

Article

A Foreign People: Towards a Holistic Identity Theory within a Christian Context

Philip La Grange Du Toit

Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Mahikeng 2745, South Africa; philip.dutoit@nwu.ac.za

Abstract: In this contribution, the identity theory is reconsidered in respect to its epistemology. The social identity theory (SIT) and social identity complexity theory (SICT) are both instruments of social sciences based on naturalistic assumptions. The question is asked if social identity theories can fully account for the Christian identity, especially in respect to being confined to the natural, *social* domain. In light of the way that identity is presented in the New Testament, and especially the way in which the Christian identity is presented as a socially *foreign* identity in texts such as 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11; Philippians 3:20 and Ephesians 2:19, a more holistic approach to identity that includes aspects of a supernaturalistic epistemology is considered. In other words, a holistic theory of identity is considered, in which the Christian identity is described in terms of one's relationship to other people (sociological), as well as one's relationship to God (theological).

Keywords: identity; social identity theory; 1 Peter; epistemology; methodology; naturalism; supernaturalism

1. Introduction

It has become common practice to utilise social identity theories in New Testament studies. One of the main questions in applying these theories to identity formation in the New Testament is whether they *fully account* for the Christian identity as is described by the various New Testament authors. Jacobus Kok (2014, p. 1) rightly asks whether the social identity theory (SIT) is “able to account for the *dynamic multifaceted nature* of ancient Christian identity” (emphasis original). Kok (2014) was the first to apply the social identity complexity theory (SICT) to the New Testament, originally developed by Sonia Roccas and Brewer (2002). The SICT is a more nuanced version of the SIT, in that it steers beyond a “single ingroup-outgroup categorization”. It accounts for the overlapping nature of groups and aims to more precisely explain identity by way of a simultaneous membership to multiple groups (Roccas and Brewer 2002, p. 88). In utilising the SICT, Kok (2014, p. 8) argues that the ecclesia is constituted of “people from different social strata, cultures and backgrounds . . . as being part of the same social group”, in which their social identity is high in “social identity complexity”. In a more recent article, Kok and Swart (2021, p. 8) argued that the Christ-following identity is superior to other identities. The Christ followers “became the new dominant social order”, in which the influence of the Graeco-Roman household is not necessarily eliminated. In reference to Paul's request to Philemon about Onesimus, Kok and Swart argued that “Paul constructs a community in which people from different social backgrounds are encouraged to show each other mutual respect and love as siblings would do”. In this manner, Paul “solves the identity complexity arising as a slave enters into the Christ-following community of his master”. Kok and Swart (2021, p. 9) rightly stated that there were ways in which Christians were indeed countercultural in terms of the way in which their identity and ethnos transcended boundaries.

The question still remains, however, if the SICT fully accounts for all the dimensions of the Christian identity, for even in the SICT the frame of reference remains within the *social* domain, which is inevitable, since the SIT per definition resorts under the subject field of social psychology (Esler 2003, p. 19; 2021, p. 101). In New Testament terms, both the SIT



Citation: Du Toit, Philip La Grange. 2023. A Foreign People: Towards a Holistic Identity Theory within a Christian Context. *Religions* 14: 1167. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091167>

Academic Editors: H. H. Drake Williams III and Jacobus Kok

Received: 10 August 2023
Revised: 4 September 2023
Accepted: 8 September 2023
Published: 13 September 2023



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and the SICT are applied to describe the *multiethnic composition* of the Christ-believing community. Yet, ethnicity and kinship are normally seen as *social constructs*, especially within the ethnic-reasoning approach (e.g., [Johnson Hodge 2007](#), pp. 15–16). In this article, the question is not so much as to whether inserting the qualification of “complexity” into the identity theory (SICT) solves the identity question, but whether the category of identity being a *social* category is adequate to fully account for the Christian identity.

A tendency in both the SIT and the SICT is that identity is a social construct. Even in applying these theories to the New Testament, it is normally argued that the respective New Testament writers are the ones who are instrumental in constructing identity. For example, William [Campbell \(2023, p. 236\)](#) argues that in the book of Romans, Paul attempts “to construct a meaningful social identity for the ethnē as a part of the household of God . . . Rather than viewing Israel as being bypassed in God’s purpose, and as being entirely alienated from the ethnē in Christ, Paul has constructed a family affiliation in which the latter are intrinsically related to the Jewish people via their Messiah” (emphasis added; cf. also [Campbell 2023](#), pp. 238, 317, 324, 326).

Similarly, [Esler \(2023, pp. 39, 57, 361\)](#) argued for Paul’s engagement in identity entrepreneurship, in which a shared identity is actively constructed by leaders. A similar approach was followed by Minna [Shkul \(2009\)](#) in viewing Paul as a social entrepreneur in the way in which identity is presented in the letter to the Ephesians (cf. also [Mbwangi 2020, p. 7](#); [Kok and Swart 2021, p. 8](#)).

