SEÅ 87 (2022): 202–226

Populism and Biblical Studies, Part 1: The Continuation of a Debate, with a Response to Robert W. Yarbrough

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As populism, for better and worse, is thriving (with an increase on both the political supply and demand side), research on populism is also likely to thrive.[1]

Introduction and Purpose

The 2021 meeting of the Swedish Exegetical Society featured papers on "The Bible in Politics."[2] The present article contributes to that discussion with a focus on American evangelical biblical interpretation and possible understandings of "populist" and "elitist" constituencies among nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century biblical scholars.

A debate that appeared in *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* five years ago provided the impetus for the book *Clash of Visions: Populism and Elitism in New Testament Theology* (hereafter: *Clash*) by Robert W. Yarbrough. The book's first chapter responds to the debate, which Yarbrough considers

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[1] Claes H. de Vreese et al., *Communicating Populism: Comparing Actor Perceptions, Media Coverage, and Effects on Citizens in Europe* (Routledge Studies in Media, Communication and Politics; London: Routledge, 2019), 433.

[2] The revised papers have now published: Athalya Brenner-Idan, "Bible, Theology, and Politics in Times of Pandemics," *SEÅ* 87 (2022): 28–51; Andrew Mein, "Biblical Scholarship and Political Propaganda in First World War Britain," *SEÅ* 87 (2022): 52–72; Karin Neutel, "The Bible in Migration Politics in Northern Europe," *SEÅ* 87 (2022): 85–105.

to be indicative of an elitism that pervades the academy.[3] The book's second chapter discusses "elitist" and "populist" tendences in over a century of biblical scholarship.[4] The purpose of the present article is to assess Yarbrough's critique of the earlier discussion in *SEÅ*, to lay out the tendencies underlying his history of scholarship, and to weigh the usefulness of the categories "populist" and "elitist" for identifying scholarly traditions and confessional identities.

Background

In 2017, I reviewed *Guds Ord räcker: Evangelisk tro kontra romersk-katolsk* (Eng. "God's Word Is Sufficient: Evangelical Faith against Roman Catholic [Faith]"),[5] written by an established biblical scholar, whose main objective was to critique Roman Catholic theology, including Catholic biblical interpretation, and to persuade Protestant evangelicals not to convert to Catholicism.[6] Although the book's primary theme was not germane for a nonconfessional journal of biblical studies such as *SEÅ*, what initially caught my eye were oversimplifications about purported consensuses among biblical scholars. I also faulted the presentations of the Bible in relation to tradition; outdated notions about the origins and development of the New Testament canon; use of the "Protestant historiographic myth" as a rhetorical weapon; and overgeneralizations about what is biblical, evangelical, or Catholic.

In the same issue of *SEÅ*, the author responded to my article, criticising my review, as well as the journal's editorial board, for intolerance

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[3] Robert W. Yarbrough, *Clash of Visions: Populism and Elitism in New Testament Theology* (Reformed Exegetical and Doctrinal Studies; Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2019), 28–37, section entitled "Case Study: A Scandinavian Debate."

[4] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 39–60.

[5] Anders Gerdmar, *Guds Ord räcker: Evangelisk tro kontra romersk-katolsk* (Uppsala: Areopagos, 2016).

[6] J. A. Kelhoffer, "Simplistic Presentations of Biblical Authority and Christian Origins in the Service of Anti-Catholic Dogma: A Response to Anders Gerdmar," *SEÅ* 82 (2017): 154–178.

and the curbing of academic freedom.[7] In a rejoinder, also in that issue, I asserted that such a book may legitimately be evaluated in an academic forum, that a popular audience deserves to know about pertinent scholarly debates and uncertainties, that bringing to light power structures is an intrinsic part of critical inquiry, and that all should be welcomed to participate in a mutual, multi-vocal, give-and-take academic discourse.[8] To my knowledge, Yarbrough was the next to weigh in, adding to the discussion trends in the history of biblical scholarship and a critique of the "historical-critical method" championed by "elitist" exegetes.[9] Inasmuch as Yarbrough addressed issues that were aired in *SEÅ*, it is suitable for the conversation to continue in this forum.

Overview

An intriguing aspect of *Clash* is its attention to populism, which over the last century has played, and continues to play, a pivotal role in various religious movements, ideological controversies, and political uprisings.[10] Conceptions of populism in relation to elitism can also affect

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[7] Anders Gerdmar, "The End of Innocence: On Religious and Academic Freedom and Intersubjectivity in the Exegetical Craft – A Response to James Kelhoffer," *SEÅ* 82 (2017): 179–209.

[8] James A. Kelhoffer, "A Diverse Academy Recognizes No Boundaries for Critical Inquiry and Debate: A Rejoinder to Anders Gerdmar," *SEÅ* 82 (2017): 210–222.

[9] Anders Gerdmar himself, in *Det står skrivet: Bibeltro kontra bibelkritik* (Eng. "It Is Written: Biblical Faith against Biblical Criticism") (Uppsala: STH Academic, 2020), e.g., 233, 257, 338, 426, takes up a few minor points voiced in Kelhoffer, "Simplistic Presentations" (e.g., pseudonymity) but, on my reading, does not deal with my main criticisms in either that article or my other article ("Diverse Academy"). It was through posts on social media that I became aware of Yarbrough's and Gerdmar's recent publications. Although neither scholar was obligated to contact me or *SEÅ*, the lack of any opportunity to give feedback or correct misunderstandings contrasts with the openness of *SEÅ's* editorial board, which offered to Gerdmar an opportunity to respond in a piece (Gerdmar, "The End of Innocence," which turned out to be longer than my review article).

