

Article

Group Formative Processes in 2 Cor 6:14–7:1

Gijsbert van Appeldoorn 

Theological University Utrecht, 3512 CA Utrecht, The Netherlands; gtvappeldoorn@kliksafe.nl

Abstract: This article offers a fresh interpretation of the intended impact of 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 on the group formation of the Corinthian Christ community. To achieve this interpretation, it will first determine the most likely social reference of the term οἱ ἄπιστοι. Secondly, it will describe a methodological tool from the Social Identity Approach that will help to visualise how groups are formed and reformed when the context changes. Finally, it will apply this tool to determine how 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 affected the boundaries of the Christ community in Corinth.

Keywords: Second Corinthians 6:14–7:1; οἱ ἄπιστοι; extended and restricted contexts; opponents; stereotyping

1. Introduction

There has been a significant amount of scholarly literature written about the pericope 2 Cor 6:14–7:1.¹ This is largely due to the strong tone of the passage, the presence of many hapaxes in the text, and the search for the reference of οἱ ἄπιστοι (the disloyal²). This article aims to contribute to the ongoing debate about this pericope.

I will argue that Paul's goal in 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 is to (re)connect the Corinthian community to himself and separate it from his opponents, denoted as οἱ ἄπιστοι in 2 Cor 6:14. This proposal aligns with the thesis that οἱ ἄπιστοι most likely refers to Paul's opponents in Corinth. Furthermore, I will add arguments and an explanation using a model from the Social Identity Approach (SIA).³

In the 1990s, Philip Esler introduced the use of SIA in the exegesis of the New Testament (Esler 1994, 1995). Nowadays, this approach is widely used in New Testament studies and has borne fruit.⁴ I will mention some objections to the use of such methodological tools in the field of exegesis and reply to them briefly.

One objection to the use of these methods is the very nature of sociology. Sociological methods are designed to map and understand sociological processes (Jokiranta 2010, p. 201). They are not designed to examine ancient texts. Researchers risk looking at their research object with the wrong set of tools. However, ancient texts also describe processes with sociological components (Omerzu 2014, pp. 5–6). For example, in the letters to the Corinthians, tensions related to identity and change can be registered (Clarke and Tucker 2016, p. 46; Welborn 2011; Winter 2001; Nguyen 2008; Finney 2011). Furthermore, texts in the New Testament explicitly construct in- and outgroups (Trebilco 2014b, pp. 7–9). Those investigating this benefit from methods suitable for analysing group formation (Chalcraft 2019, p. 237).

A second objection to using a method from sociology is the lack of data (Clarke and Tucker 2016, p. 45). Sociological methods require more data than just texts. However, this objection is only valid if a social historian pretends to do full-blown sociological research. However, a social historian does historical research using a method from sociology only as a heuristic tool (Chalcraft 2019, p. 238).

I concur with what Mikael Tellbe writes in his study *Christ-believers in Ephesus*:

I regard the social sciences as heuristic devices that can help interpreters pay attention to social aspects and processes of identity formation in the texts. While



Citation: Appeldoorn, Gijsbert van. 2024. Group Formative Processes in 2 Cor 6:14–7:1. *Religions* 15: 538. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050538>

Academic Editor: Dyron B. Daugherty

Received: 23 February 2024
Revised: 16 April 2024
Accepted: 23 April 2024
Published: 26 April 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

general social theories cannot answer specific historical questions, they can help an interpreter pay attention to social processes and raise interesting questions about the historical material under investigation (Tellbe 2009, p. 138).

A third objection to the use of sociological methods is that exegetes of classical texts have insufficient knowledge of them (Clarke and Tucker 2016, p. 45). As a result, they may not apply the most recent, improved methods. However, this need not be a problem, since the exegete does not primarily pretend to contribute to sociology, but to the exegesis of the writings under investigation. They are concerned with new insights into ancient texts (Esler 1994, 2000, 2007; Lieu 2004; Baker and Tucker 2016; Tucker and Kuecker 2020). Therefore, the tool Alexander Haslam described is only heuristically used to clarify the identity formative function of 2 Cor 6:14–7:1.⁵

After introducing the topic, the article briefly reviews the current state of research on 2 Cor 6:14–7:1. In the third paragraph, I present my view on the social reference of the term οἱ ἄπιστοι. The fourth section examines Haslam's model and how it can be applied to the passage. Finally, the article offers a probable explanation and visualisation of the social identity formative effect of the passage in section five.

2. State of the Research

In 2 Cor 6:14, Paul states that it is impossible to wear the same yoke as οἱ ἄπιστοι. In Paul's view, the faithful and the unfaithful are so different that wearing the same yoke causes a lot of problems (cf. Deut 22:10 and Lev 19:19).⁶ The metaphor of bearing a yoke most often denotes in the New Testament and rabbinic literature 'being under the law' (Thrall 2004, p. 472; Neusner 1988, p. 679).⁷ This indicates that in 2 Cor 6:14, Paul most likely means that the faithful being under the same law as the unfaithful causes problems. Therefore, working closely together with οἱ ἄπιστοι is problematic (Seifrid 2014, p. 292; Lang 2018).

To reinforce his statement, Paul uses sharp contrasts to clarify the distinction between both groups: righteousness versus lawlessness (6:14), light versus darkness (6:14), Messiah versus Beliar (6:15), faithful versus unfaithful (6:15), and God's temple versus idols (6:16) (Schmeller 2010, p. 374; Guthrie 2015, p. 351; Rabens 2014, p. 294; Long 2016, p. 255). These stark contrasts are an example of auxesis, a rhetorical figure that amplifies the importance and weight of his argument. This technique ensures that the audience not only comprehends but also retains the message effectively (Kennedy 1971). Furthermore, the contrasting pairs exemplify the Aristotelian rhetorical device known as antithesis (Fahnestock 2011, p. 232). Through these antitheses, Paul underscores the fundamental dichotomies and moral choices faced by his audience, compelling them to make virtuous decisions that align with his teachings. These antitheses stereotype the faithful and the unfaithful in order to underscore the boundaries between them.