The intention here is not to argue against the SIT or the SICT as such, but to contend that the Christian identity involves *more than social identity* and cannot be confined to aspects of identity that are *socially constructed*. Neither is it the intention to point out that the SIT or the SICT do not accommodate a divine element in identity. There are in fact scholars who utilise social identity theories who acknowledge a divine element in identity formation itself (e.g., [Kok 2014](#); [Lim 2014](#)). What is proposed here is to work towards a theory of identity in which the description of Christian identity does not only transcend the methodological limits of the conventional social identity theory (SIT), but also the limits of a description of identity that is confined to the *social* sphere. The problem that is addressed is, thus, more of an *epistemological* one than a methodological one. In this article, I start by outlining the naturalistic epistemological underpinnings of social identity theories in contrast to a supernaturalistic epistemology, in which the limits of the social sphere of the identity theory are transcended. As the next step, I briefly refer to previous research about a divine element that exists in the identity of the in-Christ identity. As a main focus, texts such as 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11; Philippians 3:20 and Ephesians 2:19 are prompted in respect to picturing an identity that is not only foreign or alien to other social identities, but seems to transcend social and ethnic realms, and even stand in contrast with them.

2. Naturalistic and Supernaturalistic Epistemologies of Identity

Naturalism remains to be prominent in Western epistemology ([Sherman 2018, p. 356](#)). In a naturalistic epistemology, everything is part of the world of nature and can be explained by natural sciences. In a naturalistic epistemology, the scientific method is the only way in which knowledge can be secured. Naturalism stands opposed to supernaturalism in that it accepts explanatory monism rather than dualism or pluralism ([Bunnin and Yu 2004, pp. 458–59](#)). In other words, in a naturalistic epistemology, “[e]pistemology is contained in the natural sciences and the natural sciences are contained in epistemology” ([Bunnin and Yu 2004, p. 459](#)). The implication of the latter would be that in a naturalistic epistemology, knowledge *exclusively* belongs to the domain of natural sciences, whereas in supernaturalism, knowledge is *inclusive*, in that it is constituted by both natural and supernatural sources (dualism or pluralism). Stated differently, it is not that in terms of epistemology supernaturalism stands opposed to the epistemology of naturalism per se, it is rather that in supernaturalism the sources of knowledge are expanded to include the supernatural as a legitimate source of knowledge. [Sherman \(2018, p. 349\)](#) explains that as an after-effect of the so-called linguistic turn, a specific aspect of Western epistemology is to

“linguistify” the sacred, in which the supernatural is evacuated of the authority that it once had. This is mainly done by deconstructing supernatural elements in cultures and reducing the legitimisation of cognitive or normative claims to a purely human sphere. Sherman specifically argues for a revaluation of emic epistemologies over against solely insisting on an etic approach, which is characteristic of social sciences.

Supernaturalistic epistemologies are generally part of ancient cultures, such as the cultures of the first century CE, but also of contemporary non-Western cultures, such as African cultures. Daniel Darko (2020, pp. 165–66, 210), for example, argues that in sub-Saharan Africa, religion and culture are inseparable. Identity is linked to the community and the ruling deities. A strong connection exists between human beings and spiritual beings in that spiritual beings are considered to be real entities that are actively involved in human affairs. A perceived divine element in identity is, thus, not confined to the Christian identity. From a survey that Darko (2020, p. 210) conducted in Ghana, it is clear that sub-Saharan Africans that are converted to Christianity generally retain a supernaturalistic epistemology. One of the underlying notions of postcolonial biblical criticism is that there should be a kind of epistemological critique of Western civilization, universalism and Eurocentrism (Punt 2015, p. 18). In other words, the epistemological approaches of non-Western cultures should also be heard and even seriously considered (cf. Sherman 2018).

I have argued elsewhere (Du Toit 2023) that there are several aspects of the in-Christ identity, which is mainly a Pauline concept that presupposes supernatural revelation, not only in respect of epistemology in general, but in respect of how *identity itself is defined*. The in-Christ identity is expressed in terms of one’s relation to other people (social) as well as one’s relation to God (theological). In fact, as can be derived from an emic reading of the Pauline corpus, one’s status before God and one’s relationship with God seem to be *primary and determinative of identity*, whereas one’s relationship with other people, including ethnicity, seems to be secondary and dependent on one’s status and relationship with God. The other important element that comes forth from the Pauline material is that the in-Christ identity is primarily something that is received from God and not something that is humanly or socially constructed. Yet, one’s received identity should have an effect on one’s social identity as well. I have argued from texts, such as Romans 3:21–31; 6:6; 8:1–17; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 12:12–14; 2 Corinthians 5:16–21; Galatians 2:19–20; 3:26–29; Philippians 3:3–9 and Philemon 16, that identity is primarily defined in terms of one’s new status and relationship to God. As part of the new creation, human beings are created in a right standing with God, within God’s family, which forms the basis of the in-Christ identity. This new identity is also pictured as a new person who received new, spiritual qualities that enable them to stand in a new relationship with other people (cf. De Villiers 2006, p. 339; Du Toit 2006, pp. 167–69). In the in-Christ identity, social or ethnic identities are still acknowledged, but are *not constitutive* of the in-Christ identity, which is primary. Social or cultural variances are still accommodated as long as cultural markers of identity do not impinge on the new-found core identity in Christ.

