

What Have They Done to the Bible?



# What Have They Done to the Bible?

A History of Modern Biblical Interpretation

*John Sandys-Wunsch*



A Michael Glazier Book

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TO MY WIFE SHEILA

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“Many women have done excellently,  
but you surpass them all.”

—Proverbs 30:29



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## Preface

This book is for those who enjoy learning, who take pleasure in learning about ideas and their developments, as well as in the varieties of behavior our species shows—saints, rogues, the balanced, the eccentrics; the rational learned with their feet on the ground and the helpless victims carried off by a predatory idea like a rabbit in an eagle's claws; the religious and the irreligious and the would-be religious—a panoply of human beings who had in common a concern with explaining the Bible, and sometimes little else.

The way the Bible has come to be seen in the Western world since the beginning of the modern period is one of the great cultural changes that have occurred in human cultural history. This work attempts to give a general overview of what took place between 1450 and 1889, for by the end of the nineteenth century the competing variety of attitudes, assumptions, and critical questions on which subsequent scholarship has been based had been defined. This development is important not just to those who still look to the Bible for religious guidance but for anyone who wishes to make sense of modern Western culture. John Spencer, one of the authors discussed in this work, gave as his first motive for research “the joy of knowing.”

I have tried to make this book accessible for those who have not been initiated into the arcane language of the discipline of biblical studies without “dumbing it down” to “Dick and Jane meet Erasmus.” I hope that some of what I say may also be of interest to my professional colleagues, especially to that small guild of those who study the history of biblical interpretation in a serious manner.

Apart from disinterested learning, I hope that this work may be of use also to those whose religious faith is based on the Bible or parts of it. In my experience, ignorance of this subject is rampant, and the intensity of the debates that break out in churches and synagogues might be attenuated if some of the scholarship discussed here were better known.

The author of the book

I should admit to a glaring weakness. I consider it important to be as fair as possible to everyone I discuss, especially to those whose opinions I do not share. However, on occasion my own opinions may seep through the prose, and a whiff of Gilbert and Sullivan whimsy may spoil the academic dignity so dear to the hearts of some of my more solemn colleagues. As an example, I find it hard to warm to Bossuet because of his treatment of Richard Simon, and I would like to record my sincere conviction that the fact that Bossuet has gone down in history with the title of Bishop of Condom is one of the few irrefutable proofs of the existence of a just God who combines righteous judgment with humor.

A few words about how I have tried to fulfill my task:

1. *The basis for choosing certain commentators and ignoring the rest*

- i. In studying the history of scholarly biblical exegesis, one takes seriously only the work of those who have the learning and the intellectual integrity to offer interpretations open to reasonable discussion. Here the difficulty is that there is a matter of discernment involved. Some cases are easy; the Elizabethan preacher who denounced a certain type of hairdressing on the basis of the text "top knot come down" can be dismissed by consulting the actual text and seeing that it reads "let he who is on a house top not come down." In other cases our evaluation is a little more difficult, such as the example of Guillaume Postel, whose extraordinary learning was an integral part of an equally extraordinary eccentricity.
- ii. There also remains an arbitrary factor; no book the size of this one can hope to discuss all the competent scholars of the past five hundred years. The best any historian can hope for is that his or her choice comes from genuine erudition and not from personal preference, and that his or her choice is a reasonable selection from the scholars who were eligible.

2. *Method in history*

All history is characterized by the interplay of great movements and unpredictable individual occurrences. Thus historians have recognized that the history of the whole Roman Empire might have been different if only Cleopatra's nose had been less symmetrical. When an inch or two

of cartilage can shake great empires, it means that the history of biblical scholarship, like other types of intellectual history, is better described as the parallelogram of forces rather than as a straight line heading direct to its goal.

Biblical interpretation, then, does not take place without a context, and the context is not always directly related to the discipline. Thus the arrival of scholars and manuscripts as a result of the fall of Constantinople and the discovery of peoples hitherto unknown are partially responsible for the burst of scholarship in the sixteenth century, yet it would be far-fetched to suggest that Sultan Mohammed II and Prince Henry the Navigator should be hailed as cofounders of modern biblical studies. Without being exhaustive, here is a list of the sort of factors that will be referred to in this work.

- i. The nature of society: Is a country or a coherent geographical area unified with a coherent national policy of censorship, or is it sufficiently fragmented to allow for censored authors to slip through the gaps? Is it religious or secular, and to what extent? If it has an established church, is it Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, or Anglican?
- ii. Means for the dissemination of ideas: Does a country have an established printing industry, and what is the level of its competence? Are there easy means of communication, such as obliging scholars or learned journals? How are the universities supported, and from where do they draw their faculty and students? Are the universities marked by innovation and serious scholarship, or are they intellectually unexciting?
- iii. The intellectual and religious life of a country: Are there interesting developments in science, philosophy, political thought, and exploration, as well as in theology and biblical studies?
- iv. The scholarly study of the Bible: What is being done in the areas of textual criticism, language, translation? Are internal problems with making sense of the text, such as contradictions, parallel passages, or incoherent statements, being recognized, and how are they being addressed by scholars? Are there interesting suggestions about authorship and literary dependence of biblical books?
- v. Evidence from other areas of knowledge: How is the Bible being related to new discoveries in cognate disciplines, such as world history, languages, and ethnology?

