize this "community" as consisting of ancient Christian (house-)churches, which formed some sort of interconnected network. The reason is that some of the Epistles refer directly to "houses" and "churches," they envision contact between these associations, and they hint at internal schisms and leadership struggles within them as well.

". . . sharing a common, distinctive theological outlook." Third, scholars assume that this group shared a body of distinctive views in common, views thought to be consistently represented in the Gospel and Epistles of John. Ergo, scholars refer to this community as a "Johannine" community – a community with a definably "Johannine" outlook.

". . . in which the Gospel and Epistles of John were produced." Last, scholars assume that the group in question produced most or all four of the so-called "Johannine" works in the New Testament.

By contrast, this book argues that the Johannine Community – at least as scholars have conceptualized it – never existed. By this, I mean that there was probably no coherent, distinct Johannine Community or Johannine Christianity in the first century, as scholars have long assumed. No such group is attested in antiquity. More importantly, as I argue throughout this book, the distinctive features of these texts make better sense if we identify their authors with a broader range of (intellectual, geographical, and temporal) contexts. That literature is more diverse and disharmonious than initially meets the eye.

This study, then, frees the study of the Epistles from the constraining assumption that they must all have emerged from a single matrix, a single community. It invites readers to engage in a more open and free exploration of the multiple contexts or matrices – even the different kinds of matrices – that might have shaped these works. This book also proposes an alternative model for the emergence of these works, a model that has greater power to explain their distinctive features. Specifically, this book argues that the Epistles are a chain of falsely authored works.

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I.1.1.2 Earlier Attacks on the Community Hypothesis

This book is hardly the first to critique the Johannine Community Hypothesis. My intervention sits beside other challenges to this paradigm, but it should not be confused with them. It attacks this hypothesis on different grounds, and it develops a different account of the origins of the Gospel and Epistles than those proposals do.

Perhaps the most visible challenge to the Johannine Community Hypothesis in recent decades, the so-called Gospel for all Christians (GAC) Hypothesis, came into prominence with the publication of *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking Gospel Audiences*, edited in 1998 by Richard Bauckham.[12] In the lead essay of that volume, Bauckham argues against the premise that each gospel, including John, was written for and to a "particular church, with its particular situation, character, and needs at the forefront."[13] Instead, Bauckham insists that each "evangelist writing a Gospel expected his work to circulate widely among the churches."[14] As multiple writers have noted, however, the GAC paradigm addresses the question of gospel audiences; it was not developed to explain how the Epistles of John first emerged, and it largely bypasses questions about the origins of these works in its critique of the Johannine Community Hypothesis.[15] To the extent that GAC proponents have later attempted to fill this lacuna, they have fallen back on the traditional notion that the Gospel and Epistles share a common author.[16] My book argues at length against this assumption. Additionally, Adele Reinhartz correctly observes that the GAC paradigm "implies a homogenization of [early Christianity] into a unified entity and therefore requires us to ignore the substantial evidence for difference and diversity within that movement."[17] By contrast, my work centers the diverse characteristics of the Gospel and Epistles, plotting them against the complexity of second-century Christianity.

Reinhartz herself pioneered a second major challenge to the Johannine Community Hypothesis, also emerging in 1998. Taken as a whole, Reinhartz's approach emphasizes the limits of any attempt to reconstruct the original contexts of the Johannine literature.[18] It is, in that respect, more a doubt than a faith. Nevertheless, across several published works, Reinhartz has engaged in some tentative speculation about Johannine origins. In several pieces, she suggests that although a definable "Johannine Community" might not have existed at the time the Gospel was composed, one might have existed at the time the Epistles were written.[19] In a 2003 article, in fact, Reinhartz observes that the Epistles of John "seem to demand the existence of such a community."[20]

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My approach, by contrast, dispenses with all remaining need to reconstruct a "community" to explain the features of the Epistles.