3. A Foreign Identity: 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11; Philippians 3:20 and Ephesians 2:19

Another noteworthy notion that has bearing on how the Christian identity finds expression in the New Testament is the notion that Christians are *foreigners* or *aliens* in this world. This idea is especially expressed in 1 Peter 1:1 and 2:11. Although set in a different context, the idea of a foreign identity seems to correspond with the Pauline concept of heavenly citizenship in Philippians 3:20. Ephesians 2:19 also mentions the idea of aliens or strangers, but it is applied in a different manner than in 1 Peter. These texts can be prompted in respect of the way in which they inform the understanding of the Christian identity, especially the way in which the Christian identity stands in contrast to the society in which Christians live.

3.1. 1 Peter 1:1 and 2:11

In 1 Peter 1:1, there is a fleeting reference to the congregants being elect sojourners or resident aliens (*παρεπίδημος*) of the dispersion. In 1 Peter 2:9–12, the Christian readers are described as being a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation and a people that God has for his own possession (v. 9). They were once not God's people but now belong to God (v. 10). They are urged as foreigners or strangers (*πάροικος*) and resident aliens or sojourners (*παρεπίδημος*) to abstain from the passions of the flesh, especially before the gentiles who consider them as evildoers (*κακοποιός*, vv. 11–12).

Bauer et al. (2021, p. 689) define the concept of *παρεπίδημος* as pertaining to “staying for a while in a strange or foreign place”. Regarding its occurrence in 1 Peter 1:1 and 2:11, they apply it to Christians, “who are not at home in this world”. The concept of *πάροικος*, occurring in 2:11, is generally described as a “stranger, alien, one who lives in a place that is not one's home” (Bauer et al. 2021, p. 692). In reference to 1 Peter 2:11 (and Eph 2:19, see below), they explain the concept as figuratively referring to Christians, “whose real home is in heaven” (par. 2 in Bauer et al. 2021, p. 692). Louw and Nida (1988, p. 133) group the lexemes *πάροικος* and *παρεπίδημος* together (domain 11.77), describing them as referring to “a person who for a period of time lives in a place which is not his normal residence—‘alien, stranger, temporary resident.’”

Regarding the text of 1 Peter 1:1, the expected article is absent before *ἐκλεκτοῖς* or *παρεπιδημοῖς*, which creates a difficulty in determining the syntactical function of these two concepts. As Travis Williams and David Horrell in their recent two-volume commentary on 1 Peter (Williams and Horrell 2023, pp. 307–8) explain, *ἐκλεκτοῖς* can be interpreted as a substantive and *παρεπιδημοῖς* its adjectival modifier (“sojourning elect”), which would be unusual, or both *ἐκλεκτοῖς* and *παρεπιδημοῖς* are substantives in apposition to one another (“chosen ones, sojourners of the diaspora”, Williams and Horrell 2023, pp. 307–8), which is more likely. According to Karen Jobes (2005, p. 67), this interpretation “highlights both the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of their *identity as Christians*. On the one hand, they are chosen with respect to God (the vertical dimension), but, at the same time, they are foreigners with respect to their sociopolitical world (the horizontal dimension)” (emphasis added). Another possibility is to read *παρεπιδημοῖς* as a substantive and *ἐκλεκτοῖς* as its adjectival modifier (“elect exiles” or “sojourners who have been chosen”), which for Williams and Horrell (2023, p. 309) would mean that “the construction is intended to emphasise the privileged status that belongs to the readers despite their transient situation”. Both the latter two interpretations would make sense in this context and must not be taken as mutually exclusive. As an example of holding onto both the latter two notions, Reinhard Feldmeier (2008, pp. 54–55) interprets the expression as “elect foreigners” and explains it as follows: “election and foreignness correlate: ‘Election’ designates separation by God, which finds its social form in integration into the people of God. On the other hand, societal exclusion as a ‘foreign body’ results from this”.

John H. Elliott (2000, pp. 312–13) has argued that the term *παρεπιδημοῖς* (1:1; 2:11) describes the readers' sociopolitical situation, being strangers amidst a gentile society, having “only limited political, economic, and social rights and status”. He contended that they were “disenfranchised, and subject to the ignorance, slander, and hostility of a local populace suspicious of their pedigrees, intentions, and allegiances” (cf. also Elliott 1981). Elliott's approach was also followed by McKnight (1996, pp. 48–51) and Janse Van Rensburg (2006, pp. 478–80). Most commentators, however, understand the concept of foreigners as a metaphorical description of Christian's relationship to the world (e.g., Schreiner 2003; Jobes 2005; Osborne 2011; Watson 2012; Keener 2021; Williams and Horrell 2023). The main reason that scholars find Elliott's proposal unconvincing is that *παρεπιδημοῖς* is used in conjunction with *πάροικος* in 2:11, in which it is clearly used in a spiritual context (Williams and Horrell 2023, pp. 222, 311, see below). Other reasons include the difficulty in explaining how such displaced people would initially arrive within the regions mentioned in verse

1 on the one hand, and the way in which they would later dominate the membership of those Christian communities on the other hand. Another problem is that in extrabiblical Greek, *πάροικος* denotes a noncitizen, not a resident alien as such, which would not fit well with Elliott's approach (see [Williams and Horrell 2023](#), pp. 220–22).