[10] For example, De Vreese et al., *Communicating Populism*.

how researchers understand their work within the academy and how the fruit of their efforts is viewed by the general public, including within religious constituencies. Generations of political scientists and scholars in several disciplines of the humanities have debated the meaning of populism, as well as its role in historical developments and intellectual discussions. By comparison, theologians and historians of religion seem to be arriving late to the party. This article is a modest attempt to encourage biblical scholars to contribute to the conversation and, as such, broadens the scope of the invitation that Yarbrough issued to evangelical Protestants.

The next section of this study will look at *Clash's* presentation of "populism" and "elitism" within the academy and, in particular, within biblical and theological studies. It will then be argued that, since claims about protagonist populists and antagonist elites can be based on subjective perceptions, it is advisable to weigh the usefulness of those categories. I will also discuss why scholarship is, in certain respects, necessarily an elite endeavour, as well as why it is arbitrary to label only *some* scholars as elitist. The lauding of a populist movement can have a strong rhetorical appeal. Thus, it is pertinent to consider the additional bases that Yarbrough gives for his categories—namely, persecution as a source of validation for evangelical populists and the linking of their contemporary opponents with ostracised theologians who lived generations, if not centuries, ago. The article concludes that, although *Clash* is to be praised for placing populism on the exegetical landscape, the us-versus-them framework of its review of scholarship is untenable.

The Continuation of a Debate

Chapter 1 of *Clash* outlines two irreconcilable ways of approaching the Bible: the elitist, critical stance employed by "the world's biblical studies authorities"[11] and, by contrast, the populist reading strategy based on

[11] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 15.

common doctrinal beliefs, which is embraced by more or less all (other) believers.[12] This section takes up Yarbrough's definitions of populist and elitist, and examines how those terms are marshalled in his response to the debate in *SEÅ*.

Visions of Populist and Elitist

Yarbrough identifies "populist Christianity" as "the movement whose reading of the Bible ... has been under attack by secularist-leaning academicians since at least the seventeenth century."[13] The designation "populist," he holds, applies also to "groups" affirming the correct doctrine that is "derivable from the Bible and representative of historic Christianity."[14] Those features could be seen as two sides of the same coin: the oppressed hermeneutical strategy is the one that reflects correct biblical beliefs. In contrast to populist Christianity, elitist readings of the Bible are said to form "a tradition" that has roots in the ancient church, that blossomed in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, and that remains the dominant voice within the academy today.[15] That elitist tradition, Yarbrough holds, is also characterised by a set of "convictions."[16]

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[12] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 16; cf. 19. We will return to those beliefs in the following paragraph.

[13] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 22–25 (22).

[14] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 22, explains that "populist Christianity as [he is] defining it refers to groups affirming the view of God, the world, and the church's identity and mission more clearly derivable from the Bible and representative of historic Christianity." Those beliefs are as follows (*Clash*, 16): (1) a transcendent creator God, (2) the Trinity, (3) human and cosmic fallenness, (4) the incarnation, (5) the divinity of Christ, (6) Christ's virgin birth, atoning death, and bodily resurrection, (7) biblical miracles, (8) the "new birth" of a sincere Christian conversion, (9) Christ's Second Coming, (10) eternal life and eternal punishment, and (11) "an inspired and authoritative Scripture that affirms all these things and much more." See also Gerdmar, *Det står skrivet*, 416–417.

[15] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 25–28. The claim (*Clash*, 25) is that this tradition "has existed since the first century" of the Common Era, and that it is akin to "movements like Gnosticism and pagan skeptics like Celsus" during the second century CE.

[16] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 26, holds that the scepticism of elitist biblical scholars is

For several reasons, the definitions given are questionable. A noteworthy rhetorical appeal is the novel nomenclature: a century ago, the beliefs that Yarbrough propounds were those of "fundamentalist" Protestantism, but they are now branded as "populist," although there is no discernible difference between the two sets of beliefs. It is also curious to refer, first, to "the movement" (singular) and, subsequently, to "groups" (plural) that are populist when those groups diverge so widely from one another.[17] It is likewise an unjustified generalisation to label any and all nonevangelical scholars as belonging to a single, elitist "tradition." Rather than plausible heuristic categories, *Clash* sets up an arbitrary dichotomy: all who concur with Yarbrough's convictions, and who affirm his approach to Scripture, are accorded stature within the populist tradition; conversely, all others are herded into an elitist minority that, relative to its size, has, in his view, wielded disproportionate power and influence.[18]

Introductions to the New Testament: A Model of Pedagogical and Scholarly Exchange

A principal objection that Yarbrough raises to my articles is that it was unsuitable to review a *popular* book in an *academic* journal.[19] On numerous occasions, however, Yarbrough himself has published in such

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characterised by critical stances towards (1) biblical miracles, (2) Jesus' resurrection, (3) soteriology, (4) Christology, (5) ecclesiology, and (6) the church's confessions.

[17] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 23, mentions the diverse confessional standards of Lutherans, Reformed Protestants, Baptists, and even Roman Catholics—groups that, historically, have competed for influence and which could hardly be considered a single "movement."

[18] It seems more likely, however, that orthodox beliefs could be adhered to not only by populists but also by elitists, just as nonorthodox beliefs could be embraced by both populists and elitists.

[19] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 28–29, 37. Gerdmar, "The End of Innocence," 180–182, had also raised this objection.

journals reviews of books that were written for popular audiences.[20] The church historian Mark Noll observes that a hallmark of British and American evangelical biblical scholarship during the last century has been "critical anti-criticism."[21] That is, rather than subjecting the Bible to "higher criticism," evangelicals have tended to criticize the critical scholarship of nonevangelicals. But when the shoe is on the other foot, and someone levels criticism at "critical anti-criticism"—in this case, my censuring of a popular book's "pre-critical views"[22]—Yarbrough dismisses the criticism as elitist.

