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Utgivare och redaktör: Göran Eidevall (goran.eidevall@teol.uu.se)
Redaktionssekreterare: David Willgren (david.willgren@altutbildning.se)
Recensionsansvarig: Rosmari Lillas-Schuil (rosmari.lillas@gu.se)

Redaktionskommitté:

Göran Eidevall (goran.eidevall@teol.uu.se)
Rikard Roitto (rikard.roitto@ths.se)
Blaženka Scheuer (blazenka.scheuer@ctr.lu.se)
Cecilia Wassén (cecilia.wassen@teol.uu.se)

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c/o Teologiska institutionen
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Innehåll

EXEGETISKA DAGEN 2016

<i>Eidevall, Göran</i> , 80 år senare: Exegetiska sällskapet, <i>SEÅ</i> och de exegetiska dagarna – tal vid exegetiska sällskapets 80-årsjubileum	1
<i>Crawford, Sidnie White</i> , Textual Growth and the Activity of Scribes.....	6
<i>Laato, Antti</i> , Rewriting Israel's History in the Apocalyptic Context: Animal Apocalypse in First Enoch	28
<i>Docherty, Susan</i> , Why So Much Talk? Direct Speech as a Literary and Exegetical Device in Rewritten Bible with Special Reference to Pseudo-Philo's <i>Biblical Antiquities</i>	52

ARTIKLAR

<i>Spjut, Petter</i> , Polemisk etikett eller saklig beteckning? En studie av svenskspråkiga opinionsbildares användning av termen "gnosticism" och dess implikationer för bibelvetenskaplig och kyrkohistorisk forskning	76
<i>Hedlund, Simon</i> , Who Are the ἀρσενοκόϊται, and Why Does Paul Condemn Them (1 Cor 6:9)?	116
<i>Kelhoffer, James A.</i> , Simplistic Presentations of Biblical Authority and Christian Origins in the Service of Anti-Catholic Dogma: A Response to Anders Gerdmar	154

REPLIKER

<i>Gerdmar, Anders</i> , The End of Innocence: On Religious and Academic Freedom and Intersubjectivity in the Exegetical Craft – A Response to James Kelhoffer	179
<i>Kelhoffer, James A.</i> , A Diverse Academy Recognizes No Boundaries for Critical Inquiry and Debate: A Rejoinder to Anders Gerdmar	210

RECENSIONER

Aichele, George, <i>Simulating Jesus: Reality Effects in the Gospels</i> (Joel Kuhlin)	223
Amos, Roger, <i>Hypocrites or Heroes? The Paradoxical Portrayal of the Pharisees in the New Testament</i> (Tobias Ålöw)	226
Collins, John J., <i>Encounters with Biblical Theology</i> (Stig Norin)	230
Dochhorn Jan, Susanne Rudnig-Zelt, and Benjamin Wold (eds.), <i>Das Böse, der Teufel und Dämonen – Evil, the Devil, and Demons</i> (Torsten Löfstedt)	235
Ehrman, Bart D., <i>Jesus Before the Gospels: How the Earliest Christians Remembered, Changed, and Invented Their Stories of the Savior</i> (Joel Kuhlin)	239
England Emma och William John Lyons (red.), <i>Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice</i> (Mikael Larsson)	243
Fewell, Danna Nolan (ed.), <i>The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative</i> (Josef Forsling)	245
Gordon, Robert P. and Hans M. Barstad (eds.), <i>“Thus speaks Ishtar of Arbela”: Prophecy in Israel, Assyria and Egypt in the Neo-Assyrian Period</i> (Magnus Halle)	249
Giuntoli Federico and Konrad Schmid (eds.), <i>The Post-Priestly Pentateuch: New Perspectives on Its Redactional Development and Theological Profiles</i> (Jan Retsö)	256
Hayes, Elizabeth R. och Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer (red.), <i>“I Lifted My Eyes and Saw”: Reading Dream and Vision Reports in the Hebrew Bible</i> (Stefan Green)	261
Heilig, Christoph, <i>Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul</i> (Joel Kuhlin)	264
Kim, Yeong Seon, <i>The Temple Administration and the Levites in Chronicles</i> (Jan Retsö)	268
Klein, Anja, <i>Geschichte und Gebet: Die Rezeption der biblischen Geschichte in den Psalmen des Alten Testaments</i> (Lars Olov Eriksson)	272
Klink III, Edward W., och Darian R. Lockett. <i>Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice</i> (Bo Krister Ljungberg)	274
Knoppers, Gary N., <i>Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of Their Early Relations</i> (Cecilia Wassén)	278