[Jobes \(2005\)](#) proposes that something of both is probably true, arguing that the readers were Roman Christians who were deported to Roman colonies in Asia Minor during one of several expulsions in the first century, which were not confined to Judaeans or Christians but were directed against foreigners in general and even philosophers who were perceived as being too "Greek". The writer of 1 Peter would then use this disorientating experience to instruct them that all Christians are foreigners in the place that they live, regardless of their place of residence, especially when Christian values are in conflict with that of society. There is, thus, a sense in which all Christians can be considered as metaphorically being of the Diaspora ([Watson 2012](#), p. 20). Craig [Keener \(2021\)](#), p. 116) sees the believers here being pictured as "not *permanent* residents of this world system" (emphasis original), but as belonging to another one. Similarly, Grand [Osborne \(2011\)](#), p. 147) describes believers as "'dispersed' in strange places far from our true home, heaven". On the basis of these connotations, [Schreiner \(2003\)](#), p. 50) argues that the readers were primarily gentiles that were exiles, not because of being dispersed from their homeland, but because "they suffer for their faith in a world that finds their faith off-putting and strange".¹

Regarding 1 Peter 2:9–12, the "identity designations" that are attributed to the Christian readers correspond with ideas found in Isaiah 43:20–21 and Exodus 19:6, although there is not a direct correlation ([Williams and Horrell 2023](#), p. 662). These designations of identity can be considered as "honorific titles of Israel" that are applied to mostly gentile believers ([Williams and Horrell 2023](#), p. 663). The use of the word *γένος* ("nation" or "people") in verse nine is indeed unusual, and is not typically used for Christians ([Williams and Horrell 2023](#), p. 665). It is interesting, however, that in the gospels, the term is applied to a *kind* of people showing the same traits rather than pointing to a race or a people of the same ethnic composition (Mat 13:47; 17:21; 23:33; 24:34; Mark 9:29, see [Du Toit 2018](#)), which might well be the kind of connotation here (contra [Williams and Horrell 2023](#), p. 665). The idea of the *identity* of Christian believers as collectively representing a priesthood harks back on 2:4–5, in which believers are referred to as being built into a "spiritual house" (*οἶκος πνευματικός*) to be a "holy priesthood" (*ἱεράτευμα ἄγιον*, [Jobes 2005](#)), confirming the metaphorical, spiritual context in which *παρεπιδήμιος* and *πάροικος* are used in 2:11. In verse 10, the writer states that believers are now God's people and received God's mercy, which is a designation of their basic identity—an identity that was brought about by God's mercy.

The pair *παροίκους καὶ παρεπιδήμιους* in verse 11 is probably a *hendiadys*, in which both terms equally appropriately describe the addressees. This pair corresponds with the LXX of Genesis 23:4, in which it indicates the nature of Abraham's residence among the Hittites ([Williams and Horrell 2023](#), p. 696). According to the Genesis account, the pair is indicative of Abraham not being a native, which is why he wanted to obtain property to bury his dead. The context is, thus, of a literal alien and stranger in the land.

Yet, [Williams and Horrell \(2023\)](#), pp. 696–97) specifically direct attention to 1 Chronicles 29:15 (LXX) for the way in which the expression *πάροικοι ἐσμεν ἐναντίον σου* ("we are resident aliens before you," NETS) is clearly spiritualised, for it is followed by *ὡς σκιά ἀίήμερα ἡμῶν ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ὑπομονή* ("Our days on earth are like a shadow, and there is no endurance," NETS).² The notion of being aliens and strangers forms part of David's prayer at the inauguration of the newly built temple. While the "sociopolitical sojourning" of the nation of Israel might be the point of reference here ([Klein 2006](#), p. 538), in David's prayer, Israel is portrayed as aliens and strangers "before You" (*ἐναντίον σου*), that is, before God. The idea of humans having a limited lifespan on earth before God further emphasizes its metaphorical use. Since David is ready to hand over the kingdom to his successor and he has come to the end of his life, his own situation also seems to be reflected in his words (cf. [Knoppers 2004](#), p. 954). Additionally, in David's words, the

idea of not having a physical temple in which the people of Israel could worship Yahweh might have been experienced as a kind of estrangement from God. Nevertheless, while the exact connotations behind David's words might be somewhat illusive, David seemed to be spiritualizing the idea of being strangers and aliens in some way.

Williams and Horrell (2023, p. 697) argue that the two terms in 1 Peter do not exclude connotations about social alienation, but that they primarily "express the alienation and estrangement of God's people from the world". Similarly, Watson (2012, p. 58) states that it is believers' "new spiritual status that makes them aliens and resident foreigners in their own land". For Schreiner (2003, p. 119), the two terms denote the fact that believers are strangers to this world. What we have in both 1 Chronicles 29:15 and 1 Peter 2:11 is, thus, an interplay between sociopolitical and metaphorical or spiritual connotations about estrangement. The difference in which the metaphor is used in these two texts is that in 1 Chronicles 29:15, the pair refers to estrangement from God, and in 1 Peter 2:11 to estrangement from the world as a holy people.