2.1. Authenticity

One of the main reasons for several scholars to question whether 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 originated from Paul's hand is the strong dislike of οἱ ἄπιστοι and establishment of strong boundaries by auxesis in this part of the letter, which reveals almost sectarian traits (Rabens 2014, p. 295). In combination with the attested hapax legomena in this passage, several suggestions of the origin were proposed (Leppä 2005, p. 375; Minor 2009, p. 130; Park 2010, p. 735).

The scholarly literature provides four main opinions about the origin of 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 (Schmeller 2006, p. 221; 2010, p. 369). The first view is that the passage does not occur in its original context, nor does it originate from Paul (Brooke 2014, p. 15; Leppä 2005, pp. 380–84; Betz 1973; Duff 1993). The second view is that the text was written by Paul before he composed this letter, and later inserted in 2 Cor (Newton 1985, pp. 110–14). The third view holds that the text does not originate from Paul, but has been included in this context from the beginning (van Spanje 2009, p. 48). The fourth view is that the text originates both from Paul and from the outset, and was part of 2 Cor (Heil 1996, pp. 718–21; Barnett 1997, pp. 337–41).

This article follows the view that Paul is indeed the author of this passage and proposes a solution to the perceived problems (Hall 2003, p. 86; Long 2004, pp. 169–72; Keener 2005, pp. 192–93; Nathan 2013). Firstly, with regard to the structure of the text, there is no need to assume an interpolation. The passage fits well at the end of the defence of Paul's apostleship (Long 2004, p. 169; Walker 2002). Secondly, there are no manuscripts that support an interpolation. Thirdly, the passage is suitable in the rhetorical argumentative structure of 2 Cor, as textual analysis points out (Hall 2003, p. 86; Long 2004, pp. 169–72). Fourthly, some exegetes argue that 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 reflect a world avoidance that is not in line with other Pauline writings. However, such an exegesis is unnecessary (Harris 2005, pp. 183–88).

2.2. The Referent of οἱ ἄπιστοι

Assuming the social context of the Corinthians, the question arises as to which people the designation οἱ ἄπιστοι refers to. The history of the research offers several possibilities.⁸ I only mention the two most prominent opinions. The first is that οἱ ἄπιστοι refers to Paul's opponents. The second is that it refers to all unbelievers outside the community.

2.2.1. Opponents

David Rensberger brought the first view into the debate (Rensberger 1978). He emphatically takes the social context into account and proposes to read ἄπιστοι as a reference to the false apostles about whom Paul writes in 2 Cor 11 (Georgi 1986, pp. 99–127).⁹ He gives the following arguments for his thesis that οἱ ἄπιστοι have the same referent as the ὑπερλίαν ἀπόστολοι and ψευδαπόστολοι from 2 Cor 11:5,13; 12:11. Firstly, it would be strange if Paul ended the defence of his apostleship with a whimsical diatribe against unbelievers outside the congregation. His apostleship is under discussion within and not outside the congregation (Rensberger 1978, p. 31). Secondly, Rensberger points to the similarities in language between 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 and 2 Cor 11:2–4, 13–15. In 2 Cor 11, Paul verbally attacks the pseudo-teachers (ψευδαπόστολοι) (Starling 2013, p. 52). Thirdly, Rensberger argues that 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 seems to be a call to avoid those that are unfaithful (ἄπιστοι) entirely. Elsewhere, Paul accepts some association with non-Christians, as in 1 Cor 5:9–10; 7:12–14; 10:27. Unbelievers were not banished from the gatherings of the congregation (Barnett 1997, p. 346; Fee 2014, p. 681).¹⁰ Hence, in Rensberger's view, the word ἄπιστοι does not refer to unbelievers in general, but only to the 'false apostles'.¹¹

2.2.2. Outsiders in General

This reading of ἄπιστοι as referring to the opponents of Paul has been criticised. William Webb wrote a dissertation as well as two articles about the referent of ἄπιστοι in 2 Cor 6:14 (Webb 1993, 1992a, 1992b). Firstly, he considers it inconceivable that false apostles would literally worship idols, given the fact that they present themselves as Hebrews and Israelites (2 Cor 11:22). In 2 Cor 6:16, Paul remarks that the temple of the living God has nothing to do with idols. Initially, a metaphorical use of εἰδώλων seems obvious, because believers are, in contrast, metaphorically described as 'the temple of the living God'. However, in the Old Testament and extra-canonical Jewish literature, the comparison between the 'living God' and 'idols' always refers to the God of Israel and literal idols (Long 2016, p. 256).¹² Furthermore, all other occasions of some form of εἰδῶλα in Paul (of which 16 occurrences are found in 1 Cor¹³) refer to literal idols (Webb 1992b, p. 39). Therefore, in 2 Cor 6:16, the word probably refers to literal idols as well (Fee 1977).

Secondly, Paul uses οἱ ἄπιστοι eleven times in 1 Cor, and each time οἱ ἄπιστοι refers to persons who are not loyal to Jesus Christ (Morgan 2015, p. 248).¹⁴ Where one sees oneself as loyal to God, Christ and the message of the gospel, one considers those who do not belong to the in-group as οἱ ἄπιστοι (disloyal ones) (Trebilco 2014b, p. 77). This would not hold for Paul's opponents, because they are *within* the Christian community and cannot be called unbelievers on the grounds of unbelief in Jesus Christ, in the opinion of Webb (Trebilco 2014a, p. 187; Webb 1993).

Thirdly, according to Webb, the Old Testament catena of Scripture passages in 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 refers to the separation between Israel and the nations. The issue at stake is not so much physical distance, as distance in identical, ethical, and ritual terms (William J. Webb 1992b, p. 28, 42). Paul does not forbid believers social interaction with unbelievers in general, but he forbids the ethical and ritual impurity that comes with intimate social contact which does not fit with their identity of belonging to Christ (Martin 2014, vol. 40, p. 206). While Rensberger sees a contradiction between the traditional interpretation of 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 and 1 Cor 5:9; 7:12–14; and 10:27, the nature of avoidance is different, according to Webb (Rabens 2014, p. 296; Webb 1992a, pp. 164–65).

Finally, the linguistic similarity between 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 and 2 Cor 11:2–4, 13–15 is insufficient as an argument. According to Webb, the agreement only indicates that the influence of the false apostles evokes the same feelings in Paul as ritual impurity (Webb 1992b, p. 36). He proposes to hold to the traditional interpretation and read οἱ ἄπιστοι as a referent for unbelievers in general (Hodge 1891, p. 166; Thrall 2004, p. 473).