Markschies, Christoph, <i>Christian Theology and Its Institutions in the Early Roman Empire: Prolegomena to a History of Early Christian Theology</i> (Carl Johan Berglund)	282
Mettinger, Tryggve N. D., <i>Reports from a Scholar's Life: Select Papers on the Hebrew Bible</i> (Cian Power)	285
Neusner, Jacob och Alan J. Avery Peck (red.); William Scott Green och Günter Stemberger (rådgivande red.), <i>Encyclopedia of Midrash. Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism. Volume I-II</i> (Tobias Ålöw)	289
Porter, Stanley E. och David I. Yoon (red.), <i>Paul and Gnosis</i> (Paul Linjamaa)	291
Smith, Geoffrey S., <i>Guilt By Association: Heresy Catalogues in Early Christianity</i> (Martin Wessbrandt)	295
Strauss, Mark L. och Paul E. Engle (red.), <i>Remarriage After Divorce in Today's Church</i> (Bo Krister Ljungberg)	299
Willgren, David, <i>The Formation of the 'Book' of Psalms: Reconsidering the Transmission and Canonization of Psalmody in Light of Material Culture and the Poetics of Anthologies</i> (Anja Klein)	302
Wright, Tom, <i>The Day the Revolution Began: Rethinking the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion</i> (Mikael Tellbe)	306

A Diverse Academy Recognizes No Boundaries for Critical Inquiry and Debate: A Rejoinder to Anders Gerdmar

JAMES A. KELHOFFER

Uppsala University

james.kelhoffer@teol.uu.se

Therefore, I believe it is essential to “move” biblical interpretation’s primary place from the academy to the church and [to move] its framework to the universal Christian faith. Then biblical interpretation will be in its correct milieu.¹

οὐ γάρ ἐστιν κρυπτὸν ὃ οὐ φανερόν γενήσεται οὐδὲ ἀπόκρυφον
ὃ οὐ μὴ γνωσθῆι καὶ εἰς φανερόν ἔλθῃ (Luke 8:17)

I would like to thank Anders Gerdmar (G.) for such a thoughtful and stimulating response to my review article of his book *Guds Ord räcker*.² The issues at stake are significant and deserve to be debated in academic forums, including this journal, and can be meaningful for scholars, lay

¹ Anders Gerdmar, “Bibelforskningens primära ‘plats’” [“The Primary ‘Place’ of Biblical Scholarship”], *Stefan Swärd: Allt mellan himmel och jord*, 15 December 2012, <http://www.stefansward.se/2012/12/15/har-kommer-ett-till-gastblogginlagg-av-anders-gerdmar-2>. Swedish original: “Därför tror jag att det är väsentligt att ‘flytta’ bibeltolkningens primära plats från akademien till kyrkan och dess ram till den allmänliga kristna tron. Då får bibelforskningen sin rätta miljö.”

