

Here we begin a series of posts written by my colleague at UNC, Hugo Mendez. Hugo has had an intriguing and impressive career. He did an MA in Religion at University of Georgia, but then his PhD was in Linguistics, also at Georgia. He went from there onto a two-year postdoctoral fellowship at Yale and “retooled” to become a New Testament scholar through some, well, incredibly intense study. He came to UNC as a postdoctoral fellow in 2016 for two years, after which we were fortunate to hire him as an assistant professor on tenure track.

Hugo’s skills are remarkably wide-ranging. He knows far more ancient languages than I do (on his CV he lists: Indo-European: Ancient Greek, Latin, Classical Armenian, Gothic, Old Church Slavic, Sanskrit (Classical, Vedic). Aramaic (Biblical Aramaic, Classical Syriac), Classical Hebrew, and Akkadian. Really. OK then.

If you’re interested in checking out his C.V. (hey, is this guy qualified? J), it is here: https://religion.unc.edu/files/2020/05/CV_2020_Mendez_abbr.pdf

Hugo has just started his publishing career, and is doing so with a bang. One of his (rather many and broad-ranging) areas of expertise is the Johannine literature of the NT - the material I’ve been posting on over the past couple of weeks. This last year he wrote an article that is making some serious waves, something that rarely (very rarely) happens in the NT academic community (articles hardly ever make much of an impact, though books sometimes do). It is called “Did the Johannine Community Exist?.” If you’ve been reading my posts, you know that the answer most of us have is, YES, and, well, we have thought for a long time that it’s rather IMPORTANT. Hugo challenges the consensus, and has agreed to write a series of posts on it.

The article appeared in an important international academic journal, The Journal for the Study of the New Testament; it is open to the public, and can be read here, if you are so inclined: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0142064X19890490>

Hugo has been on the blog for a long time, and has agreed to post his views about the topic for us, at a level everyone should be able to understand. We’ve talked about (he and I) having a back-and-forth about it all when he’s done posting - but that may be a while, because it will take him some time for him to lay out his views and their rationale. So far I’ve found much of what he has said convincing (it coincides with a lot of my other views of things); but a couple of things I disagree with. Isn’t scholarship fun?

So here is the first post. An important note: **Hugo has agreed to respond to your comments.** I’ve suggested he *start* doing that; if it gets too overwhelming, I may have to cut it off, for his sake. (Several guest bloggers in the past have told me they can’t BELIEVE how much time and effort it takes!)

So please, out of fairness, if you have a question, keep it succinct and to the point, and ask only *one* question per day, not a whole string of them.

What Do We Mean by “Johannine Community?”

It’s a pleasure to introduce myself to you all. I’m the other (fairly new!) New Testament faculty member at UNC’s Department of Religious Studies and a long-time reader of this blog.

As many of you have heard, I published a piece last month in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, entitled “Did the Johannine Community Exist?” (March 2020). Simply put, the article argues that the “Johannine community”—the hypothetical setting in which the Gospel and Epistles of John were written—never existed. The piece has received significant attention in the weeks since its publication. In the next few blog posts, I want to condense my article for this audience and address some common questions about my work.

In this first post, I want to begin by clarifying what I mean when I use the term “Johannine Community.” I’ve found that some people tend to use the term in imprecise and slippery ways, so defining the language I’ll be using will help us moving forward.

The Settings of the Johannine Texts

Let me start by stating the obvious: clearly, the Johannine texts were written somewhere—in some kind of social context(s) or matri(ces). After all, human beings are social creatures. Nearly all of us belong to some social group; in fact, we typically belong to several groups simultaneously—including, families, networks of friends, neighborhoods, congregations/communities of worship, workplaces, ethnic groups, etc. Undoubtedly, the Johannine authors participated in local groups and gatherings (e.g., Christian assemblies); they probably exchanged ideas with people they knew; their own views were probably shaped by memories, ideas, and texts circulating among people they knew in various settings; and when writing their texts, that 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 question is: what kind of groups or gatherings—what contexts or circles—stand behind the Gospel and Epistles of John? How many were there, and what did they look like?

The “Johannine Community”/“Johannine Christianity”

We can imagine a number of possible contexts behind these texts, but most scholars limit themselves to one option. They believe these texts were written within a single entity called the “Johannine Community” or “Johannine Christianity.” Note carefully that the “Johannine Community” is not a catch-all title for any and every possible setting for these texts. Rather, as I’m using the term (and as scholars generally use the term), it’s the name for a **very specific** concept of where these texts were written with **very specific** characteristics.

Specifically, the “Johannine Community” is conceptualized as “a single, close-knit network of ancient churches sharing a distinctive theological outlook” (Méndez 2020: 350). Let’s unpack that a bit:

“A single, close-knit...”

Scholars don’t think the Johannine authors came from very different contexts. They believe they came from *a single* context—that is, from *the same* group—and that they probably knew one another through this group. That group may or may not have been limited to the same place (it’s possible that these authors lived in different towns, but kept contact by

letter-writing), but it was a single entity. That's why we speak of a singular Johannine "community" rather than "communities."

"...network of ancient churches..."

Scholars conceptualize the "community" not merely as a set of authors but as an entire set of ancient Christian congregations or churches, which formed some sort of network. The reason, as we'll see, is that some of the Epistles refer directly to "churches" and hint at internal schisms, and leadership struggles.

"...sharing a distinctive theological outlook."

Scholars assume that this group shared a body of distinctive views in common—the same views we find in the Gospel and Epistles of John. It was, to put it another way, a "Johannine" community.

The claim, then, is that John, 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John emerged in a single ancient Christian movement or sect with real members ("Johannine Christians") and distinctive beliefs and practices ("Johannine Christianity"). Scholars imagine that this movement existed parallel to others on the landscape of first-century Christianity, including so-called "Jewish Christianities," "Pauline Christianity," and so forth.

My intervention

Enter my paper. My paper 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 movement of "Johannine Christians" in the first century, as scholars have assumed for at least a half-century.

Although these texts emerged in some social context(s) somewhere, they did not emerge in the kind of setting scholars imagine. In my work I suggest, for instance, I suggest that these texts might have been written...

... in multiple settings or contexts...

...by authors who did not know one another or have personal contact...

...and whose views may not have been shared with others...

I'll explain why I think this is the case in my next few posts.



[Were the Gospels Generally Written for “Communities” of Christians: Guest Post by Hugo Mendez](#)

[The Johannine Letters in Sum](#)