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Reading Romans in light of social identity theory

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ABSTRACT

This essay provides an extended review on William Campbell's new commentary on the Epistle to the Romans in the T&T Clark Social Identity Commentaries on the New Testament series published in 2023. It evaluates the methodology used in this commentary and highlights some of the fresh insights Campbell's commentary offers and how social identity theory could be profitably used in understanding the inter-group hostility existing among the various groups addressed in the letter. This essay also considers how Campbell employs social identity theory in resolving the difficulty in reading Romans 9–11 on the question of the status of Israel. Implications of reading Romans through the lenses of social identity theory are also offered.

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Introduction

This essay provides a detailed review of William Campbell's new commentary on Romans (2023). This commentary is the third published in the new series, T&T Clark Social Identity Commentaries on the New Testament, after Brawley's inaugural volume on *Luke* (2020) and Esler's *2 Corinthians* (2022). In this commentary, Campbell brings together his decades of research on Paul's most challenging letter, drawing insights from reception history, engaging with the latest scholarship on the study on Romans, and framing his arguments within the Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Paul within Judaism interpretations. Campbell also offers his own translation of the Greek text. He takes the historical context of Paul's letter to the Romans seriously and argues that this letter should be treated as a historical document written to the recipients 'in response to the actual situation of the Roman ethnē in Christ' rather than merely a theological treatise which has been assumed in some of the more traditional commentaries 'where Paul reflects his stance on important issues not intrinsically connected with the situation in Rome' (48). While Paul is not the founder of the Christ-movement in Rome and has yet to visit them, the long list of names mentioned in Rom 16 suggests his close links with them, demonstrating that he is aware of the situation and issues in Rome (12–14).

This commentary series does not aim at providing a verse by verse discussion as found in traditional series such as the New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT) or the New International Greek Testament Commentary (NIGTC). Therefore, a few remarks on Campbell's approach are necessary for readers to be better acquainted

with this commentary, although a detailed exegetical analysis of verses is provided of key important verses.

Methodology: social identity theory

Firstly, a number of terminologies employed by Campbell deserved to be highlighted as this review will use some of these. Instead of the usual translation of ἔθνη as ‘gentiles/Gentiles’ or ‘nations’, Campbell opts for the transliteration of *ethnē* throughout the commentary to avoid the overtones of later Christian tradition. The Greek word ἐκκλησία is either left untranslated or translated as ‘assembly’ rather than using the common word, ‘church’. In translating the word πίστις, ‘trust’ is preferred instead of ‘faith’. The dawning of the new age of the Christ-event is labelled as the Messianic Time in Christ.

Secondly, in terms of methodology, SIT deals with dynamics of group relations between ingroups and outgroups. Campbell rightly observes that there is a tendency to view that in order to promote group cohesiveness and a positive social identity among members of a particular group, it would require a negative or antagonistic evaluation of others (23). Yet this particular approach within SIT needs to be questioned. Drawing from other strands of SIT, group formation can also be accomplished through cooperation and mutual support between members of a group or groups to achieve well-defined common goals (24). As such, Campbell further draws from the concepts of complex social identity and superordinate identity in reading Romans (25–28). Complex social identity views the possibility that a person may belong to more than one social group, and this leads to a higher openness to others who are and remain different. Potentially, this leads to reduce intergroup tensions (26). In order to bring different groups together in overcoming intergroup hostility, it is important to recategorise these groups so that they see themselves as part of a larger superordinate group by stressing their commonality rather than their differences (26). Yet, the superordinate identity cannot replace or relativise subgroup identities which remain inherently.

Thirdly, Campbell argues that Paul frames his guidance and teaching cautiously by using a ‘diatribal style’ of approach rather than a literary diatribe (34). With the aid of the voice of an imaginary interlocutor of gentile origin, Paul is able to address and navigate through sensitive issues without being perceived as ‘criticizing or disputing directly with the Roman *ethnē* in Christ’ (40). In this commentary, Campbell argues that there was some misunderstanding of Paul’s apostolic mission and the implications of the coming of the Messianic Time in Christ by the Christ-followers from the *ethnē*. Some groups in Rome mistakenly perceived that the *ethnē* in Christ have replaced Israel as God’s new people because many Jews could not see or accept the significance of the Christ-event (18–20). This results in an arrogant attitude among the *ethnē* towards Israel, causing conflicts with the Jews. By using a diatribal style, Paul is able to address these issues by employing a number of rhetorical questions (for example, Rom 3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:7, 13; 9:14; 11:1, 11, etc) to ‘facilitate his ongoing conversation concerning Israel and related delicate issues without getting personally polemically involved’ (48) with the hope that the audience would be persuaded to ‘align themselves, both intellectually and emotionally with what, through the interlocutor, Paul commends or repudiates’ (48).