² 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, responding to James 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): 154–78, review of Gerdmar, *Guds Ord räcker: Evangelisk tro kontra romersk-katolsk [God’s Word Is Sufficient: Evangelical Faith against Roman Catholic (Faith)]* (Uppsala: Areopagos, 2016).

people, and the general public. In his response, G. outlines five main objections to my review. This rejoinder will address each of those objections.³

My principal theme will be that scholarly arguments made in a popular book are subject to scholarly review. Gerdmar's claim to an exemption from such critique on the grounds that he addresses a popular audience amounts to a plea for special treatment. Since G. repeatedly presents his theology as if it were consistent with sound exegetical scholarship, he applies a double standard to assert credibility from scholarship without engaging in pertinent scholarly debates on some level, even in a popular book. This is where G.'s use of his scholarly credentials is relevant: he writes as a "docent" in New Testament Exegesis at Uppsala University, and uses that academic standing to add weight to his teaching. This rejoinder will also object to G.'s inference that calling into question one scholar's views of biblical literature suggests a lack of tolerance for diverse viewpoints. On the contrary, any worthwhile academic discourse requires the freedom to both give and receive critique and to engage in debate.

APPEALS TO SCHOLARSHIP IN A POPULAR BOOK MAY BE SUBJECT TO REVIEW

First, G. holds that an academic journal should not review a popular book and that, in any case, such a review should have been published only in the same language as the book under review.⁴ I am of the opin-

³ I thank the editors of *SEÅ* for offering Gerdmar the opportunity to respond to my review article and for allowing me to respond in this rejoinder. Due to the journal's publication schedule, after G.'s response arrived I was given one week to submit this reply. Given the word limit and schedule prescribed by the editors, this rejoinder is selective.

⁴ Gerdmar, "Innocence," 179: "[I]t is surprising that Kelhoffer writes, and *SEÅ* publishes, a review of a confessional and popular book, written and available in Swedish, whereas the review is in English so that the reader cannot evaluate Kelhoffer's critique."

ion that any material in the public domain pertinent to scholarship can, and should, inform academic discourse. The question of what is pertinent can, and should, be debated. But, in any case, it is unclear to me just who within, or outside of, the academy would be qualified to judge for the academy as a whole what should or should not be subject to scholarly review. One Swedish theologian, Christian Braw, describes G.'s book as last "fall's most discussed book in Swedish Christendom."⁵ It is perhaps not surprising that a writing of such interest, by an exegete and supported by numerous interpretations of biblical literature, would be of interest to an exegetical journal.

To be shielded from critique of the scholarly positions taken would, in effect, remove the author from a shared discourse, placing him outside of it – or even above it – unless and until he decides that he is engaging with scholars rather than a popular audience. Gerdmar chose to publish his views in a popular book rather than, first, to subject them to "peer review" and, subsequently, to produce a version for the general public. In this journal, moreover, he has the opportunity to defend those views in an academic forum.

The objection to my responding in English to a Swedish-language book is curious. Gerdmar himself wrote an impressive monograph in English, treating German-language exegetes and theologians.⁶ I believe that readers of that monograph can evaluate his earnest critiques and, likewise, that readers of my review article can evaluate my assessment of G.'s Swedish-language book. Presumably, G. and I would agree that biblical studies is an international and multilingual discipline. I do not understand an insistence that the book be reviewed only in Swedish. One

⁵ Christian Braw, "Gedigen granskning av den katolska katekesen" ["Substantial Scrutiny of the Catholic Catechism"], *Dagen*, 19 September 2016, http://www.dagen.se/kultur/gedigen-granskning-av-den-katolska-katekesen-1.778848?cx_art. Swedish: "höstens mest omdebatterade bok i svensk kristenhet."

⁶ 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).

reason I chose to write in English is that several issues stemming from his book merit attention and debate in an international context.

As G. sees it, the mixing of the popular/ecclesial with the academic is inappropriate. He is naturally entitled to his views on that matter, but it would be unreasonable to insist that all people in the church or the academy affirm the same limits and distinctions as he does. Notably, G. himself has recently reviewed in a church newspaper a popular, nonconfessional book on the historical Jesus written by two exegetes.⁷ This first objection is not compelling as an indictment of a scholar for writing the review or of a journal for deciding to publish it.

