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The Epistles of John

For centuries, Christians believed that the biblical letters of 1, 2, and 3 John were penned by a disciple of Jesus. Today, scholars speculate that the three are artifacts of a lost "Johannine Community." In this groundbreaking study, however, Hugo Méndez challenges both paradigms, meticulously laying out the evidence that the Epistles are, instead, a series of falsely authored works. The texts position themselves as works by a single author. In reality, they were penned by three different writers in a chain of imitation, creative adaptation, and invention. Through incisive, close readings of the Epistles, Méndez clarifies their meaning and purpose, demystifying their most challenging sections. And by placing these works in dialogue with Greco-Roman pseudo-historical writing, he uncovers surprising links between Classical and early Christian literature. Bold, comprehensive, and deeply original, this book dismantles older scholarly views while proposing new and exciting approaches to these enigmatic texts.

Hugo Méndez is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. A scholar of the New Testament and Early Christianity, he is the author of *The Gospel of John: A New History* and *The Cult of Stephen in Jerusalem*: *Inventing a Patron Martyr*. He is also the co-author, with Bart Ehrman, of *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 8th edition.

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Origins, Authorship, Purpose

HUGO MÉNDEZ
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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To Divya,
brilliant, strong, and true.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book reimagines the origins of three biblical books: the Epistles of 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John. Across its pages, I argue that these works were not written by a single pen, as tradition claims, nor were they written in a single community setting, as many scholars presently suppose. Instead, these three works are a chain of falsely authored texts written by three authors with different extractions and projects. In the earlier chapters of the book, I meticulously lay out the evidence for this view, and in later chapters, I reinterpret these texts in light of it, developing novel interpretations of each.

I began drafting this manuscript during a year-long research leave from UNC (2021–22). The first semester represented my junior development leave; the second, however, was an extraordinary gift – one made possible by UNC's Institute for the Arts and Humanities, where I had the privilege of being a Borden Faculty Fellow. I look back with deep gratitude for my IAH fellowship – for the precious, focused time it offered to develop my manuscript, for the warm and supportive cohort that commented on my writing, and for the institute's flexibility in allowing me to complete part of that fellowship out of state to care for my son. That latter accommodation is rarely offered to young parents in residential fellowships. That I was offered such an accommodation speaks volumes of the generosity of the IAH's excellent director, Patricia Parker, and her commitment to equity and accessibility.

As critical as that initial fellowship experience was, however, my manuscript only truly came into its own through a second and completely unexpected opportunity: a Summer Residency at the National

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Humanities Center (2023). My research thrived in the unique (quasi-monastic!) atmosphere of the NHC, and it was there that I completed the initial draft of this book. For this privilege, I thank Elizabeth Engelhardt, Senior Associate Dean for Fine Arts and Humanities at UNC, who nominated me for that residency. And, of course, I have nothing but immense gratitude for the friendship of other residents and staff during the most productive and memorable summer of my professional career.

Two publication grants also contributed to the final production of this book. The first was a generous gift from the Catholic Biblical Association. The second was an Arts and Humanities Publication Grant awarded by UNC's Institute for the Arts and Humanities.

Through the period supported by the above fellowships and grants, I continued to develop this manuscript in other contexts. A few come to mind as especially formative for this work due to the feedback I received at them – specifically, invited talks at Duke University and Stanford University, an invited talk for the Australian Catholic University's BECS Global Seminar, an invitation to deliver the annual Freedman lecture at the University of Michigan, several presentations at Annual Meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and Catholic Biblical Association, as well as workshops through the UNC-Duke Christianity in Antiquity reading group and the Atlanta New Testament Colloquium. Among all these venues and others, there are too many individual names to thank. Still, I can single out Harold Attridge, Stephen Carlson, Jeremiah Coogan, Wayne Coppins, Mitchell Esswein, Mark Goodacre, Alicia Myers, Michael Penn, Adele Reinhartz, Christopher Skinner, and Jason Staples for their constructive comments. I am grateful to my editor, Beatrice Rehl, and the anonymous reviewers of this text for their helpful feedback on the project. Above all, I owe this book, and everything else, to my loving family – my parents, Hugo and Ida, my pride and joy, Roman, and my brothers, Pedro and Ruben – as well as to so many friends.