In terms of identity, the divine aspect of the believers' identity is especially portrayed in 1 Peter 2:4–5, in which believers are pictured as "living stones" (λίθοι ζῶντες) that are being built up by God as a "spiritual house" (οἶκος πνευματικῶς) to be a holy priesthood. In this regard, οἰκοδομεῖσθε ("being built up") could be considered a divine passive. God is, thus, carrying out the building up. The same idea is enforced in verse nine. The divine aspect of their identity is especially expressed in the idea that believers are a people for God's own possession. In other words, their status before God is established by God who chose them as a people, by calling them out of darkness and bestowing mercy on them. Their identity before God, which has a direct bearing on their relation to society, is, thus, based on God's election and his action to bring them out of darkness into the sphere of his light to be a people separated from the world (a holy nation).

In context of the spiritual connotations to believers' identity in 2:4–5 and 9–10, the reference to believers being foreigners and strangers or exiles, among other things, refers to the "moral estrangement" that Christians experience in their society (Jobes 2005), which would logically imply that they should abstain from the fleshly passions (v. 11) of this world. Such a stance would, however, lead to their alienation and even marginalisation from society (Jobes 2005). Similarly, Feldmeier (2008, pp. 147–50) understands the pair παροίκους καὶ παρεπιδήμιους to have an ethical dimension. He explains that it is Christians' *duty* to differentiate themselves from the desires of the flesh that are akin to society. The latter is clarified in verse 12, in which there is no contrast between God and the soul, but between God and the "outside," especially those who see Christians as evildoers. Andrew Mbuvi (2007, p. 41) argues that the writer's emphasis on moral conduct is put side by side with the focus on identity (1:15, 17; 2:12). Their status as aliens "should help guard their identity," being the "only way to keep themselves from being consumed by the surrounding cultures, risking loss of their distinctive Christian identity".

Osborne (2011, p. 189) reasons that the writer reminds the readers of their "status in this world before they consider how they are to interact with the people of this world". In other words, their newfound identity as God's own people should be determinative of how they act and relate socially. Similarly, in reference to 1 Peter, Fika Janse Van Rensburg (2006, p. 488) states that for "Christians their identity as Christians functions as the basis of ethics. Their identity is rooted in the reality of God, and specifically his will to bring persons who find themselves estranged from Him . . . into a restored relationship with Him . . . This soteriological action of God results in a social redefinition of the individuals involved". There is, thus, a way in which the foreignness of the Christian identity implies an active alienation from the evil values of society, and in that sense even implies a form of antisocial behaviour in contexts in which their values are threatened.³

3.2. *Philippians 3:20*

Philippians 3:18–21 must be understood against the backdrop of Paul's renouncing of his former accomplishments, such as being from the tribe of Benjamin, being a Hebrew of

Hebrews and Pharisee (3:5). He considers these identity designations as a loss in order to gain Christ and be found in him as having a righteousness that comes from God (3:7–9). By implication, Paul's new identity is, thus, based on his new-found *status before God* (cf. Bird and Gupta 2020, p. 131) and his *participation in Jesus Christ* (v. 10). In 3:12–16, Paul continues to point out that he is pressing on towards the upward call of God in Christ. In Philippians 3:18–21, Paul bewails the people who are enemies of the cross by considering their own belly as their god. For Paul, their glory is their shame and their minds are set on “earthly things” (ἐπίγεια, vv. 18–19). Then, in contrast, Paul states that believers’ “citizenship” or “commonwealth” (πολίτευμα) is in heaven, from where Christ as Saviour is expected (v. 20), who will transform “the body of our humiliation”, (NRSV) or “our lowly bodies” (ESV; NIV), that it may conform to the body of Christ’s glory (v. 21). The noun *πολίτευμα* in Philippians 3:20 is a *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament. Yet, the verb *πολιτεύομαι* occurs earlier in the letter (as well as elsewhere in the NT) in 1:27, in which Paul urges the congregants to “live as citizens” (Keown 2017b, p. 268) that are worthy of the gospel. Bauer et al. (2021, p. 750) defines the term *πολίτευμα* as denoting “commonwealth” or “state”. Louw and Nida (1988, p. 132), probably more accurately (see Keown 2017b, pp. 269–70, similarly most translations), describe the term as denoting “the place or location in which one has the right to be a citizen—‘state, commonwealth, place of citizenship’” and translate Philippians 3:20 as “our place of citizenship is in heaven”.