Some warnings:

1. *Objectivity and subjectivity*

There is currently a fashion for postmodernism, a movement derived in part from European thinkers such as Foucauld and in part from the American physicist Thomas Kuhn's work on scientific revolutions. What various forms of postmodernism have in common is a feeling that we cannot achieve impartial, objective statements; I have seen suggestions that even mathematics is a social construct. Now if postmodernism means that absolute objectivity or absolute truth escapes our efforts, the news is not new. But if it is taken to mean that everything is completely arbitrary and subjective, then it follows that anything can mean anything, and therefore nothing means anything. I see here the fatal self-contradiction that is at the root of all skepticism of which postmodernism is a variant, namely, if you assert that nothing is objectively true, then you have cut off the branch you are sitting on, for unless the statement "nothing is objectively true" is itself an objectively true statement, your position is a little hard to explain.

Perhaps one can say that a belief in objective truth is more fundamental than arguments against it, or else no one would bother to translate Foucauld himself unless there was some hope of an objective rendering of his thought. A useful image to indicate the level of objectivity we can hope for at our best is that while no swimmer ever gets his or her body completely out of the water, the more successful ones nonetheless manage to keep at least their noses in contact with the air. Even so, while our interpretations of the Bible or of our predecessors are inevitably infected with our own cultural presuppositions, we can nevertheless hope that some part of what we do in scholarship will turn out to have enduring importance. One may take some comfort in Pope's description of the human condition in the second epistle of his *Essay on Man*:

A Being darkly wise, and rudely great:  
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,  
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,  
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;  
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;  
In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer;  
Born but to die, and reasoning but to err;  
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,  
Whether he thinks too little, or too much:  
Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confused;

Still by himself abused, or disabused;  
 Created half to rise, and half to fall;  
 Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;  
 Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurled:  
 The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

## 2. *A note about words and reality*

The history of ideas properly done has the benefit of making us aware of the dangers of the popular words we all are prone to. When we use words such as “liberal,” “reactionary,” “right wing,” “left wing,” we are lulled into thinking that they are as objective and unambiguous as words like “four,” “kilometer,” “hour,” and so on. They are not. For example, when I declare myself to be conservative in my politics, I might mean I want a society where a citizen’s rights are as clearly defined as a citizen’s duties; I might also mean that I want a society where I do not have to pay taxes to provide health care and education for the less affluent.

In the history of biblical interpretation and in its larger relative ecclesiastical history, words like “orthodox” and “heretical” have been notorious shape-shifters. Immanuel Hirsch pointed out that the heresy of one century can often become the orthodoxy of the next. Guardians of orthodoxy often appear to be self-appointed; it is also true that the orthodoxy they proclaim is generally a comfortable fit with their own vision of the truth.

One word that needs special attention at the outset of this book is “criticism” and its various derivatives. The root meaning comes from the Greek word *krinein*, “to judge.” Criticism of a text consists of making judgments about its origins and composition, its subject and meaning, and finally its importance for us, if any. In popular parlance “criticism” has the undertone of negativity, antagonism, and scorn, but this was not how the discipline of “*critica sacra*” was thought of from the time of the Renaissance on. It is sometimes said that “we do not judge the Bible; it judges us.” While rhetorically this has a fine ring to it, it is of course utter nonsense. Only humans judge; books without readers are inanimate objects. If we wish to say that we should never make negative comments about anything in the Bible, this statement is based on our prior judgment about the Bible’s contents, and therefore we have already begun by judging the Bible, albeit in a very positive way.

Biblical criticism is the careful examination of all aspects of the Bible; in theory this examination is based on the reasonable examination of the

evidence and is open for public debate. Like all statements about human behavior, this belief requires a certain amount of qualification, for no one is innocent of prejudice, *amour propre*, or even just plain bad temper. But having admitted that much, it is interesting to see that despite the foregoing, there is often a respect among scholars that leaps across the boundaries of confession, nationality, and personal dislike.

3. *A particular class of expressions that education should teach us to be wary of is the generalization*

A generalization is the sort of expression that says, "In the Renaissance people believed X." Generalizations are inevitable, especially in a book like this one; therefore the unwary should be warned that while generalizations have their uses, they can be treacherous allies, for they have the effect of covering over the almost infinite variations of opinion among humans, even among educated authors who claim that they all believe the same things. Perhaps generalizations are best treated as road maps; when we have never visited a place, they show us where interesting sites are located; when we have actually seen the sites, the maps serve to remind us of the details we now know. Similarly, generalizations are useful both at the beginning and the end of an investigation, but those who rely on them for real knowledge are like those who feel they understand the Middle East because they know where Damascus is located.

