

Is 2 John a Case of “Protective Anonymity”?

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Plainly though regrettably stated, 2 John has never occupied a place of prominence in the New Testament (NT) canon. Its brevity and less impressive (according to some) canonical attestation by the early church has relegated 2 John (and 3 John even further) to a lesser status in the life of the church in terms of preaching and theologizing. Our paper will focus on an additional reason for this lesser status. Second John is a quite enigmatic letter whose provenance has proven to be elusive.¹ One main reason is the possibility that the letter may exhibit the phenomenon of ‘protective anonymity’.

A modern reader of 2 John can easily come away with a sense of situational murkiness. Both the author and recipients of the letter are unnamed and are instead cryptically referred to as ‘the elder’ and ‘the elect lady and her children’. Other references in the letter to ‘deceivers’, ‘the antichrist’, and ‘the children of your chosen sister’ are also obscure. The author seems to be talking about real people and situations without naming any of them or locating them within a clear historical context. On the surface, this pronounced theme of vague anonymity throughout this short letter seems deliberate and designed to disguise the letter’s recipients and even the author.

In this paper, we will set out to briefly explain the concept of ‘protective anonymity’ and then explore whether 2 John constitutes such a case. Given the rank scholarly uncertainty surrounding this letter in terms of author, original audience, date of the letter, and the historical situation that occasioned its writing and what the letter may or may not be hinting at or describing on a host of issues, any clarity that can be gained may count as profitable.²

¹ Uncertainty about the who, what, where, when, and why of a writing can almost naturally lead to uncertainty about the relevance of the writing to folks far removed from whatever the original circumstances of the writing may have been.

² A survey of studies on the Johannine epistles reveals copious uncertain speculation on each of these core issues. On 2 John, there is manifold speculation on who ‘the elder’ is and what this title does or doesn’t signify. The identity of the ‘elect lady’, her ‘children’, her ‘elect sister’, and the ecclesial relationship of all of them to ‘the elder’, preoccupies much opining on the letter. The theme of ‘true/truth’ in 2 John and what it does or doesn’t encompass and whether its use parallels its use in the larger Johannine corpus is disputed. And while the nature of the false teaching being combatted seems somewhat clear, its origins and whether the Diotrephes of 3 John is an individual embodiment of it has been heavily theorized. It is even suggested (though only by a small minority) that 2 John is not describing real people and contemporaneous issues at all but is instead a non-historical work that is intending to

What is 'Protective Anonymity'?

In recent times, the concept of 'protective anonymity' has gained popularity in academic circles mainly through the work of Gerd Theissen. In the early 1990s, Theissen published a study that aimed to trace the pre-history of the Gospel writings prior to the finished assemblage of the material in the Gospels that are now in our NT.³ Theissen attempted to accomplish his task by understanding the applicable cultural 1st century conditions that would have influenced the needs and concerns of the original Christian communities.⁴ In so doing, Theissen advanced the view that Mark 14-16 was not primarily composed by the author of the 2nd Gospel, but instead represented an intact pre-Markan oral Passion tradition that was very old and formulated much closer to the actual historical events of the Passion itself.⁵

Why is this important? In Mark's Passion narrative, a number of figures go unnamed. In the Gethsemane scene of Jesus' arrest, the person wielding the sword that cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest, as well as the high priest servant himself, are both unnamed (Mk 14.47). In addition, the naked young man, a witness to Jesus' arrest and all that transpired in Gethsemane, is also unnamed (Mk 14.51-52). Theissen contended that this old tradition material that was ultimately incorporated into the 2nd Gospel dated back to a time of great difficulty for the emerging primitive church in Jerusalem. There was a need to protect the people involved by concealing their names. Both the sword-wielder and the naked young man had illegally crossed the authorities and could be in grave danger if they had been named in any kind of early retelling of the account that could have ultimately gotten back to the authorities. So, in order to protect

offer paraenesis in a purely hypothetical or preemptive way. It is quite something to witness professional scholars often being reduced to professional speculators by this letter.

³ Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992).

⁴ In focusing on social and political influences in reconstructing the history of the Synoptic tradition, Theissen believed he was breaking with classical form-critical reconstructions that tried to trace the oral tradition through study of small synoptic textual units or segments. For those steeped in the study of Gospels origins, this is an important point, given how thoroughly the pre-Markan Passion narrative hypothesis was birthed from and became the crowning achievement of form criticism. We can recall Ralph Martin's infamous declaration that the existence of an early coherent Passion narrative tradition was "the most assured result of form criticism". But with form criticism falling on hard times, Theissen is saying the pre-Markan Passion narrative hypothesis still holds water despite the drubbing its methodological forebear has taken. Not all would agree, but I'm sympathetic.