At the 1999 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Yarbrough participated in a panel debate with Bart D. Ehrman, an avowed former evangelical who regularly engages evangelical scholars on topics such as the historical reliability of the Bible. The two harshly criticised one another's recently published introductions to the New Testament, both of which distilled, for beginning students, an array of interpretive problems and debates.[23] The exchange between Yarbrough and Ehrman subsequently appeared in the scholarly journal *Perspectives*

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[20] Allowing for differing definitions of what constitutes a "popular" book or an "academic" journal, we cite several examples of reviews of popular books in academic journals (to which many could be added): R. W. Yarbrough, Review of Walter M. Dunnett, "New Testament Survey," *JETS* 29/4 (1986): 480–482; Review of James K. Beilby, "The Historical Jesus: Five Views," *Themelios* 35/1 (2010): 95–96; Review of Ken Gire, "Shaped by the Cross: Meditations on the Sufferings of Jesus," *Themelios* 37/3 (2012): 583–585; Review of Adolf von Schlatter, "Einführung in die Theologie," *BBR* 24/2 (2014): 297–299. Given that Yarbrough's reviews of those books are overwhelmingly positive, would that indicate that only positive reviews of such books are suitable in academic journals?

[21] Mark Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (2nd ed.; Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004 [1986]), 85–90, 154–161.

[22] See below, on Yarbrough, *Clash*, 30.

[23] Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997); Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey* (Encountering Biblical Studies; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998).

in Religious Studies.[24] Each author penned a review article of the other's textbook and a separate article responding to the other's review—a format akin to that of the debate in *SEÅ*.[25] On my reading, their conversation was a commendable example of sharp debate and frank scholarly exchange, which, beyond pedagogy, treated broader questions about theory, method, and, especially, historiography. Thus, it is surprising that, in *Clash*, Yarbrough takes exception to my subjecting a popular book "to withering scrutiny."[26]

A Response to a Debate and a Response to the Response

Yarbrough's definitions of populist and elitist are brought to bear upon the debate in *SEÅ*. Inasmuch as my review is called "a recent and some-

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[24] Bart D. Ehrman, "A Critique of Encountering the New Testament, by Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough," *PRSt* 27/4 (2000): 353–358; Robert W. Yarbrough, "Response to Professor Ehrman's Review," *PRSt* 27/4 (2000): 359–362; idem, "The Power and Pathos of Professor Ehrman's New Testament Introduction," *PRSt* 27/4 (2000): 363–370; Bart D. Ehrman, "A Response to Robert Yarbrough's Critique," *PRSt* 27/4 (2000): 371–373. See also the discussion, in the same issue, of both textbooks by Susan R. Garrett, "Bridging a Chasm or Burning Bridges? Criticism vs. Confessionalism in Beginning New Testament Study," *PRSt* 27/4 (2000): 375–382. In neither his review of Ehrman nor his response to Ehrman's review does Yarbrough use the terms "populist" and "elitist."

[25] Several objections that I had raised (Kelhoffer, "Simplistic Presentations," 159–166) strike a chord with earlier objections by Ehrman, "Critique of Encountering," 358 (italics original): "The problem is that Elwell and Yarbrough provide no discrimination for their innocent readers, but brand critical scholarship as all godless and senseless. It is easier, of course, to caricature than to engage—especially when dealing with beginning students. But why is it necessary to present half-truths and to ridicule sincere and serious scholars who have devoted their lives to engaging in sober historical research? Why is it not better, even in a theological introduction, to present the data and then mount an *argument*, or provide the *evidence*, or even give the *options* and let a reader decide for him[-] or herself?"

[26] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 29. In "The End of Innocence," Gerdmar likewise subjected my response to a "withering scrutiny," which I regard as legitimate in the give-and-take of scholarly deliberations.

what extreme example" of "elitist interpretation,"[27] I could hardly claim to offer a neutral or an objective perspective on that assertion. In what follows, I will discuss how his is a *populist* response, and why he regards the debate as emblematic of an "elitist-populist divide"[28] that pervades much contemporary biblical scholarship.

A limitation to Yarbrough's response is that he gives no indication of actually having *read* the book I had reviewed. Although this is understandable, since the book is in Swedish, he does not, and apparently could not, maintain that my criticisms of *that* book were unfounded. Rather, it seems to be unsuitable to critique *any* such book. His response is thus vulnerable to missing nuances in the book, in my critiques, and in the debate's Swedish cultural and theological context. It is also an extreme example of special pleading—tilting the rhetorical playing field in Yarbrough's favour before a debate could even begin.

Several of Yarbrough's other objections may be mentioned more briefly, such as my criticisms of "pre-critical views."[29] He also censures the problematising of an affirmation of "faith in all of God's Word," since he finds unpersuasive my stance that biblical literature reflects diverse viewpoints, and since the biblical authors' understanding(s) of "God's Word" could differ from a modern affirmation of biblical inerrancy.[30] Furthermore, Yarbrough finds unreasonable my expectation that the book's numerous references to scholarly consensuses be aligned with accurate representations of those consensuses.[31] Also questioned are my remarks on the history of the New Testament canon, on the (pseudepigraphic) authorship of letters such as Colossians and Ephesians, and on historiographic models for understanding "Marcion and

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[27] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 28–37.
[28] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 29.
[29] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 30.
[30] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 30–32.
[31] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 32–33.

the gnostics" in relation to other late ancient Christian theologies.[32] Yarbrough concludes that, when encountering the arguments in my articles, "we are dealing with an elitist reading of the New Testament and its message"; moreover, "the elitist guild consensus" is said to be "functioning like the papal magisterium."[33]

In certain respects, though, Yarbrough's objections seem not to take into account the genre and limitations of a review article, within which it is not possible to defend each objection, or to refute each questionable element. What is possible is to ask why a book does not adequately address certain issues, which is often a part of much shorter reviews. Although I welcome the fact that Yarbrough engaged in the debate,[34] it is disconcerting that my objections are dismissed *because* they are seen to be elitist. In other words, what scholars routinely do—namely, critique each other's work—is, in this case, deemed a partisan assault on populist scholarship.

