



Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue: Exploring the Complexity of Identities and Boundaries in the New Testament and Related Literature

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to situate this volume within the context of a specific academic research context in the field of Biblical studies, specifically New Testament studies and related literature. The research gap to which this volume contributes is the exploration of the complexity of identity and boundaries in early Christianity.¹ Past New Testament studies have not sufficiently taken the complexity and “nestedness” of identity into consideration on a theoretical identity level. This volume intends to provide fresh information from newer developments in social identity studies (e.g., social identity complexity theory) with the aim of stimulating ongoing research in the field. This essay will first point out the problems of approaching the Bible from a Western individualist perspective and then state why it is necessary that we reflect on identity from an ancient group-oriented perspective. It will also consider this without losing an awareness of ancient introspectiveness, albeit as group-oriented individuals, which is often underplayed in research. Secondly, this essay will provide an overview of recent approaches to social identity in the New Testament but also point out the research gaps that remain, which justify this volume and ongoing research in the field in the future.

2. Know Thyself: Western Individualistic versus Ancient Dyadic?

Many know, and could cite from heart, the well-known inscription from the temple of Apollo at Delphi: “γνῶθι σαυτόν”—know yourself.

When Pliny the Elder (in *Plin. Nat.* 7.32) recalls this inscription at Delphi, set in gold letters with its typical Ionic–Spartan–Chilonian brevity, it had stood there for centuries. The popular appeal still resonates with many today.² For Aristotle in his *Nicomachean ethics*, knowing yourself was inextricably linked to *ethos*, i.e., identity and behavior go hand in hand (Van der Watt 2006, pp. v–ix; Zimmermann 2009, pp. 399–400; Zimmermann and Van der Watt 2010; *Arist. An. Post.* 1.33–89b 9). It would be wrong to think that the ancient person was anti-introspective, as Malina (2002, p. 199) once explicitly argued. While we agree with Malina that the ancient person was mainly collective and dyadic in their orientation, the evidence of the primary ancient literature also shows us a clear indication that the ancients were not anti-introspective in their self-fashioning, even though Malina would want to argue otherwise. One can be a group-oriented person and dialogically introspective, as we see in Cicero’s four personae (see *De Officiis*) and in Epictetus, as recent works in classical studies have shown (see Niehoff and Levinson 2019; also Hawley 2020).

Saying who you are is also a way of saying who you are not. That is, by saying who we are, we are defining our identity, and we are also defining our boundaries. Therefore, identity and boundaries are two sides of the same coin. Or perhaps we could use the more convincing biological metaphor of a semi-permeable cell that has clear cell walls, but in



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the process of osmosis, it must also determine which elements the cell integrates from the outside into itself and which to reject and keep outside.³ Some would argue that it is anachronistic to argue that the ancient contemporaries of our Biblical writings clearly thought about identity, boundaries, and even a hierarchy of values. We think otherwise. We find significant evidence in the ancient texts about constructing identity and boundaries and reflection on values framed in a cognitive hierarchy. Hawley (2020), e.g., points to Cicero's explicit differentiation between the *natura universa* (universal nature) and the *natura nostrum* (our own nature) and that the ancient person had to reflect on both of these and on their social roles and construct a hierarchy of values that would enable them to make wise choices in the fashioning of themselves, such that they also perform their duty properly. In our opinion, here lies a very clear ancient primary source example of nested and co-existing identity. Social identity complexity theory, which we will comment on below, would be one such valuable heuristic tool to critically reflect on the nature of such envisioned identity complexity. However, we will reserve this discussion for later in the essay.

