

HOW COMPLEX WAS THE SOCIAL IDENTITY OF JESUS CHRIST? AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary study examines the social identity complexity (SIC) of Jesus Christ within the framework of Social Identity Complexity Theory (SICT) as developed by Roccas and Brewer (2002). Situated in a broader research agenda of mitigating ethno-religious violence in Northern Nigeria through high SIC, the paper explores how Jesus' multiple and intersecting social identities—as represented in the New Testament—can serve as a model for promoting high social identity complexity, thereby fostering tolerance and peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims. Drawing on biblical, theological, and social scientific methodologies, the study argues that Jesus embodied a high level of social identity complexity, demonstrated through his (self-) identification across diverse roles (e.g., Son of God, Son of Man, Prophet), his teachings, and his relational dynamics within the Trinity. The study situates Jesus' identity within the broader conceptual domains of Trinitarian theology, the God-Man Christological paradigm, and the Kingdom of God motif, presenting these as divine and human ingroup affiliations of Jesus, reflective of his overly complex identity negotiations. By highlighting the inclusive, integrative dimensions of Jesus' social identity, the study proposes a model of high SIC that holds promise for contemporary interreligious peacebuilding, especially in the context of persistent Christian-Muslim conflict in Northern Nigeria.

Keywords: Jesus Christ, Social identity complexity (SIC), ethno-religious violence, peacebuilding, and northern Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Situated within the broader context of my research on the role of social identity complexity in ethno-religious violence and the role it can play in peacebuilding in the context of incessant ethno-religious violence in Northern Nigeria,¹ I am researching the social identity complexity of the most revered 'human'² religious figures in Christianity and Islam – Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammad, respectively. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to analyse and describe the social identity complexity of Jesus Christ, alongside a similar ongoing paper that attempts

to analyse and describe the social identity complexity of the Prophet Muhammad. The goal is to present the social identity complexity of Jesus Christ from the Christian side and Prophet Muhammad from the Islamic side as resources for promoting high social identity complexity, which can contribute to the awareness and recognition of the inconsistency in the two social ingroups in Northern Nigeria (Christianity and Islam), therefore engendering mutual tolerance and peaceful co-existence in Northern Nigeria.

Methodological Difficulty and Clarification

One common difficulty in studying the social identities of Jesus and Muhammad is the nature of the sources available. Social identity refers to an individual's subjective perception of the self in relation to others. However, most of the information we have about how Jesus and Muhammad understood themselves socially comes from narrated sources. Hence, it seems inadequate to study the social identity complexity of a person based on what others say he or she is rather than who the person says he or she is. In the case of Jesus and Muhammad, the sources we have are either those that have been recounted by their respective followers (e.g., the Gospels for Jesus and the Hadith for Muhammad) or that which is reported as what God himself has revealed to them about who they are (e.g. in the Qur'an).

Nevertheless, since Jesus' disciples were his most trusted allies, we would consider their report as representative of Jesus' self-perception of his social identity. Similarly, since Muhammad believed and propagated what Allah had revealed to him concerning who he is in the Qur'an, we would take what is said about Muhammad in the Qur'an as representative of his self-perception of his social identity, on the basis that Muhammad transmitted the Qur'an to his followers because he believed what it says, including what it says about his social identity. While the Islamic Hadith and some extra-canonical literature in Christian tradition will supplement this study, the focus shall remain on the most revered sacred literature of Christianity and Islam – the Bible and the Qur'an respectively. The focus on the Bible and the Qur'an, being the most revered sacred literature in Christianity and Islam, is consistent with the present study's focus on the social identity complexity of the most revered 'human' characters in the two religions – Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad respectively. Moreover, the focus is placed on the narrated rather than the historical Jesus and Muhammad in consonance with the way these religious figures are perceived and received in Northern Nigeria, which is the primary context and locus of the research.

The Premise of the Study: Interreligious Peaceful Co-existence and Peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria

Noteworthy is that the present study is primarily situated within the purview of interreligious dialogue towards peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria. This broad context of the study underpins the specific focus of the study on the elements or indices of high social identity complexity of these two most revered religious figures in Christianity and Islam, and the choice of the Bible and Qur'an respectively. In other words, the aim of this study is not to discuss both the high and low social identity complexity of Jesus and Muhammad, nor is it to compare their Social Identity Complexity (SIC henceforth) to ascertain who has higher or lower SIC. Instead, the aim is to identify and describe indices of high SIC in their respective lives, titles, teachings, and actions, towards promoting high SIC in Northern Nigeria in the overall interest of tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Any kind of comparison between the two revered religious figures is for explanation or clarification only.