⁵ While most now agree that Mark was the first of the four Gospels to be written, even most conservatives estimate the 2nd Gospel not being composed in final form until the late 50s/early 60s AD. So Theissen's contention that Mark incorporates a Passion tradition that goes back perhaps two decades prior is quite a statement on authenticity. Theissen is not alone in viewing the Markan Passion material this way, and in my view, it doesn't conflict with early church tradition that Peter stands behind the Gospel of Mark. Peter himself could have been a keeper and even formulator of much of this early Jerusalem-based tradition (Acts 1-5; Gal. 1.18-2.10).

them, they remained unnamed. Moreover, in an attempt not to inflame an already difficult situation, the name of the injured high priest's servant is also unnamed.⁶ Theissen's theory largely presumes that as long as everyone involved was still alive, the two anonymous companions of Jesus were in danger if unwittingly disclosed.

Theissen's 'protective anonymity' theory has gained considerable additional traction through the work of Richard Bauckham.⁷ Bauckham expanded on Theissen by also citing the unnamed anointer of Jesus in Mk 14.3-9, as well as other 'anonymous supporters of Jesus' in Mk 11.1-7 and 14.12-16. Bauckham, in line with Rudolf Pesch, also thinks it notable that Mark does not mention Caiaphas by name (referring to him as 'the high priest' in 14.53) while the other three later Gospels (and Acts) do name him. For Bauckham, this cumulative evidence lends credence to the 'protective anonymity' dynamic in Mark and that the danger to those who could be considered "complicit in the events that led to [Jesus'] arrest...[could] continue for many years afterward if they belonged to the early Christian community in Jerusalem and its environs."⁸

He also skillfully shows that some of the individuals unnamed in Mark *are* named in the later Gospel of John. The unnamed anointer of Jesus in Mark is revealed to be Mary the sister of Martha in John (Jn 12.3). The unnamed sword-wielder in Mark is revealed to be Peter in John (Jn 18.10). The unnamed lacerated servant of the high priest in Mark is revealed to be Malchus in John (Jn 18.10, 26). This seems to make clear that 'protective anonymity' had a decidedly situational component to it. If Theissen and Bauckham are correct that the relevant material in Mark reflects an early Jerusalem-based oral tradition, the need for protection is plausible. But for John, writing decades later in Asia Minor (if tradition is to be believed), the need to protect the identities of those previously unnamed in Mark would be far less or even no longer necessary.

The concept of 'protective anonymity' has been extended beyond Gospels scholarship. Bockmuehl has argued that *1 Clement* utilizes this device in its accounting of the deaths of Peter and Paul.⁹ While paradigms like this have a tendency to become faddish and overused,¹⁰ rightly guarding against excesses should not discount possible applicability. Its relevance should be assessed on a

⁶ Although, Lk 22.51 says Jesus healed him. It should perhaps not be surprising that Luke's Gospel uniquely records this piece of the story, if we are to believe that the physician Luke is the author (Col. 4.14; Lukan Anti-Marcionite Prologue, arguably drawn upon by Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* (HE), 3.4. To be fair, Calvin disagreed, believing the 'physician Luke' of Colossians was a different Luke than the Evangelist).

⁷ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

⁸ Bauckham, 189.

⁹ Bockmuehl, *Simon Peter in Scripture and Memory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 110. Those interested in this topic might be interested in my "The Problem of 1 Clement: Did Fellow Christians Have a Hand in the Deaths of Peter and Paul, Part 2." *Biblical Perspectives Magazine* 27 no. 14: (March, 2025).

¹⁰ While admiring Bauckham's proposal, I happen to think he's stretching his argument a bit when attempting to loop in the Mark 11 and 14 'anonymous supporters of Jesus' into his presentation.

case-by-case basis without either pre-reading it into a document or ruling it out in advance.

The Case of 2 John:

The possible applicability of 'protective anonymity' to 2 John was first suggested in modern times by C.H. Dodd. Right after WWII, Dodd published his commentary on the Johannine epistles that is still widely referenced today.¹¹ Commenting on the first verse of 2 John where the identities of both the author and recipient(s) are seemingly cloaked as 'the elder' and the 'elect lady and her children', Dodd says this:

The possibility should perhaps not be excluded that, in the unfavourable situation of Christianity at the time (see I John iii. 13), it was judged safer, in case a document implicating the Church should fall into hostile hands, that it should appear to be a harmless letter to a friend. It is possible that the names of the writer and of the church addressed are omitted for similar prudential reasons...On the whole it seems likely that the device is little more than a 'conceit', conforming to the taste of the period. However that may be, the fiction is kept up all through; the language is such as might be addressed to a pious matron, but it is a thin disguise for a pastoral epistle to a Christian congregation.¹²

By 'conceit', Dodd appears to mean something like an elaborate metaphor, since he also cites numerous other cases of various places being personified in female form to argue that such a practice was "a well-established convention."¹³ Thus, "[t]he probability is that the elect Lady is a disguise for a community."¹⁴

Dodd's suggestion of a disguising of the author and recipient through enigmatic protective code names has been favorably cited by several commentators in more recent studies.¹⁵ While not overly dogmatic, scholars sympathetic to this point of view see the need for 'protective anonymity' as a safety measure in a time of persecution and difficulty for the burgeoning Christian movement.