Based on semantic reasons Paul Trebilco argues that οἱ ἄπιστοι is the antonym of οἱ πιστεύοντες and a Pauline novum to denote outsiders in general (Trebilco 2017, pp. 47–48). Also, Teresa Morgan states, in accordance with this view, that οἱ ἄπιστοι in 2 Cor 6:14 most likely refers to outsiders in general based on its use in opposition to ‘brothers’ and ‘saints’ in 1 Cor (Morgan 2015, p. 236).

3. The Opponents

After this short overview of the state of research, I will argue for my view that οἱ ἄπιστοι most likely refers to Paul’s opponents in the social context of the Corinthian Christ community. Firstly, Paul never has such a strongly negative tone towards outsiders. Secondly, from a sociological point of view, it is very unlikely to approach unknown people, as most of the general outsiders are, so negatively. Thus, there must be a specific outgroup in mind. Thirdly, Paul employs the same strongly negative approach to his opponents in 2 Cor 11 (esp. 11:13–15 ‘ψευδαπόστολοι’). Fourthly, 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 is about a close relationship of the Corinthian Christ community with οἱ ἄπιστοι. Paul uses the phrases ‘unequally yoked’, ‘sharing’, ‘fellowship’, ‘part’, and ‘agreement’. A close relationship with outsiders in general would be remarkable.

However, what to do with the strong argument that οἱ ἄπιστοι is used for outsiders in 1 Cor as an opposite term to ‘brothers’ and ‘saints’, as Trebilco and Morgan denote? There is one remarkable dissimilarity between the use of οἱ ἄπιστοι in 1 Cor and 2 Cor.¹⁵ That is the tone. In 1 Cor, it is neutral or positive (contra: (Trebilco 2017, p. 51)), but in 2 Cor, it is strongly negative. To explain this, Suzan Sierksma-Agteres provided a plausible explanation. Based on her analysis of the πιστός-vocabulary in the Graeco-Roman world, she argues that in Paul’s undisputed letters, οἱ ἄπιστοι refers to persons in close proximity to οἱ πιστεύοντες who lack loyalty in some aspect (Sierksma-Agteres 2023, p. 482). Which aspect is lacking is determined by the context. For example, οἱ ἄπιστοι could lack certain loyalty to Christ or lack an appropriate ethical way of life (Sierksma-Agteres 2023, p. 483). When these aspects are the case, Paul approaches (in 1 Cor) οἱ ἄπιστοι more or less positively as potential ingroup members. On the other hand, Paul can treat οἱ ἄπιστοι negatively (2 Cor 6:14–7:1) because of a lack of loyalty to Paul and his vision of apostleship on their part. This lack of allegiance is totally unacceptable to Paul, leading him to call the community not to have fellowship with these individuals, so οἱ ἄπιστοι denotes in 1 Cor those in the proximity of the ingroup members, i.e., other fellow citizens or husbands, and not general outsiders.¹⁶

It is difficult to accurately reconstruct who the opponents exactly were to whom Paul refers to. According to Paul, these individuals were not members of the congregation and sought to undermine his authority (10:15–16). They were referred to as “the many” (πολλοί) in 2 Cor 2:17, 11:18, and 10:12, suggesting that they operated as a group (Barnett 1997, p. 33). Based on the description in 2 Cor 11:22–23a, these opponents were most likely Ἑβραῖοι (Hebrews), indicating an ethnolinguistic identity based on ethnicity, language,

and culture (Seifrid 2014, p. 425). The opponents presented themselves as both servants of Christ and descendants of Abraham (Barnett 1997, pp. 33–34; Gunther 1973; Georgi 1986; Porter 2005).

Various identifications of these opponents have been proposed (Keener 2005, p. 145; Lim 2020, p. 328; Thrall 2004, vol. II, pp. 926–45). The opponents could be Gnostics, legalists, pneumaticians, or a combination of these movements. In any case, they are of Jewish origin (11:22) and perhaps invoke Moses (cf. 3:7–13) (Keener 2005, p. 145). Dieter Georgi sees evidence for this in the likely lack of collections for the non-Hellenistic Christ community in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8 and 9), their request for money for their speeches, their criticism of Paul’s lack of rhetoric, and their comment that they were of Jewish descent (11:22) (Georgi 1986; Keener 2005, p. 145; Oropeza 2012, p. 113).

Georgi’s view on this point has garnered support and appears to be plausible (Keener 2005, p. 145; Lim 2020, p. 328; Sumney 1990; Porter 2005, p. 118). In any case, the opponents applied different criteria for apostleship than Paul did. They believed that they surpassed Paul in rhetoric and charisma. To counter this, Paul presents a list of all the suffering he endured for Christ’s sake. Suffering for Christ’s sake was an important sign of discipleship in the Jesus tradition (Mark 8:34–38; 13:9–11; Matt. 10:24–25; Luke 10:16).¹⁷ His opponents could not match his level of suffering (11:23; 12:10). Furthermore, they were accused of hubris (10:12–16) and boasting about visions and revelations (12:1–12; cf. 1 Cor. 1:22). The Corinthians may have been impressed by his opponents’ rhetoric, but Paul turns it around by stating that the one who suffers is a genuine apostle. The one who boasts and brags about “great” things is not an apostle at all.

B.J. Oropeza, like Georgi, argues that the opponents were Jewish followers of Jesus Christ (cf. 10:7; 11:4, 13, 22–23). Firstly, the opponents refer to themselves as servants of Christ and the apostles (as seen in 10:7). Secondly, they likely presented themselves as “sent” (ἀπόστολοι) and workers (ἐργάται) (11:13). According to Paul, they viewed themselves as servants of righteousness (11:15). Despite this, Paul equates them with Satan and an angel of light. Thirdly, the opponents may have used letters of recommendation from other ministers (mentioned in 2 Cor 2:17, 3:1–3, 4:2, 5:12, 6:4, 10:12–18, 11:7–11, 20, and 12:11–12) (Oropeza 2012, p. 119). Fourthly, it appears from 2 Corinthians that they preached the gospel with dark motives and focused on financial gain, rather than bringing a deviant gospel. By emphasizing their Jewish heritage and apostleship, they may have sought acceptance from those who were loyal to Peter (as mentioned in 1 Cor. 1:12) (Oropeza 2012, pp. 116–17; Taylor 2005, p. 120).