SOCIAL IDENTITY COMPLEXITY THEORY: A BRIEF EXPLANATION

SIC, a development of Social Identity Theory (SIT henceforth), refers to how individuals subjectively perceive the interrelationships among their multiple social group affiliations. Roccas and Brewer (2002) identify four primary modes of social identity representation: intersection, dominance, compartmentalization, and merger. Intersection and dominance represent lower levels of SIC as they consolidate or prioritize identities, often denying inconsistencies. In contrast, compartmentalization acknowledges multiple identities in context-specific ways, while merger reflects the highest complexity by integrating diverse and even contradictory group memberships into a unified, inclusive identity (Manomi, "Intersections" 77-78; Kok 2014; Roccas and Brewer 2002).

This theoretical framework arranges identity complexity along a continuum from low to high, reflecting the cognitive strategies individuals employ to reconcile conflicting group memberships. High SIC entails a nuanced recognition and integration of social diversity, while low SIC simplifies identity by suppression or fusion. Notably, individuals may shift modes based on context or psychological needs, underscoring the dynamic and situational nature of identity complexity. This model offers a valuable lens for examining the multi-faceted social identity of figures such as Jesus, especially in contexts marked by cultural and religious plurality (Manomi, "Intersections" 78-79; Kok 2014; Roccas and Brewer 2002).

SOCIAL IDENTITY COMPLEXITY OF JESUS CHRIST: A STARTING POINT

An appropriate *point du départ* for our study of the SIC of Jesus Christ is the question that N.T. Wright asked, “who did Jesus think he was?” (Wright 216). The difference, however, is that Wright is asking who Jesus thought he was in terms of both his personal and social identity, while the present study asks “who did Jesus think he was” primarily in terms of his social identity.

The debate regarding the identity of Jesus, both personal and social, goes back to the beginning of his ministry. Jesus himself was aware of the debate, which was why he asked the disciples, “who do people really say that I am?” (Mark 8:27-29 & Matthew 16:13-14) (Wright 216-217). It was difficult to locate Jesus because, even though he spoke and acted like several other leaders or popular figures of his time such as rabbis, healers, prophets, miracle workers, sages, Cynic philosophers, priests, royal leaders, exorcists, etc., he was unlike them in many ways (Wright 217). Some scholars dismiss any attempt to study who Jesus thought he was, arguing that such information has been beclouded with theology by his early followers, such that what we have is what his followers thought he was rather than what Jesus himself thought he was. However, there is much biblical and extra-biblical historical information sufficient to study who Jesus thought he was (Wright 218).

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SIC IN NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

Starting from Esler (cf. 2003), the appropriation of SIT in New Testament studies has become an established area of scholarly discipline within the broader field of social scientific criticism of the NT. Social scientific criticism of the Bible, in this sense, refers to the analysis of the social and cultural data of biblical texts and their environmental contexts using the research, perspectives, theories, models, and insights of or from the scientific discipline of social sciences (Elliot 7; see Malina and Rohrbaugh 2003 – the Context Group). As it relates to New Testament (NT henceforth) studies, SIT, as a sub-discipline of social scientific criticism of the NT, refers to the study of NT texts to identify and describe social groups therein and how the members’ concept of self-corresponded to their knowledge of group membership along with the value and emotions involved in such membership.

However, the appropriation of SIC in NT studies is novel and at an early stage, compared to the broader field of SIT. Starting with Kok (2014), a few publications using Social Identity Complexity Theory in reading NT texts are beginning to

emerge (see Kok and Dunne 2014; Anderson 2024). This study, therefore, contributes to this novel but promising enterprise.