Such a rubric would also help explain the arguably peculiar closing of 2 John, in which the elder says he has much more to say to his audience but doesn't want to use paper and ink, preferring a face-to-face meeting instead (v12). It seems

¹¹ Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Harper, 1946).

¹² Dodd, 145. Along with Dodd and most others, we will adopt the view that 'the elect lady' and 'elect sister' are churches, not individuals.

¹³ Dodd, 144.

¹⁴ Dodd, 144.

¹⁵ See Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, WBC, Vol. 51 (Waco: Word, 1984), 318; Barker, *1, 2, 3 John*, EBC, Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 361; Kistemaker, *James, Epistles of John, Peter and Jude*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 374.

odd to have written such a short letter if the author had plenty more to say to his audience.¹⁶ While this verse is commonly (and correctly) cited as being a rather conventional closing typical of Greco-Roman letter writing of the time, a 'protective anonymity' reading of 2 John would add notable texture to the sentiment. In effect, the closing would be the author's way of not wanting to leave a paper trail of details and specifics that might break the cover of protection that supposedly dominates the letter.¹⁷ An in-person meeting would be a far safer way to discuss the many (perhaps incendiary) things the elder wants to discuss, rather than committing such things to paper. After all, a paper trail creates a record which could be used against all of them if the letter were to fall into the wrong hands.

In assessing whether 'protective anonymity' is at work in 2 John, at least two general topics need to be considered. First, was the late 1st century Christian movement in Asia Minor under serious pressure and threat from outside persecutors, namely the Romans? And second, is 'protective anonymity' really the best explanation for the lack of naming we find in 2 John? Are there alternative explanations that might explain the data better? It is to these questions that we will devote the remainder of our study.

The Issue of a Domitian-era Persecution of Christians

The Emperor Domitian reigned over the Roman Empire from 81-96 AD. Later church tradition judges Domitian harshly.¹⁸ Melito of Sardis accuses Domitian (and Nero before him) of "misrepresenting our doctrine" and "were the source of the unreasonable custom of laying false information against the Christians."¹⁹ Clement of Alexandria refers to Domitian as a "tyrant."²⁰ Eusebius himself remarks that "many were the victims of Domitian's appalling cruelty" and that

¹⁶ Much 'paper and ink' have been devoted to trying to tie this statement to the relationship of the three epistles to each other, and particularly 2 John to 1 John. While interesting and perhaps even tangentially relevant to our study, the interrelationship between the three epistles in terms of order, audience and even message has become a wave pool of speculation and will be addressed here only on an as-needed basis.

¹⁷ Schnackenberg offers a variant of this idea by theorizing that the elder may have wanted to discuss confidential matters where names would have to be named, and it would have been unsuitable to do this in a public letter. See his *The Johannine Epistles*, trans. by Reginald and Ilse Fuller (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 318.

¹⁸ It should be noted that Roman historians during the time of Domitian were also quite unkind in their after-the-fact appraisals of the emperor. Tacitus (*Histories*, 4.86) criticizes Domitian's duplicitous character. Suetonius (*Life of Domitian*, 10-11, 15) offers numerous cases of Domitian's "savage cruelty", which, as we'll see, has echoes in the Christian historian Eusebius's statements about Domitian two centuries later. That said, it is now widely argued that Tacitus and Suetonius were heavily biased against Domitian due to their aristocratic allegiance to the Senate, which despised Domitian. It is now in vogue to treat the Suetonius account of Domitian as skewed and peddling in rumor, and designed to be on the 'right side' of the post-Flavian era 'damnation of memory' of Domitian.

¹⁹ *HE*, 4.26.

²⁰ *HE*, 3.23.

Domitian was the second emperor to “organize persecution against us...”²¹ He cites the Irenaeus account of John being exiled to Patmos at the end of Domitian’s reign.²² But interestingly, Eusebius also cites the more nuanced accounts of Tertullian and Hegesippus which depict Domitian relenting from punishment of Christians.²³ Nonetheless, a century after Eusebius, Orosius claims Domitian “ordered the persecution of Christians” (and Jews).²⁴ Given that the Johannine epistles are often dated to the early 90s, these accounts of the Domitianic era might provide credence to the idea that Christians were indeed being systematically persecuted and needed the safety that ‘protective anonymity’ was designed to provide.