A CRITIQUE OF APPEALS TO SCHOLARSHIP IS NEITHER CONFSSIONAL NOR ANTI-CONFSSIONAL

Second, I am alleged to require that “scholarly rules of the game” apply to “confessional theology,” a requirement that G. labels as itself “confessional.”⁸ It is true that G.’s book has to do with faith – a contrast he draws between two types of Christian faith, the charismatic evangelical and the Roman Catholic. My article states clearly that my purpose is not to take sides in that confessional debate. Above all, what I respond to is that *Guds Ord räcker* defends G.’s views on faith with numerous seemingly academic arguments, including problematic arguments about biblical literature and that literature’s purported origins, apostolic unity, and nearly instantaneous canonization by the church. I focus on stances

⁷ Anders Gerdmar, “Jesus var ingen misslyckad profet” [“Jesus Was Not a Failed Prophet”], *Världen idag*, 13 February 2017, <http://www.varldenidag.se/recension/jesus-var-ingen-misslyckad-profet/Bbbqba!G5mAkykZBosYBVCH@zfhfg/>, reviewing Cecilia Wassén and Tobias Hägerland, *Den okände Jesus: Berättelsen om en profet som misslyckades* [*The Unknown Jesus: The Story about a Prophet Who Failed*] (Stockholm: Langenskiöld, 2016).

⁸ Gerdmar, “Innocence,” 179: “Kelhoffer makes the mistake to apply scholarly rules of the game to quite another game, confessional theology, and that he himself thereby takes on a role that is confessional rather than scholarly.”

that G. presents as based in biblical scholarship to support a confessional theology. I do not demand that G.'s – or anyone else's – theology follow particular "scholarly rules." In the use of scholarship to prove his views or disprove Roman Catholic views, G. does not merely express his opinions about faith but also acts in his capacity as an established scholar. My review article is neither confessional nor anti-confessional when noting that some of G.'s attempts to defend his faith or to attack another faith are inconsistent with scholarly opinions that he himself has affirmed in previous publications – for example, concerning hermeneutics and opposition to an essentialist historiography.⁹

One of my review's central contentions is that the choice of genre and forum is not a license to escape critique for misusing, or presenting skewed views of, scholarship. Those who appeal to scholarship to promulgate their views should, in all fairness, be prepared to face feedback, and even critique, from fellow researchers. The author does not seem ready to meet that prerequisite for participating in a mutual give-and-take academic discourse about his argumentation in *Guds Ord räcker*. In his reply to my review, G. dismisses my objections to his scholarship as if I were making confessional attacks on his faith, a dismissal that reduces our differences to two contrasting confessional opinions. I must reject that relativist oversimplification of our disagreements.

Even a popular book – perhaps especially a popular book – ought to have such a solid foundation in scholarship that it can withstand scrutiny, since its audience is most susceptible to being misled by an unbalanced presentation. Therefore, as an exegete I take seriously the potential of popular books both to inform and to mislead the general public. I also believe that a popular audience is capable of handling more complex alternatives and ambiguities than emerge from *Guds Ord räcker*. For these reasons, I do not see G.'s second objection as a serious challenge.

⁹ See Kelhoffer, "Response to Anders Gerdmar," 160–61, 166–68.

THE ACADEMY MUST BE BOTH
MULTI-VOCAL AND OPEN TO CRITIQUE

Third, G. thinks I hold “that one consensus should rule the academic work.”¹⁰ This objection inaccurately attributes to me an extreme and intolerant position, with the implication that his own view is unfairly marginalized. In fact, I agree with G. that “modern theological academia must be multi-vocal.”¹¹ Nothing that I wrote affirms a single consensus for academic work. My calling attention to certain views that are untenable in the light of scholarship does not amount to an affirmation of a monolithic “consensus.” Again, this would reduce our differences to two opposing dogmatic views.