In summary, the presumption is that Paul’s opponents were Hebrew-speaking Jews who followed Jesus. They came to the community most likely as a group and preached a similar message to Paul’s, but with one difference: they had a different view on leadership. According to them, leadership needed to be accompanied by persuasive speaking, while suffering was seen as a sign of weakness and renouncing one’s rights was unworthy of an apostle. However, these were precisely the things that Paul considered as the hallmarks of his apostleship and following Jesus Christ (Oropeza 2012, pp. 112–34; Tomson 2014, p. 129).

4. Theory

Now I am going to explain the rhetorical purpose of 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 by using a model from Haslam. In his *Psychology in Organizations* (2004), Haslam applied SIA to a wide range of social psychological processes within or between organisations (Haslam 2004). Although the Corinthian community is not a modern organisation, a model from his book seems helpful for understanding the social process of identity formation in the Corinthian community and reflected in 2 Cor 6:14–7:1. The text itself describes group formative processes with sociological components (Omerzu 2014, pp. 5–6). The purpose of the use of the specific tool from SIA is to gain a better understanding of the text and the dynamics between the groups described in it. Firstly, I give a sketch of Haslam’s model (4.1); secondly, I apply this theoretical framework to 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 (4.2).¹⁸

4.1. The Model of the Self-Categorical Relationship

In his book *Psychology in Organizations*, Haslam uses two diagrams to illustrate how the self-categorical relationship¹⁹ of people shifts in changing contexts (Haslam 2004, pp. 33, 281).²⁰

The first scheme of Figure 1 mentions two poles: a scientific and a non-scientific pole. The second division makes visible that in the psychological representation on one abstract level, there is a clear distinction between physicists and biologists, namely when both are compared in terms of scientificity (Haslam 2004, p. 31). The psychological representation of many people reveals that physicists are more scientific than biologists, although according to Haslam, this is not objectively the case. This can encourage a form of social polarisation between biologists and physicists due to the verbal emphasis on whether they are scientific and to what extent they are scientific.

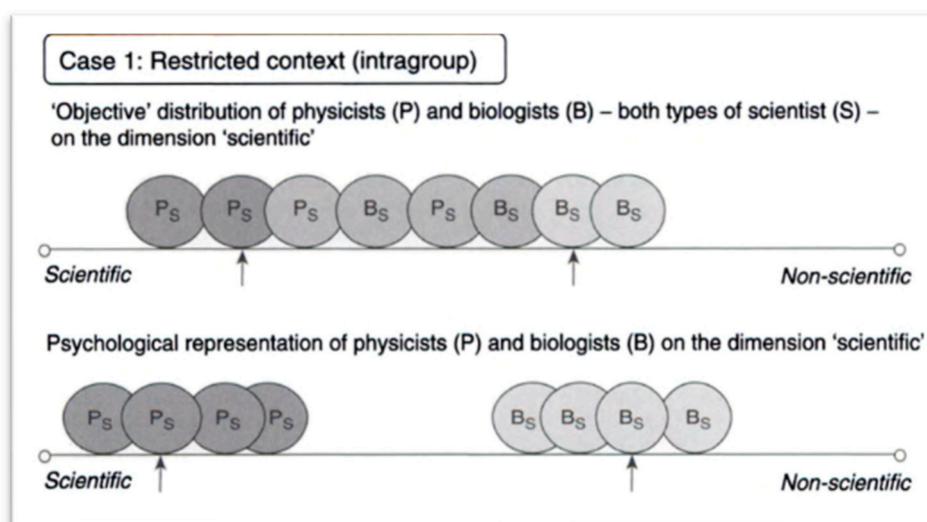


Figure 1. A schematic representation of the role of a restricted comparative context in defining the self-categorical relationship between people.²¹

When the context changes and a third group comes in besides the physicists and biologists, namely the artists, the position of the groups within the distribution changes (see Figure 2). The psychological representation of biologists and physicists now are both labelled as scientific. The distinction between them in the former context fades away like shades of grey resemble each other when compared to bright white.

Haslam not only distinguishes between physicists, biologists, and artists, but also within these groups. The figure draws several circles with the same letter (respectively, S_B , S_P , and A). These circles indicate different people. The person placed closest to the 'scientific' pole in this distribution is the most representative or prototypical of the 'scientific' category. Those who are further away from the pole are also representative but to a lesser and lesser extent, like a sparrow is more representative of a bird than a penguin. Conversely, the person placed closest to the 'non-scientific' pole is the most representative or prototypical of the 'non-scientific' category. Those who are further away from this pole are also less and less prototypical for the predicate 'not scientific' (Haslam 2004, p. 32).

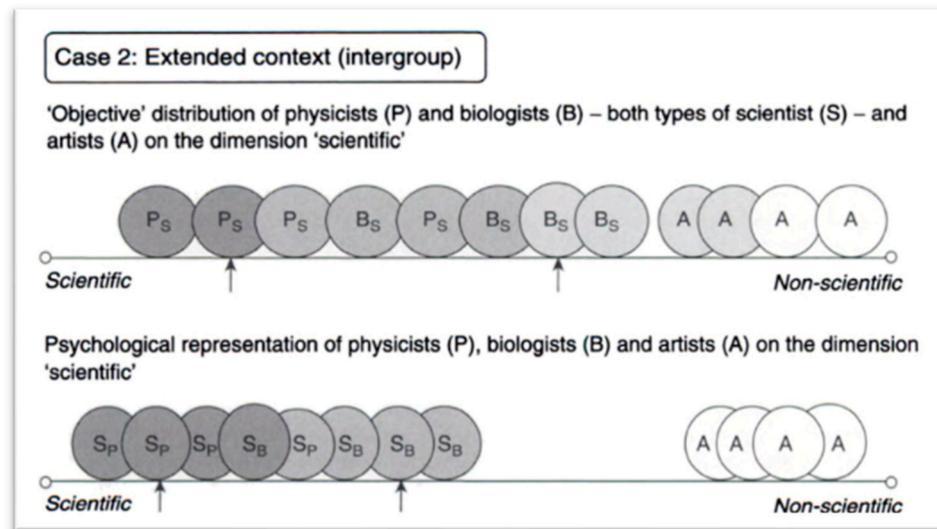


Figure 2. A schematic representation of the role of an extended comparative context in defining the self-categorical relationship between people.²²