First, before we read “γνώθι σαυτόν” anachronistically through contemporary Western eyes, we need to pause for a moment and also not make ourselves guilty of forms of ethnocentrism. We currently live in a *superdiverse* (Vertovec 2007) and *supermobile* (see Kok and Van den Heuvel 2018) time in which individualism and free expression are high values in the West, and also only recently so, given our long history. In our present context, scholars such as Brené Brown (2020, p. 68) memorably say: “Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we actually are”. For her, such authenticity entails the cultivation of a form of courage “to be yourself”, “to be imperfect”, “to set boundaries”, and be “vulnerable”. We currently live in a hyper-individualized Western world in which people value a form of authenticity that has the courage to break away from the (social) molds that have been placed upon them. We value forms of freedom and encourage the importance of liberty from social constraints from a young age in our children and motivate them towards self-expression, *quamquam*, within what we consider to be healthy boundaries. However, we cannot read the Delphic oracles, Plato (e.g., *Charmides* 165a–165b), Socrates, Aristotle (*Nic. Eth.* 9.9), or Paul and Peter for that matter, through contemporary Western individualist eyes in such a way. They lived in an ancient Mediterranean group-oriented honor and shame world (Rohrbaugh 2020, pp. 74–84) in which the values of the group (e.g., *Arist. Nic. Eth.* 9.9) were more important than the values of the individual (see Crook 2020). Knowing yourself for the ancients meant knowing, in a humble way, your proper place in the bigger scheme of people, places, and times.

Ancient Christians lived in a paternalistically structured, group-oriented world (see Crook 2020), and conversion was not merely an individualist experience. Michael Wolter (2011, p. 323) points to the noticeable evidence in what he calls the “*Prinzip der egalitären Reziprozität*” (*Principle of egalitarian reciprocity*), which is expressed in Greek through the words ἀλλήλων (*allēlōn*), ἀλλήλους (*allēlois*), and ἀλλήλους (*allēlous*) (see Table 1). These are different case forms of the same root word, which relate to the reciprocal pronoun “one another” or “each other.” This shows the *priority of the group* in ancient and earliest Christian thinking.

For Wolter, the way the New Testament, and especially Paul, placed an accent on this group dimension is “*innerhalb der antiken Literatur einzigartig*”, i.e., rather unique given the rest of ancient literature. However, as such, the phenomenon of the foremost importance of the group and the ethos constructed such that it benefits the concerns of the group is not strange at all for the ancient reader (see Crook 2020), e.g., as we see in Cicero (see Hawley 2020).

The salience of the group is clearly visible in the way the earliest Christian authors reflect on identity, ethos, and communal metaphors, such as one body, one family, and one temple made of many stones (see, e.g., Ephesians, 1 Peter, Paul), etc. Now the interesting thing that Wolter (2011, pp. 324–25) points out in his Pauline Theology is that although there is a strong focus on the group and on *egalitarian relationships* within the ecclesia, it must be noted that it is expressed “*innerhalb der Ekklesia*”, that is, a kind of “*Gemeinde-ethik*”,

but that “in der die alltagsweltlichen Statusunterschiede keine Rolle spielen”, i.e., that in everyday life, the status differentiation was maintained. If Wolter is correct, which we think he is, this means by implication that a form of social identity complexity and nestedness of identity, or a co-existing identity, was at play. Becoming part of the Christian household did not obliterate your ethnic identity, for instance, which rather co-existed and continued (Campbell 2008, pp. 15–16). We argue that in the past, the complexity and nestedness of ancient Christian identity were often downplayed, and that it is necessary to move away from such essentialist notions of identity that collapse the nestedness of continuing identity that was at play. One also subsequently needs an appropriate theory of identity (e.g., SICT) that can deal with such complexity (which we will expand on below).

Table 1. Examples of egalitarian reciprocity © Williams and Kok⁴.