A similarity may be noted in the argumentation in *Guds Ord räcker* and in this third objection: in both, numerous complexities and possible nuances are reduced to *a choice between two posited alternatives*. In the review, I characterize G.’s contrast between evangelical and Catholic positions as oversimplified, if also rhetorically advantageous for the aim of dismissing one alternative while commending the other. This third objection implies another questionable dichotomy: either the author’s views must be exempted from critique, or there is a problem with intolerance in the academy. That objection is a misuse of postmodernist and intersubjective principles, principles that rightly have a place in academic discourse. I acknowledge that no person is completely objective, but that does not mean that any person’s views, including my own, are exempted from critique. Since at least as far back as the 1800s, it has been commonly accepted that the results of anyone’s research may be questioned. In short, *the academy must be both multi-vocal and open to critique*. A multi-vocal setting without freedom to give and receive critique would not be a worthwhile academic milieu.

¹⁰ Gerdmar, “Innocence,” 179: “[M]odern theological academia must be multi-vocal, whereas Kelhoffer seems to favour that one consensus should rule the academic work.”

¹¹ Ibid.

A further example of an either-or dichotomy concerns reference to the so-called “historical-critical method.” As G. sees it, “even the historical-critical method is biased,” and the only acceptable alternative for scholarship today is to foster an “intersubjective dialogue.”¹² Elsewhere in his response to my review, G. cites an article in which I address the questions, “What is the relationship between newer and more traditional methods in New Testament Exegesis, and Is the so-called historical-critical method just *one* method?”¹³ My position of affirming a plurality of methodological approaches and perspectives within biblical studies should be clear from that article.

To refer to the “historical-critical method” as if it were a single method is therefore an egregious simplification.¹⁴ To label the method as “biased” is a desperate attempt to use postmodernity to his advantage, destabilizing scholarly consensus and opening the door to legitimizing as proper scholarship pre-critical assertions about biblical literature. Although I agree with G. about the need for “intersubjective dialogue,” for humility among all scholars, for awareness of one’s blind spots and agendas, and for every voice to be heard, no amount of intersubjectivity is going to erase the gains of 200 years of historical criticism.

When, in my review, I mention that “uncritical views” about biblical literature, such as those voiced in *Guds Ord räckter*, can “foster the construction of a parallel moral and religious universe,”¹⁵ I do not, as G. alleges, suppose that there are only “*two* competing universes.”¹⁶ Rather, my point is that there are certain views that fall outside the diverse cho-

¹² Gerdmar, “Innocence,” 188–89.

¹³ James A. Kelhoffer, “Nya testamentets exegetik som akademiskt ämne med relevans för andra ämnen,” *SEÅ* 77 (2012): 55–70 at 63–67; English translation (referenced in Gerdmar’s reply): “New Testament Exegesis as an Academic Discipline with Relevance for Other Disciplines,” *CurBR* 11 (2013): 218–33 at 224–26; revised version: *Conceptions of “Gospel” and Legitimacy in Early Christianity* (WUNT 324; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 3–18, at 10–14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Kelhoffer, “Response to Anders Gerdmar,” 156.

¹⁶ Gerdmar, “Innocence,” 186 (emphasis original).

rus of scholarly voices that fervently engage in academic debates. No amount of listening to other voices is going to increase the likelihood that the apostle Paul would, as G. assumes in *Guds Ord räcker*, have written a letter like Ephesians.¹⁷ Nor would any amount of philosophizing about a “hermeneutical turn” render as plausible G.’s explanation that the whole church instantaneously accepted the NT writings as Scripture.¹⁸ Nor would a multi-vocal dialogue be likely to compensate for G.’s disregard in *Guds Ord räcker* for diversity of expression within the biblical writings.¹⁹

Therefore, my review article should not be construed as an expression of intolerance. Nor, in light of this journal’s invitation to G. to participate in a debate, can this journal be deemed intolerant. Nobody is excluded, and each person’s viewpoints are expressed freely and openly. This third objection shifts the focus of the debate from questionable appeals to scholarship to claims of academic intolerance and attributes to me an extreme hierarchical and positivist position that I do not affirm and that cannot be derived from my critiques of G.’s argumentation or from my other publications.

