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MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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The 100-Minute Bible

What do you do with a book that has a whirlwind, edge-of-your-seat opening: the creation, Adam and Eve, the apple and the serpent, history's first murder, the flood, but then gets bogged down in seemingly endless pages of begetting and smiting, Israelites versus Amalekites, and lots of old men in beards? Sure, it picks up a bit with Joseph and Potiphar's wife, David's adultery, and Samson's excesses. But after Song of Songs, what's left? At least until the main character of the story - Jesus - arrives on the scene. But you have to go through 39 of the 66 books to even get to that point.

What we need is a distillation of the canon which can be read in short order, or so says a publisher from Canterbury, England, who has produced *The 100-Minute Bible*. Launched at the famed Canterbury Cathedral in September, the pocket-sized 58-page edition is for those who don't have time to read the original, but are nonetheless interested in the origins and message of Christianity. Authored by the Rev. Michael Hinton, it is aimed at the "hurried and harried."

Far from a translation, even the word "paraphrase" would be, at best, loosely applied. The goal was to take the Bible and try to boil it down to the essentials. So after outlining the Ten Commandments, the 100-minute version adds: "Other more detailed laws governed diet, dress, personal relations, worship and every aspect of daily life."

So much for Leviticus.

The intent of such efforts to offer a "gateway" to the Bible can certainly be understood. Biblical reading, not to mention biblical literacy, is in a free-fall. Efforts to make the Bible more accessible through modern translations (e.g., the New International Version, the New Living Translation, and the New Century Version), along with helpful paraphrases (Eugene Peterson's *The Message*) are not only helpful, but strategic.

And *The 100-Minute Bible* is far from the only innovation attempting to bring the Scriptures to an attention-challenged and biblically illiterate generation in new and arresting ways. "The Light Speed Bible" has been launched by Holman Bible Publishers with instruction on how to make it from cover to cover in as little as 16 to 18 hours. Zondervan recently released both the "90 Day Bible" and "The Story," a Bible written in novel-style format. Among Thomas Nelson's top sellers are "Biblezines," magazine style copies of the New Testament targeting specific consumers.

An Australian group has translated the entire Bible into SMS format, enabling verses to be sent direct to mobile phones. John 3:16 is now "God luvd da ppl of dis wrld so much dat he gave his only son", and Genesis 1:1 "In da Bginnin God cre8d da heavns & da earth." The Bible Society in Australia, which translated all 31, 373 verses of the Bible into text, claim that they have remained "100% faithful" to the original, building off of the Contemporary English Version and remaining faithful to the grammar (changing only the spelling of the words).

But when the essence of the Sermon on the Mount is reduced to "He taught that true happiness comes from having the right attitudes," as it is the 100-minute version, something less than an outreach tool is at hand. As one reporter commented, this "could have come from the pen of a tabloid lifestyle columnist." And some of the greatest moments are seriously downplayed. "David achieved a wider fame when he overcame the giant Goliath," is akin to saying Michael Jordan became a better-known basketball player after his first slam-dunk contest.

Hinton confessed that he "sacrificed poetry to clarity," but is that all that was sacrificed?

The goal of any effort to reach out to world must be relevance without compromise; the communication of the message in ways that people can understand without losing the message itself. Theologian Millard Erickson, building on the insights of William E. Hordern, offers a helpful distinction in the use of the terms *translation* versus *transformation*. Every generation must translate the gospel into its unique cultural context. This is very different from transforming the message of the gospel into something that was never intended by the biblical witness. Transformation of the message must be avoided at all costs. Translation, however, is essential for a winsome and compelling presentation of the gospel of Christ.

A 100-minute Bible may be needed, and useful. But any distillation – even when intended as an invitation to read the original - must remain true to the Bible itself. Else it becomes like the famed "Jefferson Bible," compiled by Thomas Jefferson, who purposefully eliminated references to the miraculous to reflect his embrace of Enlightenment thought.

It may have been a shorter read, but it ceased to be the Bible.

James Emery White

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Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*.

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