

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

The 2021 meeting of the Swedish Exegetical Society featured papers on “The Bible in Politics.”<sup>2</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> The book's second chapter discusses "elitist" and "populist" tendencies in over a century of biblical scholarship.<sup>4</sup> 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]"),<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 consensus 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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<sup>3</sup> 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."

<sup>4</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 39–60.

<sup>5</sup> Anders Gerdmar, *Guds Ord räcker: Evangelisk tro kontra romersk-katolsk* (Uppsala: Areopagos, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> Conceptions of populism in relation to elitism can also affect

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<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> James A. Kelhoffer, “A Diverse Academy Recognizes No Boundaries for Critical Inquiry and Debate: A Rejoinder to Anders Gerdmar,” *SEÅ* 82 (2017): 210–222.

<sup>9</sup> Anders Gerdmar himself, in *Det står skriver: 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).

<sup>10</sup> 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"<sup>11</sup> and, by contrast, the populist reading strategy based on

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<sup>11</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 15.

common doctrinal beliefs, which is embraced by more or less all (other) believers.<sup>12</sup> 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 *SEA*.

### 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."<sup>13</sup> The designation "populist," he holds, applies also to "groups" affirming the correct doctrine that is "derivable from the Bible and representative of historic Christianity."<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> That elitist tradition, Yarbrough holds, is also characterised by a set of "convictions."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 16; cf. 19. We will return to those beliefs in the following paragraph.

<sup>13</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 22–25 (22).

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

### **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.<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> 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.”

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.”<sup>21</sup> 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”<sup>22</sup>—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.<sup>23</sup> The exchange between Yarbrough and Ehrman subsequently appeared in the scholarly journal *Perspectives*

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<sup>20</sup> 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. Dunnnett, “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?

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> See below, on Yarbrough, *Clash*, 30.

<sup>23</sup> 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*.<sup>24</sup> 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 *SEA*.<sup>25</sup> 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.”<sup>26</sup>

### 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 *SEA*. Inasmuch as my review is called “a recent and some-

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<sup>24</sup> 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.”

<sup>25</sup> 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?”

<sup>26</sup> 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,”<sup>27</sup> 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”<sup>28</sup> 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.”<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Yarbrough finds unreasonable my expectation that the book’s numerous references to scholarly consensuses be aligned with accurate representations of those consensuses.<sup>31</sup> 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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<sup>27</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 28–37.

<sup>28</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 30–32.

<sup>31</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 32–33.

the gnostics” in relation to other late ancient Christian theologies.<sup>32</sup> 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.”<sup>33</sup>

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,<sup>34</sup> 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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<sup>32</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 33, after which Yarbrough summarises Gerdmar’s response to my article (*Clash*, 34–35) before critiquing my rejoinder to that response (36).

<sup>33</sup> 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 Yarbrough’s assessment, Gerdmar, *Det står skrivet*, 420–423, calls for the liberation of biblical studies from its “Babylonian captivity.”

<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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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<sup>35</sup> 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.”<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup> 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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<sup>36</sup> Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1902), esp. 95–105.

<sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, Yarbrough may be speaking for some evangelical exegetes but not necessarily for others.<sup>40</sup>

### 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.<sup>41</sup>

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

<sup>40</sup> 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.

<sup>41</sup> 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 Yarbrough 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.<sup>42</sup> 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.”<sup>43</sup> Rebecca Y. Kim points

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<sup>42</sup> 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.

<sup>43</sup> 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."<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> However, cautions about such reasoning are in order, for the value attributed to any noneconomic form of capital may be open to differing evaluations.<sup>46</sup> 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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<sup>44</sup> Rebecca Y. Kim, Review of McAlister, "Kingdom of God," *Sociology of Religion* 80/2 (2019): 263–267 (264).

<sup>45</sup> 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.

<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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).<sup>48</sup> 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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<sup>47</sup> 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).

<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup> 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?<sup>50</sup>

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

<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> "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.<sup>52</sup> 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.

<sup>51</sup> 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).

<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup>

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.”<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> 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.

<sup>54</sup> 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.

<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup>

### 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.<sup>57</sup> Antecedents for that truth-versus-heresy conflict are identified in Jesus' conflicts with "elitist" Jewish scribes<sup>58</sup> and in later conflicts with the "gnostics," whose path Baur and others have taken.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> 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.

<sup>57</sup> Those convinced by Yarbrough might even accord him a standing analogous to that given to church fathers who opposed heresy.

<sup>58</sup> 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.

<sup>59</sup> 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).<sup>60</sup> 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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<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup> 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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<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> See above, on Kelhoffer, “Diverse Academy,” 210–222.

# Populism and Biblical Studies, Part 2: Political Action, Democratic Principles, and Academic Pluralism

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Exegesis and theology are part of a larger cultural fabric.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

Прощай, элита (Eng. “Farewell, elite!”)<sup>3</sup>

## INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

After the election of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., as America’s forty-sixth President, the storming of the United States Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, by thousands of Donald J. Trump’s supporters<sup>4</sup> stunned both na-

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<sup>1</sup> 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), 601.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Title of the 2022 pop song by the Russian band Leningrad (Rus. Ленинград).

<sup>4</sup> In regard to the number of protesters (at least ten thousand, but possibly as many as eighty thousand) and those who surrounded the Capitol Building before its breach (several thousand), see Jie Jenny Zou and Erin B. Logan, “Jan. 6: By the Numbers,” *Los Angeles Times* (January 5, 2022). Zou and Logan also report that, as of January 2022 (one year after the incident), over 700 people had been arrested for their assault on the Capitol.

tional and international observers. Some of those who infiltrated the Capitol Building used biblical narratives (e.g., the fall of Jericho and David's vanquishing of Goliath) to explain—and justify—their actions. It was thus clear that, for some protesters, a populist political uprising and populist uses of the Bible were intrinsically intertwined. The 2021 meeting of the Swedish Exegetical Society featured papers on "The Bible in Politics."<sup>5</sup> The present article contributes to that discussion with a focus on American evangelical biblical interpretation and its recent impact on political activism.

In a monumental study, Anders Gerdmar lays out the interplay of nineteenth- and early twentieth century German nationalism and biblical interpretation.<sup>6</sup> He sharply insists that, since "[e]xegesis and theology are part of a larger cultural fabric,"<sup>7</sup> theologians bear a responsibility to weigh the possible effects of their work within the church and in society at large. That responsibility naturally includes taking account of possible repercussions on *other* religious, ethnic, or ideological groups.<sup>8</sup> In the wake of the Holocaust, the (nearly) universally proclaimed resolution, "Nie wieder!" ("Never again!"), vows that the twentieth century genocides of Jews (and, e.g., of Armenian Christians) must not be repeated. A sometimes-overlooked challenge in keeping that resolution is the fact that a religious ethno-nationalism underlay the Holocaust, and that ominously similar religious ethno-nationalisms continue to flourish. Even today, then, theologians and historians of religion, regardless of their religious persuasion or nationality, would do well to be cognisant of the cultural fabric(s) within which their teaching and research are

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> Gerdmar, *Roots*.

<sup>7</sup> Gerdmar, *Roots*, 601–609 (601).

<sup>8</sup> All religious traditions, of course, need to weigh the possible impact of their theologies beyond their synagogues, churches, mosques, or temples.

conducted, as well as of how their work might be used to nefarious ends outside the academy.