Populism and Elitism: Two Impalpable Categories

The allegation of a decidedly elitist approach to biblical interpretation gives rise to a number of questions. In what follows, we will consider Yarbrough's portrayal of a centuries-old conspiracy, his reification of his-

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[32] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 33, after which Yarbrough summarises Gerdmar's response to my article (*Clash*, 34–35) before critiquing my rejoinder to that response (36).

[33] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 37. The latter is a clever assertion: whereas I had asked whether the inclusion, at the beginning of Gerdmar's book *Guds Ord räcker*, of endorsements by nine (!) prominent Swedish evangelical leaders amounted to "a kind of evangelical curia" for defining correct doctrine (Kelhoffer, "Simplistic Presentations," 171), Yarbrough holds that I rely upon an analogous absolutist authority. Concurring with Yarborough's assessment, Gerdmar, *Det står skrivet*, 420–423, calls for the liberation of biblical studies from its "Babylonian captivity."

[34] In writing the review article, it was my hope that broader questions of biblical dogmatics and scholarship would receive attention. The responses by Yarbrough and Gerdmar could thus be seen as an affirmation of the article's purpose.

torical criticism, and his "othering" of opponents. Attention will then be given to a tautology, to the question of who could be designated as elites, to elitism and populism as subjective categorisations, and to scholars' engagements with the populist public. We will also assess *Clash's* appeals to persecution as a source of validation and the book's taxonomic anti-heretical argumentation.

Conspiracy Theory, Reification, and Othering

A central contention in chapter 2 of *Clash* is that there is a prevalent conspiracy within the academy that dates back at least as far as the Enlightenment. According to this claim, doubts about miracles and the perspicuity of divine revelation have driven a particular way of studying the Bible—the "historical-critical method." Questions may be raised, however, about the posited alternative of either believing in the supernatural or employing historical criticism. The historical-critical method is, in fact, not just one method.[35] If exegetical research since the 1800s could be boiled down to anything, it might be the recognition that believers, agnostics, and nonbelievers are free to pose critical questions to biblical literature and to draw their own conclusions. When this is done, numerous methods and theoretical approaches come into play. Moreover, academics perennially—and vigorously—debate which methods and theories are most apt for illuminating texts, answering questions, and solving problems. There is no consensus as to whether more traditional methods (e.g., semantics and redaction criticism), newer methods and theories (e.g., socio-historical, feminist, and postcolonial approaches), or some combination of the "old" and the "new" should be employed.

Although Yarbrough demonstrates that, in the history of biblical scholarship, *particular* leading figures have had a philosophical bias

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[35] See Kelhoffer, *Conceptions of "Gospel" and Legitimacy in Early Christianity* (WUNT, 324; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 10–14, and Kelhoffer, "Simplistic Presentations," 175 n. 65.

against miracles, it is unpersuasive to extrapolate from those examples a generalisation for the field as a whole. A possible counterexample to such bias could be identified in Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), who acknowledged that, in the early church, miracles were "ein sehr wichtiges Mittel der Mission und Propaganda."[36] I personally have no naturalist bias against the possibility of miracles, and have examined the often-underappreciated value of miracles in the writings of Paul and Justin Martyr, as well as in numerous other early Christian sources.[37]

Likewise, for those who examine the biblical writings' historical, theological, and ethical viewpoints, there need not be any prima facie bias against the writings' "accuracy" (however construed). On the contrary, the confronting of critical questions can, at least to some, confirm the reliability of biblical accounts.[38] Where many academicians would draw the line is the distinction between an *openness* to revisionist conclusions and the *presumptions* that the biblical accounts are always accurate and that they are compatible with one another. On my reading, Yarbrough *reifies* (i.e., objectifies) a complex phenomenon by restricting the historical-critical method to a particular approach that is beholden to a naturalist worldview. In doing so, he vanquishes a "straw figure" caricature of what in reality encompasses diverse approaches, trends, and developments.

The paradigm of *Clash* pits "us" (populist believers) against "them" (nearly everyone else). Critical scholars of various stripes are herded into a single amorphous pantheon, and those in the "us" camp are exhorted

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[36] Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1902), esp. 95–105.

[37] In particular, the references to "ordinary," or unnamed, Christ-believers who perform miracles is an intriguing topic that merits further study. See Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and Their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark* (WUNT, 2/112; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 248–339, and Kelhoffer, "The Apostle Paul and Justin Martyr on the Miraculous: A Comparison of Appeals to Authority," *GRBS* 42/2 (2001): 163–184.

[38] See Noll, *Faith and Criticism*, chapters 5–8.

to conduct their work within a sanctioned ecclesial context. In what therefore seems to be an "othering" of opponents, everyone belongs to one *habitus* or another, and never the twain shall meet. But Mark Noll has shown that, within British and American evangelical circles, questions about the relationship between "faith and criticism" have been met with a variety of explanations.[39] Accordingly, Yarbrough may be speaking for some evangelical exegetes but not necessarily for others.[40]

Elitism in the Eye of the Beholder?

The picture painted in *Clash* is one of elitism endemic in the academy. To be sure, there is an element of truth in this "elite" characterisation; whether in the natural sciences, the social sciences, or the humanities (including theology and religious studies), researchers devote years to discipline-specific training, and subsequently conduct their research for advanced students (including doctoral students), colleagues, and the interested public. Because of the stringent academic requirements, respect is due to specialists in any field and occupation.[41]

It thus becomes a *tautology* (i.e., a circular definition) to describe scholars as elitist, and it is unjustified to disparage them for that reason.