But in recent decades, a reevaluation of Domitian’s reign has gained real traction. Most relevant for our purposes, considerable doubt has been cast on the existence of an organized policy of persecution toward Christians under Domitian.²⁵ The basic idea is that neither Christian nor non-Christian contemporaneous sources speak of a targeted policy of persecution against Christians. While we’ve already seen that Roman sources cast Domitian in an unflattering light, they do not cite Christian persecution as one of his hallmarks.²⁶ And the Christian sources cited above are considered both late and uneven.²⁷ Melito doesn’t expressly accuse Domitian of persecution. Technically, neither does Clement.²⁸ The Hegesippus passage shows Domitian asking questions and rendering a favorable verdict. The Tertullian passage is more complicated, in that it asserts that Domitian was cruel like Nero, which strongly implies cruelty against Christians. But in the end, Tertullian’s account portrays Domitian reversing his cruelty. Under this reassessment, it is argued that Eusebius, and then Orosius

²¹ *HE*, 3.17. He also asserts that Domitian “showed himself the successor to Nero in enmity and hostility to God.”

²² *HE*, 3.18. Separately, Origen, citing ‘tradition’, implies it was Domitian himself who exiled John (*Matt.* 16.6).

²³ *HE*, 3.20. The Tertullian account starts by “nearly” equating the cruelty of Domitian with that of Nero, but then says such cruelty “very soon stopped” with Domitian reversing previous banishments.

²⁴ Orosius, *History Against the Pagans*, 7.10.5-6.

²⁵ The standard treatment of this reassessment has become Jones, *The Emperor Domitian* (London: Routledge, 1992). However, I might offer a mild word of dissent. In attempting to dispel what he believes are myths and falsities about Domitian, he dismisses or impugns the accuracy and motives of more than a few extant sources and then appeals to lack of evidence as his primary counterargument to what these sources say without always building a good evidential case himself. A reasonable read of Jones is that in an effort to cleanse Domitian of a number of unsavory acts and traits, Jones is offering an (over?) correction to other imbalanced treatments of Domitian by being rather imbalanced himself. That said, Jones’ work commands respect and does raise legitimate questions about the broadly negative view of Domitian that has long prevailed.

²⁶ Tacitus, of course, didn’t shy away from recounting the persecution of Christians under Nero (*Annals*, 15.44). But to be fair, the section of Tacitus’s *Histories* that would have covered the imperial reign of Domitian has been lost, thus, depriving us of a possible wealthy source of information.

²⁷ We have not yet covered John’s Apocalypse, which most would consider relevant to this issue. We will touch on Revelation shortly.

²⁸ Clement’s labeling of Domitian as a ‘tyrant’ doesn’t necessarily equate with Christian persecution. It might, but not necessarily, given Domitian’s seeming cruelty directed toward various folks and groups.

after him, later amped up the Domitian persecution line of thought from these earlier non-uniform accounts to create a narrative of intense persecution that didn't actually exist.²⁹

This reassessment of Domitian has gradually gained an impressive level of support, even among evangelical scholars who might be more inclined to defend Eusebius.³⁰ If we can no longer be confident of the existence of a campaign of persecution against Christians in the later years of Domitian's reign, this would seem to deprive the 'protective anonymity' reading of 2 John of a ready-made context for its necessity. Several scholars are on record disputing the existence of persecution as an underlying backdrop to 2 John.³¹ And while Domitian's infamous vine edict in 92 AD of limiting land for viticultural use may have hurt Asia Minor, this program did not target Christians.³²

But what about the book of Revelation?³³ Likely written at the end of Domitian's reign only a few years after the Johannine epistles and likely from the same region (Asia Minor), it constitutes a source that is quite proximate to 2 John.³⁴ Tribulation is an obvious current that runs throughout the book, and in numerous places, there are hints of emperor worship being a focus of trouble for the audience.³⁵ It has long been asserted that the era of Domitian witnessed a rising emperor cult, particularly in Asia Minor, in which worship of the emperor as a god became either compulsory or a test of loyalty.³⁶ Clearly, this would have been a problem for Christians whose worshipful allegiance rested solely with the Christian God. But the veridicality of a pervasive emperor cult under Domitian is also in a period of reassessment. While the data is somewhat mixed, the lack of

²⁹ Even if we assume that Eusebius' negative view of Domitian was informed by consulting Suetonius (which is speculation but possible), his linking of Domitian to intense Christian persecution could not have come from any reliance on Suetonius.

³⁰ In their New Testament Introduction, Carson and Moo are decidedly cautious on the Domitian persecution issue. They opt for something of a middle ground which tends to reject an official policy of persecution while maintaining that spasmodic local episodes of trouble, possibly related to a growing emperor cult in Asia Minor, were still occurring at the time.