In another article, on which the present study builds, I critically assessed the monograph *Clash of Visions* (hereafter: *Clash*) by Robert W. Yarbrough, who outlines two irreconcilable ways of interpreting the Bible.<sup>9</sup> The springboard for his book was a debate in this journal.<sup>10</sup> In *Clash*, the “populist” approach to biblical theology, to which most believers throughout the world are said to adhere, is lauded. Conversely, the “elitist” approach to biblical studies, affirmed by a tiny minority of critical scholars (mainly in European and North American universities and schools of theology), is repeatedly censured. As a preface to this populist-elitist distinction, two qualifications are given in *Clash*. One is a distinction between *hermeneutical* populism and the *political* populism of “contemporary political figures like Donald Trump ... or his [Trump’s] opponents.”<sup>11</sup> The other is an acknowledgement that “[t]here

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<sup>9</sup> Kelhoffer, “Populism and Biblical Studies, Part 1: The Continuation of a Debate, with a Response to Robert W. Yarbrough,” *SEÅ* 87 (2022): 203–227 (210–220), discussing Yarbrough, *Clash of Visions: Populism and Elitism in New Testament Theology* (Reformed Exegetical and Doctrinal Studies; Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 28–37, “Case Study: A Scandinavian Debate,” responding to J. A. Kelhoffer, Review of Anders Gerdmar, *Guds Ord räcker: Evangelisk tro kontra romersk-katolsk* (Eng. “God’s Word Is Sufficient: Evangelical Faith against Roman Catholic [Faith]”) (Uppsala: Areopagos, 2016); 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): 154–178; 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; and James A. Kelhoffer, “A Diverse Academy Recognizes No Boundaries for Critical Inquiry and Debate: A Rejoinder to Anders Gerdmar,” *SEÅ* 82 (2017): 210–222. Anders Gerdmar has also recently responded to the debate in his book, *Det står skrivet: Bibeltro kontra bibelkritik* (Eng. “It Is Written: Faith in the Bible against Biblical Criticism”) (Uppsala: STH Academic, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 7. Gerdmar, *Det står skrivet*, 416–426 (420–423), concurs with Yarbrough’s distinction between types of populism, as well as with the notion that a populist-elitist divide has pervaded modern biblical scholarship.

are evils in populism deserving note.”<sup>12</sup> Yarbrough offers only one example of those evils—that, each year, some unscrupulous church leaders siphon off “billions” of dollars given for overseas missionary work.<sup>13</sup>

For several reasons, those qualifications are fodder for this article. First, it is unclear how Yarbrough’s populism differs from that of Donald Trump or other politicians. Nor is it ever considered whether the populist vision in *Clash* could be tied to any of the “evils in populism” obliquely acknowledged at the beginning of the book. As we will see, it is questionable to make, or to presume, distinctions among types of populism. Representing a variety of disciplines (e.g., political science, sociology, and economic history), many hold that *all* forms of populism share several basic characteristics. What is more, populism can be seen as intrinsically hostile towards democratic principles. However well intended, some populist movements over the last century—whether political, religious, or both—have had numerous harmful effects, including the suffering, even death, of dissenters and bystanders.

Before proceeding, a couple qualifications of my own deserve mention. *Clash* does not advocate for an ethno-nationalist religious programme. On the contrary, the discussions of evangelical believers in developing countries align against a Eurocentric orientation.<sup>14</sup> Nor do I consider Yarbrough to be a nationalist.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, since American evangelical political action has often been characterised by ethno-nationalism, it is surprising that *Clash* does not warn of potential draw-

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<sup>12</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 11. To me, however, it is unclear how the theft of funds earmarked for missionary work is a *populist* instance of theft. Perhaps Yarbrough surmises that some populist megachurch leaders use their influence to raise money and then steal some of it. If that is his point, he would seem to confuse *popularity* (i.e., leading a large congregation) with *populism* (whose traits are discussed below).

<sup>14</sup> For example, Yarbrough, *Clash*, 67–72.

<sup>15</sup> I have known Robert Yarbrough since the early 1990s (during my student years), and none of my interactions with him then, or afterward, have suggested to me that he holds a nationalist viewpoint.

backs woven into the cultural fabric to which the book speaks. That ethno-nationalism has had far-reaching consequences in the United States and throughout the world. Ironically, American evangelicals' efforts to make converts of all nations abroad and to actualise nationalist political and economic policies at home may, *mutatis mutandis*, harm some converts to evangelical faith in developing countries.

Before examining specific instances of political and hermeneutical populism, this article will outline populism's principal characteristics, potential for good, and potential for harm. Afterwards, we will consider several instances of the fuelling of populist political agendas by populist biblical hermeneutics (and vice versa). Within biblical and theological studies, a sobering example of that interaction is the populism and nationalism of German theologians before and during the Third Reich. Two more recent examples are evangelicals' overwhelming support for the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and for his candidacy in 2020. Attention will also be given to the biblical rationale that some posited for the assault on the Capitol Building in January 2021. A correlation will then be drawn between "monological" belief systems, such as ardent biblicism, and the inclination to lend credence to one or more conspiracy theories.

Our purpose is thus to examine possible, even likely, repercussions of a populist agenda within, and beyond, Yarbrough's American evangelical *habitus*. Whereas *Clash* presents populism as a positive force for change, it can also foster intolerance and weaken democratic principles. Within the academy, that intolerance could curtail crucial principles of academic freedom, debate, and blind (i.e., neutral or impersonal) peer review. As a result, the call issued in *Clash* for the liberation of evangelical scholars from oppression by elitist academicians could compromise prospects for critical inquiry and exchange among those (both researchers and others) of differing viewpoints and backgrounds. An overarching argument in this article is therefore that the advancing of any populist cause includes a concomitant moral responsibility to mitigate undesirable consequences.

## POPULISM: PROMISES AND PITFALLS

We will now take up definitions of populism from a multidisciplinary perspective, as well as the potential benefits and drawbacks of populist ideologies and movements. I have previously attempted to show that the populist vision in *Clash* rests upon the reification of the historical-critical method, the othering of perceived opponents, a subjective understanding of populism, and a dubious “victim identification” of persecuted populists.<sup>16</sup> The present discussion will consider possible effects of the book’s populist vision. Since populism is not, in fact, a stand-alone ideology and since it can spawn undesirable by-products, any populist political leader should at least attempt to safeguard against its unintended harmful effects. The same responsibility, I suggest, applies to clergy and theologians who advocate populist sentiments.

### What Is Populism?

As mentioned above, Yarbrough asserts that the populism he endorses is different from the populism of Donald Trump and other politicians.<sup>17</sup> We will see, however, that, although populism has been endowed with diverse meanings, it is nonetheless identifiable by several core features, which are a basis for weighing similarities between rhetorical-political and hermeneutical-theological populist strategies.

In 1967, over forty scholars gathered at the London School of Economics to articulate “an acceptable definition of populism.”<sup>18</sup> When the conference began, it was noted that, despite several influential studies, “[t]he term continue[d] to be used in many different ways.”<sup>19</sup> Over the

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<sup>16</sup> Kelhoffer, “Populism and Biblical Studies, Part 1,” 207–208, 210–220.

<sup>17</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Unpublished report, “London School of Economics Conference on Populism, May 20–21, 1967” (London, 1967), 6. Online: [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/102463/1/Conference\\_on\\_Populism\\_1967\\_Report\\_0001.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/102463/1/Conference_on_Populism_1967_Report_0001.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> “London School,” 3.

course of the meeting, participants voiced differing views about which twentieth-century political movements could be characterised as populist—with particular discussion of the German-Austrian Third Reich led by Adolf Hitler (“Nazism”), the Chinese Communist movement led by Mao Zedong (“Maoism”), and the anti-Communist movement led by the US Senator Joseph R. McCarthy (“McCarthyism”).<sup>20</sup>

In a monograph on recent and contemporary populist movements in Europe and the United States, Jan-Werner Müller argues that *anti-pluralism*, *anti-elitism*, and *exclusivity* are trademarks of populism.<sup>21</sup> Largely concurring with Müller, Bart Bonikowski and three other political scientists identify “anti-pluralism, anti-elitism and the juxtaposition of a virtuous people against elites” as among populism’s key features.<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, Rogers Brubaker holds that, in addition to populism’s “core element” of “claim[ing] to speak and act in the name of the people,” another factor at work is “majoritarianism”—that is, “the assertion of the interests, rights, and will of the majority against those of minorities.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., “London School,” 29, 48–49, 90–91, 101–103, 149 (on Nazism); 7, 16, 19–21, 30–32, 111–112, 119 (on Maoism); and 24, 29, 59–60, 101, 103, 143 (on McCarthyism).

<sup>21</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016). For example, Müller holds that populism “necessarily involves a claim to exclusive moral representation” (38).

<sup>22</sup> Bart Bonikowski, Daphne Halikiopoulou, Eric Kaufmann, and Matthijs Rooduijn, “Populism and Nationalism in a Comparative Perspective: A Scholarly Exchange,” *Nations and Nationalism* 25/1 (2018): 1–24 (2). See also Roger Eatwell and Matthew J. Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy* (London: Pelican, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Rogers Brubaker, “Why Populism?,” *Theory and Society* 46/5 (November 2017): 357–385 (362–364, 365). Three other characteristics that Brubaker attributes to the “repertoire” of populism are “antagonistic re-politicization,” anti-institutionalism, and protectionism (364–366). Yet another aspect concerns not *what* populists communicate but, rather, *how* they communicate in a style that is “‘low,’ ... ‘raw’ and crude,” rather than one that is “‘high,’ ... refined and cultivated” (366–367).