Next, Campbell proposes to read Romans within the oral culture of the Greco-Roman world of the first-century CE where letters were typically read to the intended recipients. This means that the audience listening to the letter would have no idea of what is to come in the later parts of Romans until it is read. As such, reading backwards is not a viable option. For example, one cannot read the content of Rom 2:17 (where a reference is made to a person who calls himself a Jew) and argue that the audience Paul is addressing in 2:1–16 must have been Jews. Campbell insists that Romans must be read in a linear fashion and progressively where Paul builds on his argument from the beginning to the end of the letter.

Finally, Campbell takes the position that Paul's letter to the Romans is written *solely* to the ethnē in Christ (3, see also 17–22, 54–57). While Campbell does not discount that some Jewish individuals might be present when the letter was read, they were not addressed directly by Paul (18). Similarly, those Jews named in Rom 16 to whom greetings are being extended, are also not addressed here by Paul (3).

With these preliminary comments in place, we will now proceed with our review of Campbell's commentary on Romans. We will focus on how Campbell's use of SIT in reading Romans yields fresh insights and enables readers to read this fascinating letter and understand Paul in exciting ways. At the same time, we will also assess the usefulness of SIT as a methodological approach in reading Romans.

Reading Romans from a social identity approach (SIT): new insights

In Rom 1–2, Campbell identifies four different subgroups of ethnē addressed by Paul. Group 1 is highlighted in Rom 1:19–32, comprising foolish idolators who were handed over by God to impurity, degrading their bodies, and debased thinking because of their worship of idols. By describing this sub-group of ethnē in this way, Campbell argues that Paul sees the improper worship of God as the marker of gentile deviance, thus creating a boundary line placing the Jews and Christ-following ethnē on one side and gentile idolators on the other. Therefore, the 'gentile Christ-followers in Rome must determine where their loyalty lies, with Israel and her God through Christ or with Caesar and the ethos of associated idolatry' (75).

Group 2 are those described in Rom 2:1–6. The unspecified person mentioned in Rom 2:1 should not be assumed as the person who 'calls himself a Jew' identified in Rom 2:17 because the audience of Romans could not have known this while the letter was being read. Campbell's linear and progressive reading of Romans 'rules out this modern regressive reading of introducing a Jew without any evidence for such in the text' (84). Based on the manner in which Paul uses a rhetorical device of apostrophe in addressing the audience (ὦ ἄνθρωπε) in Rom 2:1 as ὁ κρίνων, Campbell argues this could be a prototype comprising some 'who fit the category of those judging others, and who therefore consider themselves superior to these' (87). This social group of ethnē choose to identify themselves as 'Jews' even though they are gentiles by birth. They are most likely, as suggested by Campbell, a sub-group of ethnē who are God-fearers 'linked loosely to synagogal communities' and also others 'interested in Jewish tradition who have not accepted Paul's message about the Christ-event' (90). They judge others worshipping idols, but do not repent themselves, and this explains Paul's harsh language in Rom 2:1–6 in addressing them.

The next apostrophe in Rom 2:17 describes a new conversation partner, ‘if you call yourself a Jew’. Campbell insists that this interlocutor remains of the same non Jewish ethnic origin. This person, identified as belonging to Group 3, ‘*prides himself on the adoption of Jewish life and practice*’ (98, Campbell’s emphasis), is most likely a gentile proselyte described as a transgressor of the Law through his circumcision as specifically mentioned in Rom 2:27b (102). Campbell sees adult circumcision carried out by the ethnē as breaking the law of eighth-day circumcision practised by Jews (109–110). For Paul, it is ritually impossible for a non-Jewish person to become a full member of Israel by going through adult circumcision (110). The final sub-group, Group 4, based on Roman 2:27a are those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law, and they will judge those from Group 3.