³¹ See Brown, *The Epistles of John*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 680. Judith Lieu, referring to the 'elect lady' and 'elect sister' of vv. 1,5,13, asserts, "[I]t is hard to find any purely historical reason for this 'cover' – there is no sense that persecution is necessitating code names." See her *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, NTT (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1991), 93.

³² For more on this, see Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), II:251. But the impact and even enforcement of the edict especially in the provinces is in dispute, so caution should be exercised.

³³ This is not the place to assess the makeup of the Johannine corpus and/or unity of authorship. Whether one does or doesn't subscribe to unitary authorship is not essential to our study, though the former position is the better one evidentially and makes the flow of our study cohere more tightly.

³⁴ I am aware that the main alternative to a mid-90s dating of Revelation is a much earlier Neronian-era dating. For our purposes, we will assume the traditional Domitianic-era dating voiced by Irenaeus (*AH*, 5.30.3).

³⁵ Rev. 13.4-16; 14.9-11; 15.2; 16.2, 10-12; 19.20; 20.4.

³⁶ Among many that could be cited, see Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 603.

epigraphic evidence argues against it. Now, like persecution, it's possible that local spasms may have occurred or that a milder flavor of this sentiment may have existed, which could explain the Revelation passages.³⁷

But even if we assume the existence of an emperor cult pressure campaign that would have put Christians in a difficult position, Revelation would then be remarkable for its lack of 'protective anonymity'. Revelation can be read in part as an attack on Rome and the emperor. It would undoubtedly have been considered a highly seditious document by the authorities.³⁸ Persecution would have been a likely result if the Romans had discovered this writing, which arguably would have been probable given that it's a circular letter to seven churches rather than a more localized correspondence like 3 John. Yet, the author names himself (1.1, 4, 9), identifies his location (1.9), and clearly enunciates his immediate audience (2.1-3.21). No code words, no cloaking, no anonymity. If one were to suggest that by this point in his life, the elderly John had nothing to lose and therefore no longer had any reason to disguise his identity compared to earlier Johannine writings, I disagree. Tradition is clear that upon Domitian's death in 96 AD and the undoing of his policies under Emperor Nerva, John's "exile"³⁹ on Patmos ended and he returned to Ephesus.⁴⁰ John had another life chapter after Patmos. That the most explicit document resisting Rome in the Johannine corpus is also the document where the author most reveals himself and his audience is striking, and argues against 'protective anonymity' as a motive in 2 John.

Moreover, certainly when compared to Revelation, 2 John is not a commentary on Rome or the emperor at all. The sharp rhetoric of 2 John is about an internal dispute and the correct response to it. If this letter had fallen into Roman hands, it's a bit difficult to see what kind of offense they would have taken to its contents. The doctrinal dispute in the letter over Jesus having come in the flesh would not have been a heightened point of concern for the secular authorities, even if there had been a thriving emperor cult. Jesus is not being set up as a rival to the

³⁷ A better explanation is that the persecution prophetically described by John was not yet in full swing in Asia Minor but was coming. But we should also not forget that John's exile to Patmos indicates that banishments were in fact occurring. Suggesting that persecution may not have been organized and systematic during Domitian's reign doesn't mean it was non-existent. Paul's prophecy to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20.29 is sometimes brought into this mix. I disagree, as the context of Paul's prediction is internal rather than external strife. If anything, Acts 20.29-30 has a closer connection to the situations described in the Johannine epistles.

³⁸ I agree with Bauckham: "Revelation advances a thorough-going prophetic critique of the system of Roman power. It is a critique which makes Revelation the most powerful piece of political resistance literature from the period of the early Empire." See his *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, NTT (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1993), 38. Bauckham may be over-contextualizing Revelation to the 1st century Roman situation. But in terms of how Roman authorities would have read the book, it almost certainly would have been seen by them as an attack.

³⁹ Bauckham thinks it possible that John may have voluntarily gone to Patmos to receive his revelation, contra church tradition that rather uniformly sees Patmos as a place of exile for John. *Revelation*, 4.

⁴⁰ *AH*, 2.22.5, 3.3.4; *HE* 3.23.

emperor in 2 John. Plus, one wonders how effective the supposedly protective labels like 'elect lady' would have been. The Romans weren't born yesterday and would likely have been wise in the tricks of the trade of how 'suspicious' movements and groups operated. Further, the forbidding of hospitality to false teachers (vv. 10-11) follows the uncontroversial Mediterranean practice of testing as part of a process of receiving strangers and changing them to guests.⁴¹ The letter's closing is, as previously noted, a pro forma feature of 1st century Mediterranean letter writing that nonetheless communicates a genuine desire on the part of the elder for fellowship and communion with his 'children'. To read any more into it, such as the elder wanting to save more inflammatory topics for a face-to-face chat, is severe speculation, and doesn't explain why 'protective anonymity' would have been needed in a letter that doesn't discuss such things.

