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9. Reformations in Reading

Short Bibles and the Aesthetics of Abridgment

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Abstract

This article takes up a period in the Bible's history of publication when the text was redacted to approximately half of its original size. In the mid-twentieth century, editors, publishers, and book designers worked to rebrand these shortened Bibles as works of modern literature. It considers the rise of short Bibles, looking at the editorial choices behind the creation of *The Dartmouth Bible* as one prominent example of the literary and social components of textual emendation required to make the Bible "readable" in modern terms. It then compares these short Bibles to analogous abridgement projects, looking at literary abridgment in general as well as other redactions of the biblical canon. It concludes by arguing that making the Bible "readable" by removing its hermeneutic difficulties abbreviates not only the text but also the interpretive tasks this canon poses to its reader – an abbreviation that is not without its cost.

Keywords: Bible, book history, hermeneutics, Christianity, reading

Introduction

There is a narrow and often forgotten chapter in the Bible's material history – a period in which publishers attempted to turn this ancient, unwieldy text into a work of modern literature by making it significantly shorter. Short Bibles of various styles, edited from various translations, emerged on the book market in the mid-twentieth century, each with their own strategies of abridgment.¹ Editors marketed these new abbreviated versions as the first “readable” Bibles. Random House published the “Short Bible,” Scribner's the “Shorter Bible,” Princeton “The Reader's Bible,” Reader's Digest the “Reader's Digest Bible,” and the Jewish Publication Society published “Pathways Through the Bible.” Simon and Schuster made one, Knopf made one, Cambridge made one, each cutting the Bible down to a half or even a third of its original size.

While these short Bibles have largely fallen out of vogue, the questions that animated their production – questions about how to make the Bible “readable” in modern terms – are very much alive. These questions are part of a longer, ongoing enterprise of publishers, editors, and book designers who have worked since the late nineteenth century to endear modern readers to this ancient text by means of a diverse array of print trends and technologies. The Bible has been excerpted for its “choice” literary contents, removed of its versification and chapter divisions, rebound in fashionable cloth bindings, and re-rendered in modern “literary” language. Since the late nineteenth century, publishers have reformed and reformatted the Bible in any number of ways, trying to make it look and read like any other book.²

What makes the creation of short Bibles unique within this larger trend is the significant liberties their editors took as they dramatically reduced the size of the canon and presented their abbreviated versions of this text not as excerpts or anthologies but as a fair representation of the whole. These radical liberties invite us to take a closer look at these redacted texts as reform movements of a particular kind, and to consider the impact of these textual reforms not only on the length or design of this sacred text, but also on those habits of reading that have grown up around it. In what follows, I will narrate, first, how these short Bibles emerged and what strategies their editors used to turn the Christian Bible into an abbreviated modern classic. Second, I will consider how this now defunct trend in the Bible's publishing history might help us think in clearer terms about the move toward readability, the aesthetics of abridgment, and the place of interpretive difficulty within a Christian tradition of reading.

A Call for Shorter Bibles

In 1913, a weekly New York City newspaper published an editorial by B. F. Bezell, a Methodist Episcopal minister, that asked publishing houses to consider the printing of a

¹ While the rise of short Bibles on the mainstream publishing market is a unique moment in the Bible's history as a book, there were shortened Bibles before this time – predominantly abbreviated and illustrated for children, but occasionally marketed toward the adult laity, as well. For more on these earlier texts, see Ruth B. Bottigheimer.

² This sentiment was famously expressed by theologian Benjamin Jowett who encouraged readers to “interpret the scripture like any other book.” (377). We find a similar sentiment expressed in the earlier work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in one of his *Letters on the Inspiration of the Scriptures* (later called *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*) as he writes, “I take up [the Bible] with the purpose to read it for the first time as I should any other work – as far at least as I can or dare” (579).

significantly shorter Bible. The traditional Bible is “too bulky,” Beazell writes. Though its heft may once have been a symbol of its worth, the “ceaseless productions” of printed texts in the modern age have made the unwieldy “bigness” of the good book a “serious barrier” to its reception (692).

But bigness was not the Bible’s only flaw, in Beazell’s estimation. Among its auxiliary offenses, Beazell cites the Bible’s irritating habit of repetition, its problematically divergent histories, as well as its inclusion of scandalous material like the Song of Songs, which he claims is “unsuitable for public or even private use” (692). In light of these various offenses, Beazell makes a case for the publication of an abridged Bible which would eliminate repetition and divergences altogether. This new Bible would boil the Old Testament down to its essential teachings, combine the gospels into a single harmonious narrative, and synchronize the witness of all included books to lend a sense of coherence and unity to the whole.

Against any objections he imagines his readers might pose to this abbreviated canon, Beazell insists that reformations like this one are neither radical nor new: they have recurred at intervals since the beginning, starting with the Bible’s very composition. Scrolls were set aside in the creation and canonization of both testaments, readings were set aside in the creation of church lectionaries, and Psalms were set aside in the composition of church hymnals. It is only prejudice, superstition, and sentiment, Beazell argues, that keeps Protestantism from continuing its ongoing work of reformation and creating a form of the text that might retain the fickle attention of modern readers. He writes, “Why should it be thought an incredible thing that a Christian council in this century should be able to fashion a more inspiring book than a Jewish synod in the first century?” “It has not yet been constructed,” Beazell concludes, “but it will be; it must be” (693).