A POPULAR AUDIENCE DESERVES TO KNOW ABOUT RELEVANT DEBATES AND UNCERTAINTIES

Fourth, G. is unconvinced that his views are “characterised by unsound scholarship.”²⁰ This part of his response addresses only part of my objection that the book embraces several pre-critical positions, presents them as if they were backed by sound scholarship, and never hints that those positions are debated among scholars. That is problematic, especially when addressing a popular audience that can hardly be expected to see

¹⁷ See Gerdmar, *Guds Ord räcker*, 76, 103, 115, 187, 188, 195.

¹⁸ Gerdmar, *Guds Ord räcker*, 81–83; idem, “Innocence,” 195–98.

¹⁹ See further, Kelhoffer, “Response to Anders Gerdmar,” 169.

²⁰ Gerdmar, “Innocence,” 179: “Kelhoffer fails to show that my positions in the scholarly issues he addresses are characterised by unsound scholarship.”

through the oversimplifications. Might it also be ethically questionable for G., as President of the Scandinavian School of Theology, to engage in fundraising among that same misinformed audience?²¹

Although the constraints of a popular book understandably limit how much could have been said about differing perspectives, the book's genre is no excuse for ignoring debates or perpetuating misinformation. Were G. presenting only his own theology, omitting any mention of scholarly debate could be understandable. But since the theology is presented as if it were consistent with sound scholarship, a double standard seems to lend credibility from scholarship while eschewing engagement in pertinent scholarly debates at least on some level.

It comes as no surprise that, in his response, G. can list recent publications that support some of his views about biblical literature and its origins. That he aligns himself, for example, with Donald Guthrie and David Trobisch illustrates how far from mainstream biblical scholarship he places himself. However, I must commend him for taking up some critical issues – for example, pseudonymity. I sincerely hope that he will continue to do so in his future teaching and publications, whether scholarly or popular.

THE ASSESSMENT OF POWER STRUCTURES IS AN INTRINSIC PART OF CRITICAL INQUIRY

Fifth, G. asserts that I have put forth “baseless speculations” and erected a wall between my university faculty and certain churches.²² Worth mentioning here is his explicit goal, cited at the beginning of this rejoinder, of moving biblical interpretation from “the academy” to “the

²¹ See Kelhoffer, “Response to Anders Gerdmar,” 176.

²² Gerdmar, “Innocence,” 180: “Kelhoffer, through baseless speculations about myself and Christian leaders who have endorsed the book, goes beyond the pale and erects a wall between his department at Uppsala University and large portions of Swedish Christianity.”

church.”²³ The aspiration is one of segregation and freedom for church-based biblical interpretation vis-à-vis the academy, a move that G. envisions as essential for ecclesiological and hermeneutical renewal. He has every right to define the habitus of his scholarship outside the academy and within what he recognizes as “the universal Christian faith.” Parts of *Guds Ord räcker* may be viewed as an attempt to realize that vision and to concentrate control over biblical interpretation within churches that affirm a, or the, universal view of the Christian faith, albeit not a Roman Catholic view.

The allegation that my review erects a wall is without merit. No member of my university faculty could do that. Nor, to the best of my knowledge, would any of us would want to do so. For most of my colleagues, academic theology does not separate itself from church life but fulfills its task when it enters into a critical dialogue with diverse pastoral realities. Nonetheless, even pastoral theology is expected to respect scholarly criteria and to be prepared to defend its own methods, assumptions, and conclusions.

Let us now consider the objection to my purported speculations. To gather toward the beginning of *Guds Ord räcker* the affirmations of nine recognized religious leaders as a collective imprimatur for the teachings set forth is a remarkable assertion of power seeking to influence others. It is relevant and appropriate in a review to suggest likely effects of a book in wider contexts, including congregational and educational milieux. Further, an important part of academic freedom is the right to analyze structures of power and their likely or actual consequences – whether positive, negative, or both.