Lastly, we should briefly return to Dodd. Despite being the scholarly inspiration for a possible 'protective anonymity' angle to 2 John, Dodd was a bit non-committal on his suggestion. In addition to the multiple qualifiers included in his statement cited earlier, he elsewhere asserts, "The epistles do not seem to belong to a period of persecution."⁴² In both places in his commentary, he relies on 1 John 3.13 to argue that the church in Asia Minor was not having an easy time of it. This, of course, is true, and it's also true that some have tried to see in this verse a possible allusion to Domitianic persecution.⁴³ But I think not. In 1 John, 'the world' and the author's secessionist opponents are amalgamated. The immediate context of 1 John 3 is brotherly hate. The opposition here is from within rather than without. I don't disagree that 'the world' has a larger connotation in Johannine theology than intramural jousting.⁴⁴ But the context Dodd is relying on to paint a picture of the church under pressure from pagan authorities is a bit of a stretch. The three Johannine epistles, and 2-3 John especially, are much more about inner strife than strife visiting the church from secular actors. 'Protective anonymity' would be no remedy to this kind of threat.

But if Roman persecution is an unreliable basis upon which to support a 'protective anonymity' reading of 2 John, what are we to make of the cryptic epithets in lieu of actual names that pervade the letter? Are viable alternatives to 'protective anonymity' possible to explain this phenomenon? To this endeavor we now turn.

No Single Overriding Purpose for the 'Anonymous' Labels

⁴¹ On this, see my "Hospitality: The Apostle John, Jacques Derrida, and Us." *Reformed Perspectives Magazine* 9 no. 34: (August, 2007). See also 1 John 4.1; Rev. 2.2. 'Testing' is also a recurring theme in the Gospel of John.

⁴² Dodd, lxviii.

⁴³ See Schnackenberg, 169.

⁴⁴ This section of 1 John has affinities with the Farewell Discourse in John 15-17 where persecution's source seems more outer than inner.

Biblical scholarship has a long history of developing metanarrative rubrics in an attempt to organize, understand, and stack the biblical material.⁴⁵ To varying degrees, real insights have been gleaned from proposals such as this. But it is equally if not more the case that such rubrics force the biblical material into a predetermined grid that flattens the data and inadequately accounts for it fully. Each of the rubrics mentioned in the antecedent footnote have been abandoned either partially or fully. It serves as a cautionary tale against relying on a single governing grid through which to force-fit biblical material within. In that spirit, I would like to break from this tendency a bit and suggest that in the case of 2 John, there may not be any single overriding reason to explain the data before us. There might instead be several differentiated reasons.

We must start with an unsatisfactory observation. The brevity of the letter and the non-establishing of a larger historical context rather obviously indicate that author and recipient both knew much more than what is being said in the letter. Mutual familiarity expedites what we might think of as shorthand. Much information is shared, does not need to be repeated, and would actually clutter the main point of the writing if it were. But for those of us on the outside looking in, the lack of such information is frustrating. It almost understandably forces us to speculatively reconstruct the situation of the letter absent the basic information that would make this task much easier. But it needs to be recognized that mutual familiarity by itself is almost certainly a factor behind the non-naming phenomenon the letter exhibits.

Regarding the author's self-titling as the elder in v1, this designation almost certainly means more than merely an aged man. The use of 'elder' in both the NT and early church writings is varied, which makes it difficult to pinpoint its significance here, and in 3 John 1. But in my view, it is virtually certain that the recipients knew who this person was. In 2 John, the elder claims authority or at least influence over multiple churches (vv. 1, 13). He implicitly claims to be a keeper of Jesus' teachings (vv. 5-6, 9). He claims the authority to define and discern doctrinal error about the person and nature of Jesus (v7), and exercises judgment on those who adhere to the error or assist them (vv. 7, 9-11). And there is an assumption that the audience will want to hear and learn much more from him (v12). A stranger with unknown bonafides could not command this kind of authority from afar.⁴⁶ Therefore, it stands to reason that 'the elder' was an honorific title that the author either personally preferred, and/or a title that the churches under his auspices knew and endorsed as a fitting term of affection and authority.

⁴⁵ Among many that could be cited are the Graf-Wellhausen Documentary Hypothesis to the OT, Baur's Peter (Jew) and Paul (Gentile) schism prism to understanding the NT, the allegedly very gradual and late development of high Christology that can be traced through the NT, to the supposed delay of the Parousia that forced the need for a theological Plan B allegedly seen in the later NT writings.