Another viewpoint prevalent among political scientists is that populism is “a ‘thin’ ideology that combines with ‘thicker’ ones.”<sup>24</sup> To say that populism is “thin” means that, in and of itself, it is not a complete worldview; rather, it is “an ideational phenomenon ... that concerns the antagonistic relationship between the good people and the evil elite.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, when populism is combined with one or more *other* ideologies, it can be described as “thick,” rather than “thin.” Cas Mudde puts it this way: “As a thin-centred ideology, populism can be easily combined with very different (thin and full) other ideologies, including communism, ecologism, nationalism or socialism.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Bonikowski et al., “Populism and Nationalism,” 8; cf. 2, 9, 17–18. See, further, Ben Stanley, “The Thin Ideology of Populism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13/1 (2008): 95–110 (95): “The argument presented here is that populism is a ‘thin’ ideology that in practice is to be found in combination with established, ‘full’ ideologies.”

<sup>25</sup> Bonikowski et al., “Populism and Nationalism,” 9. See also Michael Freeden, “Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?,” *Political Studies* 46/4 (1998): 748–765 (750); and Claes H. de Vreese, Frank Esser, Toril Aalberg, Carsten Reinemann, and James Stanyer, “Populism as an Expression of Political Communication, Content and Style: A New Perspective,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23/4 (2018): 423–338 (425): “Accordingly, populism can be understood as a discursive manifestation of a thin-centered ideology that is not only focused on the underlying ‘set of basic assumptions about the world’ but in particular on ‘the language that unwittingly expresses them.’” The authors are quoting Kirk A. Hawkins, Scott Riding, and Cas Mudde, “Measuring Populist Attitudes: Political Concepts Committee on Concepts and Methods,” *The Committee on Concepts and Methods*, Working Paper (#55), 2012:3. Online: <http://www.concepts-methods.org>.

<sup>26</sup> Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government & Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics* 39/4 (2004): 541–563 (544). In another study, Mudde “define[s] populism as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’” and holds that, as a thin ideology, populism “argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* [“general will”] of the people” (Cas Mudde, “Populism in the Twenty-First Century: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism,” *Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy*, 2022, §3. Online: <https://amc.sas.upenn.edu/cas-mudde-populism-twenty-first-century>). See also

Each of the aforementioned traits, I suggest, comes to the fore in *Clash*. The book is avowedly anti-elitist, and the review of scholarship repeatedly pits a laudable cohort of marginalised evangelical researchers against an intolerant elitist minority.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, a long-standing conflict is narrated—that is, conservative-evangelical protagonists against liberal-elite antagonists—with laments about the exclusion of evangelical colleagues by the antagonists. Further, Yarbrough's us-versus-them stance could be, or could become, anti-pluralist: if an evangelical populist agenda were to become the majority viewpoint, it could foster intolerance towards nonevangelical groups or viewpoints. He also claims to speak for the Bible-believing masses, and addresses them, rather than engaging in a nuanced exchange with those who bring sceptical higher criticism to bear upon Scripture. It would also follow that *Clash* does not advocate for a stand-alone ideology; rather, its "thin" populism lends itself to combination with other causes. The question, then, is not whether, but *which*, causes could be bolstered by *Clash*'s populist assessment of biblical scholarship.

### The Promises of Populism

If one accepts that populism is not a stand-alone viewpoint or agenda, the question of its effects in relation to other viewpoints and agendas comes to the fore. In a recent article on populism as a political form of communication, Claes H. de Vreese and three others give a nuanced picture of potential benefits and drawbacks when asking if "populism [is] per se a positive force for change or a threat to democracy."<sup>28</sup> For

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Stanley, "The Thin Ideology of Populism," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 73/1 (2008): 95–110; and Daphne Halikiopoulou, sole author of subsection in Bonikowski et al., "Populism and Nationalism," 17–18, who explains: "'Thick' populism then adds more dimensions to the people vs. elites axis, [for example,] an inclusion/exclusion axis [such as] nationalism."

<sup>27</sup> See Kelhoffer, "Populism and Biblical Studies, Part 1," 213–216.

<sup>28</sup> De Vreese et al., "Populism," 424. See also the studies in Roger Kimball, ed., *Vox Populi: The Perils and Promises of Populism* (New York: Encounter Books, 2017).

both alternatives, their answer is neither an unreserved “yes” nor a categorical “no.” In regard to the former, they hold that populism might (1) “increase representation,” (2) “broaden attention for issues,” (3) “mobilize groups of people,” (4) “improve the responsiveness of the political system,” and (5) “be a refreshing wakeup call to powerholders.”<sup>29</sup>

Populism is by no means a new arrival on the American religious scene. The church historian Nathan O. Hatch observes that Protestantism in the United States has, historically, been shaped by “a democratic or populist orientation.”<sup>30</sup> Hatch highlights the positive effects populism has had as “a residual agent of change in America over the last two centuries.” That agency, he holds, has resisted aristocratic tradition, fostered new religious movements, contributed to a distinctly American form of democracy, encouraged attention to ordinary churchgoers and the acceptance of their viewpoints, and challenged people to think for themselves.<sup>31</sup> Those benefits dovetail nicely with the ones outlined by de Vreese et al.<sup>32</sup> Naturally, I concur that a broadened awareness of issues,

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<sup>29</sup> De Vreese et al., “Populism,” 424.

<sup>30</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989), 5: “Yet American Protestantism has been skewed away from central ecclesiastical institutions and high culture; it has been pushed and pulled into its present shape by a democratic or populist orientation. ... America exalted religious leaders short on social graces, family connections, and literary education. These religious activists pitched their messages to the unschooled and unsophisticated. Their movements offered the humble a marvelous sense of individual potential and of collective aspiration.”

<sup>31</sup> Hatch, *Democratization*, 5: “Religious populism has been a residual agent of change in America over the last two centuries, an inhibitor of genteel tradition and a recurring source of new religious movements. Deep and powerful undercurrents of democratic Christianity distinguish the United States from other modern industrial democracies. ... These currents ensure that churches in this land do not withhold faith from the rank and file. Instead, religious leaders have pursued people wherever they could be found; embraced them without regard to social standing; and challenged them to think, to interpret Scripture, and to organize the church for themselves. Religious populism, reflecting the passions of ordinary people and the charisma of democratic movement-builders, remains among the oldest and deepest impulses in American life.”

<sup>32</sup> See above in this subsection, on de Vreese et al., “Populism,” 424.

attention to alternate viewpoints, and the questioning of common assumptions are positive, oftentimes necessary, challenges to those who converse only amongst themselves. On these points, Yarbrough and I seem to agree, and he would presumably welcome a facilitation by his book of such renewal within evangelical circles or even the academy at large.

### Populism's Latent Pitfalls

Remarkably, Nathan Hatch does not consider the potential of populism to yield adverse by-products. As noted above, *Clash* mentions, in a single paragraph, only one such possible repercussion.<sup>33</sup>

Since the First and Second World Wars, however, and perhaps even more so in our time, the potential harm of populism has attracted much scrutiny. The aforementioned article by de Vreese et al. cautions that populism might also (1) question or damage the conditions needed for a "liberal democracy," (2) curb the rights of minority groups, (3) weaken nongovernmental institutions (e.g., the courts or the media), or even (4) "lead to political tribalism" whose members seek neither dialogue and debate nor compromise with other groups.<sup>34</sup> *Clash's* populist agenda could arguably serve as a catalyst for any of those consequences, because (1) the book casts doubt upon the ideal of a liberal (i.e., a free and diverse) academy, (2) the interests of minority perspectives could be curbed (since the majoritarian view of Scripture is what matters), (3) trust in double-blind peer review could be eroded due to mistrust of elitist academicians, and (4) an intellectual tribalism could be fostered among evangelicals (as well as, it should be noted, among other proponents of special-interest hermeneutics) if their conversation is primarily (or solely) with like-minded thinkers.

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<sup>33</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 11, on the embezzlement of funds by some unscrupulous church leaders.

