

# Condensed Bibles and the Story of God's Love

By John Brug

This review/article is something of a hybrid. First, as an article, it briefly reviews some of the history and the controversy about condensed Bibles. Finally as a review, it takes a look at a recently published condensed Bible, *the Story of God's Love*, based on the Evangelical Heritage Version.

There are, of course, numerous ways of condensing the Bible in order to serve a variety of purposes. Historically, the most important form of abbreviated Bible is the lectionary. A lectionary selects a Gospel reading, an Old Testament reading, and Epistle reading, and in some cases a psalm, for each Sunday and each major festival of the church year. Generally, the Gospel reading is the lesson that sets the theme for each Sunday. An attempt is made to correlate the other readings thematically to the Gospel, with varying degrees of success. The readings for the festival half of the church year from Advent to Pentecost follow the order of the life of Christ. In the season after Pentecost, the emphasis is on Christian living, with the last Sundays of the church year focusing on End Times. There is a lot of flexibility and variety in the form of the lectionary. There are dozens, perhaps even hundreds of lectionaries or pericope series. Some systems use the same readings every year. Some systems have different readings for each year of a three-cycle. Lectionaries generally follow the text of the Bible without editing it, although occasionally some verses of longer readings may be omitted.

Another important form of condensed Bible is the Bible history book. Most often, these books are instructional books for children. This format selects Bible stories that summarize the plan of salvation from Eden to Eternity. A portion of each year's program presents Old Testament accounts that summarize the flow of key events of Old Testament history. Another part of the year's agenda presents events from the life of Christ and Acts—this section of the history is often correlated with the Sundays of the festival half of the church year. For use in Christian elementary schools that study Bible history multiple times per week, the selections can be more complete. For Sunday Schools that have only one hour of class per week, it is necessary to use different series of lessons for successive years in order to cover even the basic framework of Bible history. Use of only fifty-two lessons per year leaves a lot of gaps. Certain events like Creation, the Fall, the Flood, Good Friday and Easter may be taught every year. To cover other periods of biblical history it may be necessary to use different sets of stories in successive years: the lives of the Patriarchs one year; the times of Moses the next year; and the life of David the third year, and so on. Another solution to the coverage problem is for the Sunday School children to have a program in which, each week, they read at home several stories that are supplementary to the previous Sunday's story. Bible history books have much more freedom than lectionaries to simplify the biblical text to adapt it to the reading and understanding skills of various age groups.

As we were developing the plan for the publication of *the Story of God's Love*, we sometimes described the project as a condensed Bible or a Reader's Digest version of the Bible. We were a little uncomfortable with using those terms in our pre-publication publicity because we realized that some people might find the very concept of condensing the Bible to be offensive and that others might think it would be an act of hubris for the Reader's Digest to assume that they had the skill to digest the Bible. It was only after we had completed our project that we realized that there actually already were abbreviated versions of the Bible called the *Condensed Bible* and the *Reader's Digest Bible*, and that it was especially the Reader's Digest Bible that had generated a certain amount of controversy.

## The Reader's Digest Bible (RDB)

After seven years of planning, the Reader's Digest published its condensed Bible in 1982. The RDB was 40% shorter than the 850,000-word text of the Revised Standard Version on which it is based. The

Reader's Digest Bible contains all 66 books of the Bible arranged in their traditional sequence, but the length of the 39 books of the Old Testament has been reduced by about 50% and the New Testament's 27 books by some 25 %. The actual work of condensing the Bible, which was done by a team of seven editors and was supervised by Bruce Metzger, the chairman of the RSV committee, took three years.

“It was the hardest job I've ever done in my life,” said John E. Walsh, the director of the team of editors, who acknowledged that he was initially appalled at the idea of condensing the Bible. “We were dealing with a library of ancient literature with so many different literary forms to which the condensation had to be adjusted and adapted.” Digest editors had long been interested in condensing the Bible, according to John T. Beaudouin, editor of Reader's Digest Condensed Books: “We condensed a 14-volume set of 56 classics for young readers in the late 1960's, but the Bible had always been considered the ultimate challenge. We weren't sure we could do it, but after we studied the text and found it repetitive we thought we could.” A principal motivation of the Digesters stemmed from their perception that although the Bible is the all-time best-selling book, it was also one of the least-read of all important books because of its length and often repetitious style—obstacles that the editors decided they could overcome. However, to attempt to justify their condensation project on the grounds that they felt that they could improve the style of the Bible was probably not the best PR move the editors could have made, especially since some Evangelical Christians were already skeptical of the RSV.