Paul’s reference to people’s minds that are set on earthly things (v. 19) stands in contrast with the notion that believers’ citizenship is in heaven (Halloway 2017, p. 179), which is comparable with the notion in 1 Peter 2:11, that being strangers and aliens to this world implies abstention from the passions of the flesh. Another contrast that can be detected in this passage in Philippians is a contrast between the people’s shame being their glory (v. 19) and the body of glory in the eschaton (v. 21, Halloway 2017, p. 179). Mark Keown (2017b, pp. 262–63) reasons that the reference to shame here does not denote a mere feeling of shame, but shame to the point of disgrace. He continues that in an honour–shame culture, in which one’s reputation and honour are all-important, Paul’s statement here can be seen as “deeply offensive and ironical”. For Keown, in context of the coming Saviour (v. 20), their shame is primarily an eschatological shame “as a result of their rejection of the gospel of a crucified Messiah and their shameful, licentious deeds in which they glory”.⁴ As Walter Hansen (2009, p. 268) explains, “Paul’s eschatological vision establishes the basis for his ethical imperatives. The future shines a bright light on the present to guide our moral choices” (cf. Fee 1995, pp. 376–77).

Paul’s reference in verse 20 to the Philippians having their citizenship (*πολίτευμα*) in heaven harks back on 1:27, in which he urged them to live as citizens (*πολιτεύομαι*) worthy of the gospel. Keown (2017b, p. 268) argues that Paul “played on the notion of Roman citizenship” in both 1:27 and 3:20 (cf. Heil 2010, p. 138). Philippi was a Roman colony in which veterans settled after the civil wars of 42 BCE and 31 BCE. The city enjoyed Roman citizenship and was considered an extension of Roman culture (see Bird and Gupta 2020, p. 161; cf. Acts 16:12). Keown (2017b, p. 268) continues that the Philippians “are to live out their heavenly citizenship within the context of Romanized Philippi according to the gospel *rather than the norms of Roman life*” (emphasis added). In other words, the term can be understood “ironically against the notion of Roman citizenship and Jewish nationalist claims” and being “politically subversive” (Keown 2017b, p. 270; cf. Hansen 2009, pp. 270–71). Similarly, James Thompson (2016, p. 115) reasons that, according to Paul’s statements here, the church “is alienated from the local society and its government is composed of the citizens of a state that is in heaven, thus mightier than Rome”. He adds that Christians’ heavenly citizenship “precludes the longing for honor on earth”.⁵ Several commentators also see an underlying contrast between Christ as Saviour over against the notion that Caesar would be a saviour (e.g., Hansen 2009; Hawthorne and Martin 2004).

Significantly, Keown (2017b, p. 267) argues that Paul’s enemies’ (see esp. 3:2–4) “*identity* is centered in Jerusalem” (emphasis added), while they “remain waiting for their savior” (cf. Hawthorne and Martin 2004, pp. 231–32). The inverse of such a notion would

be that those in Christ's *core identity* are defined by their *core citizenship*, which is not bound to the social or political structures of this world, but bound up in the heavenly realm. Although a clear eschatological dimension exists in this passage in that Christians await their Saviour (v. 20), it is not as if Christians' citizenship in heaven is merely something to look forward to. In fact, they already enjoy heavenly citizenship. Their citizenship is, thus, a present reality (ὕπαρχει being in the present tense) from which the eschatological notions flow (so Fee 1995, pp. 376–77; Reumann 2008, p. 597).

It could be asked how the congregants could identify with the idea of heavenly citizenship if most if not all of them did not enjoy Roman citizenship themselves. Even so, they would have had a conception of what citizenship entails. Paul's reinforcement of their heavenly citizenship could be understood as confirming a sense of belonging to God's family and thereby relativising the importance of a worldly citizenship. Being a Roman citizen himself, it is not as if Paul is arguing against earthly citizenship as such, but rather that believers' true identity or core identity is rooted in their relation to God and his people. In 3:20–21, this identity is portrayed as an eschatological identity, in which the Lord Jesus Christ transforms believers' earthly bodies into heavenly bodies with the power that enables him to subject all things to himself. Their eschatological, heavenly identity, which is already a present reality, is, thus, based on God's action. The latter dimension of identity has to be understood as complementing Paul's previous notion of renouncing his old identity or identities (3:5–6) to be found as having a righteousness that comes from God. A heavenly citizenship can, thus, be considered a forming part of a divine element in identity, which is based on God's action in Christ, and not as something that is socially constructed.

3.3. Ephesians 2:19

In Ephesians 2:11–22, the readers are reminded that they once were gentiles in the flesh (v. 11). They are also reminded that they were once separated from Christ and alienated (ἀπαλλοτριώω) from the citizenship (πολιτεία) of Israel and strangers (ξένος) to the covenants of promise, having no hope and being without God in the world (v. 12). In Christ, who broke down the dividing wall of hostility between God's people and the gentiles, they have now come near (vv. 13–14). In Christ, they have been created into "one new man" (ἓνα καινὸν ἄνθρωπον), reconciling both gentile and Judaeans into one body through the cross (vv. 15–16). In verse 19, the statement follows that believers are no longer strangers (ξένος) and aliens (πάροικος), but are now fellow citizens (συμπολίτης) with the saints and members of God's household (v. 19). All people are built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (v. 22).