4.2. Application of the Model

Now the qualifications scientific and unscientific for social groups will be left aside, and the qualifications faithful (F) and unfaithful (U) will be applied, as is the case in 2 Cor 6:14–15. There also is a third group: opponents of the apostle Paul (O). From the perspective of the prototypical faithful one (Paul), the situation within the ‘restricted context’, in which the opponents (O) are left out of the picture, is as follows:



This scheme depicts a self-categorical relationship in which a clear difference is experienced between the faithful themselves and the unfaithful. This difference is the strongest with F₁. The distribution of the faithful amongst F₁, F₂, and F₃ makes it clear that each person is not representative of the group in the same way. In a literary text, people can be placed on the same level, while in reality, nuances are present (Oakes et al. 1994). Texts can attribute characteristics of F₁ to F₃, and attributing the representation which is considered to be characteristic of the unfaithful and strictly speaking only applies to U₁, can also be attributed to U₃. This is a form of stereotyping.²³

When Paul’s opponents are given a place in this scheme, the distribution shifts. The question is how this shift will be perceived in the diverse representations by the Corinthian believers and by Paul. This article argues that the representation of Paul differs from the representation of various Corinthian believers, and that the text aims to rectify the representation of the faithful in order to distinguish them from his opponents.

5. The Boundaries of the Corinthian Christ Community

Before Paul’s opponents entered the congregation of Corinth, the identity boundaries of the Corinthian community of Corinth were on one level of abstraction clear to Paul: those who accept Jesus as Lord and Christ belong to the community. The non-members were the unfaithful ones. This leads to the following figure which shows a clear distinction between the faithful ones and the unfaithful. It shows that there is some difference between the faithful, marked with F₁, F₂, and F₃, and in between the unfaithful, visualised with U₁, U₂, and U₃.

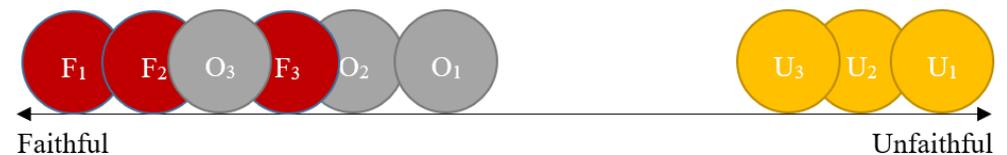


Then, opponents came in, who also viewed themselves as faithful, but who caused tension by not acknowledging the apostle Paul in his unique position and his view on apostleship.

These opponents exert pressure on the social boundaries of the group: who belongs to the ingroup and why? The interpretation of 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 by Webb cum suis only takes two parties into account: believers and unbelievers. Then, the question arises as to whom the opponents belong in the perception of Paul. Do they belong to the ingroup, as Webb suggests? Paul’s argumentation in 2 Cor 11 makes this interpretation unlikely.

Rensberger and his followers point to the opponents’ presence in the social context of 2 Cor. In their ‘extended context’²⁴, Paul’s opponents could be characterised as the faithful ones in the social representation of some ingroup people, because they impersonate themselves as apostles of Jesus Christ. However, Paul argues the opposite on the grounds of their rejection of his apostolic authority and their view on apostleship (David Starling 2013).

The figure below shows the perception of Paul’s opponents by some Christ followers in Corinth, as assumed in the text.²⁵ In their view, the opponents (O) of Paul confess Jesus as Lord, and thus they could be considered faithful.



Paul criticises this and states that the opponents should be assigned among the unfaithful because they do not accept his unique authority and his view on Christ (Lim 2020, p. 331; Starling 2013, pp. 45, 59).²⁶ This means that the opponents (O) belong on the side of the unfaithful (U) and not that of the faithful (F). He wants to achieve the following:



To achieve this result, Paul stereotypes the opponents as unfaithful and idolaters, belonging to Beliar and being unclean. Although the opponents do not meet all the characteristics of the unfaithful, they are labelled as unfaithful because they transgress the boundaries Paul has set. Not all characteristics of the stereotypical unfaithful (U₁) apply in reality to the opponents (O).

The stereotypical accusation of being idolaters seems problematic due to the fact that Paul’s opponents were most likely Jews who did not worship idols, as Webb argues. However, such accusations were not uncommon in internal Jewish debates (Tomson 2014, p. 130). Paul stereotypes the outgroup to reinforce his rhetorical purpose, separate the Corinthian community from his opponents, set the boundaries of identity, and give the Corinthian community a different perception of his opponents.

6. Conclusions

This article delves into the intended contribution of 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 towards the formation of group identity of the Corinthian Christ community. Firstly, it argued that the

phrase οἱ ἄπιστοι (the unfaithful) most likely refers to Paul's opponents in Corinth. This is because of the semantics of the word which refers to people in close proximity to the faithful ones in Corinth. Additionally, the vehement tone of 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 towards οἱ ἄπιστοι is doubtful from a sociological perspective if the phrase refers to general outsiders. However, such a tone fits well when the term refers to Paul's opponents. In this section, Paul sets up sharp contrasts and stereotypes them to emphasise the need for separation from these opponents.