Campbell’s reading based on SIT stands in sharp contrast with the traditional interpretation of Romans where it is often assumed that Rom 1 addresses the gentiles while from Rom 2:1 onwards, Paul is addressing specifically the Jews, leading to the interpretation that the Jews are those who break the Law and they are pitted against the gentiles. What is significant is Campbell’s identification of four different sub-groups within the ethnē in Rome. These different sub-groups display negative out-group perception where they seem ‘to be in competition as to who embodies the relation to the one God most appropriately’ (107). To do so, one option is to take up the Jewish Law and be called a Jew. This is perceived to be misguided by Paul, and requires correction (107). Paul seeks to explain how the ethnē must see themselves as non-Jews who through Christ, the Messiah are enabled to be part of the family of Abraham.

The misunderstanding of the ethnē towards Israel also needs to be addressed. In Rom 3, Campbell argues that Paul places a series of questions dealing with God’s faithfulness to the Jewish people in the voice of an imagined gentile interlocutor (118), and not a Jewish interlocutor as traditionally understood. Campbell argues that the questions being raised in Rom 3 (such as Rom 3:1: ‘Is there any benefit in being a Jew?’) would only make sense if they are raised by non-Jews (114–115). Similarly, questions such as, ‘What then shall we say? . . . Have we (“gentiles”) found Abraham (to be) our forefather according to the flesh?’ (139) in Rom 4 can only be rightly understood as being raised by a non-Jewish interlocutor, rather than a fictitious Jew as understood traditionally.

Campbell sees Paul constructing the identity for the ethnē as part of the lineage of Abraham through union with Christ. Paul presents Abraham as the father of both Jews and also of non-Jews in Christ, affirming both ethnic identities of Jews and non-Jews. According to SIT, this affirmation of group identity is important so that the non-Jews should not view the Jews as a threat to their group identity leading to hostility towards them. On the contrary, this affirmation could lead to mutual acceptance, respect, and peace. What emerges from Campbell’s reading is that in Rom 1–4, Paul seeks to affirm those ethnē in Christ in their new identity, but this is done in such a manner that is not to the detriment of the Jews.

Moving on to Rom 5–8, the concentrated use of first-person plural pronouns is noted, and this is done to demonstrate the unity between Paul and his readers on the basis of their reconciliation in Christ and the implications of the Christ-event (166). By emphasising his oneness with the ethnē, Paul aims to convince them that he shares their central core values. These shared beliefs are crucial in constructing a corporate identity as a coherent group of Christ-followers. In social identity terms, this action of Paul

demonstrates his goal of seeking to exercise leadership as their apostle to the nations (166). Paul calls the *ethnē* to have peace with God through Christ and to live peacefully together (Rom 5:1) by ceasing all hostility (168–169), noting that the notion of reconciliation is directed both to God and to one another. As ritual is often a key component in identity formation, Paul uses the metaphor of baptism in Rom 6:1–14 as participating in Christ (182). The choice of slavery metaphor, one which the *ethnē* in Rome could easily identify with within their Greco-Roman context, describes the former status of the non-Jews as slaves of sin who have been freed in relation to God, and are now bound to him through Christ (192). In Rom 7, Paul uses the analogy of marriage addressing the *ethnē* to ‘focus upon their relation to Christ rather than on the Law’ (210). This is done by using the diatribal style with the aid of an imaginary interlocutor in the voice of a *persona*, ‘I’ (Rom 7:7–25), who characterises someone seeking to do the Law as ‘a non-Jew with a view to self-mastery and setting up a right relationship with God’ (216). This attempt of this ‘wretched man’ is doomed to fail. The Law can only be fulfilled through the Spirit (Rom 8:1–11). Another metaphor that is used to describe the incoming of the nations is that of adoption in Rom 8:12–17. The new life in the Spirit for the *ethnē* is described as being adopted into the family of God, not as Israel nor replacing Israel, but as ‘*an associate people*, through Christ, alongside Israel’ (227, emphasis Campbell’s). These series of metaphors lay the foundation for the superordinate identity of the *ethnē* in Christ so that they need not view the Jews within the family of God negatively.