Last, my view should also be distinguished from those studies that, in the wake of these criticisms, have sought to preserve the outlines of the classic Johannine Community in a more careful and restrained form. (This approach characterizes most recent scholarship on the Epistles.)[21] In this study, I will argue that no form of the Johannine Community Hypothesis is methodologically cautious and restrained enough in its interpretation of the Epistles. A new paradigm for interpreting these works is needed, one that recognizes the possibility that they emerged in different matrices.[22]

I.1.2 "Social Context/Matrix"

My choice to speak of social "contexts," "matrices," or "settings," rather than "communities," opens up space for a wider set of conceptions about where we might locate the authors of each of these texts. In common scholarly usage, the term "communities" typically conjures up images of congregations or house churches. In this way, Stanley Stowers argues, "the uncritical assumption that early Christianity exclusively consisted of communities precludes and occludes the possibility of finding other social formations" that might inform the features of the texts we study:

> Why should community or even households-plus-communities be the only social formations that can be used in the explanation of early Christianity? Why should social formations such as neighborhoods, merchant networks, patterns of social connection based on religious places, artisan networks, religious entrepreneurial-consumer relations and networks, circles of slave friends, linked levels of social dominations, coalitions of friendship and enmity, age and gender sets (e.g., elderly men, early teenage girls), many sorts of markets, patterns and practices of ethnic identification and non-identification and many other social formations not be important for the social explanation of early Christianity?[23]

For that matter, as both Stowers and Robyn Faith Walsh have argued, the term "community" also tends to connote German Romantic concepts of group effort and harmony in the creation of literary works, concepts they rightly problematize.[24] For this reason, I prefer more neutral terms than "community," terms that make space for other ways of relating these texts to one another and to their environments. I am especially keen to do so since I believe the authors of these texts engaged in a practice of disguised authorship – a practice often executed independently and covertly.

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I.1.3 Falsely Authored/Pseudo-Historical Works

In my usage, the terms "disguised authorship" and "false authorship" refer to the same practice: suggesting to readers that a work was written by a specific person (or persons) other than its real author. In disguised authorship, an author does not merely say things about themselves that are false – for example, misrepresenting some part of their character or views. Rather, they describe themselves in ways that would necessarily require them to be a different person than who they are, and that would prevent a reader from correctly identifying them. In this way, the author assumes a false authorial guise.[25] As I use the term, then, "false authorship" encompasses a wide variety of literary practices we might see today, including the use of pseudonyms and pen names. In turn, I call works produced through these practices "disguised works" or "falsely authored works."[26]

These expressions are equivalent to others applied by Classicists to ancient literature, and I am comfortable using these other expressions as well. For example, what I call "falsely authored works" are equivalent to "literary fakes," which Irene Peirano defines as "texts which self-consciously purport either to be the work of the [different] author to whom they are attributed or to be written at a different time from that in which they were composed."[27] Insofar as falsely authored works also construct a false historical situation, they can also be described as "pseudo-historical works."[28]

The above expressions are interchangeable with yet another term, "pseudepigrapha," but only when the latter is used in a narrow, carefully defined sense. Despite its currency in biblical scholarship, "pseudepigrapha" is a notoriously ambiguous term that presents special problems when discussing the Johannine Epistles. First, the term "pseudepigrapha" is built from the word "epigraph" (literally "superscript" or "title"). It is possible that none of the Epistles originally bore titles, however, making the term "pseudepigrapha" imprecise.[29] (Titles are not typical of epistles as a genre.) Second, the term historically encompasses both works in which authors disguise themselves (falsely authored works) and works that later editors misattributed to different authors (falsely attributed works).[30] These are, of course, two very different practices, both of which have impacted the Epistles of John, making the term potentially confusing to use in a study of those texts. Third, the term "pseudepigrapha" is also widely used to denote a specific Jewish literary corpus that does not include the Epistles of John.[31] Last, the term is often unintelligible to

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other humanities scholars and the public.[32] For all these reasons, I use the term "pseudepigrapha" sparingly but always to denote falsely authored works. I also occasionally speak of "pseudepigraphers," by which I mean persons who produce falsely authored works.