⁴⁶ Indeed, see 3 John 5-7 which implies previous vouching by the elder's church (a la Demetrius in v12) for the traveling brethren being honored and hosted by Gaius, even though they were 'strangers' to him. The entire exchange implies commissioning of, and accountability by all involved, to the elder.

The 'elect lady' (v1), 'dear lady' (v5), her 'children' (vv. 1, 4) and 'the elect sister' and her 'children' (v13) can all be treated together. Most agree that the lady and her sister refer to congregations, probably in the same region and possibly with close ties, and that their respective children refer to congregants of these two churches. As for why they would be referred to in this manner, I offer two suggestions.

First, the existence of two churches in this letter which are under the elder's influence and authority implies that there was a larger consortium of congregations of which these two churches were a part.⁴⁷ By using somewhat generic (though enigmatic) designators, the elder would have enabled this letter to be applicable and distributable to multiple congregations in his sphere. Given that 1 John describes either the same or very similar doctrinal error (1 John 4.2-3) and seems intended for a wide audience, it supports the view that the error being opposed in 2 John was not a threat to a single congregation but a regional threat that either had or could infect a number of churches. Under this view, the labels used in the letter were for practical efficiency of distribution, which may have been very important given the urgent tenor of the letter. It would also help explain why this feature of 2 John is altogether different from what we find in 3 John, where names are named throughout. It implies that while 3 John is clearly addressing issues in a single congregation, 2 John's applicability is broader.

Second, it seems likely that the Johannine circle, however that's defined, saw itself in deeply familial terms. The familial designators in 2 John (particularly 'children') are somewhat replicated in 3 John and is a dominant theme in 1 John.⁴⁸ The imagery of a fatherly figure fiercely safeguarding his spiritual kin is a striking feature of the Johannine epistles. This was a close-knit community bounded by the common theme of love (vv. 3-6). Under this view, these titles, particularly 'the elect lady' and 'elect sister', would be reverential familial titles and even monikers signifying the deep personal bonds between and within the community. And, as cited previously, it would also be consistent with the larger cultural convention of personifying places in female form.

Lastly, a word about 'antichrist'. 'Antichrist' only appears in the Johannine epistles (1 John 2.18-22, 4.3; 2 John 7), but there are parallels elsewhere.⁴⁹ While not entirely straightforward, the Johannine concept of antichrist is

⁴⁷ Rev. 2-3 would obviously be very consistent with this and arguably confirms it.

⁴⁸ It's also notable that in the Gospel of John, Mary is unnamed (2.2-5, 2.12, 19.25-27) and is referred to simply as Jesus' 'mother' (and ultimately becomes the Beloved Disciple's 'mother' (19.27)). Nor are Jesus' 'brothers' named (2.12, 7.1-10), nor is John's brother named (21.2). The strong tendency of utilizing familial designators in lieu of proper names in the Johannine corpus is both spiritual and literal.

⁴⁹ One might think of the 'man of lawlessness' in 2 Thes. 2.3-9 and the beast imagery of Revelation. One could also add in the 'false prophets and Christs' of the mini apocalypses recorded in the Synoptics, although their identification with 'antichrist' is less strong. For more on this, see Watson, "Antichrist", in Martin and Davids (eds.), *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 50-53.

something of a spiritual taxonomical category which is made up of very real people in both the present and future. First John describes the spirit of the antichrist as both already present in the world and still coming. All three Johannine references portray this spirit of the antichrist being embodied by multiple or 'many' people/spirits. So, while the concept of antichrist is clearly plural in the epistles, there is a pervading singular 'spirit' of commonality that coheres all the individuals together.⁵⁰

Whether the biblical picture of antichrist looks forward to one singular embodiment of Antichrist climactically opposing God in the final future is not clear.⁵¹ However, I agree with most scholars that the grammatical construction and argumentation of the Johannine epistolary texts deductively point in this direction, and that this approach harmonizes best with Paul's 'man of lawlessness'.⁵² But in terms of the naming convention in 2 John 7 not identifying a specific individual, the simple explanation is that the immediate urgency of the threat of antichrist in 2 John is a plural understanding. It's an existential present and imminent threat to the audience (v8) made up of 'many' individuals, albeit bound together by a common heretically deceiving spirit at work in the world.⁵³ The great coming eschatological foe of God is being realized in principle in the here-and-now in 2 John, stressing the nearness rather than remoteness of the threat.