<sup>34</sup> De Vreese et al., "Populism," 424.

Jan-Werner Müller paints an even more pessimistic picture of populism's effects on both recent and contemporary political movements, and accentuates populism's dangers while dismissing possible advantages. In contrast to Nathan Hatch's interpretation of religious populism as an enriching factor for American democracy, Müller holds that populism inherently contradicts democratic principles: since populist politicians assert that they already know the will of "the people" and since they claim to represent that will, "*there is no real need for debate*, let alone the messy back-and-forth of deliberating in Congress or other national assemblies. The populists have always been the faithful spokespersons of the real people."<sup>35</sup> Two principles undergirding a populist standpoint, Müller explains, are that the people have a single, unified will, and that a populist leader serves as the designated advocate for that will.

Similarly to Müller, Pope Francis gave in 2017 a bleak assessment when reflecting that "populism is evil and ends badly as the past century showed."<sup>36</sup> The following year, Francis put it more explicitly, asserting that populism led to the rise of Hitler; thus, it remains important for young people to understand the forces behind the two World Wars, "so that [young people] do not fall into the same mistake and" so that they "know how populism spreads."<sup>37</sup>

The eschewal of debate looms large in the political rhetoric of Donald Trump, who, at a political rally in May 2016, declared, "The only important thing is the unification of the people, because the other people don't mean anything."<sup>38</sup> That rallying cry to unify his supporters im-

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<sup>35</sup> Müller, *Populism*, 31, italics added.

<sup>36</sup> Associated Press, "Pope Francis Warns: 'Populism Is Evil and Ends Badly,'" *Business Insider* (March 9, 2017). Online: <https://www.businessinsider.com/ap-pope-in-interview-with-german-paper-warns-of-populism-2017-3?r=US&IR=T>.

<sup>37</sup> "Pope Francis Says Populism Leads to Hitler," *Deutsche Welle* (October 23, 2018). Online: <https://www.dw.com/en/pope-francis-says-populism-leads-to-hitler/a-4601214>.

<sup>38</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, "Real Citizens," *Boston Review* (October 26, 2016), §1. Online: <https://bostonreview.net/articles/jan-werner-muller-populism>. We will return to Donald Trump's populist rhetoric, below.

plied that any detractors are de facto irrelevant. Likewise, the theme of eschewing, rather than welcoming engagement with, political opponents reverberates through the 2022 song “Farewell, elite!” (Rus. Прощай, элита), by the Russian pop band “Leningrad” (Rus. Ленинград). As vocal supporters of President Vladimir Putin, the band members sarcastically bid “farewell” to their countrymen who have recently fled Russia due to fear of reprisals after protesting the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>39</sup> According to both Trump and the song by Leningrad, “we” already know what is true, and any dissenters may just as well exit the stage.

With its reticence to engage in mutual debate, *Clash* sounds an analogous rallying cry.<sup>40</sup> The cautions of Müller, de Vreese, and others bring the book’s review of biblical scholarship into sharper focus. Yarbrough claims to represent the cause of faithful scholars who comprehend God’s will and purposes in redemptive history (i.e., *Heilsgeschichte*) but who have been oppressed and excluded by an elitist minority.<sup>41</sup> According to

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<sup>39</sup> In startlingly crass language, the song “Farewell, elite!” mocks wealthy, elite Russians as hypocritical for complaining about their plight after having left Russia. Conspicuously, the singers do not lament their country’s loss of trained professionals (i.e., “brain drain”); rather, they shine a harsh light of personae non gratae on the elites who take exception to the policies of a populist president. A video of the song is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WQIW7aK5Bk>. The Russian lyrics, with translations into English and Italian, may be found online at <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/proshchay-elita-farewell-jet-set.html>. Although I do not read Russian, the Italian translation strikes me as closer to the original. I am grateful to Cecilia Uddén, a reporter for Sveriges Radio [Sweden’s radio], for her report that mentions this song as well as for her sending me these links by email. See, further, Uddén, “Putinmotståndare flyr till Israel” (Eng. “Putin Opponents Flee to Israel”), *Sveriges Radio* (April 25, 2022). Online: <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/putinmotstandare-flyr-till-israel>.

<sup>40</sup> In a chapter entitled, “Is Rapprochement Possible ... or Even Relevant?”, Yarbrough, *Clash*, 61–83, esp. 61–65, holds that the only terms for rapprochement are the conversion—or re-conversion—of liberal, critical scholars to confessional evangelical doctrine.

<sup>41</sup> We will discuss understandings of *Heilsgeschichte*, below.

*Clash*, there is apparently no point in debating with outsiders; rather, it seems sufficient to affirm the majority biblical-theological viewpoint that is attributed to the church historically and throughout the world today.

### **Summation: Promises and Pitfalls**

Taken together, what populism promises to deliver, and the negative consequences it can engender, lead to several conclusions. It would be short-sighted, even presumptuous, to proceed as if populism were inherently benign. Nor is populism a stand-alone framework; rather, it is a “thin” means of communication.<sup>42</sup> Once it is conjoined with one or more other ideologies, however, it can become “thick” and thereby be more likely to have political repercussions that impact partisans, dissenters, and others caught in the crossfire. Whether within the academy, in religious traditions, or in other contexts, an awareness of possible consequences is therefore a necessary component of responsible populist advocacy.

### **NIE WIEDER! THE NAZI CULTURAL FABRIC**

This and the following section will consider similarities between the German nationalism of nearly a century ago and contemporary American nationalism. In both milieux, biblical scholars and other theologians have not been immune to influence from those nationalistic impulses, which they have reinforced and, in fact, to which they have contributed.

### **German Nationalism and (Purportedly) Jewish Nationalism**

As mentioned above, Anders Gerdmar traces tendencies and developments in over a century of anti-Semitic biblical scholarship. Some les-

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<sup>42</sup> On “thin” and “thick” populism, see the discussion above, and Bonikowski et al., “Populism and Nationalism,” 8–9, 16–17.

sons from that era of biblical studies are relevant, I suggest, for understanding the contexts within which contemporary research is conducted and to which it speaks. During the time period Gerdmar lays out, prominent theologians played a fateful role in fostering hostile attitudes towards ancient Israelite religion, towards “late Judaism” (*Spätjudentum*) of the Second Temple period, and towards the European Judaism of their day. Through their work in biblical and theological studies, numerous authorities, including Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), and Paul de Lagarde (1827–1891), laid the “religious” groundwork for a German nationalism.<sup>43</sup> Gerdmar concludes that, in much German biblical scholarship, there was “*a nationalistic undercurrent that influence[d] how Jews and Judaism [were] dealt with.*”<sup>44</sup>

The undercurrent that fostered violence against Jews legitimised violence against others as well—including European Roma, the Jehovah’s Witnesses (whom the Nazis called *Bibelforscher*), homosexuals, and the mentally ill.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Gerdmar shows, whilst theologians advanced German nationalism, the nationalism that they and others attributed not only to ancient Israelite religion and “late Judaism” but also to contemporary Judaism came under fire.<sup>46</sup> It could thus be seen as ironic, even hypocritical, that a German nationalist undercurrent went hand in

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<sup>43</sup> Gerdmar, *Roots*, 57–60 (59), on J. G. Herder, who “laid the ideological foundations of a new [German] nationalism”; 73–76, on F. Schleiermacher; 87–89, on W. de Wette; and 180–181, on P. A. de Lagarde.

<sup>44</sup> Gerdmar, *Roots*, 601.

<sup>45</sup> Gerdmar systematically traces “roots of theological anti-Semitism.” However, in a book of over six hundred pages, it is surprising that at least some attention is not given to other “anti-” sentiments within the Third Reich. Although it was, above all, the Jews who were persecuted, the Nazi programme applied also (in addition to groups just noted) to people with physical disabilities and to a relatively small number of Catholic and Protestant clergy who spoke out against Nazism (e.g., Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

<sup>46</sup> Gerdmar, *Roots*, 98–102 (100), on F. C. Baur, who criticized ancient Judaism as nationalistic; 150–154 (154), on Wilhelm Bousset’s assessment of Judaism; 226–233 (229), on Franz Delitzsch’s views.



hand with criticisms of a minority religion's purported nationalism. Theologians' complicity, even agency, in the rise of Nazism and its genocidal policies illustrates why populist religious sentiments do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they can have far-reaching consequences for others.