Secondly, Paul aims to redefine the boundaries of the Corinthian Christ community and add other characteristics of group identity, such as loyalty to him and his view on the Christ-likeness of an apostle and Jesus followers. As Christ was weak, emptied himself, and suffered, so also for the Christfollowers applies: the weaker the better, etcetera. All of this leads to a strong call to banish the opponents from the community and open their hearts again for Paul.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data generated. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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

Notes

- ¹ For bibliographies about this pericope until 2010, see (Bieringer et al. 2008, pp. 94–100; Schmeller 2010, pp. 366–67).
- ² For the translation οἱ πιστοὶ and οἱ ἄπιστοι as “(dis)loyal” rather than the more common “(un)believer”, see (Morgan 2015, p. 240; Muraoka 2009).
- ³ For other proposed references of οἱ ἄπιστοι, see Section 2.2 and furthermore: (Thrall 2004, pp. 926–45; Lim 2020, p. 328).
- ⁴ For a fruitful use of tools from the Social Identity Approach, see (Clarke and Tucker 2016, p. 46; Kuecker 2011; Trebilco 2014b; Baker 2012; Newsom 2007).
- ⁵ For borrowing tools from sociolinguistics in a heuristic manner, see (Kok 2014).
- ⁶ For the Jewish background on ‘wearing the same yoke’, see Deut 22:10 and Lev 19:19 (LXX). The scholars illustrate how 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 functions almost like a Midrash on certain Old Testament Passages: (Beale 1989; Brooke 2014, p. 9; Leppä 2005, p. 374).
- ⁷ Mat 11:29–30; Acts 15:10; Gal 5:1; 1 Tim 6:1; Rev 6:5; Mishna, *ʿAvot* 3.5; Talmud b. Ber. 12b, 13a–b, 14b.
- ⁸ 1. For untrustworthy persons, see (Duncan and Derrett 1978); 2. gentile Christians who do not keep the Law, see (Gunther 1973); 3. immoral people within the church community, see (Newton 1985; Wendland 1980; Lategan 1984); 4. Paul's opponents in Corinth, see (Rensberger 1978; Barentsen 2011, p. 168); 5. all non-Christians, see (Webb 1992a, 1992b).
- ⁹ In Georgi's view τῶν ὑπερλίαν ἀποστόλων and ψευδαπόστολοι have the same referent, namely Paul's opponents. See also (Taylor 2005).
- ¹⁰ Cf. 1 Cor 7:12–15; 14:22–24; 1 Cor. 10:33; Gal 6:10; Col 4:5–6; 1 Tess 3:12,4:11–12; 5:15.
- ¹¹ This opinion has recently been defended and provided with new arguments by (Lang 2018; Sierksma-Agteres 2023, pp. 550–57).
- ¹² 2 Kgs 19:4,16; 18:33–35; 19:12,18; Isa 37:17; Jer 10:8–10; 1 Tess 1:9; Acts 14:12–15; 17:16.
- ¹³ 1 Cor 5:10–11; 6:9; 8:1, 4 (2x), 7 (2x), 10 (2x); 10:7, 14, 19 (2x), 28; 12:2.
- ¹⁴ 1 Cor 6:6; 7:12, 13, 14 (2x), 15; 10:27; 14:22 (2x), 23, 24.
- ¹⁵ 1 Cor 6:6; 7:12, 13, 14 (2x), 15; 10:27; 14:22 (2x), 23, 24. 2 Cor 4:6; 6:14, 15.
- ¹⁶ 1 Cor 6:6; 7:15; 10:27.
- ¹⁷ During ancient times, suffering was generally not considered honourable. However, there were some exceptions to this rule. For instance, it was considered an honourable act to suffer for one's religion and people, see (Luckritz Marquis 2013; Van Henten and Avemarie 2002; Barton 2001). Similarly, Christ followers believed that suffering for the sake of Christ was a great honour (cf. 1 Pet 4:12–19).
- ¹⁸ The purpose is not to present a full description of the model, but only so far as it is helpful to the exegesis.
- ¹⁹ Self-categorical relationship is the perceiving of the self in relation to others as an interchangeable member of a category that is defined at a particular level of abstraction.
- ²⁰ For New Testament studies on self-categorisation in a shifting context, see (Malina 1993). For the place of Haslam's book within the framework of Social Identity Studies, see the foreword of his book: (Haslam 2004, pp. xvii–xx, 33).
- ²¹ Figure 1 is in an adapted form derived from (Haslam 2004, p. 33).
- ²² Figure 2 is in an adapted form derived from (Haslam 2004, p. 33).

- ²³ Stereotypes are a set of simplified and rigid beliefs about the attributes of a social group: (Fisher and Kelman 2011, p. 64). For ‘stereotyping’ in the ancient world, see (Hakola 2008).
- ²⁴ For this technical term, see Section 4.1.
- ²⁵ The opponents (O₁, O₂, O₃) are randomly placed between the faithful.
- ²⁶ Leppä remarks: “The word ἄπιστος thus not seem here to refer to Gentiles but to Christians representing attitudes divergent from those of the writer” (Leppä 2005, p. 379).