The editors must, however, be credited with a valiant attempt to anticipate and head-off predictable but erroneous criticism. Early on, they wisely decided that the best-known, favorite passages such as the 10 Commandments, the 23rd Psalm, and the Lord's Prayer would remain untouched. The process of condensing the Bible followed definite, predetermined guidelines, and so it was not haphazard. In making their cuts the editors were required to follow a 50-page guide analyzing, describing, and giving examples of each facet of the condensation techniques involved.

The marketers and defenders of the RDB stressed that the Reader's Digest Bible was never intended to be a substitute for the complete, uncondensed Bible. It was designed to be a summary of the contents of the Biblical text. They felt that the average person approaching the Bible for the first time is likely to be overwhelmed by the size of it. The RDB was designed for the person who would otherwise not read the Bible at all, or who would do so only sporadically. It is not a substitute for the full text.

In spite of the editors' best efforts, review articles about the Reader's Digest Bible included terms like “a storm of controversy,” “a curiosity,” and “a failed effort.” If you want to follow up on the discussion about the merits of condensed Bibles, the arguments for and against the RDB are still available online because the RDB is still being sold, used, and discussed forty years after its appearance. It seems to have found both a readership and detractors. It also appears in various expanded versions with more notes and pictures, and the Reader's Digest publishes *A Complete Guide to the Bible*.

Some PR tips for editors of condensed Bibles: Avoid terms that give the impression that you are improving or simplifying the Bible. Simply call it a summary of the Bible. The Reader's Digest's main PR mistake was probably calling their book a Bible and giving it a lettered abbreviation RDB as if it were a real Bible.

#### Other Condensed Bibles

Here we will simply list some relatively recent condensed Bibles, beginning with two of the more notable ones. This list is something of a mixed bag of apples and oranges since these Bibles have different approaches to the task of producing a condensed Bible. The included blurbs give some of the rationale for condensed Bibles. You can evaluate their appeal or lack of appeal for yourself.

*Condensed Bible: Condensed From The Worlds Finest Bibles* by David Coory: “At last you can read the whole Bible, and you won't be bored. How many times have you promised yourself, ‘One day I'll

read the whole Bible and judge it for myself,' but you have been too busy. Or perhaps you've been put off by the sheer size of the traditional Bible, or tried to read it but found it difficult, or boring. Now it has never been easier or more achievable to read the Bible. This Condensed Bible is half the length of the traditional Bible yet preserves all the important details, books, stories, parables, prophecies, power and spiritual upliftment of the full length Bible. You'll be astonished how much you will learn in a short time. It moves along, flows naturally, and is clear and easy to understand. You won't be bored." [Perhaps calling the Bible boring is not the most tactful way to tout your condensed Bible to potential readers. But who knows? The blurb may address a felt need of their targeted readership, which is further addressed in the next paragraph.]

"Experience perfect peace from reading the Bible. For centuries people have testified of the peace that comes from reading the Bible.... Solve your most perplexing problems. Every effective self-help book ever written has been based on Bible teachings. Now you can get this knowledge first hand, especially in the timeless parables and teachings of Jesus, and the true life experiences of great men and women who lived many years ago."

*The Story: The Bible as One Continuing Story of God and His People, NIV* by Randy Frazee (Editor), "The Story is an abridged, chronological Bible that reads like a novel. There are no verse references, and Scripture segments are seamlessly woven together with transition text into a single grand narrative. For those intimidated or overwhelmed by the unabridged Bible, The Story helps people understand God's Word more fully and engage with it more easily. ...Condensed into 31 accessible chapters, The Story sweeps you into the unfolding progression of Bible characters and events from Genesis to Revelation. Using the clear, accessible text of the NIV Bible, it allows the stories, poems, and teachings of the Bible to read like a novel. And like any good story, The Story is filled with intrigue, drama, conflict, romance, and redemption; and this story's true!"