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[39] Noll, *Faith and Criticism*, e.g., 85–90, compares, inter alia, the positions of British and American evangelicals during the period 1860–1937.

[40] Noll, *Faith and Criticism*, 154–161, 211–226, presents the results of a 1984 survey that he himself conducted, and identifies differences in the types of "believing critics" between members of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) and members of the Institute for Biblical Research (IBR). One could thus wonder how to categorise those who identify as evangelical but who have reservations about some of Yarbrough's viewpoints.

[41] See above, on Ehrman, "Critique of Encountering," 358. Nonetheless, some academic programs and institutions of higher learning could be considered more prestigious than others. Additionally, among the so-called elites there are great variations with regard to degree of expertise, authority, and charisma, as well as with regard to degrees of respect based on gender, race, wealth, social position, and prestige. I am grateful to Adela Yarbro Collins for suggestions on this theme.

Demurring from *Clash's* clear-cut distinction between populists and elites, I suggest that *any* of us blessed with the opportunity of having completed postgraduate studies or of having written a doctoral thesis belong, in some sense, to an elite class; no such person is an unlettered commoner, in contrast to members of a privileged aristocracy. Further, most readers of this journal, who possess the educational background, access to theological literature, and both time and leisure to engage with exegetical matters, would also belong to an elite class. This would, of course, apply also to Yarbrough and many who read his book. What is at stake in *Clash*, I suggest, are competing views *among elites*, who vie for influence among colleagues as well as the general public, including the religiously affiliated public. And if most of those engaged in a debate are elites, the rhetorical force of discounting some, but not others, as elitist would be curtailed.

What is more, the binary distinction in *Clash* could be turned on its head. Historically speaking, critically inclined exegetes and other progressive theologians have formed a distinct and vulnerable minority. In speaking out, many have risked retribution from ecclesial, governmental, and even royal power brokers. As has been observed in regard to beauty, a judgement about what is elitist may lie "in the eyes of the beholder." To prima facie question others' bias, motivation, or legitimacy due to their privileged status dampens the prospects for meaningful exchange in academic debates and, for that matter, in ecumenical discussions. That kind of stance did not come to the fore in Yarbrough's earlier exchange with Bart Ehrman. Its appearance in *Clash* could imply a shift in how Yarbrough interacts with nonevangelical scholarship.

What, then, can be said about the book's endorsement of populist endeavours and questioning of elitist endeavours? All have a right to share their intuition, experiences, receipt of otherworldly revelations, or interpretation of divine revelation. Many specialists do not communicate solely with others in their guild but also write popular works (at a high level and based on rigorous research) for pastors and people in the churches, giving attention to the spiritual life, ethical issues, and so

forth. Ideally, then, there is no necessary either-or "clash" between populist and elitist pursuits.

Persecution and Taxonomy as Bases for Delegitimising Opponents

Two claims in *Clash* merit particular comment, since they are laden with judgements about mainstream biblical scholars' ethical conduct, identity, and legitimacy as participants in debate and shapers of public policy. One claim is that elites persecute non-elites; the other, that there are taxonomic links between today's elitist theologians and their heterodox forerunners. Those links to ancient Judaism, late ancient Christianity, and the Enlightenment span centuries as well as diverse cultural and theological contexts.

Persecution as Validation

Cited repeatedly in *Clash* are the suffering and persecution of Christians through the ages, as well as in many parts of the world today.[42] Those violations of religious liberty are presented as an analogy to the persecution that evangelical scholars have historically endured, and continue to endure, within the academy.

In a study of evangelical faith and political action, Melani McAlister finds that perceptions of a hostile world are characteristic of American evangelicalism; are experienced as victimisation; and result in the curious phenomenon of "victim identification."[43] Rebecca Y. Kim points

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[42] For example, "More [Christian] martyrs die annually [ca. ninety thousand] than the number of elitist scholars existing in university and church graduate schools, certainly in the United States ... and possibly worldwide" (*Clash*, 67–72 [72]). Gerdmar, *Det står skrivet*, 417–420, likewise highlights the "populist" approach to the Bible in growing evangelical constituencies worldwide, but does not follow Yarbrough in validating that approach by virtue of the persecution it endures.

[43] Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (New York: Oxford University, 2018), e.g., 39–51.

out, in a review of McAlister's book, the irony that "American evangelicals from the most powerful country in the world are identifying themselves as part of the global body of persecuted Christians by connecting with stories of Christian martyrs outside of the United States."[44] What *Clash* adds to the mix is the claim that, since evangelical biblical interpretation is also prevalent in the Two-Thirds World, scholars in North America and Western Europe (including Sweden) are morally culpable for marginalising that interpretation.

Claims of persecution, while they seek to discredit opponents, may also be used to validate a position. Precedents for claiming validation on the basis of withstanding persecution may be seen in the New Testament. Numerous passages speak to the value of a leader's or a group's endurance of tribulation as a symbolic form of "capital" (or currency), whose value is leveraged to confirm a leader's or a group's legitimacy, authority, or power.[45] However, cautions about such reasoning are in order, for the value attributed to any noneconomic form of capital may be open to differing evaluations.[46] Also, whether in an ancient or a modern context, it may be unclear how, and at what point, undergoing persecution may be exchanged for power and prestige at the expense of a persecutor's power and prestige.

As an illustration of that uncertainty, we will consider two examples from the undisputed letters of Paul. Towards the end of Galatians, Paul insists that, since he bears in his body the "marks" (στίγματα) of Christ—caused by the apostle's persecutors—nobody should cause him

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[44] Rebecca Y. Kim, Review of McAlister, "Kingdom of God," *Sociology of Religion* 80/2 (2019): 263–267 (264).

[45] See Kelhoffer, *Persecution, Persuasion and Power: Readiness to Withstand Hardship as a Corroboration of Legitimacy in the New Testament* (WUNT, 270; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 42–351.