NT Reference	Greek NA 28
Rom 12:10	“...τῆ φιλαδελφία εἰς ἀλλήλους φιλόστοργοι...”
Rom 12:16	“...τὸ αὐτὸ εἰς ἀλλήλους φρονούντες...”
Rom 15:5	“...ὁ δὲ θεὸς τῆς ὑπομονῆς καὶ τῆς παρακλήσεως δώη ὑμῖν τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν ἐν ἀλλήλοις κατὰ Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν...”
Rom 13:8	“...Μηδενὶ μηδὲν ὀφείλετε εἰ μὴ τὸ ἀλλήλους ἀγαπᾶν...”
1 Thes 3:12	“...ὁμᾶς δὲ ὁ κύριος πλεονάσαι καὶ περισσεύσαι τῇ ἀγάπῃ εἰς ἀλλήλους καὶ εἰς πάντας καθάπερ καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς ὑμᾶς...”
1 Thes 4:9	“...αὐτοὶ γὰρ ὑμεῖς θεοδίδακτοὶ ἐστε εἰς τὸ ἀγαπᾶν ἀλλήλους...”
Rom 14:19	“...ἄρα οὖν τὰ τῆς εἰρήνης διώκωμεν καὶ τὰ τῆς οἰκοδομῆς τῆς εἰς ἀλλήλους...”
Rom 15:7	“...Διὸ προσλαμβάνεσθε ἀλλήλους, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς προσελάβετο ὑμᾶς εἰς δόξαν τοῦ θεοῦ...”
Rom 15:14	“...δυνάμενοι καὶ ἀλλήλους νοουθετεῖν...”
Rom 16:16	“...Ἀσπάσασθε ἀλλήλους ἐν φιλήματι ἀγίῳ...”
1 Cor 16:20	“...Ἀσπάσασθε ἀλλήλους ἐν φιλήματι ἀγίῳ...”
2 Cor 13:12	“...ἀσπάσασθε ἀλλήλους ἐν ἀγίῳ φιλήματι...”
1 Cor 11:33	“...ὧστε, ἀδελφοί μου, συνερχόμενοι εἰς τὸ φαγεῖν ἀλλήλους ἐκδέχεσθε...”
1 Cor 12:25	“...ἵνα μὴ ᾖ σχίσμα ἐν τῷ σώματι ἀλλὰ τὸ αὐτὸ ὑπὲρ ἀλλήλων μεριμνῶσιν τὰ μέλη...”
Gal 5:13	“...ἀλλὰ διὰ τῆς ἀγάπης δουλεύετε ἀλλήλοις...”
Gal 6:2	“...Ἀλλήλων τὰ βάρη βαστάζετε...”
Phil 2:3	“...ἀλλήλους ἡγούμενοι ὑπερέχοντας...”
1 Thes 4:18	“...Ὡστε παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους ἐν τοῖς λόγοις τούτοις...”
1 Thes 5:11	“...Διὸ παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους καὶ οἰκοδομεῖτε εἰς τὸν ἕνα, καθὼς καὶ ποιεῖτε...”
1 Thes 5:15	“...ὁρᾶτε μὴ τις κακὸν ἀντὶ κακοῦ τινι ἀποδῶ, ἀλλὰ πάντοτε τὸ ἀγαθὸν διώκετε [καὶ] εἰς ἀλλήλους καὶ εἰς πάντας...”

Converting to the Christ-following movement challenged the earliest Christians regarding their social identity and sense of belonging in ways we often underestimate today (see Despotis and Löhr 2022). In many ways, their experience was more complex and layered than we used to think.

In a recent paper, Kaminski (2022, p. 91) argues the following:

Scholars and practitioners alike celebrate the Apostle Paul as an exemplar of Christian mission. But few emphasize how the ministry and practices of the biblical author developed amid incredible intrareligious conflict and relational

wreckage. Embroiled in tension over doctrinal and ritual changes, plagued by vitriolic attacks on his character, and caught up in a web of splintered relationships, Paul offers contemporary people of faith a lesson on unity in diversity for mission in an age of hybridity. Embracing the ‘terrible and troubled’ experience of Paul enables us to bring into relief a transformative hermeneutical strategy for negotiating new forms of religious life and multiplicity in belonging.