SIT and the questions over the status of Israel

If the incoming of the *ethnē* through Christ is clearly established, where does Israel stand? Campbell argues that Paul addresses the question of God’s faithfulness to his covenant with Israel in light of the incoming of the nations in Rom 9–11, the climax of the arguments in Rom 1–11.

Campbell views Rom 9 as Paul’s personal anguish towards Israel due to some misunderstanding concerning his role as an apostle to the *ethnē* where he is seen as ignoring Israel as if ‘she were a *former* people of God’ (246, emphasis Campbell’s). Campbell argues that Paul is denying that he is anti-Israel and pro-gentile. On the contrary, Paul insists that he has positive relation to the identity of Israel by identifying himself as part of Israel and affirming Israel’s irrevocable call. Paul uses his grief ‘to call upon these *ethnē* to share with him his deep concern for Israel’ (248), reminding the gentiles that the purpose of God remains that he will have compassion for Israel based on the citation of Hosea in Rom 9:25–26 that speaks of the reversal of fortune for Israel.

In Rom 10, Paul provides an analysis of why Israel did not respond to the arrival of the Messianic Time in Christ. Campbell cautions that there is ‘too much interest in scholarship in ensuring that Israel is shown to be guilty and worthy of punishment’ (283). He suggests that Paul is ‘seeking to understand and explain Israel’s encounter with the Christ-event, rather than to pronounce a verdict of any kind’ (283). Accordingly, what Israel did not understand is the incoming of the nations without the Law, and the failure to recognise Paul’s mission to the nations as God’s new way of rectifying the *ethnē* (270). In this regard, Campbell argues that Israel has not fallen out of the race but merely stumbled along the way (based on the reading of Rom 9:33) in their lack of understanding concerning the divine plan for the nations. God

remains faithful to Israel by stretching out his hands to them, as supported by the citation of Isa 65:2 in Rom 10:21. As such, Christ is the τέλος of the Law (Rom 10:4), taking τέλος as the goal for the ethnē, and not the end of the Law for the Jews, so that the ethnē may find righteousness (275). Campbell cautiously reminds readers that in reading Romans, too much attention has been given to the incoming of gentiles rather than the reversal of judgment for Israel, and there is in need of correction to this focus.

In Rom 11, Paul's provides an explanation that the misunderstanding concerning the coming of the Messianic Time on the part of Israel is not permanent but only temporary in nature. Israel's hardening has its ultimate purpose, leading to the incoming of the nations. When the nations come to trust in Christ, this in turn would provoke Israel to jealousy so that they might respond positively to the Christ-event. In light of this, Campbell argues that Paul hopes to move the ethnē to caring concern for Israel, rather than continuing animosity against the Jews. The ethnē should be agents of peace and reconciliation rather than boasting over Israel's fate. This is highlighted through the use of the metaphor of a wild olive shoot being grafted in the tree in Rom 11:17–24. The shoot cannot boast of its own survival without depending on the native olive tree, demonstrating 'gentile incompleteness without acknowledgement of and connection to Israel' (303).

SIT and the overcoming of inter-group hostility

Campbell sees Rom 12:1–15:13 as one section and argues that there is no need to read this section as if Paul is presenting issues of interethnic conflict or giving a series of paraenesis (325). On the contrary, Campbell sees Paul calling the ethnē to righteous living rooted in Scripture of Israel. Therefore, this section can be understood as providing the ethnē community guidance in group identity formation, focussing on love as the 'identity-descriptor' (338). The ethnē are told to welcome the different groups among themselves (Rom 14:1–15:6), emphasising that what they have in common in Christ 'is greater than any differing practices that might threaten to separate them' (361), such as dietary differences and observances of certain sacred festivals. It is a recognition of diversity not only in life and practice but also in valuing the other in their differences. Finally, in Rom 15:7–13, the imperative to welcome one another is reiterated with citations from the Hebrew Bible, and it is a fitting conclusion not only of Rom 14:1–15:6 but of the entire letter (388).

The long list of names mentioned in Rom 16 need not be counted among those to whom Paul wrote the letter. The greetings are meant to be passed on by the addressees to those listed from Rom 16:3–16 (414–415) demonstrating Paul's large network of people known to him.