As can be seen from the themes in this passage, the idea of being strangers or aliens is used differently from 1 Peter 1:1 and 2:11. Here, the readers are reminded of their past in which they were alienated from the covenants and from being God's people. It could, thus, be understood as a kind of *inverse scenario* from that of the 1 Peter texts. Whereas Christians are pictured as strangers to the world, here, those outside of God's household, here referring to gentiles, are pictured as *strangers to God's people*.

Regarding the terms used in this passage, while the word *πάροικος* is used in verse 19, corresponding to its use in 1 Peter 2:11, the word *ἀπαλλοτριώω* is used in verse 12 and *ξένος* is used in verses 12 and 19. Bauer et al. (2021, p. 84) define *ἀπαλλοτριώω* as "estrangle" or "alienate", while Louw and Nida (1988, p. 133) define the term as "to be a stranger or foreigner". According to Bauer et al. (2021, p. 606), in verse 12, the word *ξένος* is used in reference to "an entity that is unacquainted" with something, whereas in verse 19, it is used as "an entity involved in [an] experience of unfamiliarity," to be translated as a "stranger" or "alien". Louw and Nida (1988, p. 132) define the term as "a person belonging to a socio-political group other than the reference group".⁶ Similar to *πολίτευμα* and *πολιτεύομαι*, the concept of *πολιτεία* (v. 12) denotes "the right to be a member of a sociopolitical entity, citizenship" (Bauer et al. 2021, p. 750) or "a group of people constituting a socio-political unit" (domain 11.67 in Louw and Nida 1988, p. 132).

The term συμπολίτης denotes “a fellow member of a socio-political unit” (Louw and Nida 1988, p. 132) or a “fellow-citizen” (Bauer et al. 2021, p. 852).

Since some inscriptions about Roman citizenship were found in Ephesus, the Ephesians would have been familiar with the concept of citizenship (Baugh 2016, pp. 184–85).⁷ In a sociopolitical context, foreigners (ξένοι) would be foreigners in a city, without guaranteed civil rights or privileges (see Acts 16:20–23), staying in a city on a temporal basis. They might only enjoy the protection that associates, patrons or friends might provide through personal influence. Most of the Ephesian residents had such a resident alien status. The citizenship of God’s household would, thus, be like an elite privilege that God grants to people (Baugh 2016, p. 199; cf. Hoehner 2002, p. 357).

In terms of God’s household (οἰκεῖος) (v. 19), Philip Towner (1993, p. 417) significantly remarks that the “household provided members with a sense of security and *identity* that the larger political and social structures were unable to give” (emphasis added). In this passage, identity is defined around being drawn into the sphere of God (v. 12) and the citizenship of God’s household (v. 19). In verse 19, fellow citizenship is qualified as being with “the saints” (τῶν ἁγίων) in the same verse. Frank Thielman (2010, p. 179) reasons that like these saints, believers “are set apart from the rest of the world,” which is an idea that is also established elsewhere in the letter (see Eph 1:4; 5:3, 27). It is also worthy of note that the “one new man” (v. 15), which points to the *new identity* of God’s household in which people are reconciled to God and the hostility between Israel and the gentiles having been eradicated, is something that God created (κτίζω). The unity of the believers within this new identity is, thus, “a gift from God’s love” (Heil 2007, p. 132). The way in which identity is presented in Ephesians 2:11–22 is, thus, an identity that primarily involves reconciliation to God and the membership of God’s household, which God created, and secondarily involves believers’ relation to fellow believers and unbelievers. The intricate relationship between the divine and social dimensions of identity are, thus, exemplified in this passage.

4. Conclusions

From the New Testament texts that were discussed, it is clear that the perception of identity in the New Testament is based on a supernaturalistic epistemology. Identity is primarily defined in terms of people’s relationship to God and God’s family, and secondarily in relation to society. The idea of being foreigners to society, which is especially evident in 1 Peter 1:1 and 2:11, can be interpreted as a sense of identity that is not primarily constructed in relation to the social structures of society, but an identity that is received from being born into God’s family, which in fact stands in opposition to both the structures (e.g., Roman citizenship) and the moral values of society. To be strangers to the world and society is not only part of a newly received identity, but it forms part of a Christian’s duty in this world. They should especially distance themselves from moral values of society and let their minds be renewed not to be based on worldly patterns. Although ethnic and cultural distinctions are still accommodated within the believing community, ethnicity or culture is not perceived as being constitutive of the core of the Christian identity anymore.

The question is, what does this say for identity theories and the epistemology that underlies the identity theory? While current social identity theories remain valuable tools to describe the social aspects of the Christian identity, especially in respect of how Christians relate to social and ethnic identities, it must be conceded that they do not fully account for the description of the Christian identity. This inadequacy does not so much lie in the methodologies of social identity theories, but rather their epistemology. A holistic identity theory should not merely be an etic description of a specific culture or society that purely relies on naturalistic Western epistemologies, and neither can a holistic identity theory solely be based on a model that is derived from social sciences. A holistic identity theory should also involve an emic reading and, thus, be epistemologically informed by the very identity that is studied, allowing the culture that is studied to speak for itself. In respect of the way in which identity is described in the texts that were discussed in this

article, it would indeed be ironical to describe the Christian identity in a way that forces an epistemology onto the text that denies or contradicts the very fabric of the epistemological categories in which the New Testament writers understand and describe identity. One such example would be to insist that the New Testament writers *constructed* a new identity as being part of a *social endeavour*, whereas it could be derived from their writings that they understood the new identity as something that could not be humanly constructed, but that is received as a gift of God. That does not mean that aspects of the Christian identity cannot be described in terms of social identity theories or that the Christian identity does not have a social dimension. However, one should acknowledge the epistemological limits of social identity theories.