#### A Few Other Attempts Simply Listed

- In 1909 J. M. Dent and Sons published *The Shorter Bible*, an abridgement of the KJV. The same title was given to an effort published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1921.
- In 1928 *The Living Bible* was printed in New York by Alfred Knopf. [Not to be confused with Taylor's paraphrase]
- In 1933 Edgar Johnson Goodspeed released a condensed Bible, entitled *An American Translation*.
- In 1936 Simon and Schuster published an arrangement and editing of the KJV known as *The Bible Designed to be Read as Living Literature*, leaving out the whole of Chronicles, the minor Epistles, genealogies, repetitions, and passages regarded as unimportant.
- In 1950 *The Dartmouth Bible* cut the length of the Bible in half, eliminating material thought to be repetition and material of interest only to technical students.
- In 1952 *A Shortened Version of the Modern Readers Bible*, edited by Robert Ballou, was published as *the Living Bible* by Viking Press.
- In 1952 *the Olive Pell Bible*, a shortened version of the KJV, was published by Exposition Press.
- In 1955 another abridged version known as *the Compact Bible* was published by Hawthorne Books.

This list is not complete. There are very many condensed Bibles.

Strange as it seems there have even been condensed study Bibles. A condensed study Bible would seem to be an oxymoron or paradox since the chief problem facing editors of a study Bible is to figure out how to fit even a condensed version of what they would like to say into a bindable volume with a font big enough to read without a magnifying glass. But it seems there is a market for short-cut volumes even here. "The *Reformation Study Bible, Condensed Edition* provides concise, trustworthy commentary in a portable format carefully crafted under the editorial leadership of R.C. Sproul with contributions from 75

distinguished theologians and pastors from around the world. Notes have been condensed from the *Reformation Study Bible* to offer a more convenient solution for study on the go.”

There is no end of making many books, and much study wears out the body. Both factors come into play in the continued production and popularity of condensed Bibles.

## *The Story of God's Love*

A Summary of the Holy Bible

This book started out as a Bible History text for schools, and it still can be used for that purpose, but it developed into something much more. It could be called a condensed or abbreviated Bible. Each section is an excerpt from the EHV translation of the Holy Bible. The sections are not simplified summaries, but retain the wording of the EHV translation of the biblical text.

Reading this book is like reading the whole Bible in chronological order. Selections from the prophets, the epistles, and some of the psalms are inserted at the point where they fit into the historical narrative. For example, lessons about the journeys of Paul recorded in Acts are followed by selections from an epistle of Paul that is connected to that journey. A lesson about David's repentance after his sin involving Bathsheba and Uriah is followed by a psalm that David wrote about his repentance. This abbreviated Bible does not include material like the genealogies, the ceremonial laws, and long descriptions. It does not include all of the historical sections of the Bible, but those that are included were selected to summarize the whole plan of salvation from Eden to Eternity.

Besides serving as a Bible History book for elementary schools and home schools, this book can be used for many instructional purposes. It could be used as a text book for high school or college surveys of the Bible. It would be especially useful for an "Introduction to the Bible" course for students of any age who have little prior knowledge of the Bible. For elementary school use, it is most appropriate as a text for use in grades 5-8, but it can be introduced to younger students. For teachers of lower grades and even pre-K, it can be used as a resource to help the teachers become more familiar with the flow of the whole Bible, so that they are better able to provide their individual lessons with context. For Sunday Schools it can be used as a textbook for home reading.

It is also recommended for use by first-time Bible readers who want to get a summary of the Bible before tackling all the details. Long-time Bible readers will appreciate it as a summary of the highlights of the Bible. It is recommended for distribution in institutional ministries and for outreach.

In addition to the biblical text, each section has an introduction to help the reader make the connection with the biblical context. Each section concludes with a brief prayer which gives an application of each lesson to the plan of salvation and to Christian life. Each section has a heading which identifies the chapters it is based on. Throughout, the emphasis is on tracing the revelation and the progress of the gospel.

This shortened version of the Evangelical Heritage Version (EHV) presents God's plan of salvation from beginning to end and declares his love for humanity by means of select Bible readings.

- 250 readings of unaltered Bible text selected from all 66 books from Genesis to Revelation, including 175 of the most significant Bible stories, in chronological order
- A single-column format with no in-text chapter or verse numbers makes for easy, continuous reading
- 13 Bible History timelines and 6 maps of Bible lands
- Hardcover, 388 pages. \$21.99. Discounts from the list price are offered for bulk purchases. Order from Northwestern Publishing House.