References

- Baker, Coleman A. 2012. Social Identity Theory and Biblical Interpretation. *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 42: 129–38. [CrossRef]
- Baker, Coleman A., and J. Brian Tucker. 2016. *T&T Clark Handbook on Social Identity in the New Testament*. London: T&T Clark.
- Barentsen, Jack. 2011. *Emerging Leadership in the Pauline Mission: A Social Identity Perspective on Local Leadership Development in Corinth and Ephesus*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series 168; Eugene: Pickwick.
- Barnett, Paul. 1997. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, vol. 8.
- Barton, Carlin A. 2001. *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Beale, Gregory K. 1989. The Old Testament Background of Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5–7 and Its Bearing on the Literary Problem of 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1. *New Testament Studies* 35: 550–81. [CrossRef]
- Betz, Hans Dieter. 1973. 2 Cor 6:14–7:1: An Anti-Pauline Fragment? *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92: 88–108. [CrossRef]
- Bieringer, Reimund, Emmanuel Nathan, and Dominika Kurek-Chomycz. 2008. *2 Corinthians: A Bibliography*. Biblical Tools and Studies 5. Leuven: Peeters.
- Brooke, George J. 2014. 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 Again: A Change in Perspective. In *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Pauline Literature*. Edited by Jean Rey. Leiden: Brill, pp. 1–16.
- Chalcraft, David. 2019. Social Scientific Approaches: A. Sectarianism. In *T&T Clark Companion to the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Edited by George J. Brooke, M. DeVries, Charlotte Hempel and D. Longacre. T&T Clark Companions. London: T&T Clark, pp. 237–41.
- Clarke, Andrew D., and J. Brian Tucker. 2016. Social History and Social Theory in the Study of Social Identity. In *T&T Clark Handbook on Social Identity in the New Testament*. Edited by Coleman A. Baker and J. Brian Tucker. London: T&T Clark, pp. 41–58.
- Duff, Paul Brooks. 1993. The Mind of the Redactor: 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1 in Its Secondary Context. *Novum Testamentum* 35: 160–80. [CrossRef]
- Duncan, J., and M. Derrett. 1978. 2 Cor 6:14: A Midrash on Dt 22:10. *Biblica* 59: 231–50.
- Esler, Philip F. 1994. *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds: Social-Scientific Approaches to the New Testament Interpretation*. London: Routledge.
- Esler, Philip F. 1995. *Modelling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in Its Context*. London: Routledge.
- Esler, Philip F. 2000. Keeping It in the Family: Culture, Kinship and Identity in 1 Thessalonians and Galatians. In *Families and Family Relations: As Represented in Early Judaism and Early Christianities*. Edited by Athalya Brenner and Jan Willem Van Henten. Studies in Theology and Religion 2. Leiden: Brill, pp. 145–84.
- Esler, Philip F. 2007. Prototypes, Antitypes and Social Identity in First Clement: Outlining a New Interpretative Model. *Early Christian Identities, Annali di storia dell’esegesi* I: 125–46.
- Fahnestock, Jeanne. 2011. *Rhetorical Style: The Uses of Language in Persuasion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fee, Gordon D. 1977. II Corinthians 6:14–7:1 and Food Offered to Idols. *New Testament Studies* 23: 140–61. [CrossRef]
- Fee, Gordon D. 2014. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament 7. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Finney, Mark T. 2011. *Honour and Conflict in the Ancient World: 1 Corinthians in Its Greco-Roman Social Setting*. Library of New Testament Studies 460. London: T&T Clark.
- Fisher, J. D., and H. C. Kelman. 2011. The Formation of Enemy and Self-Images. In *Intergroup Conflicts and Their Resolution: A Social Psychological Perspective*. Edited by Daniel Bar-Tal. Frontiers of Social Psychology. New York: Psychology Press, pp. 64–70.
- Georgi, Dieter. 1986. *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians*. Studies of the New Testament and Its World. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Pub.
- Gunther, John J. 1973. *St. Paul’s Opponents and Their Background: A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings*. Novum Testamentum Supplements 35. Leiden: Brill.
- Guthrie, George H. 2015. *2 Corinthians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Hakola, Raimo. 2008. Social Identity and a Stereotype in the Making: The Pharisees as Hypocrites in Matt 23. In *Identity Formation in the New Testament*. Edited by B. Holmberg and M. Winninge. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 227. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 123–39.
- Hall, David R. 2003. *The Unity of the Corinthian Correspondence*. Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 251; London: T&T Clark.
- Harris, Murray J. 2005. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Haslam, S. Alexander. 2004. *Psychology in Organisations: The Social Identity Approach*, 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications Inc.

- Heil, Christoph. 1996. Die Sprache der Absonderung in 2 Kor 6,17 und bei Paulus. In *The Corinthian Correspondence*. Edited by R. Bieringer. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum theologicarum Lovaniensium 125. Leuven: Peeters, pp. 717–30.
- Hodge, Charles. 1891. *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. New York: Armstrong & Son.
- Jokiranta, Jutta. 2010. Sociological Approaches to Qumran Sectarianism. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Edited by John J. Collins and Timothy H. Lim. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 200–31.
- Keener, Craig S. 2005. *1–2 Corinthians*. New Cambridge Bible Commentary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kennedy, Verne R. 1971. Auxesis: A Concept of Rhetorical Amplification. *Southern Journal of Communication* 37: 60–72. [CrossRef]
- Kok, Jacobus. 2014. Social Identity Complexity Theory as Heuristic Tool in New Testament Studies. *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70: 11–9. [CrossRef]
- Kuecker, Aaron. 2011. *The Spirit and the 'Other': Social Identity, Ethnicity and Intergroup Reconciliation in Luke-Acts*. The Library of New Testament Studies. London: Bloomsbury.
- Lang, T. J. 2018. Trouble with Insiders: The Social Profile of the Ἀπίστοι in Paul's Corinthian Correspondence. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137: 981–1001. [CrossRef]
- Lategan, B. C. 1984. Moenie met ongelowiges in dieselfde juk trek nie. *Scriptura* 12: 20–34.
- Leppä, Outi. 2005. Believers and Unbelievers in 2 Corinthians 6:14,15. In *Lux Humana, Lux Aeterna: Essays on Biblical and Related Themes in Honour of Lars Aejmelaeus*. Edited by Antti Mustakallio, Heikki Leppä, Heikki Räisänen and Lars Aejmelaeus. Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 89. Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, pp. 374–90.
- Lieu, Judith M. 2004. *Christian Identity in the Jewish Graeco-Roman World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lim, Kar Yong. 2020. 2 Corinthians. In *T&T Clark Social Identity Commentary on the New Testament*. Edited by J. Brian Tucker and Aaron Kuecker. London: T&T Clark, pp. 327–54.
- Long, Fredrick J. 2004. *Ancient Rhetoric and Paul's Apology: The Compositional Unity of 2 Corinthians*. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 131; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Long, Fredrick J. 2016. The God of This Age (2. Cor. 4:4) and Paul's Empire-Resisting Gospel at Corinth. In *The First Urban Churches 2: Roman Corinth*. Edited by James R. Harrison and L. L. Welborn. Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series 8; Atlanta: SBL Press, pp. 219–69.
- Malina, Bruce J. 1993. *Windows on the World of Jesus: Time Travel to Ancient Judea*. Time Travel Series; Westminster: John Knox Press.
- Marquis, Timothy Luckritz. 2013. *Transient Apostle: Paul, Travel, and the Rhetoric of Empire*. Synkrisis: Comparative Approaches to Early Christianity in Greco-Roman Culture. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Martin, Ralph P. 2014. *2 Corinthians*. Word Biblical Commentary 40. Waco: Word Books.
- Minor, Mitzi. 2009. *2 Corinthians*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary 25b. Macon: Smyth & Helwys.
- Morgan, Teresa. 2015. *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Muraoka, Takamitsu. 2009. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*. Leuven: Peeters.
- Nathan, Emmanuel. 2013. Fragmented Theology in 2 Corinthians: The Unsolved Puzzle of 6:14–7:1. In *Theologizing in the Corinthian Conflict: Studies in the Exegesis and Theology of 2 Corinthians*. Edited by Reimund Bieringer, Ma Marilou S. Ibita, Dominika Kurek-Chomyzc and Thomas A. Vollmer. Biblical Tools and Studies 16. Leuven: Peeters, pp. 211–28.
- Neusner, Jacob. 1988. *The Mishnah: A New Translation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Newsom, Carol A. 2007. Construction "We, You and the Others". In *Defining Identities: We, You, and the Other in the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Edited by Florentino García Martínez and Mladen Popović. Leiden: Brill, pp. 13–21.
- Newton, Michael. 1985. *The Concept of Purity at Qumran and in the Letters of Paul*. Society for New Testament Studies 53. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nguyen, V. Henry T. 2008. *Christian Identity in Corinth*, 1st ed. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. [CrossRef]
- Oakes, Penelope J., S. Alexander Haslam, and John C. Turner. 1994. *Stereotyping and Social Reality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Omerzu, Heike. 2014. Exploring the Dynamic Relationship between Mission and Ethics in Luke-Acts. In *Sensitivity towards Outsiders: Exploring the Dynamic Relationship between Mission and Ethics in the New Testament and in Early Christianity*. Edited by Jacobus Kok, Tobias Nicklas, Dieter T. Roth and Christopher M Hays. WUNT 364. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 151–70.
- Oropeza, B. J. 2012. *Jews, Gentiles, and the Opponents of Paul: The Pauline Letters*. Apostasy in the New Testament Communities 2. Eugene: Cascade Books.
- Park, Roh Sik. 2010. The Background and Function of Pauline Temple Imagery in 2 Cor 6:14–7:1. *신약연구* 9: 735–61.
- Porter, Stanley E. 2005. *Paul and His Opponents*. Pauline Studies. Leiden: Brill.
- Rabens, Volker. 2014. Inclusion of and Demarcation from "Outsiders": Mission and Ethics in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. In *Sensitivity towards Outsiders: Exploring the Dynamic Relationship between Mission and Ethics in the New Testament and in Early Christianity*. Edited by Jacobus Kok, Tobias Nicklas, Dieter T. Roth and Christopher M. Hays. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 364. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 290–323.
- Rensberger, David. 1978. 2 Corinthians 6: 14–7: 1- A Fresh Examination. *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 8: 25–49.
- Schmeller, Thomas. 2006. Der ursprüngliche Kontext von 2 Kor 6.14–7.1: Zur Frage der Einheitlichkeit des 2. Korintherbriefes. *New Testament Studies* 52: 219–38. [CrossRef]
- Schmeller, Thomas. 2010. *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*. Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 8. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie.