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF THE SOCIAL IDENTITY COMPLEXITY OF JESUS CHRIST

In the following paragraphs, we will attempt an interdisciplinary study of the social identity complexity of Jesus, asking the basic question: how complex was the social identity of Jesus Christ? While Jesus' self-categorization as "prophet," "Son of Man," "Son of God," and the like help with the study of his social identity, as will be seen below, it is important to note, however, that deciphering who Jesus (thought he) was cannot be done based on the titles attributed to him alone. "Who Jesus is' is not, then, merely the sum of the titles attributed to him: Messiah, son of man, son of God, rabbi, lord, and so on. In many ways, it is Jesus' actions and words that provide the best material to try to discern the precise role he was trying to perform and the agenda he was trying to champion" (Wright 219). In agreement with Wright, the present study analyses the social identity complexity of Jesus Christ not only from his titles but from his actions and words. In this way, therefore, we seek to explore Jesus' titles, teachings, actions, and words to understand how he understood his social identities. This will lead to an attempt to describe whether Jesus had high or low social identity complexity.

Being an interdisciplinary study incorporating biblical, systematic theological, and social scientific methods, the study will be undertaken under three main themes or sections, namely, the Trinity and SIC, the God-Man Christology and SIC, and the Kingdom of God and SIC. In other words, we will explore the SIC of Jesus by studying his self-representation of his social identities as it relates to the Trinity, God-Man Christology, and the Kingdom of God.

THE TRINITY AND SIC OF JESUS CHRIST

While the goal of the present study is not to present a detailed explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity nor to defend it, it is helpful to explain the concept, thereby providing a clear basis on which the doctrine of the Trinity will be seen with the lens of SIC. A look into the doctrine of the Trinity with the lens of SIC is predicated on a consideration of the Trinity as a relational or social ingroup, as will be explained below. However, since our focus is on Jesus Christ as a member of the Trinity or Triune God, we shall keep our discussion focused on Jesus' self-

categorization as a member of the Trinity (as an ingroup) rather than on the other members of the Trinity (the Father and the Holy Spirit).

Grudem defines the Christian doctrine of the Trinity thus: *God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God* (Grudem 184, italics original). The term “Trinity,” which means “tri-unity” or “three-in-oneness,” is the common word used to summarize the Christian doctrine that God exists as three persons, yet he is one God (Grudem 184). Even though the word “trinity” itself is not used in the Bible, the understanding that the One God exists in three persons is present in both the Old and New Testaments (Grudem 184).

It is to be acknowledged that the risk of overstressing the distinctiveness of the members of the Trinity at the expense of their oneness in Christian monotheism³ is unavoidably present in any attempt to look at the Christian Triune God from a SIT perspective, as is the case with the present research. However, such risk can be reduced by equally emphasizing the unity or oneness of the Triune God. In the present research, thus, the distinctiveness and oneness of the members of the Trinity are equally given attention to appreciate the social identity complexity of the Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ Self-Categorization as a Member of the Trinity Ingroup: Biblical Support

Scholarly discussions on the divinity of Christ in the context of the Trinity normally begin from Paul’s writings, especially Philippians 2:6-11. Others start from the Prologue in John’s gospel, linking it with Jesus’ statement that “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30) and Thomas’ reference to Christ as “my Lord and my God” (Jn 20:28). However, because the origin and timing of John’s gospel are highly contested in scholarship, its Christology is not regarded as historically convincing to many scholars (Farkasfalvy et al 6). Therefore, Farkasfalvy et al argue that the best place to begin the discussion on the divinity of Jesus is from Jesus himself in the more historically reliable sources, finding what he knew and said about his divinity, for “if Jesus did not know that he was God, nobody else did” (5). To this end, Matthew 11:25-27 and Luke 10:21-22 are in harmony with the clearest expression of Jesus’ divinity in John’s gospel and are regarded as more convincing because they are among the earliest materials in the Synoptic tradition (Farkasfalvy et al 6).

The Greek version of Matthew 11:25-27 and Luke 10:21-22 are strikingly identical both in the ideas contained therein as well as in the expressions, indicating a common source (Farkasfalvy et al 6-8). Although written in Greek, the two texts

have strong Semitic characteristics that make scholars suggest that their original common source was in Aramaic (Farkasfalvy et al 8).⁴ The two texts express the relationship between the Father and the Son in an exclusively mutual and symmetric way, albeit with “clumsy verbosity” that seems awkward to the Greek and now English speakers. “An Aramaic provenance of the texts is probably the best explanation for the clumsy verbosity when both Matthew and Luke write ‘No one knows the Father except the Son, and no one knows the Son except the Father,’ rather than affirming that ‘they know each other’” (Farkasfalvy et al 8). The closest parallel or even clearest elucidation to the Synoptic logion ‘No one knows the Father except the Son, and no one knows the Son except the Father’ is Jesus’ statement that “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30, cf. 10:15) (Farkasfalvy et al 9). According to Kuecker, Luke’s gospel presents Jesus as being aware of his divine sonship (Luke 2:29), just as Luke’s readers were also aware of Jesus’ identity as “Son of God” (Kuecker “Spirit,” 76).⁵