Of all the people I could thank, however, one stands without peer: my colleague, mentor, and friend, Bart Ehrman. Bart is a "teacher of teachers" – a figure who has shaped an entire generation of New Testament scholars and challenged untold numbers of readers through his textbooks, academic books, and trade books. In many ways, his scholarship is the foundation of this project; his 2012 study *Forgery and Counterforgery* was the initial catalyst for my rethinking of the Gospel and Epistles of John. More broadly, there is no part of my professional life that has not been shaped by Bart's mentorship, tireless

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encouragement, and constructive criticism. We have trained students together, we have authored a book together, and it is my highest privilege in this field to be his colleague and friend. If this study is anything, I hope it is a tribute to his legacy in our field and in my life.

Ultimately, however, I have dedicated this book to my brilliant and loving partner, Divya Mallampati. Divya has been my companion throughout the many days, weeks, months, and years I spent writing this text. And nestled between its many pages are as many travels, memories, laughs, and quiet moments we have spent together. May we share a lifetime more.

This book was inspired by my 2020 article "Did the Johannine Community Exist?" and elaborates text from that piece in its first four chapters. It was also developed alongside another book of mine, *The Gospel of John: A New History*, fleshing out the views of that book's fifth chapter into a full-length study. To avoid the appearance of idiosyncrasy in translation, I generally utilize easily accessible English translations of ancient works. Quotations of biblical texts are adapted from the RSV and NRSVue. Finally, to keep the manuscript efficient and reader-friendly, I have been selective in the number and kinds of sources I cite, balancing multiple factors.

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Abbreviations

Scholarly Works

AB	The Anchor (Yale) Bible
AG	Ehrman, Bart D. and Zlatko Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011
ANT	Elliott, J. K., ed. *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
BINS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BZ	*Biblische Zeitschrift*
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CAG	Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca
DSS	García Martínez, Florentino and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997
EG	Hercher, Rudolphus, ed. *Epistolographi Graeci*. Paris: Didot, 1873
EKK	Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller. Leipzig, 1897–
HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
ICC	International Critical Commentary

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JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JECS	*Journal of Early Christian Studies*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSNTSupp	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JTS	*The Journal of Theological Studies*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NovTSupp	Novum Testamentum Supplements Series
NTL	The New Testament Library
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
OECT	Oxford Early Christian Texts
OTP	James H. Charlesworth, ed. *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. 2 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1983–85
PG	Migne, J.-P. , ed. Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca. 161 vols. Paris, 1857–66
PL	Migne, J.-P. , ed. Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina. 221 vols. Paris, 1878–90
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLECL	Society of Biblical Literature Early Christianity and Its Literature
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
SNTSMS	Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP	Sacra Pagina
STAC	Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum
TENT	Texts and Editions for New Testament Study
THKNT	Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altkirchlichen Literatur
ZTK	*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

Ancient Authors and Works

Act. Paul	*Acts of Paul*
Act. Thom.	*Acts of Thomas*
Ath.	Athanasius of Alexandria
ep. fest. 39	*Epistula festivalis trecesima nona*

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Clem.	Clement of Alexandria
adumb. 2 Jo.	*Adumbrationes in epistola Johannis evangelistae secunda*
str.	*Stromateis*
Cosm. Ind.	Cosmas Indicopleustes
top.	*Topographia Christiana*
Did.	*Didache*
Diogn.	*Epistola ad Diognetum*
ep. (All Authors)	*Epistle/Letter*
Ep. Ap.	*Epistula Apostolorum*
Eus.	Eusebius
h.e.	*Historia Ecclesiastica*
Herm.	Hermas
Mand.	*Mandata pastoris*
Vis.	*Visiones pastoris*
Hier.	Jerome
De vir. illustr.	*De viris illustribus*
Ign.	Ignatius of Antioch
Eph.	*Epistula ad Ephesios*
Magn.	*Epistula ad Magnesios*
Philad.	*Epistula ad Philadelphenses*
Smyrn.	*Epistula ad Smyrnaeos*
Iren.	Irenaeus of Lyons
haer.	*Adversus Haereses*
Just. Mart.	Justin Martyr
1 Apol.	*First Apology*
Mur. Frag.	Muratorian Fragment
Or.	Origen
princ.	*De principiis*
Jo.	*Comentarii in Jo.*
Polyb.	Polybius
Hist.	*Histories*
Polyc.	Polycarp of Smyrna
ep.	*Epistula ad Philippenses*
Ps. Sol.	*Psalms of Solomon*
1QS	*Community Rule*
Socr.	Socrates Scholasticus
h.e.	*Historia Ecclesiastica*
Soz.	Sozomen
h.e.	*Historia Ecclesiastica*

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T. Jud.	*Testament of Judah*
T. Levi	*Testament of Levi*
T. Sim.	*Testament of Simeon*
Thuc.	Thucydides
Hist. Pelo.	*History of the Peloponnesian War*

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