We agree with Kaminski’s (2022, pp. 91–104) observation that early Christianity should not be idealized as representing a movement that was freed from conflict and that much can be gained by seeing the earliest Christian movement(s) as one that struggled with issues related to a “multiplicity in belonging”. Unfortunately, Kaminski does not at all engage with social identity theory, or the even more helpful social identity complexity theory, which allows biblical scholars to deal exactly with the questions of the nestedness of identity and the complexity involved therein from a proper theoretical angle applied heuristically to the biblical texts. We want to put it to you as readers that when we reflect on the early Christian movement but do not have an appropriate identity theory lens to account heuristically for the complexity and inherent tension that was involved in the earliest Christian movement(s), (a) we miss the opportunity to draw proper theoretical correlation with the present context; and (b) we also fail to see the complexity of early Christianity and struggle to make sense of conflicting data. In fact, on a macro-level, we should think not of the earliest Christian movement in the singular, but of early Christian movements in the plural. On the meso- and micro-level, we also need to think of Biblical authors writing circular letters to congregations that were possibly made up of several groups that might have internal difference and plurality (see Campbell 2008, pp. 15–31). On the micro-level, we need to imagine that biblical authors such as Paul and even Peter, embodied not some essentialist form of identity, but one which was more complex in nature. Such complex notions of identity would also help us to deal with what we perceive as being inherent tensions in Paul (e.g., Rom 7). However, if we do not have the heuristic tools provided by an appropriate identity theory, we will fail to see such complexity and how such inherent tensions could be part of one and the same person or group, which may be holding different social discourse structures in dialogical tension. This is often the trap one steps into, as we, for instance, see in cases where those trying to discover Paul *within* Judaism might again sway the pendulum to the other extreme, that is, underplaying the Graeco-Roman embeddedness and identity complexity involved in forms of nested and co-existing identity (see Boccaccini and Segovia 2016; Bird et al. 2023). To their credit, most of the authors of this latest volume are very aware of both Paul’s Jewish and his Graeco-Roman background. However, the pendulum has recently swung a bit towards a rediscovery of Paul *within* Judaism. In our opinion, future research in the fields of SIT and SICT would benefit greatly from engaging with this source and the work of the authors of the chapters therein. Some, such as Tucker (2023) and Porter (2023), have also combined their SIT concerns with this pendulum swing, which is an encouraging trajectory.

To circle our argument back to the cognitive frame of the metaphor of the semi-permeable cell, we could also reflect upon cells that live and thrive and those that die. Any living organism has to be engaged with and in contact with other living systems. Groups are, in this sense, also similar to living organisms. When a group, as an organic entity, fails to reflect critically in an ongoing process on its identity in a changed context and how it wants to engage with its environment, it has the potential to die. In any process of osmosis, a cell would take elements outside of itself and integrate them within itself. Groups act the same. Groups are socially constructed and, on a discourse level, also integrate elements of the world around them into themselves. For that reason, a group should always organically seek to dialogue with its environment, letting certain elements from the outside in while also critically reflecting on what elements to discard that are harmful to its health.

In this train of thought, Michael Wolter (2011, pp. 316–17), a New Testament scholar specializing in Paul, referred to the challenge that the authors of the New Testament had in the formative years of the movement to express both exclusive ethos and inclusive ethos.

On the one hand, exclusive ethos refers to the identity and outflowing behavior of a group that *differentiates* itself from other groups. Such an ethos consolidates identity inside and makes the group distinct. On the other hand, there is also, as with all groups, a form of inclusive ethos. The latter refers to the ethos of the group that is shared with the world outside of the group and makes it possible for that group to also integrate with the society around them. Wolter himself did not make use of social identity theory, but his insights have direct implications for this, especially for social identity complexity theory, because they deal with the complexity involved in both the inclusive and exclusive ethos referred to by Wolter. Inclusive ethos presupposes forms of sameness with the *Umwelt*, albeit from a different motivational background, which by implication calls for forms of SICT overlap. Rediscovering Paul *within* Judaism also means to reflect on the way that Judaism was not a monolithic movement but a diverse one, and furthermore, that Judaism(s) was/were penetrated by Graeco-Roman (e.g., Stoic) ideas. Rediscovering Paul *within* Judaism also entails rediscovering the nestedness and social identity complexity of Judaism within its Graeco-Roman context, as well as the earliest Christ-following movement *as* a Jewish movement of sorts within the first century.

3. Studies of Social Identity in the New Testament

In recent years, several volumes have appeared that make use of social identity theory (from hereon, SIT) as a heuristic lens to explain in new ways how early Christians constructed their social identity, as well as the boundaries of their group. In this regard, one can point to the original work of Philip Esler, who in the mid-1990s presented a paper at the British New Testament Society making use of SIT and applying it to Matthew's Gospel for the first time (see [Esler 2014](#), pp. 29–65). As a heuristic lens, it opened up a whole array of fresh questions and new insights and would gain momentum in the next three decades.