In Mark 12:29, Jesus quotes what has been referred to as the only explicit quotation of the Shema in the New Testament (Hurtado 59) by affirming Jewish monotheism. However, in Mark 10:17-22 (cf. Matthew 19:16-22 and Luke 18:18-23), Jesus responds to the question regarding how to obtain eternal life by restating the point of the Shema, that no one is good except God alone. In the two Markan passages here, we see that Jesus and his early followers still believed in Jewish monotheism, but their view of monotheism has been “modified in light of God’s new revelatory act in Jesus” (Hurtado 59-60) without compromising on Jewish monotheism.

One of the typical NT texts indicating Jesus’ affirmation of his Trinitarian existence and function is his command to the disciples to baptize all nations in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19), which has been regarded as a direct formulaic reference to the Trinity (Bray 921).

The relationship between Jesus and the two members of the Triune God (the Father and the Holy Spirit) is akin to the relationship between members of a family as a social ingroup. Jesus himself talked about his relationship with his Father, how he only did what was pleasing to his Father (John 8:28), and how, towards the end of his life and ministry on earth, said he had obeyed the Father’s commandments and abide in his love (John 15:10). Similarly, he related with the Holy Spirit in terms that are akin to typical social ingroups. For example, he said he (and the Father) would send the Holy Spirit (Luke 22:49; John 14:26). In another instance, the Holy Spirit led him to the wilderness (Matthew 4:1). In the following section, we will discuss further the basis on which the present study regards the Trinity as a social ingroup.

The Trinity as a Social Ingroup

Having described the Trinity as well as how Jesus self-categorized himself as a member of the Trinity ingroup, the next task is to clarify the context in which the present research regards the Trinity as a social ingroup. What is the basis on which the Trinity, a fully spiritual reality outside the realm of human relationships, is to be regarded as a social ingroup? To this question, we turn to Philip Esler's enumeration of the characteristics of a social ingroup, to see if the concept of the Trinity shares those characteristics or not.

The following characteristics of a social ingroup, outlined by Esler ("Group Norms" 32-38), can be identified in the existence of the Trinity as a social ingroup: Ingroup versus Outgroup Dynamics, Leadership, Beliefs, and Time. A brief explanation of how these features of a social ingroup are identifiable in the Trinity will help.

Ingroup versus Outgroup Dynamics in the Trinity

As discussed above, we find instances in the New Testament where Jesus talks about his relationship with both or one of the Triune God as an exclusive ingroup. For example, he talks about the glory that he shared with the Father before time began (John 17:5), thereby excluding his followers as an outgroup who do not share that glory from eternity. Secondly, he talks about how he and the Father are one (John 10:20) in an exclusive sense from his relationship with his followers. Moreover, he said whatever belongs to the Father belongs to him, and the Holy Spirit will receive from him what he (the Holy Spirit) will make known to the disciples (John 16:12-15), implying a specially shared knowledge and relationship between him and the Father and the Holy Spirit that is not accessible to those outside that Trinitarian ingroup. Furthermore, Jesus' instruction to his disciples to make disciples and baptise them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit makes the three an exclusive ingroup (Matthew 28:19, cf. Matthew 3:13-17).

Leadership in the Trinity

From the perspective of SIT, "leadership involves having the members of a group act as a team (= social identity salience) and not as individual members pursuing their interests (= personal identity salience)" (Esler "Group Norms" 34). In this case, there seems to be a clear leadership structure in the Trinity, and it is less of a hierarchical leadership and more of having each member of the Trinity act as a team. In several instances in the NT, we see the three members of the Triune God act

as a team. For example, at Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:13-17), we see how the Son was being baptised, the Father spoke concerning him, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him, showing their oneness of purpose. Moreover, Jesus instructs his followers to make disciples and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, again, showing their oneness in essence and purpose (Matthew 28:19).

