

T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament

J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker, eds. *T & T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014. 657 pp. \$142.99. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780567379542.

In general, the intention of a handbook as a reference work is to review the current state of scholarship in a particular field of study. As a handbook, the *T & T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament* falls within the field of social-scientific criticism. The volume provides an overview of the current state of New Testament scholarship that employs social identity theory by providing examples of how this approach to biblical studies can provide new insight into the social world of these ancient texts. In the preface, the editors of the handbook state that the purpose is “to explore the various ways the New Testament constructs social identity” (xv). This includes exploring the New Testament authors’ theological work to shape the social identity formation of their original audiences, as well as illuminating how social identity formation occurred within the social contexts of the early Christ-movement.

Social identity theory developed from within the discipline of social psychology through the work of Henri Tajfel, who developed the theory while focusing on investigating contemporary societies in the 1970s. Subsequently, the application of social identity theory to biblical studies was introduced by Philip Esler. The editors note that since the presentation of a seminal paper by Esler at the British New Testament Conference in 1994, scholars have begun to employ social identity theory to open up new avenues for understanding the texts of the New Testament. Though the editors do not reflect specifically on the genesis of this particular handbook, the significance of this particular approach to New Testament studies is evident by the volume of material employing social identity theory that has been generated since Esler’s paper. While Andrew D. Clarke and J. Brian Tucker note in their essay in part 1 of the handbook, “Social History and Social Theory in the Study of Social Identity,” that the use of social-scientific criticism is still “a debated issue” (47), the fact that this is a burgeoning field of study is evident in the publication of other recent works on the topic, such as *The Social World of the New Testament*, edited by Jerome H. Neyrey and Eric C. Stewart, and *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, edited by Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris.

According to the editors, the contributing authors for parts 1 and 2 of the handbook have been selected because of their previous work in New Testament studies using this particular approach. The editors aimed for an international representation of authors, including authors from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Part 1 of the volume focuses on methodological studies, discussing particular theoretical approaches that are fruitful for exploring social identity formation in the New Testament world, such as the narrative-identity model or ritual studies. These particular topic choices demonstrate the handbook’s concern with current conversations within the field of biblical studies that are generating considerable interest. Philip Esler is identified as a key expert in the handbook’s introduction and contributes both a chapter in the methodological section and a textual study on the Matthaean Beatitudes. Esler’s standing as a seminal scholar in the field of social identity theory in New Testament studies is evident in the bibliography, which cites twenty of his books, articles, and presentations. The essays in both part 1 and part 2 have not been previously published.

Esler’s initial essay, “An Outline of Social Identity Theory,” reviews the development of social identity theory succinctly and serves to lead the reader to explore additional questions and pursue further research. Esler presents an overview of how social identity theory relates to biblical scholarship and interpretation. The focus of Tajfel’s work was intergroup interactions and the interplay between individuals’ identity as group members and intergroup interactions. Tajfel saw the application of his work to have particular relevance in illuminating social identity with regard to ethnicity (21). John C. Turner expanded on Tajfel’s work by applying its principles to intragroup interactions, not only intergroup interactions. Subsequently, Turner’s theory was called self-categorization theory. Social identity theory can refer to Tajfel’s

theory alone, or to both Tajfel and Turner's theories together (23). The essay addresses the key factors that hold a group together and shape the social identity of the group members. Esler explains key concepts within social identity theory such as group norms, prototypes, and stereotyping. This essay serves as an introduction to social identity theory, which is helpful, since there is no extensive review of the history of the theory outside of the context of biblical studies in the handbook's introduction.

The textual studies in part 2 serve as a series of case studies demonstrating the application and usefulness of social identity theory. The essays draw from each author's particular expertise, yet cover a significant portion of the New Testament; twenty-one of the twenty-seven New Testament books are represented. Part 2 of the volume begins with Esler's revised 1994 essay, published here for the first time. Given Esler's extensive work with social identity theory, his two essays are some of the strongest in the volume. In Esler's essay focusing on the Matthaean Beatitudes, the author argues that social identity theory offers a framework for understanding intergroup relationships, particularly regarding group conflict and the social phenomena of group norms and stereotyping. These social phenomena affect the social identity formation of the individual in relation to group membership, which in turn affects intergroup relationships (149). Esler's essay makes good use of John Turner's contribution of self-categorization theory, an important addition to Tajfel's work that is noted by other contributors. His main argument is that interpreting the Beatitudes in light of norms of group behavior offers a deeper understanding of the meaning of these teachings than traditional eschatological or ethical interpretations of the Beatitudes. The remaining essays in part 2 incorporate key concepts like norms, stereotyping, and self-categorization, offering insights into the complexities of group dynamics related to leadership, kinship, ethnicity, and social class.

The sixty-seven-page bibliography draws almost exclusively on English language scholarship, which reflects the origins of social identity theory with Tajfel's and Turner's work, as well as Philip Esler's work with their theory and biblical interpretation. In addition to the index to biblical and ancient sources, there is also an index of modern authors, which provides an overview of which authors' work the contributing authors used most frequently. This index can serve to help the reader focus on New Testament scholars who make particular use of social identity theory in their work. While the bibliography provides a helpful survey of scholarship related to social identity theory, the volume would have benefited from an introduction offering a clearer outline of the place of social identity theory within the field of social-scientific criticism. By way of comparison, a helpful general introduction to social-scientific criticism is provided in *Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation*, edited by David G. Horrell.

The primary audience of this handbook is readers seeking further insights into how theoretical models like social identity theory can illuminate New Testament texts. Since the purpose of the handbook is to present further studies on the New Testament in its social context, the essays focus on scholarly applications of social-scientific criticism and do not offer particular examples of how the textual studies relate to homiletical concerns. The average reading level of the essays is for advanced students, since some familiarity with social-scientific, historical-critical, and literary-critical methods of interpretation is assumed. Recommended for libraries collecting comprehensively on social-scientific approaches to biblical studies.

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