In 2014, [Tucker and Baker \(2014\)](#) led an edited book project, which culminated in the *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, in which all books of the New Testament were treated from a specific thematic or exegetical angle, making use of SIT. Some years later, another comprehensive volume appeared under the editorship of [Tucker and Kuecker \(2020\)](#) under the title *The T&T Clark Social Identity Commentary on the New Testament*, published by Bloomsbury. In this book, different specialists conducted detailed commentary on each New Testament book and made use of SIT. Currently, several scholars are writing full commentaries on each Bible book, making use of SIT. Some full-volume SIT commentaries have appeared very recently on Luke ([Brawley 2020](#)), Romans (by [Campbell 2023](#)) and 2 Corinthians ([Esler 2023](#)). Brian Tucker's commentary on 1 Corinthians will soon (circa 2024) appear.⁵ In this context, the exploration of social identity theory is an ongoing and highly relevant field of research. [Esler \(2023, pp. 28–29\)](#) remarks that:

“In the last ten years, there has been something of a boom of interest among biblical researchers in the social identity approach. ...Accordingly, there is no sign of biblical research using social identity theory abating, and, since social identity theorists are continually pushing the field in new directions, that circumstance is unlikely to change.”

One such new development, we argue, is the social identity complexity theory.

One of the challenging issues that has appeared over time is the complexity of ancient identity. For instance, how does one explain what Brian Tucker described as “the continuation of existing identities” and “the nested social dilemma” (see [Tucker 2014](#), pp. 407ff), which come down to how we need to reflect on co-existing identities? In the past, scholars have often spoken of early Christian identity as simply superseding previous identities. The reality is not so simple, however, and is much more complex in nature. Identities, especially social ones, mostly continue in some way and are nested. Furthermore, identity theories accentuate that when we reduce the complexity of identity, we are making ourselves guilty of essentialism, both in the present and in relation to the past. Thus, this problem needs to be further investigated, namely, how ancient Christians might have dealt with identities in ways that may be reminiscent of intersection, dominance, merger, or compartmental-

ization (SICT terms). In this specific regard, [Jacobus Kok \(2014\)](#) was the first to use social identity complexity theory (SICT of [Roccas and Brewer 2002](#)) in New Testament studies by expanding the theoretical repertoire used in New Testament studies to better explain, on a sound theoretical level, how early Christian authors might have envisioned such layered, nested, or compartmentalized identities. Some have subsequently used this approach to also reflect on the complexity involved in early Christianity. [Webber \(2021, pp. 184–99\)](#), for instance, used the theory to describe identity complexity in the *Didache*, which is a document dating to the late first century (conservative estimates) or early second century (majority scholarship estimates). This illustrates that not only is this theory helpful in describing the nature of the nestedness of identity in the New Testament, but also in the context of early Christian studies, helping us to see the value of using a theoretical identity approach that would allow us heuristically to see that not only was the early Christian movement not a monolithic one, but a polyphonic movement. The authors of texts that became part of the New Testament canon, and those who were written by post-apostolic authors in leadership positions, often had the challenge of guiding their readers wisely in matters of identity and boundaries that more than often entailed forms of co-existing and thus more complex identity on macro-, meso-, and micro-levels.

4. Conclusions

In this volume, the authors reflect critically on early Christian identity as it relates to the complexity involved in the formative years of the Christ-following movement within the broader context of Hellenistic Judaism and the Graeco-Roman world. From a methodological approach, this book contributes to the theoretical perspective of social-scientific exegesis, with specific reference to social identity theory (e.g., [Esler 2014](#); [Tucker and Baker 2014](#); [Tucker and Kuecker 2020](#)) and the related, but newer, social identity complexity theory ([Jacobus Kok 2014](#); [Hunt 2018](#); [Webber 2021](#); note [Tolmie 2023, p. 199](#)). The scope is the New Testament and related literature.