SIT and the implications for reading Romans

By applying SIT in this commentary, Campbell takes into consideration the contextual circumstances of the various social groups in Rome that Paul was addressing. SIT also helps explain the complexity of group relationships and conflicts that exist among the various groups of Christ-followers in Rome. As a result, reading Romans through SIT

provides a fresh interpretive lens through which the readers understand the social dynamics and conflicts behind Paul's message.

Campbell makes the case that in Rome, the situation is that one group of Christ-followers defines themselves antagonistically over against the other, and other groups are viewed with contempt or judged negatively. This same attitude is also extended to the Jews who were unconvinced about the Christ-event. Campbell also argues that differences among groups are not the real issue. The problem is where these differences lead to negative assessment of the others, hindering mutual acceptance and cohesiveness among the Christ-followers.

Responding to this urgent divisive situation, a superordinate identity or common in-group identity approach is necessary and valuable in the attempt to overcome hostility between groups. Groups are then categorised to see themselves as part of a larger superordinate group which allow them to emphasise their commonality rather than their differences. By categorising the ethnē in Christ and the people of Israel as both being peoples of Israel's God, both groups of people could then be seen as within the family of God. This common in-group identity means that the ethnē in Christ must recognise Israel as also under the rule of the one God, and not to assume that God's purpose is ethnically limited.

Arising from this reading, the ethnic identity of both Jews and gentiles is affirmed and recognised as God's people in Christ. This will reduce intergroup tensions especially in culturally and ethnically diverse settings where mutual acceptance and respect can be promoted, and that these different groups can coexist together maintaining their respective ethnic identities as they both belong to the same Lord. Campbell sees Paul 'moving forward the proper recognition of ethnicity among gentile Christ-groups rather than moving toward assimilation of these within broader non-ethnic associations' (6). Overall, this line of argument based on SIT undergirds Campbell's coherent reading of Romans.

Concluding remarks

Readers who may not be entirely familiar with SIT and the recent Paul within Judaism interpretations may not fully appreciate Campbell's approach in this commentary. We would like to draw the attention of readers to two excellent volumes dealing with some of the methodological issues of SIT published by T&T Clark: Baker and Tucker (2014) and Tucker and Kuecker (2020).

One potential confusion that arises in reading Campbell's commentary is to work out the complex social identity of the numerous sub-groups mentioned in Rom 1–2, the 'strong' and 'weak' in Rom 14, and the seven groups of named Christ-followers based on the long list of names in Rom 16. What might be helpful is a chart or table listing these various group in a summary fashion detailing some brief information on their identities, how they view other groups, and the implications of how the superordinate identity in Christ draw these various groups together in mutual acceptance and respect. This would help readers appreciate the methodological approach taken in this commentary.

If readers are hoping to find some quick exegesis or exposition of a particular passage in Romans by consulting the relevant section in this commentary, they may be disappointed. One needs to read this commentary in its entirety in order to appreciate how Campbell progressively develops his argument and

interpretation of Paul's message, although one may not fully agree with some of Campbell's conclusion. As such, this is not a commentary where readers might find a quick and easy guide to a particular passage. However, if readers are willing to work through the entire commentary, they will come to appreciate the overall message of Paul in Romans dealing with ethnic identity and God's divine purpose in Christ. Towards this end, Campbell's commentary, informed by his decades of research on Romans, helpfully guides us in appreciating this letter with fresh insights and leads us into deeper understanding of modern scholarship on Pauline studies, especially in areas that are in need of reinterpretation or correction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Kar Yong Lim is a Lecturer in New Testament Studies at Seminari Theoloji Malaysia, Seremban, Malaysia. He also served as the founding Dean of Seminari Theoloji Malaysia-Kuala Lumpur Centre from 2020 to 2022. His research interests include Pauline studies and social identity formation of Early Christianity. His major publications include *The Sufferings of Christ are Abundant in Us* (T&T Clark, 2009), *Jesus the Storyteller* (Armour, 2015), *Metaphors and Social Identity Formation in Paul's Letters to the Corinthians* (Pickwick, 2017), and numerous academic essays. Kar Yong is currently working on a major monograph on space and social identity formation in Paul's Epistle to the Philippians.

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