Furthermore, in SIT, "The leader is the one who represents to the maximum extent the shared identity of the group" (Esler, "Group Norms" 34). In several instances, we see Jesus Christ attributing to the Father certain divine attributes that represent their shared identity as a Trinitarian ingroup, such as omniscience, eternity, glory, cosmic authority, etc. It is noteworthy that attributing those attributes to the leader as the highest representation of their shared identity does not in any way imply that the other members of the Trinity have less of such attributes compared to the leader (the Father), but they attribute it to him as the epic representation or expression of what they all share. For example, Jesus said he, the Son, does only what he has seen the Father doing (John 5:19). Statements of Jesus such as "I and the Father are one" and "whoever has seen me has seen the Father" indicate that they have a shared identity, but in their roles, they ascribe leadership of the Trinitarian ingroup to the Father. Hence, the authority, eternity, omnipresence, omniscience, and similar divine attributes of the Triune God are represented at the highest level in God the Father (cf. Matthew 10:29-30; John 17:5; Matthew 28:18; 1 Corinthians 6:14; 1 John 3:19-20), making him the 'leader' of the Trinity ingroup in the way the Son presents him.

Beliefs in the Trinity

Shared group belief is one of the characteristics of an ingroup in SIT. It is worth asking, therefore, do the members of the Trinity, who themselves are objects of belief (John 14:1), have any (shared) beliefs? A more interesting way to ask the question would be, does God, who is the object of belief, believe in anything? A careful observation of the features of the Trinity ingroup from an SIT perspective shows that yes, the members of the Trinity have a shared belief akin to any social ingroup, on the basis that "The fundamental group belief is 'We are a group', since if the members do not share this belief they could not consider themselves to be group members" (Esler "Group Norms" 35). The fact that the members of the Trinity have a shared fundamental belief that they are a group is evident in the "let us" biblical passages and instances where they have acted together (cf. Genesis 1:26; Matthew 3:13-17; 28:19).

Time in the Trinity

Social groups exist in specific historical times; therefore, necessary to discuss each social group within its temporal context. Esler notes that “Groups exist in time. They have a past, a present, and a future. In some cases – for example, in the case of ethnic groups – they may have a history going back Centuries” (Esler “Group Norms” 36). One can contest even the possibility of talking about the Trinity in terms of time as one of the features of an ingroup. However, there are references to time in the existence and operations of the Trinity. We find Jesus expressing time in relation to the Trinity ingroup, for example, when he talked about “the glory I had with you before the world began” (John 17:5) and “before Abraham, I am” (John 8:58). To this extent, we can say that the Trinity has the ‘time’ feature of a social ingroup. However, unlike human social ingroups that exist in a specific historical time that can be categorized as past, present, and future, the Trinity exists in eternity, and their ‘history’ goes back to eternity.

We can argue, therefore, that the Christian doctrine of the Triune God (Trinity), seen through the lens of SIT, can be regarded as a social ingroup to the extent that it shares the characteristics of a social ingroup, such as ingroup versus outgroup dynamics, leadership, beliefs, and time.

THE GOD-MAN CHRISTOLOGY AND SIC

In the same way that the Trinity is one God existing as three persons, so also was Jesus Christ one person existing as fully divine and human. In the words of Grudem, “*Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man in one person...*” (Grudem 456, emphasis in italics original). A study of the form and function of Jesus’ existence as fully God and fully man, therefore existing in both divine and human social ingroups, provides a useful insight into his social identity complexity.

Any discussion on the deity and humanity of Christ in the New Testament should begin with the virgin birth, as found in Matthew 1:18 and Luke 1:33 (cf. 3:23). However, because the focus here is on his self-designation, we will take up the discussion from his ministry rather than birth.

Jesus’ Human Social Identity

Regarding his human social identity, Jesus shared a geographical social identity with people from Galilee (or Capernaum), a socio-economic social identity with the “crowd” who represented the working-class people and a Jewish ethnic identity (cf. Luke 2:21-40; Mark 1:12, 23; 3:1; 6:1-3; Luke 2:41-52; Mark 6:52; Matt

9:20; 14:36; Luke 8:14). From an early age, Jesus had a Jewish outlook to life (Bond 80). Kok even affirms that “Jesus was a Jew from birth to death...” (Kok 6). Hence, in his humanity, we can say that Jesus had a human body, human mind, human soul, and emotions (Grudem 459-461), and human geographical and ethnic identities. Similarly, in his divinity, he had a divine mind and Spirit, as will be seen in the succeeding discussions. However, since the present study is undertaken within the context of SIC, attention will be given to Jesus’ subjective self-categorization of his social identities as God and human.