The gaps in future research include the following:

1. Reading New Testament texts *within* Judaism (e.g., [Boccaccini and Segovia 2016](#); [Bird et al. 2023](#)), but viewing Judaism not as a monolithic movement, but a polyphonic movement, permeated by the Graeco-Roman world (e.g., [Zetterholm et al. 2022](#)).
2. Examining New Testament texts with an eye for the complexity of identity and the nestedness and continuation of identity without collapsing such identity into essentialist notions of identity ([Tucker 2014](#)).
3. Using identity theories, such as the social identity complexity theory (e.g., [Jacobus Kok 2014](#); [Hunt 2018](#); [Webber 2021](#)), to account for a better heuristic understanding of the complexity of ancient Christ-following identity, against the background of a renewed appreciation for the complexity of Graeco-Roman identity (e.g., Cicero, Epictetus, etc.; see [Niehoff and Levinson 2019](#); [Hawley 2020](#)).
4. Examining how “messy metaphors” ([Garroway 2023, pp. 75–91](#)) could be accounted for when SICT is considered, such that it deals with superordinate and subordinate identities. In such as cases where Paul states that believers are no longer Gentiles, but elsewhere still states that they are ethnically so (e.g., 1 Cor 5:1; 12:2 and 1 Thess 1:9; 4:5; Gal 6:16 “Israel of God” τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ θεοῦ; Rom 16:4—πᾶσαι αἱ ἐκκλησίαι τῶν ἐθνῶν); [Garroway](#) speaks against superordinate identity in favor of particular identity, but a SICT approach would have enabled him to see that both are in fact conceptually possible to hold if one has a more complex identity theory.
5. Combining insights from linguistics, for instance systemic functional linguistics (e.g., [Dvorak 2020, pp. 9–36](#); see also [Porter 2022](#); [Porter and O’Donnell 2024](#)); or valency linguistic methods ([Herbst 2010](#); [Sabatini and Camodeca 2022](#); [Paridaens et al. 2022](#); [Ágel et al. 2024](#)) with SIT and SICT, so as to provide a linguistic theoretical basis that could complement social identity theoretical studies.
6. Examining the dynamics behind exemplars and figures embodying prototypical elements, as well as how prototypes were formed within ancient communities, to

give windows into the exemplary characteristics that are being promoted (Carter 2020, pp. 235–51; Esler 2023, pp. 33–36). Because the exemplar embodies prototypical elements such as identity norms for the group, members carefully follow the actions and choices of such an individual (Burke 2006). These figures also play a role in defining the attributes of a group’s identity, play a role in prototypicality, and also help to distinguish key qualities of the outgroup (Baker 2012; Williams 2019). This may be especially valuable with fresh research on the reception of Jesus in ancient Christian communities (Keith et al. 2019), since Jesus is both an exemplar and also serves as an embodiment of group prototypicality, and the remembered Jesus also serves as a form of prototype. However, the term prototype applied to Jesus is problematic from the perspective of social identity theory (Esler 2023, pp. 33–36) and needs further attention.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ We recognize that the current scholarly opinion is to explore more diversity within early Christianity. Whatever one’s opinion is about diversity and unity in early Christianity, this series of essays provides tools for examining the diversity of movements that can be considered as forms of early Christian expression.
- ² See <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0137:book=7:chapter=32> accessed 20 June 2024. “Chilonian brevity” refers in our opinion to the concise style attributed to Chilon, son of Damagetus, one of the Seven Sages of Greece. Chilon of Sparta (6th century B.C.) (thus Laconia), is known for his wisdom and manner of speech. As such, Laconic speech, is marked by terseness and economy of words. Chilon’s reputation for brevity is reflected in the famous aphorisms attributed to him, such as “Know yourself”. So, “Chilonian brevity”, in our opinion, could be understood as the art of expressing significant wisdom or advice in a concise and impactful manner, a hallmark of Chilon’s contributions to philosophical thought and his Spartan heritage.
- ³ Credit to Martelize Kok, trained in pain and structural changes to the brain who in a discussion made the link between SIT and SICT by analogy in using the example of a semi-permeable cell.
- ⁴ Data are from Wolter (2011, p. 323) and the table was drawn by Williams and Kok.
- ⁵ See <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/series/tt-clark-social-identity-commentaries-on-the-new-testament/> accessed on 20 June 2024.

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