### **Constructions of *Heilsgeschichte* as a Colonising Rhetorical Weapon**

The aforementioned undercurrent of nationalism in earlier German biblical scholarship casts into a different light Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938), who is Yarbrough's seminal protagonist in the use of *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation, or redemption, history) as a unifying theme for interpreting New Testament theology. Gerdmar devotes Part II of his monograph to "salvation-historical exegesis and the Jews." In a critical assessment of Schlatter, he explains that Schlatter held that the Jews were deemed to be "the main enemy of the German people" due to their antagonistic role within redemptive history.<sup>47</sup>

Another example of salvation-historical interpretation gone awry is that of Gerhard Kittel (1888–1948), who was among the most avid anti-Semitic exegetes of his generation. Kittel held that there was an inherently antithetical relationship between Christian *Heilsgeschichte* and Jewish *Unheilsgeschichte* (damnation, or nonredemption, history).<sup>48</sup> That is, because of the Jews' unbelief, God had "imposed upon them" a destiny within *Unheilsgeschichte*, rather than within the church's redemptive history, since Christians had replaced Jews as the covenant people.<sup>49</sup> A populist-nationalist movement, of course, strives to protect

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<sup>47</sup> See Gerdmar, *Roots*, at 253–325 (314): "Schlatter regards the Jews as the main enemy of the German people, who will 'win over us.' Although on the surface the racist 'Aryan-Nordic' people play the leading part in the attack on Christian Germany, the 'eternal' enemy, the Jews, are the hidden force behind the political power."

<sup>48</sup> In a lengthy chapter, "Gerhard Kittel: Jewish *Unheil* Theologically Founded," Gerdmar, *Roots*, 417–530, documents and assesses Kittel's salvation-historical paradigm.

<sup>49</sup> See Gerdmar, *Roots*, 468–473 (469), on Gerhard Kittel, "Die Judenfrage im Lichte der Bibel," *Glaube und Volk* 2 (1933): 152–155 (152).

the homeland, or *Heimat*, from perceived threats. Since, according to Kittel, the Jews' fate had been irrevocably sealed, there would be no place for them in a restored Germanic empire.

It would probably go too far, however, to allege that the salvation-historical paradigm of Schlatter, Kittel, and others was built upon a logical "fallacy."<sup>50</sup> A more apt critique, I propose, is that uses of the paradigm have often amounted to a *colonisation* of Scripture. Scholars attempted—and many *continue* to attempt—to impose a single overarching framework upon the Bible's diverse sources, theologies, and ideologies. In Germany (and other European nations) before World War II, exegetes filled the role of colonial viceroys whilst the subjugated indigenous voices of biblical writings were compelled to serve foreign interests. Among the "treasures" gleaned from that subjugation is the symbolic capital of possessing the correct interpretation of Scripture, a possession which can bolster the legitimacy of nationalist agendas and religious programmes. Colonisation reached its pinnacle in an affirmation of the contemporary church's exclusive place within redemptive history, with the resultant banishment of the synagogue from that history.

### *NOCH EINMAL: THE AMERICAN CULTURAL FABRIC*

Inasmuch as theological studies not only derive from, but also speak to, "a larger cultural fabric," it is relevant to consider the contemporary American milieu in which Yarbrough's evangelical populism would likely resonate.<sup>51</sup> As we will see, one could reject, as historically inaccurate and morally bankrupt, theologians' past anti-Semitism, but nonetheless employ ominously similar hermeneutical strategies in later contexts.

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<sup>50</sup> Yarbrough, *The Salvation Historical Fallacy? Reassessing the History of New Testament Theology* (History of Biblical Interpretation Series, 2; Leiden: Deo Publishing: 2004), objects strongly to the notion that the salvation-historical perspective is based upon a fallacy.

<sup>51</sup> Gerdmar, *Roots*, 601.

## Evangelical Trumpism

In recent years, among the most prominent voices of populist rhetoric has been that of the forty-fifth US President.<sup>52</sup> During his decades as a businessman and television personality, Donald Trump touted the elite status of his hotels, golf courses, and other properties.<sup>53</sup> When he began his presidential campaign in 2015, however, his earlier accolades for elitism were cut off. Instead, he expressed disdain for elite reporters and the media in general, for “a failed political elite” (in particular, his rival for the presidency, Hillary Clinton), for those who favoured standardised educational reform, and for capitalists who did business with China, Mexico, and others deemed to be unsuitable trade partners.<sup>54</sup>

One phenomenon of the 2016 presidential election was the overwhelming support Trump received from evangelical voters. Their support was probably not a coincidence, since, as political scientist James L. Guth argues, “Evangelicals share almost all of the central traits of ‘populists’” that have been “posited by observers of such movements.”<sup>55</sup> If

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<sup>52</sup> Other populist movements abound today, including political parties in several European countries: in France, Front national (“the National Front,” renamed Rassemblement national in 2018); in Germany, Alternativ für Deutschland (“Alternative for Germany”); in Hungary, Fidesz (“Hungarian Civic Alliance”); and, in Sweden, Sverigedemokraterna (“the Sweden Democrats”).

<sup>53</sup> Michael Kruse, “Trump Reclaims the Word ‘Elite’ with Vengeful Pride,” *Politico Magazine* (November/December 2018), §§1–2. Online: <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/11/01/donald-trump-elite-trumpology-221953/>. According to Kruse, “Trump Reclaims,” §1, Trump also touted, as elite, the “Elite Model Management” agency (which he owned), as well as Eli Manning as an elite American football quarterback. As noted in Kelhoffer “Populism and Biblical Studies, Part 1,” 215–216, in some contexts, there is nothing inherently wrong with elitism; for example, the academy is, of necessity, elitist in certain respects, since scholars devote years to acquire specialised training in order to produce new research.

<sup>54</sup> Kruse, “Trump Reclaims,” §3. See, further, Cathleen Decker, “Analysis: Trump’s War against Elites and Expertise,” *Los Angeles Times* (July 27, 2017). Online: <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-elites-20170725-story.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Guth, “Are White Evangelicals Populists? The View from the 2016 American National Election Study,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 3 (2019): 20–35 (20).

Guth is correct, those shared traits could account for why one prominent voice in evangelical political discourse, Jerry Falwell, Jr., exclaimed, "I think evangelicals have found their dream president!"<sup>56</sup> It was probably not Trump's patently nonevangelical ethical, moral, or religious inclinations (to which we will return below), that garnered him approximately three-fourths of the White evangelical vote in 2016.<sup>57</sup> Rather, the ideals of Trump's populism apparently resonated with the populism embraced by many evangelicals.<sup>58</sup> That is to say, a "thin" religious populism became "thick(er)" when wedded to Trump's political populism.<sup>59</sup>

Another about-face in Trump's rhetoric surfaced after he assumed the presidency. Whereas he had campaigned as an anti-elitist, he subsequently embraced, or re-embraced, an elitist persona. Not only was he proud to be an elitist but he went on to confer an elite status on his supporters.<sup>60</sup> For example, he remarked during a 2017 political rally, "I think we're the elites." A year later, he made a similar declaration: "Just

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<sup>56</sup> See Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "'Their Dream President': Trump Just Gave White Evangelicals a Big Boost," *Washington Post* (May 4, 2017). Online: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/05/04/their-dream-president-trump-just-gave-white-evangelicals-a-big-boost>. Jerry Falwell, Jr., served as president of Liberty University (2007–2020), a private evangelical university in Virginia with approximately eighty thousand students.

<sup>57</sup> See, e.g., Ryan P. Burge, "The 2016 Religious Vote (for More Groups Than You Thought Possible)," *Religion in Public: Exploring the Mix of Sacred and Secular* (March 10, 2017). Online: <https://religioninpublic.blog/2017/03/10/the-2016-religious-vote-for-more-groups-than-you-thought-possible/>; and Jessica Martínez and Gregory A. Smith, "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis," *Pew Research Center* (November 9, 2016). Online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis>.

<sup>58</sup> See Marcia Pally, "Evangelical Christians: Support for Trump and American Populism," *TLZ* 144/11 (November 2019): 1084–1103.

<sup>59</sup> See above, on Bonikowski et al., "Populism and Nationalism," and Stanley, "The Thin Ideology of Populism."