I.1.3.1 Deception

Disguised authorship does not necessarily entail deception. Admittedly, there are compelling reasons to think that many ancient authors who engaged in this practice probably did so with deceptive intent, producing what scholars including Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman call "forgeries," that is, texts "created or modified with the intention to deceive."[33] This seems clear from the fact that many such works seem designed to produce a misleading impression, offering supposed, false evidence of authorial identity, insisting on the truthfulness of a disguised author, and incorporating discovery narratives that supposedly explain why a text was previously unknown, among other devices. For that matter, as Ehrman writes, the very fact that "in many instances . . . forgeries have not been detected until the modern period" suggests that the authors of these works introduced them in such a way as to misrepresent their true origins.[34] Nevertheless, not all falsely authored works emerged within programs of deceit. Some authors assumed false authorial guises in their writings for other reasons, including compositional practice, entertainment, and as exercises of imagination.

Even when we detect a deceptive agenda, we should be careful not to overstate its significance. As many recent studies have demonstrated, "deception" is not always the first, only, or most productive way to analyze even a falsely authored work. Whether a text was meant to mislead its readers or not, it can also be analyzed in other ways – for example, as a creative use of earlier tradition, as an act of interpretation, or even as a spiritual practice.[35] Nor should we assume that every individual act of deception deserves the same ethical evaluation. Some early modern and contemporary writers have made deceptive authorial claims for what we might see as noble and ethical causes – for example, women posing as men to access literary readerships otherwise closed off to them, such as Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) and Anne Brontë (Acton Bell).[36]

In this study, I suggest that the authorial claims of 1 John and probably also 2 John and 3 John were designed to mislead readers. As I see it, the author of each work introduced their text in such a way as to encourage the erroneous impression that it was written by the same hand that produced the Gospel of John. And yet, that determination, tentative as

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it may be, should be taken as only the beginning of a more complex and nuanced exploration of the possible purposes, ethics, and significance of these writings.

I.1.3.2 Varieties of Disguised Authorship

Just as falsely authored works were executed for different ends, they could also be executed in different ways. Perhaps the best-known examples of falsely authored works are what scholars call "pseudonymous" texts – texts in which an author uses a false name. (The adjective "pseudonymous" comes from Greek *pseudēs* ["erroneous," "false," "deceitful"] and *onoma* ["name"].) In most instances, the false name in question is the name of an actual historical figure. The author assumes the guise of a writer from the past, leveraging their authority. For example, the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* claims that it was compiled by one of Jesus' twelve disciples, Thomas, even though that claim is false. Not all pseudonyms represent the names of real people, however. In some cases, an author engaging in pseudonymity might invent a name and persona corresponding to no specific historical figure. For example, the book of Tobit is partly written in the voice of a man named "Tobit" (1:3). That persona is a literary fiction, however.[37] There was no historical "Tobit." It hardly helps that the character identifies himself as the uncle of Ahiqar, a hero of Mesopotamian folklore (1:21).

At the same time, disguised authorship did not always take the form of pseudonymity. (This is a common misconception.) Some falsely authored works were written anonymously. After all, even anonymous works can project authorial claims, implying specific attributes for their nameless implied authors. Some texts will build a false authorial persona, suggesting that the author of the text was a kind of person other than the real person who penned the work. Once again, such false authorial personas can be historical or invented. The book of Wisdom, for one, implies that its author is Solomon without directly naming him (9:7–8). Other writers, however, chose to write in the cast of an invented character. For example, the *Martyrdom of Marian and James* constructs its author as an nameless eyewitness to the deaths of two early Christian martyrs.[38] The problem is that the text was written long after their deaths; the authorial persona is a mere invention.

As I see it, both the Gospel and the Epistles of John fit into this latter category. They are anonymous works that construct an invented author. The Gospel, for one, never names its author. And yet, as several scholars have argued, the text casts itself as the work of an invented, if nameless,

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figure: a supposed eyewitness to the life of Jesus.[39] The Epistles of John, in turn, are also anonymous. Nevertheless, they falsely hint that they were written by the same implied author as the Gospel.

