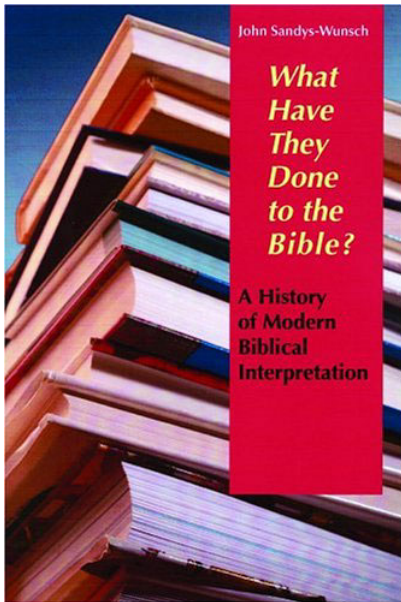


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Sandys-Wunsch, John

What Have They Done to the Bible? A History of Modern Biblical Interpretation

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What Have They Done to the Bible? is an engagingly written, accessible introduction to the history of Western Christian biblical interpretation from 1450 to 1889. It tells the story of the “dethronement of the Bible,” or the movement from an approach to biblical study in which the Bible (or its traditional interpretations) is the source of all knowledge to an approach in which even the Bible can be judged and evaluated on the basis of science and history. In this narrative, eighteenth century developments are central, and this book argues that it was in the eighteenth century that both the scientific approach to the Bible and pietistic and theological responses to it took their modern shape. The book covers a wide range of modern thinkers and exegetes, with a special focus on eighteenth-century writers. It treats Protestant and Catholic exegetes for the most part together, presenting their similarities as more important than their differences.

The central argument of the book is that eighteenth-century developments were crucial in shaping modern biblical exegesis. The developments, however, were not linear and were certainly not a straight progression from obscurantism to rationality. The author rejects both Frederick Farrar’s and Alistair McGrath’s views of the history of biblical interpretation as a simple line, progressing either up or down from faith-based to scientific exegesis. This work poses a sharp contrast to Robert Grant’s survey of the history of interpretation in *The Bible and the Church*, which situates the central shift in

methods of biblical interpretation during the Reformation and covers eighteenth-century development in less than a page. By merging the histories of Protestant and Catholic exegesis, the author provides an alternative to Peter Harrison's connection between rationalism and a specifically Protestant approach to the biblical text.

The introductory first chapter briefly describes the concerns of biblical exegetes in the modern period. These concerns include foundational matters such as establishing the text of the Bible, clarifying its language, and fixing its canon, as well as questions of date, authorship, and genre of different biblical documents. In all these areas, the author argues that developments both within and external to the field of biblical exegesis over the course of the centuries since 1450 were to allow for new possibilities of understanding the Bible in the modern period.

The second chapter surveys biblical interpretation in the Renaissance, 1450–1600. External influences such as the Renaissance yearning for discovery, the importance of the Bible in political debates, and the technical innovation of printing combined with internal developments such as the study of Hebrew and Greek and the ongoing struggle with apparent inconsistencies in the biblical text. Exegetes such as Sebastian Munster, Paul Fagius, Thomas Cajetan, Johannes Drusius and Benedictus Pererius struggled to reconstruct biblical history based on biblical texts that some of them (e.g., Sebastian Munster and Paul Fagius) were beginning to recognize as contradictory, knowing that their conclusions could have both doctrinal and political consequences.