<sup>60</sup> Kruse, "Trump Reclaims," §4: "He [Trump] has been reclaiming the word 'elite' with an almost vengeful pride." In the remainder of the above paragraph, Trump's remarks are cited and discussed in Kruse, "Trump Reclaims" §4.

remember that you are the elite. They're not the elite." On yet another occasion, when Trump called his supporters "the super-elite," he apparently meant that his constituency of populist anti-elites had superseded the privileged status of the former elites. This dual populist-elitist identity illustrates the fact that, within one and the same constituency, there need not be an either-or choice between self-referential populist and self-referential elitist assertions, for both can have strong appeal.

In addition to populism and elitism, a well-documented theme in Trump's rhetoric is nationalism.<sup>61</sup> In 2018 he exclaimed, "It's called a nationalist. And I say, really, we're not supposed to use that word. You know what I am? I am a nationalist, OK? I am a nationalist."<sup>62</sup> When Trump boasts of being a nationalist, this does not pertain to the US population as a whole; rather, he champions the interests of *White* Americans and the concomitant marginalisation of Black, Brown, Asian, and Native Americans.<sup>63</sup> Robert Schertzer and Eric T. Woods refer to Trump's combination of populist and nationalist rhetoric as "ethno-nationalist populism."<sup>64</sup> In other words, it is a nationalism supported by the White populist majority and dedicated to the White *ethnos* (ἔθνος), as opposed to other American *ethnē* (ἔθνη). That synthesis

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<sup>61</sup> Robert Schertzer and Eric T. Woods, "#Nationalism: The Ethno-Nationalist Populism of Donald Trump's Twitter Communication," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44/7 (January 27, 2020). Online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01419870.2020.1713390>.

<sup>62</sup> Schertzer and Woods, "#Nationalism," §2. See also Rogers Brubaker, "Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40/8 (2017): 1191–1226 (1216–1217) on the populist nationalism of Trump's 2016 presidential campaign.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Susan A. Ross and Bryan N. Massingale, "White Supremacy, the Election of Donald Trump and the Challenge to Ideology," *Concilium* 2017/3 (2017): 65–73, and Marina Fang, "Trump Is the Biggest 'Superspreader' of Anti-Asian Racism, Advocates and Scholars Warn," *Huffington Post* (October 21, 2020). Online: [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-anti-asian-racism-covid-19\\_n\\_5f905c0fc5b62333b24133f5](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-anti-asian-racism-covid-19_n_5f905c0fc5b62333b24133f5).

<sup>64</sup> Schertzer and Woods, "#Nationalism," §2.

of racism, nationalism, and populism exemplifies how a “thin” populism can, when combined with one or more other agendas, become a potentially dangerous “thick” force. Although *Clash* does not advocate for a religious nationalism, it is fair to ask about the ends for which the book’s populist agenda could be marshalled.

### **Support for Trump’s Re-Election: Doubling Down, Not Backing Down**

Two hallmarks of American evangelicalism are the claim to champion traditional family values and the intent to return America to the values of her founding fathers.<sup>65</sup> Given the fact that an array of allegations and scandals came to light during Trump’s tenure as the US commander in chief, some evangelicals and other religiously affiliated voters, who had supported Trump in 2016, may have faced the dilemma of choosing between their religious values and political goals when he sought re-election in 2020. A brief reminder of the most notable of those scandals will illustrate the basis for that dilemma.

A hostile foreign power, Russia, had, with Trump’s knowledge and approval, meddled in the 2016 election to ensure his victory. President Trump also interfered with the investigation of that meddling by the Special Counsel Robert Mueller. To avoid negative publicity during the 2016 election, Trump secretly paid \$130,000 to prevent a porn star, Stormy Daniels, from disclosing his extramarital affair with her. In 2019, Trump was fined \$2 million for having illegally used funds from the charitable Trump Foundation to support his election campaign. In a similar fashion, he used his political influence to garner private financial gain from foreign governments (e.g., Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey). In advance of the 2020 election, he was exposed for having attempted to strongarm Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelenskyy into in-

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<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

vestigating conspiracy theories about the business dealings of Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden. As a result of that attempt, Trump was, in September 2019, impeached by the US House of Representatives. Perhaps most tragically, Trump neglected to take swift and decisive action to stave off the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in many thousands of unnecessary deaths at home and abroad.

Trump never expressed regret for any of those (alleged) misdeeds and, to this day, denies culpability for them. From his supporters, a common response is that the allegations are, in fact, baseless and are part of a "witch-hunt." As noted above, this is a common populist response—dismissing out of hand the viewpoint of one's (elitist) opponents, and viewing as superfluous any need to engage them in debate.<sup>66</sup> Such reticence is also evident in *Clash*.<sup>67</sup>

In the light of the aforementioned scandals (and others), one might have anticipated that, in the 2020 presidential election, Trump would have received less support from evangelical voters. On the contrary, his support among White evangelicals actually increased, as found by the politically neutral Pew Research Center:

Both Trump and Biden held onto or gained with large groups within their respective religious coalitions. Trump's strong support among White evangelical Protestants ticked up (77% in 2016, 84% in 2020) while Biden got more support among atheists and agnostics than did [Hillary] Clinton in 2016.<sup>68</sup>

Accordingly, in 2020 the convergence of evangelical populist religion and populist politics remained steadfast.

Peter Wehner, a senior fellow at the conservative think tank Ethics and Public Policy Center, holds that "[t]he enthusiastic, uncritical em-

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<sup>66</sup> See above, on Müller, *Populism*, 31.

<sup>67</sup> Yarbrough, *Clash*, 61–83, discussed above.

<sup>68</sup> Ruth Igielnik, Scott Keeter, and Hannah Hartig, "Behind Biden's 2020 Victory: An Examination of the 2020 Electorate, Based on Validated Voters," *Pew Research Center* (June 30, 2021), §7.f. Online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/06/30/behind-bidens-2020-victory/>.

brace of President Trump by White evangelicals is among the most mind-blowing developments of the Trump era,” and trenchantly asks,

How can a group [i.e., evangelicals] that for decades—and especially during the Bill Clinton presidency—insisted that character counts and that personal integrity is an essential component of presidential leadership not only turn a blind eye to the ethical and moral transgressions of Donald Trump, but also consistently defend him? Why are those who have been on the vanguard of “family values” so eager to give a man with a sordid personal and sexual history a mulligan?<sup>69</sup>

Evangelicals’ faithfulness to Trump strikes a chord, so to speak, with the 1989 hit single “I Won’t Back Down” by the rock musician Tom Petty.<sup>70</sup> Their devotion continued to manifest itself in public demonstrations against Joe Biden’s electoral victory as well as in doubt cast upon its legitimacy.

### **Storming the Capitol: Evangelicals’ Protest Rallies as “Jericho Marches”**

After Joe Biden’s victory, a small, but vocal, minority of his opponents continued to not back down. Albeit without any credible evidence, it was claimed that the presidential election had been rigged and that victory had been stolen from Donald Trump.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Peter Wehner, “The Deepening Crisis in Evangelical Christianity: Support for Trump Comes at a High Cost for Christian Witness,” *The Atlantic* (July 5, 2019), §6. Online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/07/evangelical-christians-face-deepening-crisis/593353>. By “mulligan” (in amateur golf, an extra stroke allowed after a poor shot), Wehner means that evangelicals were willing to allow Trump an extra chance to improve upon his past bad behaviour, an allowance they had not afforded to President Bill Clinton. What Wehner finds surprising, then, is that, whereas both Clinton and Trump had committed adultery, evangelicals overlooked only Trump’s marital misconduct.

<sup>70</sup> For that comparison, I credit Yarbrough, *Clash*, 36, who likened my article “Diverse Academy” (see above) to the song.

<sup>71</sup> Below, we will discuss the phenomenon of belief in conspiracy theories, the



In an article on biblical interpretation and political action, the Hebrew Bible scholar Jeffrey Stackert relates how, beginning in November 2020, a significant number of evangelicals formed the group “Jericho March” and arranged biblically inspired protests of the election result.<sup>72</sup> The protesters “pray[ed] to God to [intervene, to] expose a particular darkness, and [to] bring about justice.”<sup>73</sup> It is telling that they described their rallies as “Jericho marches”—a designation that, as Stackert points out, “alludes to the biblical story in Joshua 6, where the Israelites march[ed] around the city of Jericho in their divinely ordained quest to conquer it.” On the day before the assault on the Capitol Building, some protesters even blew *shofars* (rams’ horns)<sup>74</sup> summoning God to intervene before the Congress could assemble and certify Joe Biden’s electoral victory.