1.2 CHAPTER PLAN

This study unfolds in two major parts, encompassing six chapters in total. Part I incrementally argues that the Epistles were not written in a single "community" setting but are, instead, a lineage of falsely authored works. Part II explores the Epistles in light of this conclusion, reimagining the origins and purpose of each text.

Chapter 1, "Different Hands," orients readers to the starting premise for any contemporary study of the texts, namely, the idea that the Gospel and Epistles of John do not share a common author. This view, widely accepted by contemporary scholars, is defensible on multiple grounds. It rests, first, on the observation that these texts have different reception histories – that they emerged in different periods, that they did not always circulate together, and that the authenticity of these works was scrutinized to different degrees. It also rests on subtle but apparent differences in the ideas and language of these four texts.

Even if they were written by different pens, however, the Gospel and Epistles of John are still remarkably similar. Chapter 2, "Literary Dependence," lays out these similarities in close detail, allowing readers to appreciate the many linguistic and structural features binding these works. It then develops the case, also widely held among scholars today, that these convergences are not accidental but artificial and deliberate. When one examines the language of these texts closely, one finds ample evidence of direct literary borrowing and dependence. The linguistic evidence also supports the idea that the Gospel was written before 1 John, which in turn was written before 2 and 3 John – a sequence that suits the reception history of these works.

Chapter 3, "Disguised Authors," explains why the four Johannine texts contain so much overlapping material. The answer, I argue, lies in an overlooked feature of the four texts: their shared authorial claim. For nearly two millennia, Christians have identified the Gospel and Epistles of John as works of the same author. This assumption, even if mistaken, rests on a valid observation. Although the four texts may not share a real author, they all construct a common implied author. They are a lineage of falsely authored works, as all three – and especially 2 and 3 John – were suspected of being in antiquity.

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Chapter 4, "Invented Situations," draws out an important corollary of this thesis. Recent scholarship has argued that when an implied author is fictionalized, other elements of a text – the implied addresses and implied situation of a text – are also at least partly fictionalized. As I argue in the chapter, this insight has enormous consequences for the scholarly construct of the Johannine Community. If the audiences and situations of the Epistles are partly fictionalized, then we have no secure basis for reconstructing a Johannine Community from the Epistles, at least in the form and shape long defended by scholars. In this case, one can entertain other, more diverse possibilities for the intellectual, social, and historical contexts of each text.

In the final two chapters of the book, I set out to recover those contexts, offering innovative readings of each epistle in the process. In Chapter 5, "A Treatise on Sinlessness," I argue that the idea that John, 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John were written within the same community has led to harmonizing readings of these works that obscure their different extractions and viewpoints. Examined closely, however, 1 John breaks from other works by introducing a distinctive, even idiosyncratic, vision of sin and sinlessness, one we might characterize as a radical perfectionist position. According to the text, the new birth and indwelling presence of the Spirit promised in the Gospel of John ushers believers into a state in which they "do not sin" and "cannot sin" (3:9). In this view, anyone who sins proves that they never received the Spirit. The chapter outlines how 1 John develops this distinctive view, highlighting points of contact between the thought of the epistle and the thought of contemporary Jewish and Christian works.

Finally, Chapter 6, "Quasi-Biographical Letters," explores the shorter Johannine letters. Although many ancient Christians questioned the authenticity of 2 and 3 John, few critical scholars do so today, insisting that the two are too brief, unremarkable, or mundane to be later fabrications. This chapter challenges this assumption, noting that hundreds of pseudepigrapha survive from antiquity that are as brief and mundane as these letters, among them, the many Greek pseudo-historical letters written in a "quasi-biographical" mode. In turn, the chapter demonstrates that 2 and 3 John are very comparable to works written in this mode, drawing extensive comparisons between these literatures. Just as other ancient writers explored the inner lives of Apollonius or Plato by inhabiting their voices in letters and imagining them in invented historical scenarios, the authors of 2 and 3 John took up the persona of the eyewitness narrator of John to extend his life and literary corpus.

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