The “baroque” period covered in the third chapter, 1600–1660, saw the beginning of the “dethronement of the Bible,” in which the Bible began to lose its position as the central authority “not only in matters religious and ecclesiastical, but also ... in matters of history, chronology, geography, politics, linguistics and other forms of knowledge” (80). A main external factor in this chapter is the rise of the “new philosophy” during the Enlightenment, which allowed Spinoza and the Deists to criticize the Bible based on philosophy. At the same time, new developments in the study of geology and history challenged simplistic understandings of the biblical creation account. This period was marked by a political climate that in many countries allowed a relative intellectual tolerance. Protestant and Catholic exegetes took different approaches to explaining the authority of the Bible, with the paradoxical result that, while Protestant scholars were more free to perform linguistic and textual analysis of the biblical text that might challenge authoritative translations and interpretations, Catholic scholars were more free to suggest multiple biblical authors and sources. The Catholic scholar Richard Simon, for example, developed a theory of the Bible as a composite, edited document while imagining himself consistent with the tradition of *critica sacra*. The new tolerance of unbelief allowed radical thinkers such as Louis Meyer and Benedict Spinoza to reject the

credibility of both the Bible and religious doctrines, while an innovator such as the Protestant Jean LeClerc could attack the doctrine of biblical inerrancy from within his own faith tradition.

The fifth and sixth chapters cover the eighteenth century and are central to the book's argument that these years were critical in the shift from a faith-based approach to biblical study to a modern, scholarly approach. These chapters elaborate on two major factors in the eighteenth century that contributed to this shift: the developing logic of biblical exegesis that made a divine, perfectly inerrant Bible less and less credible; and a political climate in which the will of the people and not divine and biblical sanction was the source of a state's authority. The universities of Germany (and to a lesser extent England) became the center of developments in scholarly exegesis, so German developments in philosophy and theology were significant. The rising influence of Deism allowed scholars such as Matthew Tindal and Thomas Morgan critically to evaluate biblical morality, for example condemning the cruelty of the Israelites during the conquest of Canaan. Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten used philosophy in an attempt to prove the divine inspiration of the Bible, demonstrating a shift in which the divine origin of the Bible needed to be proven rather than assumed. At the same time, the Pietistic scholars August Hermann Francke and Daniel Ernst Jablonski developed critical editions of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures to encourage students to read the Bible in the original languages.

The second half of this century saw a shift, particularly within Protestant theology, in which it became no longer problematic to challenge or question received religious wisdom. Johann Salomo Semler could ask, "What were the historical circumstances that led to the origin of a document and in what ways were the cultural assumptions and immediate concerns that motivated writers different from the thought world of the current interpreter?" (234). This question marks a shift to a method of interpreting the Bible that strips it of all a priori moral authority by situating it in a changing historical context.

Chapter 7 introduces some aspects of biblical interpretation in the nineteenth century, when the "dethronement of the Bible" was already complete. In this new era, it was the Bible that required the support of science, not science that required the support of the Bible. The use of scientific methods to interpret the Bible allowed for the development of the Documentary Hypothesis by Julius Wellhausen and others. In the study of the New Testament, David Freidreich Strauss distinguished between myth and history in the Gospel accounts, and Ernest Renan searched for the historical Jesus. At the same time, philosophical and theological approaches to biblical study, such as that of Søren Kierkegaard and Alfred Loisy, placed the emphasis on the faith of Jesus rather than the historical accuracy of the details of his life.

In his epilogue Sandys-Wunsch writes personally from his position as an Anglican priest and scholar to argue for recognition of the complex history of the Bible by those who would seek its guidance. He argues that, from a theological perspective, the study of the history of modern biblical interpretation demands both that we recognize the complex history of the Bible itself, as a book composed of many different documents, and that we face the reality that biblical interpretation itself has a complex history and that there are many problems in biblical interpretation that we may never solve.

This book is noteworthy for its vast scope, wide range, and comprehensive approach. It complements well Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg's *The Bible in Modern Culture*, which covers fewer (and more mainstream) authors in more detail. In addition to the more mainstream approaches in each period, the book also covers more unusual approaches (e.g., the bizarre philological exegesis of Johannes Goropius Becanus, who argued that Adam and Eve spoke Dutch/Flemish in the garden of Eden). The writing is exceptionally clear, and the Sandys-Wunsch often explains difficult or complex words and concepts in a footnote or in an explanatory paragraph. Each section is self-contained and can be read and comprehended separately. Because of its clarity and scope, this book is suitable for both a specialist and a nonspecialist and would work well in an undergraduate course.