Another biblical allusion among participants was a sign that read “Donald v[ersus] Goliath”<sup>75</sup>—delegitimising Trump’s opponents by likening them to the Philistine enemies of the covenant people. In appealing to those biblical precedents, the marchers claimed roles analogous to those of Joshua and David. Like Joshua, they were divinely sanctioned colonists charged with taking (back) possession of the promised land. And like David, they bravely challenged and entered battle with a much more powerful and better-armed enemy. In both

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limitations of a monolithic worldview, and the generation of “fake news” and “alternate facts.”

<sup>72</sup> See Jeffrey Stackert, “A Biblical Attack on the Capitol?”, *Sightings: Reflections on Religion in Public Life* (January 14, 2021). Online: <https://mailchi.mp/uchicago/sightings-217417?e=b6c7c1cc77>.

<sup>73</sup> Stackert, “Biblical Attack,” §1, quoting from the text of the homepage “Jericho March” *before* the page was edited subsequent to the storming of the Capitol Building (online: <https://jerichomarch.org/>).

<sup>74</sup> Stackert, “Biblical Attack,” §§1–2, points out that, in Washington on January 5, 2021 (the day before the storming of the Capitol), the shofars resounded and that other “participants sang an [e]vangelical Christian anthem titled, How Great [I]s Our God.”

<sup>75</sup> Stackert, “Biblical Attack,” §2.

respects, they were enthusiastic agents of God's violent wrath and revenge.

The US Constitution stipulates that, after a presidential election, a joint session of Congress must certify its result.<sup>76</sup> The protesters' efforts to prevent the Congress from taking up the matter thus amounted to an attempted coup d'état—the antithesis of the rule of law and democratic principles. A similarity may thus be noted between the divinely sanctioned genocide narrated in Joshua 6 and the violent storming of the Capitol Building by a crowd that conspicuously included evangelicals.<sup>77</sup> An example of such violence, attributed to the President himself, is that, on the day of the Capitol Hill riot, Trump said that “Vice President Mike Pence ‘deserves’ to be hanged for not tossing out electoral votes for Joe Biden.”<sup>78</sup> On the same day, that sentiment was echoed outside the Arizona State Capitol building by approximately one thousand Trump supporters, who erected a guillotine and called for Vice President Pence to be “take[n] out.”<sup>79</sup> This spectacle of intertwined populist politics and

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<sup>76</sup> United States Constitution, Article II, Section 1. Online: <https://constitutioncenter.org/media/files/constitution.pdf>.

<sup>77</sup> With Stackert, “Biblical Attack,” §3, who cites Joshua 6:20–21: “The people shouted and they blew the trumpets [*shofars*]. When the people heard the trumpet sound, they raised a great cry, and the wall fell. The people ascended into the city, one man after another, and they captured the city. They put to the sword all that were in the city, from man to woman, from young to old, to ox to sheep and donkey.”

<sup>78</sup> This shocking allegation was recently made by the by Republican Congresswoman Liz Cheney; see Timothy Bella, “Cheney States Trump Said on Jan. 6 That Pence ‘Deserves’ to Be Hanged,” *Washington Post* (June 10, 2022), §1. Online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/06/10/jan6-trump-pence-deserves-hanged-cheney-capitol/>.

<sup>79</sup> See Lois Beckett, “Riots, Effigies and a Guillotine: State Capitol Protests Could Be a Glimpse of Violence to Come,” *The Guardian* (January 13, 2021), §1. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/13/capitol-attack-violence-far-right-trump>. The singling out of Mike Pence for retribution came as a surprise to some, since he is a staunchly conservative evangelical Republican and since he had been an ardent supporter of Trump's presidency.

biblical hermeneutics exemplifies, I suggest, why theologians, clergy, and other leaders bear the responsibility for weighing possible effects of any populist agenda.

### BIBLICISM, CONSPIRACY THEORIES, BIBLICISM, AND THE “SCANDAL” OF THE EVANGELICAL MIND

In another article, I argued that a far-fetched assertion of “victim identification” undergirds *Clash’s* review of modern biblical scholarship.<sup>80</sup> In Yarbrough’s view, theologians have, over the centuries, belonged to one of two camps—that of a partisan minority of elitists or that of an orthodox cohort of populists. The sociologist Ted Goertzel has documented the phenomenon that, “[t]he more conspiracies” a person “believes in, the more likely he or she is to believe in any new conspiracy theory which may be proposed.”<sup>81</sup> I have no reason to believe that Yarbrough doubted the outcome of the 2020 presidential election. However, it seems plausible, even likely, that protestors gathered in Washington and elsewhere would have found, in *Clash’s* account of the marginalisation of evangelical exegetes, a kinship with their experience of political marginalisation after a purportedly fraudulent election. After all, they believed, or hoped, that the walls of Jericho (e.g., the US Capitol Building) would fall, and they placed themselves on the right side of a divinely sanctioned rivalry between the eventual Israelite king David (i.e., Trump) and the Philistine warrior Goliath (inter alii, Biden, Pence, and the Congressional leadership).

Thus far, we have touched upon two conspiracy theories—one posited in *Clash* about the secular academy, and the other within the United

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<sup>80</sup> See Kelhoffer, “Populism and Biblical Studies, Part 1,” 217–220; Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (New York: Oxford University, 2018), e.g., 39–51; and Rebecca Y. Kim, Review of McAlister, “Kingdom of God,” in *Sociology of Religion* 80/2 (2019): 263–267 (264).

<sup>81</sup> Ted Goertzel, “Belief in Conspiracy Theories,” *Political Psychology* 15/4 (1994): 731–742 (740).

States government. Another such theory, advocated by a mysterious movement known as QAnon, holds that “a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control [US] politics and media.”<sup>82</sup> Although those convictions might, *prima facie*, sound bizarre, a poll by the politically neutral National Public Radio found, in December 2020, that 17% of the US population believed them to be true, and that another 37% could not identify whether the claim was true or false.<sup>83</sup> Given that the US adult population was around 258 million in 2020,<sup>84</sup> that would suggest that *over forty-three million eligible voters* believed that an elite group of paedophiles had, in fact, stolen the 2020 presidential election from Donald Trump, and that another ninety-five million adults were unsure about whether that had occurred.

The interplay of QAnon and American evangelicalism has run in both directions, with each building on the other's beliefs and constituency. On the one hand, the popularity of QAnon among evangelicals has grown in recent years. Kevin Roose observes,

The earliest adherents [of QAnon] were mainly far-right Trump supporters, but in 2020, the movement expanded its reach to include health-conscious yoga moms, anti-lockdown libertarians and evangelical Christians.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> On that belief, see Chris Jackson et al., “More Than 1 in 3 Americans Believe a ‘Deep State’ Is Working to Undermine Trump,” *National Public Radio* (December 30, 2020), §2.e. Online: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/npr-misinformation-123020>. See also Dawn Araujo-Hawkins, “The Making of the QAnon Conspiracy Cult,” *Christian Century* 137/26 (2020): 16–17 (16): “The basic tenets of QAnon are these: a group of military leaders recruited Donald Trump to run for president in 2016 with the specific goal of having him combat a ring of liberal, Satan-worshipping sex traffickers and their stronghold over global media and politics. Adherents analyze Trump's tweets and public appearances, looking for hidden messages in his clothing, movements, and word choice that affirm QAnon's predictions and claims.”

<sup>83</sup> Jackson et al., “More Than 1 in 3 Americans,” §2.e.

<sup>84</sup> On the size of the American population in 2020, see the United States Census Bureau. Online: <https://www.census.gov>.

<sup>85</sup> Kevin Roose, “What Is QAnon, the Viral Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory?,” *New York Times* (September 3, 2021), §9.a. Online: <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html>.