[46] See Kelhoffer, *Persecution*, 9–24, on the uncertainty of converting one form of noneconomic capital, such as the withstanding of persecution, into either another form of noneconomic capital, such as legitimacy or authority, or even into economic capital (i.e., wealth).

trouble.[47] Although Paul's Christ-believing opponents might have acknowledged that he had suffered as a follower of Jesus, they probably would not have concurred that Paul's suffering confirmed his status as an authoritative apostle. Similarly, in 2 Cor 11 Paul enumerates the many trials he had endured. Citing those sufferings serves as a response to the super-apostles and their followers in Corinth, who had questioned his apostolic legitimacy (2 Cor 11:23–33).[48] Here, too, Paul's Corinthian supporters would likely have been convinced, but his detractors probably would have demurred at the attempt to exchange one form of capital (steadfastness amidst tribulations) for another (authority on a par with that of the super-apostles).

In *Clash*, the appeals to persecution are arguably a "red herring"—that is, an argument that is distracting and irrelevant. Regrettably, some contemporary totalitarian regimes do indeed persecute Christians—as well as, it should be noted, *other* religious and ethnic minorities. The appeal to this fact, as an analogy to the claim that a non-confessional academy persecutes evangelicals, is thus a stunning *ad hominem*—linking nonevangelical biblical scholars with despots who abuse their power and violate their citizens' human rights. Moreover, some Christians in the Two-Thirds World, who suffer the loss of property, freedom, or even life for their faith, might be perplexed by the suggestion that Western evangelical scholars undergo similar ordeals. Such "victim identification" might, to some, be seen as a trivialisation of the suffering borne by theologians and other believers in developing countries.

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[47] Gal 6:17: τοῦ λοιποῦ κόπους μοι μηδεὶς παρεχέτω· ἐγὼ γὰρ τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῷ σώματί μου βαστάζω. See also Gal 4:19–20; 5:11, and Kelhoffer, "Suffering as Defense of Paul's Apostolic Authority in Galatians and 2 Corinthians 11," *SEÅ* 74 (2009): 127–143 (129–130).

[48] In 2 Cor 11–12, Paul musters six defences of his authority (11:5–6, 8, 23–33; 12:1–10, 12b, 17–18). It is only when he refers to his many sufferings (11:23–33) that he does not specify to what accusation he responds. As discussed in Kelhoffer, "Suffering as Defense," 136–142, his silence about that allegation could suggest that it was particularly damaging.

Whether in an ancient or a modern context, none would identify themselves as persecutors, but are more likely to believe that they are legitimately responding to injustice or danger. The allegation of animosity towards evangelicals may thus come as a surprise to nonevangelicals, who conduct their work without an interest in undermining the faith of anyone. To be sure, academicians are in the business of debating, doubting, confirming, extending, and refining the *communis opinio*, regardless of whether a consensus viewpoint is embraced or assuaged by a particular religious tradition. To cease that work because a particular group (or some within a group) feel persecuted could mean a return to the pre-Enlightenment "dark ages," when kings, nobles, and religious authorities dominated the ideological landscape and suppressed dissenting views. However unintended, such a by-product would not be a benign populism but could result in replacing a pluralist academy with an authoritarian dogmatism.

An irony in *Clash's* appeals to persecution may also be noted. We are asked to respect the viewpoint of evangelical scholars, since that viewpoint is also represented among persecuted churches, whose numbers are, indeed, growing throughout the world. Following that logic, it could only be a matter of time until persecuted evangelical constituencies became power-wielding majorities. A similar scenario occurred after the triumph of the first Christian emperor Constantine (d. 337 CE). The church, which had been persecuted by Diocletian (d. 305 CE) and several other emperors, suddenly enjoyed the protection of Constantine, who proceeded to sanction the persecution of Jews, polytheists, and even many "heretical" Christians.[49] One may thus wonder about the endgame envisioned in *Clash*. If evangelical scholars, politicians, or clergy should ever constitute a majority within the academy or society at large, what would stop them from suppressing dissenting viewpoints?[50]

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[49] See, e.g., Harold A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2000).

[50] In regard to this trepidation that a persecuted minority could, over time, become a

Where Athens and Jerusalem Meet: Kant, Hegel, and Models of Biblical Interpretation

A significant feature in *Clash* is developed in greater detail in Yarbrough's monograph *The Salvation Historical Fallacy?* In both studies, he evaluates approaches to the Bible over approximately 150 years, then boils them down to two main alternatives.[51] "Critical orthodoxy," a tradition that questioned, or even rejected, a salvation-historical model for interpreting New Testament theology, was represented principally by Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), William Wrede (1859–1906), and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). To those exegetes, Yarbrough attributes a positivist worldview (e.g., doubting the possibility of miracles or divine revelation) which, he holds, underlay their "neo-allegorical" interpretations.[52] On the other hand, Yarbrough lauds the opposing viewpoint, which embraced "salvation history" as a unifying rubric for biblical interpretation and was championed by, inter alii, Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938), Oscar Cullmann (1902–1999), and Leonhard Goppelt (1911–1973). In many respects, Yarbrough's review of scholarship is a drama of interactions between "good" and "bad" actors, with repeated laments about the exclusion of the former by the latter. Within this grand narrative, F. C. Baur is the putative villain, who was beholden to

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persecuting majority, see the studies by political scientists, such as Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016), Roger Eatwell and Matthew J. Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy* (London: Pelican, 2018), and Bart Bonikowski et al., "Populism and Nationalism in a Comparative Perspective: A Scholarly Exchange," *Nations and Nationalism* 25/1 (2018): 1–24, who hold that populism is inherently at odds with democratic principles.