4. *Right and wrong directions in the history of biblical criticism*

It is the charm of generalizations that has often skewed the history of biblical interpretation, for the temptation is to find a general pattern in the development of the discipline that can then be used to either praise or denounce its nature. There are two points of view that are guilty in this respect, namely, the whigs and the conspirators. I use the word "whig" as a remembrance of the Whig history of England, which sees British history as a graph recording the inevitable progress toward a more enlightened and democratic society as the obscure clouds of superstition and ancient abuse are dispelled by the dawning light of new perceptions.

In the history of biblical interpretation, the whig view is analogous to the picture drawn by F. W. Farrar, who saw biblical interpretation as the record of the gradual victory of liberal theology over religious obscurantism. The contrast to the whig view of history is that of history as the

record of the conspiracy of devious and wicked men to overthrow the best a society has to offer. In other words, the line on the graph is still there, but it goes down rather than up. This is essentially the view of Alistair McGrath among others. I will argue that history is never so neat, never so much the product of a single cause, as both the whigs and the conspiracy detectors imagine.

*The value of the history of biblical interpretation:*

1. It saves us from absolutizing our own current situation. Seeing how a discipline has evolved helps us to see that it is neither a decline from nor a steady progress to truths of an almost absolute essence. To see how an institution has developed, how processes along the way have either helped or hindered it in the past, is to see it three-dimensionally against the background of its origins. This can help us to judge whether current fashionable movements, such as feminist or postmodern biblical criticism, are legitimate insights or wild aberrations.
2. Seeing the past in its own terms rather than in the cartoon fashion of popular thought is an important intellectual discipline comparable with the usefulness of meeting and trying to understand foreign cultures. The angular edges of a particular human identity present obstacles to a genuine understanding on our part, but without the pain involved we cannot enter into another way of thinking. No one is as dangerous as the leader of a nation who knows all that is worth knowing about people he or she has never met. True comprehension is a moral pursuit in that it puts limits to our assumptions that others should be as ourselves. When we enter the past, even the past that we fancy is our own, the attempt to understand our predecessors “from within” is a strenuous undertaking in the interest of our own moral development.
3. There is a genuine and important pleasure in the admiration and emulation of a past in which there were giants in the land. We all, especially the young, should learn to read great men on our knees, figuratively speaking—men such as Erasmus, Hugo Grotius, and Richard Simon. We need not agree, but we can admire the erudition they display and the ability with which they argue their points. Some of what they say is outmoded by more recent developments, but the quality of their minds is an example to follow, even if they do

not always give us conclusions to accept. To see a point well argued is a great aesthetic pleasure, even if we do not agree.

*The format and peculiarities of this book:*

It is hoped that this book will be readable by anyone with an inquiring mind, whether he or she is familiar with the Bible and the methods of interpreting it. With this in mind, the first chapter is designed as a general introduction to the subject and will set the stage for the discussions that follow. Chapters are self-contained so some material is repeated.

*A question of vocabulary:*

For Judaism the Bible is the Hebrew Bible; it is sometimes referred to by the acronym "Tenak," which stands for the three main divisions of the Jewish Bible, namely, Law (Torah), Prophets (Neviim), and Writings (Kethuvim). The Christian Bible is made up of two parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament for Protestants is identical with the Jewish Tenak. However, for Roman Catholics the Old Testament contains books that are not found in the Tenak but which were either written or preserved in Greek and are included in the Septuagint, the third-century B.C.E. version of the sacred books of the Jews that was made in Egypt.

Sometimes it is asserted that the term "Hebrew Bible" should be used generally on the grounds that an Old Testament presupposes a New Testament, an opinion Jews do not share. There is no reason why in interfaith discussion one should not use this expression in consideration of the convictions of our Jewish cousins, and I would endorse the courtesy implied. However, for the purposes of this book, the term "Old Testament" is actually more accurate, for it includes the possibility of the canonicity of books that are accepted as biblical by a large part of the Christian Church and that are included as a matter of course in Roman Catholic versions of the first part of the Christian Bible.

*Limitations of this book*

After thirty years' work on this subject, I am left with a strong sense of my own ignorance. I have attempted to cover an extraordinarily wide range of material, and obviously there is a great deal I have had to omit in the interests of reasonable length, but there is also a great deal I have

omitted by reason of ignorance. Winston Churchill once described another politician as “a modest man; so much to be modest about.” This may apply to myself.

However, I have tried to read in the original languages at least the authors I discuss where the works are available to me. This does not mean that I have gone through their works in toto; if one has a look at the size of, say, Pererius’s commentary on Genesis, I hope the reason will be self-evident. I have also tried to cover the secondary literature on the scholars I discuss, but I make no claim to have read everything. I apologize both to the authors and the scholarly community for egregious faults of omission.



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