Whether or not they were moved by Beazell’s editorial, over the next several decades, dozens of British and American publishers issued abridged Bibles, presenting these new editions as precisely the kind of condensed, redacted editions of the canon that Beazell had in mind. These Bibles gained traction in the book market of the mid-twentieth century due not only to an ongoing interest in marketing the Bible as a literary classic, but also because of what historian Matthew Hedstrom calls a “critical turning point in the history of American religious publishing.” Starting in the late 1920s, general trade publishers began to invest in the religious book business. Working together with liberal Protestant authors who sought to “rescue the faith by modernizing it,” these publishers mass-marketed spiritual texts that transcended sectarian divisions (26). In the postwar period, as books came to be advertised as “weapons in the war of ideas,” liberal Protestants took up arms, disseminating a new vision of a cosmopolitan Christian faith that could unite rather than divide a nation of readers.

“Modern religion required modern books,” Hedstrom writes, but it also demanded modern Bibles: reformatted in light of emerging aesthetic sensibilities and reconfigured as instruments of social unity. Short Bibles presented a unique opportunity to modernize the text on both of these fronts: editing this lengthy canon to make it more recognizably “literary” while at the same time bowdlerizing its more offensive and divisive contents to create a Bible more fit to the tastes of a modern age.

One such revised canon, *The Dartmouth Bible*, provides an excellent example of the dual aims and strategies of many short Bibles produced in this period. While it was by no means

the first attempt to abridge the Christian canon, *The Dartmouth Bible* goes beyond many of its contemporaries in offering extensive, explicit commentary on the aesthetic and social vision that underlies the editors' approach to textual redaction. For this reason, *The Dartmouth Bible* offers us an exemplary study of the ways in which textual emendation was used by the editors of midcentury short Bibles to remedy not only a decline in biblical literacy but also those harmful social divisions that the Bible in its original form seemed to aggravate rather than heal.

The Dartmouth Bible

The Dartmouth Bible was published in 1950 by The Riverside Press – a division of the Houghton Mifflin Company. It was the product of more than a decade of editorial labor, taken on by Roy B. Chamberlain, a chaplain at Dartmouth College, and Herman Feldman, a professor of Industrial Relations at Dartmouth's Business School. Together these men redacted the text of the King James Version, drawing occasional aid from an ecumenical advisory board of biblical scholars, comprised of faculty from Duke Divinity School and Union Theological Seminary as well as H. L. Ginsberg – a scholar of the Bible and rabbinic literature from Jewish Theological Seminary. With the help of these consultants, Chamberlain and Feldman curated a version of the Christian Bible that they thought people might actually read. "In spite of the more than a billion copies already printed, the Bible is far more often bought than read, more generally owned than known" (Chamberlain and Feldman: xv). The cause of this ignorance is not readerly indifference, the editors claim, but rather the unsightly appearance of the text along with its needlessly preserved obscurities. They explain: "In these crowded times, the excessive length of the Bible has in itself become a chief reason for why it is so little known" (Chamberlain and Feldman: xvi).

Chamberlain and Feldman set out to make a Bible fit for the modern age by reducing the King James Version to approximately half of its original word count. They reset the text they retained in a larger font and printed it on thicker, less delicate paper. Abandoning the centuries-old standard of printing the Bible *per cola et commata*, with line breaks marking each new sentence or phrase (originally employed as an aid to oral reading), Chamberlain and Feldman set the narrative portions of the Bible in modern paragraphs and arranged those sections they deemed "poetry" in stanzas of various forms.³ They retained select portions of text from all of the books of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, as well as nine selections from the deuterocanonical books of the Catholic tradition. Each condensed book is preceded by an introduction and concluded with a series of endnotes to clarify individual terms or lend historical context to obscure passages. Strikingly, between these lengthy supplementary materials and *The Dartmouth Bible's* larger typeface, this short Bible was no less bulky in the end than the original.

In defense of the extensive redactions required to reduce the Christian canon to half its original size, Chamberlain and Feldman explain that they have omitted only those passages that were "repetitive or of little interest to those who are not technical students" (Chamberlain and Feldman: xvi-xvii). These redactions include, for example, the removal of the Bible's lengthy genealogies as well as roughly twenty of Leviticus's twenty-seven chapters that the

³ This is true not only of *The Dartmouth Bible*, but also of the majority of modern literary Bibles printed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

editors dismiss as largely “dry reading” (Chamberlain and Feldman: 118). But these redactions also include the elimination of any and all redundancies from the text, expunging those narrative variants that repeat the same stories from the perspective of a new narrator. To this end, the editors combined the four independent gospels into a single harmonious narrative⁴ and reduced the second version of the history of Israel provided in 1 and 2 Chronicles to a mere three and a half chapters – all in the name of literary excellence and interpretive simplicity. “The fourfold presentation of the life of Jesus is a cause of great difficulty, if not of confusion,” they explained, and the redundant history of Chronicles is “lacking in literary vigor” (Chamberlain and Feldman: 862, 340). As they wrote in their introduction to the book of Proverbs, a text that suffered similarly drastic losses, “to make the collection enjoyable, the dull stones must first be removed, leaving on display the gems with color and sparkle” (Chamberlain and Feldman: 395).