[51] Robert W. Yarbrough, "The *Heilsgeschichtliche* Perspective in Modern New Testament Theology" (PhD Diss.: University of Aberdeen, 1985), revised and updated in *The Salvation Historical Fallacy? Reassessing the History of New Testament Theology* (History of Biblical Interpretation Series, 2; Leiden: Deo Publishing: 2004).

[52] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 39–60, chapter entitled "The Enduring Appeal of Neo-Allegorical Interpretation: Baur and Bultmann Redux." Cf. the criticism levelled by Gerdmar, *Det står skrivet*, 168–187, 205–206, of how George E. Ladd (a moderate evangelical biblical scholar) understood *Heilsgeschichte*.

the philosophical preconceptions of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, and who imported those preconceptions into exegetical-theological discussions.[53]

However, to intimate that the dissenters to, but not the supporters of, the salvation-historical model were indebted to non-Christian philosophy could give a skewed impression. When describing the salvation-historical framework affirmed by Johan Tobias Beck (1804–1878), Anders Gerdmar insightfully points out that "the whole *salvation-historical* thought is inspired by the philosophical idealism of [G. W. F.] Hegel."[54] The question many nineteenth-century exegetes faced, I suggest, was *which* philosophy (i.e., Kant's epistemological empiricism or Hegel's dialecticism, idealism, and rationalism) provided a more salient hermeneutical model. A more nuanced and complete picture of scholarship would thus acknowledge that theologians on both sides of the salvation-historical question weighed the relevance of different contemporary philosophies for biblical interpretation.[55]

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[53] In my view, there are valid reasons for questioning how some have understood "salvation history," although I believe that the concept can, with caution and precision, be utilised for historical analysis. See James A. Kelhoffer, "The Struggle to Define *Heilsgeschichte*: Paul on the Origins of the Christian Tradition," *BR* 48 (2003): 45–67. I do not, however, concur with Yarbrough that the questioning of the "salvation history" concept goes hand in hand with philosophical naturalism or a rejection of divine revelation.

[54] See Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann* (Studies in Jewish History and Culture, 20; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 203–212 (206 n. 18, italics original): "This organic thinking" of J. T. Beck, "and the whole *salvation-historical* thought, is inspired by the philosophical idealism of Hegel, which Beck also expresses" (i.e., acknowledges). See, further, Gerdmar, *Roots*, 95–100, 113–124, concerning Hegel's continued influence on the salvation-historical interpretive models of other exegetes, and Gerdmar, *Det står skrivet*, 256.

[55] In Part II of *Roots*, Gerdmar lays out examples of German-language "salvation-historical exegesis and the Jews"—in particular, Adolf Schlatter's stance that the Jews were "the main enemy of the German people" (*Roots*, 253–325 [314]) and Gerhard Kittel's notions of Christian *Heilsgeschichte* and Jewish *Unheilsgeschichte* (*Roots*, 417–530).

Readers of *Clash* will recognize much that is laid out in Yarbrough's dissertation. The main ingredient added in *Clash* is criticism of an *elitist* historical-critical method, which is traced to F. C. Baur. Yarbrough's earlier and recent studies convincingly trace the interplay of Baur's historiographic model and the Kantian dialectic. However, it is unpersuasive to leverage that interplay to question the work of many other researchers who, in subsequent generations, have not only built on Baur's work but have also criticized him.[56]

Taxonomy and Heresiography

An unstated presupposition underlying Yarbrough's review of scholarship is that the *origin* of an idea grounds or annuls its validity. His opponents are heirs to the legacy of Baur, while, despite persecutions from those intellectual descendants, a steadfast evangelical cohort continues the legacies of Schlatter, Cullmann, Goppelt, and others.[57] Antecedents for that truth-versus-heresy conflict are identified in Jesus' conflicts with "elitist" Jewish scribes[58] and in later conflicts with the "gnostics," whose path Baur and others have taken.[59]

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[56] For example, Mary Edith Andrews, "*Tendenz* versus Interpretation: F. C. Baur's Criticisms of Luke," *JBL* 58/3 (1939): 263–276; Horton Harris, *The Tübingen School: A Historical and Theological Investigation of the School of F.C. Baur* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990); William Borden Evans, Review of Harris, "The Tübingen School," *JETS* 36/2 (1993): 247–249; and Peter C. Hodgson, "F. C. Baur's Interpretation of Christianity's Relationship to Judaism," in *Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition? A European Perspective*, ed. Emmanuel Nathan and Anya Topolski (Perspectives on Jewish Texts and Contexts, 4; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 31–51.

[57] Those convinced by Yarbrough might even accord him a standing analogous to that given to church fathers who opposed heresy.

[58] Yarbrough, *Clash*, 10, referring to Chris Keith, *Jesus against the Scribal Elite: The Origins of the Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014). Keith, however, does not claim that an inter-Jewish conflict provides a precedent for the errors of elitist critical scholars.

[59] See above, on Yarbrough, *Clash*, 33.

The populist-elitist divide posited in *Clash* is complemented by claimed connections with prior Christian conflicts. Our recalling of a few taxonomic classifications among early Christian heresiographies (i.e., treatises against heresy) will cast that line of argument into sharper relief. Analogous to the systematic classification of plants or animals, a taxonomic argument connects theological systems based on presumed logical relationships to earlier theologies or theologians, even if those systems or theologians span different cultures or time frames.