‘Son of Man’ and SIC

Since SIC has to do with a person’s self-designation of his social identities, it is important to discuss Jesus’ own self-designation as ‘Son of Man’ to gain insight into his SIC, since “Son of man” was his preferred self-designation (Wright 220).⁶ Jesus used the self-designation “Son of Man” within the context of the reception history of its use in the book of Daniel (7:13-14) to embody two things, namely, the reign of God on whom he sits at His right hand, and God’s people who are vindicated after suffering (Wright 225). Placed within the context of Jesus’ other eschatological claims and teachings on the kingdom of God, he used the designation of “son of man” more as a role than a title, and it conveys the nuance of a definite Messianic claim (Wright 225). While Jesus’ self-designation as “Son of Man,” if taken literary, indicates his humanity, he used it more to indicate his divinity and especially his role as the Messiah. It was such a unique personal identity that pointed to his being the Messiah, which was the reason for crucifying him (Wright 226-231).

Jesus’ claim of being the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One when he affirmed to the High Priest that “I am” (Mark 14:61-64 cf. Dan 7:13; Ps 110:1) is an affirmation of his divinity, which is why no more evidence was needed to confirm the accusations of blasphemy against him. Placing Jesus Christ within the historical context of the Jewish expectation of the return of YHWH to Zion (e.g. in Isa 40-45) and its enactment in the New Testament (e.g. Luke 19), the exaltation and enthronement of the ‘son of man’ figure in Daniel 7 and Ps. 110 and its enactment in Mark 14:61-62, among many other instances where the divinity of Jesus Christ is strongly inferred, Wright states that Jesus knew he was God who embodied in himself the “returning and redeeming action of the covenant God” (Wright 231-241).

In terms of God-Man Christology, the SIC of Jesus Christ is evident in his existence within two social realms, in social relationship with divine beings (the Triune God) and human beings (the Christ-followers, Jews, etc.). “The virgin birth made possible the uniting of full deity and full humanity in one person” (Grudem

456). Jesus' full divinity is evident in his conception by the Holy Spirit, something outside the human processes of conception, and his full humanity is evident in his ordinary birth through a woman just like any human (Grudem 457). Beyond mere existence, Jesus' dual divine and human social realms make him a mediator of the two realms (1 Tim 2:5). This convergence of the social realms of divinity and humanity produced a socially complex Jesus who lived all his life simultaneously recognizing and relating to and merging these complex and non-converging social realms of divinity and humanity. Within the context of the God-Man Christology, we can say, heuristically, that Jesus had vertical and horizontal social identities. Jesus' ability to merge and manage these two social realms of divine perfection and human imperfection co-existing simultaneously in his life is what makes his social identity complexity high.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND SIC

Jesus' proclamation of the 'Kingdom of God' might offer us valuable insights into his social identity complexity. It is a common consensus among scholars that Jesus' central message revolves around the 'Kingdom of God' or 'Kingdom of Heaven' (Bond 89). Hence, any discussion on the social identity of Jesus needs to consider Jesus' reference to the 'Kingdom of God' as a social ingroup that he inaugurated. The Greek word 'basileia,' translated as 'kingdom,' in this context, "refers not so much to a *place*, a geographical region or reign, as to God's *active reign* over the human world" (Bond 89, emphasis original).

Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom was prophetic, hence his self-reference as a prophet. N. T. Wright notes that even though the title "prophet" was used in a broad sense, Jesus himself was happy to use the title for himself (e.g., in Luke 13:33-34) and to let others use it for him too (e.g., Luke 7:16; John 4:19) (Wright 219). Jesus' self-categorization as a prophet is so important to his earthly ministry that Wright argues that the best historically solid ground to start discussing, who Jesus thought he was or who others thought he was, is to talk about him as a prophet (rather than as God or Son of God) (Wright 219).

Jesus saw his identity and role as that of a prophet, in the order of other great prophets of Israel (Luke 13:33-35, cf. Mark 6:3-4). However, he saw himself as more than a prophet. One distinguishing factor between Jesus and other prophets within the prophetic ingroup was their other reference and their self-reference when talking about the kingdom of God. Unlike other prophets, Jesus' reference to the kingdom of God was self-referential. To have a place in the kingdom of God is to accept him, i.e. Jesus (see Mark 8:38; Lk 9:26; Matt 11:20-24/Lk 10:12-16; Matt

10:32/Lk 12:8; Lk 4:16-30; Jn 12:48). He, together with his twelve disciples, will judge the new Israel in the kingdom (Matt 19:28; Lk 22:30) (Wright 219). His announcing the kingdom of God places him within the prophetic ingroup. However, his self-reference and role in establishing or inaugurating the kingdom make him more than a prophet, but the fulfillment of prophecy.

