Sandys-Wunsch, John

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


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At the end of the preface Sandys-Wunsch makes reference to a saying by Winston Churchill concerning another politician: “He is a modest man; so much to be modest about.” Sandys-Wunsch then applies this saying to himself because after thirty years of work on the subject he confesses that he is left with a strong sense of his own ignorance. To be honest, I think this is the feeling most of the readers will have about their own insights after reading this book. Sandys-Wunsch has opened up a world of activity surrounding the Bible and its interpretation that heightens one’s awareness to the reality that biblical scholars today are just one small gear in a large machine. One quickly comes to realize that through the ages people were serious about their understanding of the Bible, had reasons for reading the Bible in the way they did, and always did it as children of their time. We realize that our roots of who we are and what we do as biblical scholars lie deeply imbedded in this history, but we also realize that we are not who they are—they rightly belong to the past, and we are children of our time.

This book gives an overview of the history of biblical interpretation stretching from 1450 to 1889, this being, of course, the period starting with the Renaissance and leading up to the critical nineteenth century. In an introductory chapter (ch. 1) the nature and concerns of biblical exegesis are discussed. The text of the Bible, language and translation, canon,
exegesis and the factors influencing exegesis, and belief and unbelief in the history of biblical interpretation are, for instance, topics that receive attention. The most important elements are treated, but in some cases not with enough depth.

Sandys-Wunsch then systematically works through the different periods in history, tracing significant development in the field of biblical interpretation. He starts (ch. 2) with the period from 1450 to 1600 under the title of the Renaissance. During this period the influence of exegesis was wide-ranging. The Bible was seen as the central source of knowledge, not only for religious insights but on all other levels of society, such as the ethical, political, legal, and even scientific levels. Major events took place during this period that had a direct impact on the exegesis of the Bible, including printing as a technical innovation, the Reformation, the founding of major European universities as centers for academic study, and, of course unbelief as a phenomenon. The humanists were active during this period, not shying away from pointing out the difficulties in the Bible. In areas of textual criticism or philology, they laid strong foundations for what was to come.

Chapter 3 deals with the “Baroque” period (1600–1660). Before continuing with a description of the content of chapter 3, a remark must first be made about the way in which Sandys-Wunsch approaches his material. He starts his chapters with a discussion of the so-called “external factors.” I regard this as the strongest characteristic of this book. Before jumping into discussions on what the biblical exegetes did, he provides a contextual framework for understanding the sociocultural and political atmosphere that prevailed during that particular period. This helps to explain why certain actions were taken during certain times and why certain solutions or positions were acceptable for their time, while later falling out of favor. Biblical exegesis is not practiced in a vacuum. Rather, children of a particular time, with the exegetical tools and insights of that particular era at hand, employ them. This is one central realization that one comes to when reading this book.

To return to the discussion of the “Baroque” period, the seventeenth century was a time during which the encyclopedic stronghold of the Bible on all levels of society was broken. Knowledge on different levels started to sideline the Bible as the central source of information. It was not immediately apparent, but cracks in the foundations began to appear. On the other hand, the Bible benefited from significant developments in language and semantics. This meant that the Bible and its text were studied with greater care than before.

Following the “Baroque” period came the early Enlightenment period (1660–1700). The Enlightenment had a direct influence on the understanding and status of the Bible and
created a climate in which certain ideas and views were regarded as preferable to others. Questions were asked about the transmission of the Bible as well as on its view on creation and certain philosophical ideas. Radical thinkers attacked the origins and nature of the Bible. Its authority was rejected, although it was still defended by most scholars. The awareness of historical developments that could be studied in order to trace the development of ideas had a profound impact on exegesis. Philology and textual transmission were favorite and safe areas for biblical scholars to work in.

Considering these dense periods in history where major shifts took place, the difficulty of writing a history such as this become apparent. As Sandys-Wunsch himself acknowledges, selection plays a role, and, of course, there is also the presentation of the material that needs to be considered. For his selection he used criteria such as choosing biblical exegetes who offer interpretations open to reasonable discussion, and from these he made a reasonable selection, since not all exegetes of relevance can be discussed. This has both positive and negative outcomes: positively, he chooses a limited number of exegetes and discusses them in some detail (given the page restrictions); on the negative side, such selection naturally means that a somewhat limited picture emerges. This is not the fault of Sandys-Wunsch but rather a reality of writing any selective history. One is constantly confronted with choices—choices of which material to use and how to construct one’s “story.” All in all, I think Sandys-Wunsch writes a plausible account that makes sense and flows well. He combines his own interpretation effectively with the material he wants to present.

Chapters 5 and 6 cover the eventful eighteenth century, when the basis for the modern approach to the Bible was worked out. The focus falls mainly on the events in Germany, although England is not forgotten. In the context of the German university system, historical studies gained ground and significantly affected the approach to biblical studies. The development of historical-critical methods questioned treatment of biblical information in naïve ways. This section is the most detailed, and several scholars are treated in some detail.

Chapter 7 deals with aspects of biblical interpretation in the nineteenth century, showing how the questions formulated in the previous century were developed and worked out in the nineteenth century. As before, several scholars are scrutinized. Technical exegetical issues such as who the historical Jesus was and how he saw himself, the Synoptic problem, and the transmittal of the material came under discussion. Hermeneutical questions about the treatment of the material and the relation to faith were also addressed.

The book ends with an epilogue that to my mind could have been left out. It is more about the author than about the historical focus of the book. Sandys-Wunsch actually
ments that adding this epilogue was a suggestion of a reader of the first draft of the book. Perhaps he should not have followed this advice. His indexes are brief but effective.

As a historical text, this book is really well written and, as a result, relatively easy to read. I think most students will have no problems in drawing the necessary information from a reading of this book. The combination between information, explanation, and commentary is well done. I did come across a few small spelling errors (one in a German quote) that could receive attention in a future printing.

I am convinced that this book will be of value to both the student and the specialist. Anyone who wants to specialize in either the hermeneutics or the exegesis of the New Testament will greatly benefit from this history of modern biblical interpretation that Sandys-Wunsch has prepared for us.