In the late second century, Irenaeus of Lyon was among the first to marshal taxonomic allegations in his work *Against Heresies*, when he tied both Marcion and "the gnostics" to the errors of the arch-heretic Simon Magus in Acts 8:9–24. By connecting contemporary opponents to an archetypal heretic, Irenaeus called for their exclusion from proto-orthodox circles. Comparable claims featured in the *Prescription against the Heretics* and the treatise *Against Marcion*, by the North African church father Tertullian (d. ca. 240 CE). Any leader or community who could not demonstrate "apostolicity"—that is, a direct lineage to the first apostles—was *de facto* illegitimate (e.g., Tertullian, *Praescr*. 32). Again, the anonymous *Refutatio* (or *Elenchos*, ca. 200 CE, traditionally attributed to Hippolytus of Rome), catalogued the errors of scores of philosophers, astrologers, and magicians (Books 1–4), and showed how each and every past and contemporary Christian heretic erred in ways analogous to those pagan predecessors (Books 5–9).[60] Additionally, in his *Panarion* (ca. 370s CE), Epiphanius of Salamis traced through roughly three and one-half centuries the origin and development of myriad false teachings.

A *basso continuo* in all those late ancient Christian writings (many more could be cited) is taxonomic argumentation: being on the side of

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[60] For an overview, see Miroslav Marcovich, ed., *Hippolytus, Refutatio omnium haeresium* (PTS, 25; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), 1–5, and James A. Kelhoffer, "'Hippolytus,' Magic and 'Heretical' Miracle Workers: An Examination of *Elenchos* IV. 28–42 and Related Passages in Light of the *Greek Magical Papyri*," *ZAC* 11 (2007–2008): 517–548 (518–519).

truth could be established by being connected with forefathers who held the truth, while anyone linked to Simon Magus (or another early heretic) was divested of proto-orthodox standing and therefore excluded. At the same time, the authoritative standing of a figure, such as Irenaeus and Epiphanius, was confirmed and enhanced, since those bishops played a role much like that attributed to Peter in Acts 8, when he confronted Simon Magus.[61] The patent similarities between the argumentation used by those church fathers and in *Clash* suggest that the book's portrayal of scholarly protagonists and antagonists is, above all, a modern heresiography. Although some may find Yarbrough's categorisations helpful, others may view them as arbitrary or even self-serving.

Conclusion

Summation

Robert W. Yarbrough's book *Clash of Visions* provides a service to theological scholarship by its highlighting of the need to understand populism and to weigh its relevance as a theoretical lens and as a basis for identity construction. This article has attempted to sketch the contours of those needs by considering possible meanings of "elitist" and "populist" and by exploring Yarbrough's recourse to those terms. Their relevance and usefulness for understanding modern biblical studies has also been addressed. The theses for which I have argued are as follows:

(1) The allegation of a conspiracy within the academy (dating back to the Enlightenment), which generated the "historical-critical method," is dubious.

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[61] The well-known biblical text (Acts 8:9–24) relates the apostle Peter's confrontation of Simon Magus, the (former) magician who wished to attain the power to work miracles in exchange for a monetary gift to the apostles. On this passage, see the recent analysis by John-Christian Eurell, *Peter's Legacy in Early Christianity: The Appropriation and Use of Peter's Authority in the First Three Centuries* (WUNT, 2/561; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 41–62 (50–51).

(2) Inasmuch as the historical-critical method is not a single method beholden to a naturalist philosophical paradigm, Yarbrough's arguments reify, caricature, and vanquish a "straw figure."

(3) The opponents in *Clash* are "othered" by separating scholars into two camps and, on the basis of that binary alternative, fostering an "us" (evangelicals) versus "them" mentality.

(4) Given that much academic work is necessarily elitist, due to the specialised training required to conduct research, it becomes a tautology to criticise scholarship for being elitist.

(5) It is arbitrary to complain that *some* scholars are elites, whereas many others, who likewise have received specialised training, are not.

(6) Perceptions of who are the elites can be subjective, even self-serving.

(7) While many scholars do indeed engage the general public, it is not reasonable to endorse a solely populist agenda and to disavow elitist academic pursuits.

(8) It is irrelevant and distracting (i.e., sets up a "red herring") to delegitimise elitist scholars on the basis of past and contemporary religious persecutions. It is also doubtful that a "victim identification" of American evangelical scholars with those persecuted in developing countries is a justified identification.

(9) The "grand narrative" in *Clash's* history of scholarship is, above all, a heresiography laden with questionable attempts to amalgamate theologians and ideas that stem from diverse historical, cultural, and theological milieux.

To some observers, then, the difference between populism (leading the *populi*) and demagoguery (misleading the δῆμος) may be illusory.

Quo vademus?

In the 2017 issue of this journal, it was pertinent to review a book not because of its anti-Catholic stance but because of questions it raised about biblical theology in relationship to dogmatics, and about the explanatory power of essentialist presentations of ancient and modern religious movements. The present article has arrived at a conclusion about *Clash* that is similar to the one I reached five years ago. Although aspects

of Yarbrough's argumentation are unpersuasive, and even falter in logic, he nonetheless calls attention to important questions that merit further consideration by biblical exegetes, as well as by (other) theologians and historians of religion. For example, in what respects is it appropriate, even necessary, for the academy to consist of highly specialised elites? How could researchers avoid being perceived as elitists, or how could such perceptions be assuaged? After all, an integral part of a scholar's *vocatio* is to communicate with others—not only fellow researchers but also students and the wider public, including the primary audience of *Clash*.

Yarbrough goes to great lengths to demonstrate the existence of a longstanding conflict between (some) evangelical scholars and elitist exegetes. However, the relationship is hardly a mutually adversarial "clash," as many nonevangelicals might be surprised to hear that they persecute a particular religious tradition. Nevertheless, some experiences of conflict with, and alienation from, the academy may be inevitable for those who eschew the posing of critical questions to biblical literature or who exclude the possibility of arriving at alternate historical reconstructions. This does not mean that anything is fundamentally flawed within the scholarly exegetical guild. On the contrary, a sign of its vitality may be its noncommittal stance towards a priori confessional commitments, and its welcoming of all to engage in mutual, multi-vocal discourse and debate.[62]

[62] See above, on Kelhoffer, "Diverse Academy," 210–222.