In the article, I demarcate critiques of the book,²⁴ on the one hand, and “possible repercussions” of the book,²⁵ on the other hand. However tentative, the latter also have a rightful place in scholarly discourse.

²³ See the citation of Gerdmar, “Bibelforskningens primära ‘plats,’” at the beginning of this rejoinder (page 210, above).

²⁴ Kelhoffer, “Response to Anders Gerdmar,” 159–70.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 170–79.

Gerdmar's soliciting of approval from nine leaders and the choice to use their collective approval to bolster the validity of his views are within the legitimate purview of a scholarly review. Gerdmar is incorrect, however, to allege that I "attack ... the nine Christian leaders who have endorsed the book."²⁶ What I do take issue with is a likely *effect* of G.'s *collecting* their endorsements at the beginning of a dogmatic book, which amounts to the assembling of an evangelical curia – an implicit warning to anyone who would disobey their judgment. I continue to wonder under what circumstances G.'s institution, the Scandinavian School of Theology, would provide a tolerant and multi-vocal environment that would allow a student or teacher there to question aspects of *Guds Ord räcker*. Contrary to G.'s strenuous objections, there is no "foul play" in raising such questions.²⁷

Gerdmar also bemoans alleged speculations about his life, although he does not specify to what he objects or give an alternate explanation. In the review, I summarize how G. himself has openly described a crisis he faced in his 20s, when he nearly lost his faith as a young theology student.²⁸ Just three years ago, the conversion of a close colleague to Roman Catholicism and the sudden closure of the school where G. had worked for twenty years may likewise have been traumatic. It is perhaps not merely idle speculation to wonder if those crises play some role in the control he would now exert over his coreligionists and fellow academics, for *Guds Ord räcker* makes extraordinary demands on how people should read the Bible, define their faith, and reject the tenets of another faith.

²⁶ Gerdmar, "Innocence," 199.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See Kelhoffer, "Response to Anders Gerdmar," 174.

FROM DENYING EXEMPTION FOR PRE-CRITICAL
STANCES TO HOPE FOR RAPPROCHEMENT

A final comment may be made about the title of G.'s response, an allusion to Jane Flax in regard to "the end of innocence."²⁹ All of us in the academy, in the church, and in society at large have the right and even the duty to raise questions and to critique of what we find problematic. The raising of questions should not presume a naïve or innocent objectivity, however. A central point in this rejoinder is the rejection of G.'s unfounded supposition that a popular book should not be subject to scholarly review. His first defense of the book is that it is a response to a pastoral situation.³⁰ The same could be said of much, if not most, Christian literature through the centuries, beginning with the undisputed Pauline and the Deuteropauline letters in the New Testament. The credulous excuse of defending one's tradition could, hypothetically, be mustered to shield some of the antisemitic theology that G. justly criticizes in other publications. A pastoral focus is no excuse for poor scholarship or questionable theology, and even the noble goal of building up, or defending, a religious movement can have lamentable consequences for insiders as well as outsiders. Therefore, a book like *Guds Ord räcker* deserves to be debated, even in an academic forum.

It is commendable to make academic subjects, including biblical interpretation, accessible to the wider public, and I would not say that G. has irreparably damaged his position in the academy by writing *Guds Ord räcker*. One problem that I have raised in this rejoinder is that the book makes claims based on the author's position as a scholar, and yet asserts an exemption from scholarly critique. It would be unfortunate if, as a result, some colleagues would be inclined to question G.'s readiness to participate in a mutual, multi-vocal, give-and-take academic discourse.

²⁹ See Gerdmar, "Innocence," 187.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 180–81.

Nevertheless, one can hope for better circumstances for reciprocal admonition, learning, and exchange. Gerdmar is as welcome as he always has been in the Uppsala University New Testament research seminar. During my first years in Uppsala, he occasionally attended the seminar and made constructive and appreciated contributions. The discourse in the seminar would be poorer were he not to return. I hope that he will receive not only my critiques of his latest book but also my standing invitation to participate in the seminar.