- Seifrid, Mark A. 2014. *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Sierksma-Agteres, Suzan. 2023. Paul and the Philosophers' Faith: Discourses of Pistic in the Graeco-Roman World. Ph.D. dissertation, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands, January 12.
- Starling, David. 2013. The Ἀπίστοι of 2 Cor 6:14: Beyond the Impasse. *Novum Testamentum* 55: 45–60. [CrossRef]
- Sumney, Jerry L. 1990. *Identifying Paul's Opponents: The Question of Method in 2 Corinthians*. Journal for the Study of the New Testament 40. Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Taylor, Nicholas H. 2005. Apostolic Identity and the Conflicts in Corinth and Galatia. In *Paul and His Opponents*. Edited by Stanley E. Porter. Pauline Studies. Leiden: Brill, pp. 99–127.
- Tellbe, Mikael. 2009. *Christ-Believers in Ephesus: A Textual Analysis of Early Christian Identity Formation in a Local Perspective*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 242. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Thrall, Margaret E. 2004. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments 34. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Tomson, Peter J. 2014. Christ, Belial, and Women: 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 Compared with Ancient Judaism and with the Pauline Corpus. In *Second Corinthians in the Perspective of Late Second Temple Judaism*. Edited by Reimund Bieringer, Emmanuel Nathan, Didier Pollefeyt and Peter J. Tomson. Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum Ad Novum Testamentum 14. Leiden: Brill, pp. 79–131. [CrossRef]
- Trebilco, Paul R. 2014a. Creativity at the Boundary: Features of the Linguistic and Conceptual Construction of Outsiders in the Pauline Corpus. *New Testament Studies*, 185–201.
- Trebilco, Paul R. 2014b. *Self-Designations and Group Identity in the New Testament*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Trebilco, Paul R. 2017. *Outsider Designations and Boundary Construction in the New Testament: Early Christian Communities and the Formation of Group Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tucker, J. Brian, and Aaron Kuecker. 2020. *T&T Clark Social Identity Commentary on the New Testament*. London: T&T Clark.
- Van Henten, Jan Willem, and Friedrich Avemarie. 2002. *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian Antiquity*. Context of Early Christianity. London: Routledge.
- van Spanje, Teunis Erik. 2009. *2 Korintiërs: Profiel van een Evangeliedienaar*. Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament. Kampen: Kok.
- Walker, William O. 2002. 2 Corinthians 6.14–7.1 and the Chiastic Structure of 6.11–13; 7.2–3. *New Testament Studies* 48: 142–4. [CrossRef]
- Webb, William J. 1992a. What Is the Unequal Yoke (Ἐτεροζυγοῦντες) in 2 Corinthians 6:14? *Bibliotheca Sacra*, June. 162–79.
- Webb, William J. 1992b. Who Are the Unbelievers (Ἀπίστοι) in 2 Corinthians 6:14. *Bibliotheca Sacra*, March. 27–44.
- Webb, William J. 1993. *Returning Home: New Covenant and Second Exodus as the Context for 2 Corinthians 6.14–7.1*. Journal for the Study of the New Testament 85. Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Welborn, Laurence L. 2011. *An End to Enmity: Paul and the 'Wrongdoer' of Second Corinthians*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche 185. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Wendland, Heinz-Dietrich. 1980. *Die Briefe an die Korinther*. 15. Aufl. Das Neue Testament Deutsch, neues Göttinger Bibelwerk 7. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Winter, Bruce W. 2001. *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.