Jesus' high social identity complexity is seen regarding his prophetic ingroup in the way that, even though a prophet, he transcended the prophetic ingroup boundaries and related with sinners and tax collectors and people considered to be 'unclean,' which drew accusations against him to the extent that his being prophetic was questioned (Luke 7:39). Moreover, by saying 'no prophet is accepted in his hometown' and citing Elijah and Elisha in the context of his experience with his fellow Nazarenes (Luke 4:14-30), Jesus places himself within the prophetic ingroup. Moreover, Jesus demonstrates high social identity complexity by showing that the privileges of his ministry cannot be limited to the subgroup of his village identity as a Nazarene. In the words of Kuecker, "Jesus presses home his subversion of the Nazarene assumption that privileged identity leads to privileged entitlement by implying that the benefits of God are available *beyond the primary category altogether*" (Kuecker 94, emphasis original).

Jesus introduced the new social identity known as the 'kingdom of God' when he showed that people would need to forsake their families, wealth, life ambitions, and certain comforts to follow him (e.g., Mk 8:34/Matt 10:38, 16, 24; Lk 9:23) (Wright 219). In other words, they would need to 'forsake' their present ingroup to join his new ingroup. In all of these, Jesus saw himself as a central agent and actor of and in the kingdom, who inaugurated and established the kingdom on earth as a replica of the one in heaven (Wright 220).

In SIT terms, we can say that, just as the Father is the prototype of the Trinity ingroup, Jesus Christ is the prototype of the Jesus followers' ingroup. "Prototypes are abstracted representations of the central tendency, average or typical values of the members of a category" (Roccas and Brewer 93). There are many ways that Jesus presented himself as the prototype of his ingroup, when he called on others to follow him (Matt 4:18-22; Luke 5:1-11; Matt 16:24-26) and when they also sought to follow his lifestyle as the standard (1 Pet 2:21). It is in following him as the prototype of the ingroup that his followers were nicknamed Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26).

Some of the indications of the Jesus movement as a social ingroup is seen in the way that: he taught his followers to pray by saying "Our Father" ("give us," forgive us") in an inclusive sense of his followers participating in his Sonship to the Father on the one hand, and in an exclusive sense in which God is "our Father" as a

social ingroup of Jesus' followers as opposed to the outgroup whose father is the devil (Matt 6:9-13, cf. John 8:38-47).

Another indication of Jesus' social identity complexity is seen in the way he crossed the borders of his social ingroup to relate with outsiders such as the social outcasts (Luke 8:48), sinners (Matthew 9:10-17, Mark 2:15-22, and Luke 5:29-39), and the like.⁷

The 'kingdom of God' ingroup that Jesus Christ inaugurated is presented in ethical terms, thus presenting a moral identity, namely, "whoever does the will of my Father" in Mark 3 (see Oten 4). The idea of "those who do God's will are my brothers and sisters," inspired by Deut. 13, is the dominant norm in Jesus's social identity as well as the dominant social identity as opposed to any ethnic or other group identities (Oten 5, citing Kok 1-9). Esler situates Jesus' Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12 as presenting the Jesus ingroup norms and prototypes that distinguish it from outgroups like the Judean leaders, showing Jesus' self-awareness of his being in a new ingroup that has its superior ethics or norms and prototypes compared to outgroups such as the "Gentiles" (Matt 5:47; 6:7), Judean leaders and 'their' synagogues (Matt 4:23; 9:35; 10:7), and Judeans (Matt 28:15) (Esler "Group Norms" 155-171; Mahrol 26, 28; Manomi "Intersections" 414-415).

The collective or superordinate identity of the Jesus ingroup is centred around the idea of righteousness of the members of the group, as opposed to the unrighteousness of outgroups (Mahrol 28). Hence, Jesus is presented as the ultimate ingroup prototype who represents the group's highest ideals and virtues, primarily righteousness (Mahrol 28; Nel 85; Manomi "Good and Faithful Slave" 415).