This gets tricky from the standpoint of proper eschatology. In my reading of the scholarly literature, there seems to be an interpretive sentiment that the 'antichrist' passages depict these here-and-now confrontations as something of a warmup act for the future main attraction of a consummative apocalyptic showdown. While this idea certainly does not do violence to the text, we need to be careful. There is a valid concern that emphasizing the here-and-now nature of these Johannine passages runs the risk of adopting an over-realized eschatology that downplays or dismisses the final grand conflict (which could then heavily influence our reading of Revelation and really the entire Johannine corpus).⁵⁴ But

⁵⁰ Polycarp later draws on these Johannine passages with an interesting phraseology: "[E]veryone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is *antichrist*." (*Phil.* 7.1). This picture is a highly malevolent version of 'out of many, one', or perhaps more aptly, 'from one, many'.

⁵¹ Irenaeus interpreted John 5.43 as referring to a singular future Antichrist (*AH* 5.25.4).

⁵² For good discussions on this, see Kruse, *The Letters of John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 97-102; Hill, "1-3 John," in Kruger (ed.), *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 497-8; Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, NTL (Louisville: WJK, 2008), 98-108.

⁵³ On 2 John 7, Lieu eloquently remarks, "Although [the elder] has anticipated the extent of the danger – 'many' – they effectively count as one, as 'the deceiver and the antichrist.' The article here is not generic but specific, presupposing the idea, recalled a little more precisely in 1 John 2:18, of the final opposition to God embodied in a single figure...At the same time, since this connection is presupposed but not made explicitly, the possibility is kept open of identifying this figure with 'anyone' (v. 10)." Lieu, *I, II & III John*, 255.

⁵⁴ Or to go further, that the elder himself held to a mistaken eschatology where not just the 'last hour' (1 John 2.18-19) but the apocalyptic finale was at hand (but contrast the 'last hour' in 1 John with the 'last day' in John 6).

there is also the danger of adopting an under-realized eschatology if, in emphasizing the final great battle, we minimize the urgency, high stakes, and expectations for victory depicted in the here-and-now confrontations in the epistles. In the Johannine writings, eternal life in Christ's kingdom, as well as the resistance to it, are both a present and future reality.⁵⁵ Therefore, the inaugurated, semi-realized, and consummative aspects of Johannine eschatology all need to be claimed and held together, and strongly.⁵⁶

Assuming the audience knew at least some of these individuals, the elder would not have needed or wanted to name them and risk furthering their fame and following (which would support the view of 2 John being a more regional circular letter). Instead, he gives clear instructions on how to do doctrinal testing of 'anyone' who might come to them (v10). In modern vernacular, he is teaching his 'children' how to fish.

Conclusion

'Protective anonymity' may well have been a real device that was used to protect people from harm, such as in the Markan Passion material.⁵⁷ But in my view, it does not suffice as an all-purpose explanation for why certain people, places, or groups were not named in various NT books. In the case of 2 John, both internal and external evidence is at best inconclusive, and more likely points away from this phenomenon. In its use of second-order familial designations to refer to real people, the author is likely employing terms that were commonly known and understood by the audience and were part of their normal community parlance.⁵⁸ The use of both familial labeling toward those who have "both the Father and the Son" (v9) and anti-Christian labeling towards those who "do not have God" (v9) is likely designed to accentuate a stark contrast for his readers which would make the elder's instructions about the needed response clear and easier for them to

⁵⁵ There is, of course, also a 'past' component to Johannine eschatology, with repeated reminders of OT heritage and holding fast to what has been true 'from the beginning' in an eschatological sense.

⁵⁶ 1 John 2.28-3.2; John 4.23, 5.25. This approach categorically departs from Käsemann's musings that the futuristic aspect of Johannine eschatology was little more than a primitive relic that the Evangelist never outgrew. See his *The Testimony of Jesus According to John 17* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 13-14.

⁵⁷ One might also cite the use of 'Babylon' in 1 Pet. 5.13 as a likely stand-in for Rome in a letter saturated with persecution overtones.

⁵⁸ This gets into sociolinguistic analysis and whether the Johannine corpus/community utilized 'in-group' technical language that would be understood by 'insiders' but not so much by 'outsiders'. In some cases, I think the Johannine writings do introduce semantic shifts into otherwise common words in which special meanings become part of the technical terminology (λόγος being an obvious example). To some degree, they may have had something approximating their own lingo. But this feature has been cited as a major factor in the once popular view of a sectarian Johannine community that, through specialized language, sought to bolster the sense of belonging and superiority of those 'in the know' while being deliberately impenetrable to those 'not in the know'. I have argued strongly against this reconstruction, particularly as it relates to the Gospel of John. There is ample speech accommodation and explanatory discourse throughout the Fourth Gospel that routs the sectarian view and preserves the Fourth Gospel's status as a strongly evangelistic and missional document.

embrace. None of this requires an appeal to ‘protective anonymity’. The ‘protection’ we see in 2 John is the elder fortifying the spiritual and doctrinal health of his children through clear instruction, loving encouragement, and hope of a future visit “so that our joy may be complete”.

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