Although, in practice, New Testament scholars that utilise the SIT and the SICT might *accommodate* a divine element in identity, originating as social scientific tools, these theories are based on naturalistic assumptions, especially in that the whole of identity is normally perceived to be something that is socially constructed. Social identity theories are, thus, not primarily designed to *intrinsically account* for a divine element in the understanding or description of the Christian identity. In other words, if an aspect of the Christian identity involves one's *standing before God*, which is on another level than one's relation to other people and even involves estrangement from the ethics, values or social structures of the world, the whole of the Christian identity cannot resort under the rubric of *social* identity, which, per definition, is confined to one's relation to other people. Again, this does not mean that the Christian identity does not involve one's relation to other people or that the in-Christ identity does not affect one's social standing. Quite the opposite is true. A Christian's social identity is in fact very much part of his or her identity, but that would only be *one aspect* of one's identity. In light of the perception of identity in the New Testament, which is based on a supernaturalistic epistemology, one's social identity is a *secondary* aspect of identity and one's relation to God primary. A holistic identity theory should, thus, be inclusive, not only in terms of methodology, but also in terms of epistemology.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Another idea that is worth mentioning here is the idea of the so-called "New Exodus", in which Jesus' death would once and for all resolve the "sin-exile-restoration" conundrum and instead of having a physical destination, as was the case with the deliverance from Egypt or Babylon; now, the destination is heaven (see [Mbuvi 2007](#), p. 32).
- ² See also Ps 38:13 (LXX), in which David uses these terms to refer to his earthly existence.
- ³ An idea that seems to be related to the idea of believers being foreigners in this world, which is worthwhile to further explore, is the notion that believers are not from this world. This idea is prominent in the Johannine literature. In John 15:19, Jesus tells his disciples that they are not "from this world" (ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου) because Jesus elected them out of the world and they are, therefore, hated by the world, a notion that is also present in Jesus' prayer in John 17:14. In 17:15, Jesus prays that his people are not taken out of the world, but that they be kept from the evil one, and in the following verse (v. 16), he states that his people are not from this world (ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου), just as he is not of this world. In 1 John 4:5–6, a similar notion is present, although in the inverse form. False spirits are pictured as being "from the world" (ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου), whereas believers are pictured as being "from God" (ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ). Edward Klink III ([Klink 2016](#), pp. 664–65) argues that the reason for the world's hatred of the disciples (John 17:14) is their "lack of identification with the world", being "a foreign entity in the world". Although not set within the same terms as in the Johannine literature, the idea that Christians are to be seen separate from the world and its thought patterns is also present in the Pauline corpus. In Romans 12:2, believers are reprimanded not to conform to the pattern of this world (συσχηματίζω), but be transformed by the renewal of their minds to discern what is God's will. In Galatians 6:14, Paul states that in the cross, the world has been crucified to him and he to the world, which, according to David [DeSilva \(2018, p. 509\)](#) implies "detachment from the world of people, human needs, and beneficent relationships".
- ⁴ In this regard, Keown interprets ἀσχύνῃ as the shame of licentious behaviour (cf. Rom 6:21; 1 Cor 11:22; Eph 5:4).
- ⁵ It can be noted that Paul does encourage the idea of "boasting" (καύχημα/καυχᾶσθαι), but not as something that elevates the status of believers themselves. E.g., in texts, such as Romans 5:2, 11; 15:17; 1 Corinthians 1:31; 2 Corinthians 10:17 and Philippians 3:3, "boasting" is in the Lord or God's glory. Paul can boast in sufferings (Rom 5:3) or weakness (2 Cor 11:30). In Philippians 1:26, Paul boasts in the work of Christ. In 2:16, he writes that the congregants are "a boast to me" (καύχημα ἐμὸν), which implies that

Paul boasts in “the work of God in and through him and in others” (Keown 2017a, p. 496; cf. also 1 Th 2:19). At most, Paul’s self-boasting is, thus, secondary and not primary.

- ⁶ The two concepts ἀπαλλοτριώω and ξένος also occur together in the LXX of Psalm 69:8 (Ps 69:8, MT), in which David is portrayed as becoming alienated to his brothers and a stranger to the sons of his mother (see Baugh 2016, p. 186).
- ⁷ E.g., the inscription δοῦναι πολιτείας αὐτῷ καὶ ἐκγόνοις, which means “to grant citizenship to him and to his descendants” (IvE 1409, line 3, see Baugh 2016, p. 184).

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