In summary, Jesus' new ingroup, the kingdom of God, was socially complex (in the same way that Jesus himself had social identity complexity) in two ways: First, the fact that the 'kingdom of God' or Jesus' ingroup comprised of people from different ethnic, religious, socio-political, and geographical groups makes it a socially complex kingdom, indicating the social identity complexity of Jesus who inaugurated and was a prototype of such a socially complex kingdom. Secondly, the fact that this kingdom is a replica of the one in heaven, showing how Jesus was simultaneously merging the heavenly and earthly kingdom, makes it socially complex in the way that it transcends spatial and spiritual boundaries between heaven and earth.

CONCLUSION

Several indices of Jesus' social identity complexity can be found in his self-categorization, titles, and actions. That Jesus Christ, self-identified as belonging to the Trinity (Triune God) social ingroup lived simultaneously as God and man,

inaugurated and served as the prototype of a socially complex social ingroup known as the kingdom of God, and showed his awareness of the non-convergence or even inconsistencies of his multiple social identities are analogous to a merger mode of social identity complexity, therefore indicating the high social identity complexity of Jesus Christ.

ENDNOTES

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² The use of “human” in relation to Jesus Christ is in recognition of his humanity vis-à-vis his divinity, as would be discussed in the subsequent sections of this paper.

³ One of the difficulties encountered in discussing the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is its seeming contradiction of the Christian doctrine of monotheism. Noting the complexity of the Jewish and early Christian understanding of monotheism and how it is different from today’s simplistic dictionary definition of monotheism, Hurtado notes that, for ancient Jews and early Christians, the primary concern about monotheism was not to “deny the *existence* of other divine beings, but instead to avoid/refuse offering *worship* to any being other than the one biblical God” (Hurtado 52, cited in Beeley and Weedman 2018). In John 17, Jesus expresses his divinity as well as his oneness with his Father in his own words (see vv. 10, 11, and 22). In this passage, Jesus presents himself as sharing special knowledge and glory with God, but much more, as one with God in a distinct way. Yet, he presents himself as distinguishable from God, as “the Son,” who has been sent by God (the Father), echoing the Johannine prologue (Hurtado 59).

⁴ Here, Farkasfalvy cites Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 218, who identifies 8 Aramaic features in Matthew 11:25-27 which also apply to Luke 10:21-22.

⁵ Moreover, Kuecker notes that Luke places Jesus within the Israelite social identity as an ingroup, and his identification as “Son of God” with its allusion to the king of Israel as God’s son in Psalm 2:7 “positions Jesus as a (the?) prototypical Israelite,” among other things (Kuecker, “Spirit,” 76, emphasis original). Nevertheless, Jesus broke several Israelite ingroup boundaries to privilege the outgroup. Kuecker’s study (2011) demonstrates a close relationship between the Holy Spirit and identity in Luke’s gospel, including the role of the Holy Spirit in

demonstrating Jesus' identity as the Son of God in his baptism, genealogy, and temptations (Kuecker 76-79). Throughout Jesus' earthly ministry, he demonstrated allocentric identity, namely, "the ability to love self/in-group and the 'other'" (Kuecker 80). Such an allocentric identity demonstrates Jesus' social identity complexity. With specific reference to how Jesus deciphered the expectations of his fellow Nazareth subgroup in the wider Galilean regional subgroup within the broader Israelite social identity in Luke 4:14-30, Kuecker's statement that "*the Nazareth incident can be interpreted compellingly as Jesus' refusal to be bound by the entitlement claims of his own Nazareth subgroup*" (Kuecker 80, emphasis in italics original) explicates the social identity complexity of Jesus.

⁶ N.T. Wright prefers not to call it a title, but self-designation (Wright 220).

⁷ Jesus' selection of only male disciples could be understood or construed as low SIC in relation to gender identity. However, such an incident is not to be taken in isolation but in the context of his overall interaction with men and women. Even though he selected only male disciples to be his closest followers within the Jesus followers' ingroup, he transcended gender boundaries and related with female disciples as well, to the extent that it made some people suspicious of his being a prophet (Luke 7:39). His selection of 12 male disciples is to be understood within his cultural context as a missional strategy and cultural sensitivity rather than low social identity complexity, since, in the right contexts, he related with women in appropriate ways that did not show gender discrimination. For a broader discussion on the strategic place of women in Jesus' ministry and the early church, see Nijay Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2023).

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