In fostering that coalition, QAnon online message boards routinely post Bible verses, albeit without advocating for evangelical religion per se.<sup>86</sup>

The coalescence of the two groups is probably not coincidental; as Dawn Araujo-Hawkins notes, “the sprawling QAnon narrative is quite compatible with certain sects of evangelicalism, especially those that adhere to Rapture [i.e., premillennial] theology.”<sup>87</sup> A recent example of the movements’ overlapping interests was during the COVID-19 pandemic, when evangelicals and QAnon supporters worked together in opposition to lockdown measures aimed at curtailing the spread of the disease.<sup>88</sup> For both groups, those preventative measures amounted to the surreptitious meddling of a “deep state”—that is, a group of those in the military, in government agencies, and in the media secretly manipulating and controlling governmental policy behind a democratic façade. The rhetoric is ominously similar to longstanding conspiracy theories that accuse(d) international cabals of Jews for controlling banking and government, a control commonly identified as Jewish nationalism.<sup>89</sup>

A supportive environment for belief in conspiracy theories, Ted Goertzel explains, may be found in “monological” belief systems. While “[d]ialogical belief systems engage in a dialogue with their” surrounding social and cultural “context, ... monological systems speak only to them-

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<sup>86</sup> Araujo-Hawkins, “Making,” 16, points out that online posts by QAnon supporters “regularly include Bible verses or other religious language—which might be one reason QAnon has found such a comfortable home among White evangelicals, who are some of its most conspicuous supporters.”

<sup>87</sup> Araujo-Hawkins, “Making,” 16. Quoting from an email from Alex Newhouse (a researcher of right-wing extremism and religious fundamentalism), Araujo-Hawkins also suggests that “QAnon holds that the world is embroiled in a large-scale, centuries-spanning war between the divinely ordained forces of good and the satanic forces of evil.” See also Benjamin E. Zeller, “New Religious Movement Responses to COVID: Frame Alignment Strategies and Social Context,” *Approaching Religion* 11/2 (2021): 62–81 (76), on how “evangelical millennialism” has lent credibility to QAnon’s conspiracy theories.

<sup>88</sup> Zeller, “New Religious Movement Responses,” 64, 73–77.

<sup>89</sup> See above, and Gerdmar, *Roots*, e.g., 100, 154, 229, 314.

selves in all but the shallowest respects.”<sup>90</sup> We have noted that the inclination to interact only with one’s tribe, and not with outsiders, is a hallmark of populism (see above). An illustration of monological belief systems at work may be seen in Molly Worthen’s discussion of some evangelicals’ truth claims.<sup>91</sup> A historian of American religion, Worthen speaks to the paradoxical (my term) relationship between what many evangelicals tout as a biblical worldview and their creation of an alternate intellectual universe:

[T]he worldview based on biblical inerrancy gets tangled up in the contradiction between its claims on universalist science and insistence on an exclusive faith. By contrast, the worldview that has propelled mainstream Western intellectual life and made modern civilization possible ... continually—if imperfectly—revises its conclusions based on evidence available to everyone, regardless of their beliefs about the supernatural. This worldview clashes with the conservative evangelical war on facts.<sup>92</sup>

Accordingly, if science calls into question cherished beliefs (e.g., creationism), the result could be a conundrum for some, since the problem is seen to lie in unbelievers’ scepticism, not in unexamined dogma.

In 1994, the church historian Mark Noll described the cause of that conundrum:

The scandal of the [American] evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind. ... American evangelicals are not exemplary for their thinking, and they have not been so for several generations.<sup>93</sup>

As a prominent evangelical intellectual, Noll found disconcerting the widespread anti-intellectual stance of his fellows towards, *inter alia*, the

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<sup>90</sup> Goertzel, “Conspiracy Theories,” 740.

<sup>91</sup> Molly Worthen, “The Evangelical Roots of Our Post-Truth Society,” *New York Times* (April 13, 2017). Online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/opinion/sunday/the-evangelical-roots-of-our-post-truth-society.html> (subscription required).

<sup>92</sup> Worthen, “Evangelical Roots”; cf. Stackert, “Biblical Attack,” §§9–10.

<sup>93</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 1–13 (1).

natural sciences.<sup>94</sup> Ten years later, he stated that, although he had become more optimistic about the increasing number of evangelical scholars who engaged with the natural sciences, philosophy, and ecumenical dialogue, he continued to affirm the book's main arguments.<sup>95</sup>

We note that several factors can form a cluster of comorbidities: adherence to a monological belief system, an ignoring of dissenting views, belief in one or more conspiracy theories, and a fideistic epistemology (the latter expressing the conviction that all knowledge depends on faith). When it comes to *Clash's* take on biblical scholarship, a similar dynamic may be at play: if historical criticism of the Bible (however construed)<sup>96</sup> is seen to be at loggerheads with a belief in biblical inerrancy, the fault is said to lie with elitist critics, not with the diverse traditions preserved in biblical literature. In that case, a fideistic response could issue in hermeneutical “fake news” or the search for “alternate facts” about the Bible.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The main theses for which I have argued are as follows:

- (1) Leading social scientists hold that populism is not a complete paradigm but, rather, a “thin” mode of communication. When used in tandem with other ideologies and agendas, that “thin” mode can become “thick.”

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<sup>94</sup> Noll, *Scandal*, 1: “[I]t has been precisely ... Bible-believers par excellence who have neglected sober analysis of nature, human society, and the arts.”

<sup>95</sup> See Noll, “The Evangelical Mind Today,” *First Things* (October 2004), §1. Online: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2004/10/the-evangelical-mind-today>: “I remain largely unrepentant about the book's historical arguments, its assessment of evangelical strengths and weaknesses, and its indictment of evangelical intellectual efforts.”

<sup>96</sup> For an argument that “the historical-critical method,” in fact, is not a single method, see Kelhoffer, “Populism and Biblical Studies, Part 1,” 213–215.

- (2) There is also an interdisciplinary consensus that populism can have positive as well as negative consequences, while some hold that it is, in fact, inherently at odds with democratic principles.
- (3) Since populism can be harmful, leaders are obliged to acknowledge that fact and mitigate those harms.
- (4) Scholars, likewise, are called to weigh the specific effects a populist ideology could have on academic freedom, debate, and blind peer review. This desideratum pertains not only to scholarly discourse in general but also to debates within religious constituencies—for example, about the character, or the “scandal,”<sup>97</sup> of some evangelical scholars’ disposition towards the historical and natural sciences.
- (5) Lessons from earlier German nationalist biblical interpretation underscore the need for theologians to reckon with how populist viewpoints could legitimise the oppression, even the genocide, of ethnic and religious minority groups.
- (6) The religious populism of many (White) American evangelicals went hand in hand with their overwhelming support for Donald Trump’s populist anti-elitism during the 2016 US presidential election, the 2020 campaign, and the election aftermath.
- (7) The fall of Jericho and David’s killing of the Philistine Goliath were cited as biblical archetypes and, hence, as justifications for the January 2021 storming of the US Capitol Building. That failed political uprising is “a recent and somewhat extreme example”<sup>98</sup> of populist biblical interpretation marshalled in support of a “thick” ideology—namely, to prevent Congress from fulfilling its constitutional mandate to certify the 2020 presidential election.
- (8) The contemporary American cultural fabric of populist politics, when combined with ethno-nationalist rhetoric, is a sobering example of how a “thin” theological populism could lend support to broader tendencies in society at large.

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<sup>97</sup> See above, on Noll, *Scandal*, 1–13.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. the use of this phrase in Yarbrough, *Clash*, 27.



The preceding points support my overarching thesis that the “vision” expressed in Robert W. Yarbrough’s book is at best, a *simplistic and incomplete* agenda and is, at worst, *dangerous and irresponsible*.

Five years ago, when responding in this journal to a book on biblical theology and confessional identity, I interacted with an interpretive tradition different from my own.<sup>99</sup> It was my intent to engage an esteemed colleague in debate, not to foster a separation of purportedly populist and elitist viewpoints. Building on an earlier article,<sup>100</sup> I have attempted in the present study to do the same, for an integral aspect of a scholar’s vocation is to communicate with others—not only with research colleagues and students but also the wider public, including those addressed in *Clash*. It remains to be seen who, in evangelical circles, will take up the mantle and address the concern of myself and others that any populist cause can have both positive and harmful repercussions far beyond religious institutions as well as the ivory tower. It also remains crucial for all to open-mindedly engage with those who embrace differing viewpoints. For none of us wishes that we—or others—would languish in monological discourses based on imagined “facts” reverberating within segregated echo chambers.

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<sup>99</sup> Kelhoffer, “Simplistic Presentations,” responding to Gerdmar, *Guds Ord räcker*.

<sup>100</sup> Kelhoffer, “Populism and Biblical Studies, Part 1.”