Beyond the removal of material that Chamberlain and Feldman deemed dull or redundant, the abridgement of *The Dartmouth Bible* also involved significant editorial labors to help prevent its readers from tripping over those texts that the sixteenth-century editors of the Geneva Bible called the “hard places” of scripture. Indeed, the citation that stands on the title page as the epigraph to *The Dartmouth Bible* reframes one of Isaiah’s prophecies as fulfilled for the reader in the inspired redaction that lies ahead: “I will lead them in paths that they have not known; I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight” (Isaiah 42:16, KJV).

One crooked element that the editors thought needed straightening were passages they feared might promote “social cleavages” amongst untrained readers – cleavages like racism, class conflicts, and denominational rifts which go against what the editors proclaim as the more “fundamental message” of the Bible – a message of “good will and brotherhood.”⁵ “Such narrow attitudes,” the editors claim, are “frequently the result of limited knowledge” and “can be dispelled among intelligent people by a better understanding of the background of the Bible and a broader perspective on its teachings” (Chamberlain and Feldman: xv-xvi).

To this end, the editors supplied additional commentary under portions of the text that might cause untrained interpreters to stumble. In the endnotes to the book of Ephesians, for example, Chamberlain and Feldman add a brief clarification regarding Paul’s admonition to servants to obey their masters. This note acknowledges that modern translators have begun to render the Greek word *douloi* in Ephesians 6:5 as “slaves,” which has initiated a conversation about the ways in which Paul himself might have participated in the “degradation of human values caused by the slave system.” The editors then supply the position of Paul’s defenders

⁴ The editors of *The Dartmouth Bible* make one exception to this rule against narrative repetition and include all four accounts of the resurrection, juxtaposing them in adjacent columns so that a reader can move back and forth between parallel accounts. Oddly enough, the only material they omit from this effort to preserve evidence of textual variance between these four accounts is Matthew 28:1, Luke 23:1-2, and John 20:1-10. These texts, which detail the first witnesses to the resurrection, represent one of the largest divergences between the four gospel accounts (Chamberlain and Feldman: 953).

⁵ While these “social cleavages” are left unspecified in the introduction to *The Dartmouth Bible*, one of the editors – Herman Feldman – uses this same term in his book *Racial Factors in American Industry* to speak about the racial, class, and denominational conflicts in this country.

(which, given the disproportionately large space allotted for this defense, appears to be their own). In Paul's defense, the social institution of slavery seemed inconsequential to the apostles of the early church because all earthly hierarchies were temporary: the second coming was swiftly approaching, and at that time there will be neither slave nor free, but all things will come under the new order of God. To this note they add a reminder that in a separate letter Paul had requested that the runaway slave Onesimus be received as a partner by Philemon, and they conclude their defense with a bold assertion from biblical scholar Ernest F. Scott who writes that Paul "did more than any other man for the abolition of slavery" (quoted in Chamberlain and Feldman: 1116-17). Similar supplementary comments can be found at the end of the book of Ezra, when the editors explain Ezra's seemingly radical decision to purify the Israelite people by sending all the foreign wives and children into the wilderness. The editors note that such proceedings should be understood "in relation to the standard of their age" – again citing a scholar who champions the relative superiority of the Bible's ethical witness in its own time by claiming the Israelites' decision to be "tame by comparison" to their Greek and Roman contemporaries (Chamberlain and Feldman: 357).

While narrow misunderstandings of certain biblical texts are dispelled by way of scholarly commentary and historical context, others are dispelled by removing the sources of misunderstanding altogether. The violent chapters that mark the end of the book of Judges, for example, are removed from *The Dartmouth Bible*, as is the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34. While you will find the text of Psalm 137 with its lament over the Israelites' captivity in Babylon and the difficulty of singing the songs of Zion in a foreign land, you might notice if you look closely that this psalm is missing its final verse, when it turns from lamentation to anger and violence, declaring: "Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones." While the editors framed *The Dartmouth Bible* as a text that had been "abridged but not, however, expurgated" – a close reading of its excisions and absences reveals the quiet work of bowdlerization that lies behind the creation of this more "readable" canon (Chamberlain and Feldman: xvi). Better, it seems, to gouge out those texts that might occasion offense than risk the "narrow attitudes" that might arise.

Though Feldman died shortly before this edited Bible went to press, Chamberlain lived to see the fruit of their editorial labors over the next two decades as this shorter, sweeter canon found many eager readers. *The Dartmouth Bible* was met with commercial success and was republished several times before becoming a part of Houghton Mifflin's "Sentry Edition" series. In this series, *The Dartmouth Bible* came to sit alongside Willa Cather's *My Antonia* and John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* as part of what Houghton Mifflin determined to be "books of permanent value which reflect development in American thought" (*Wisconsin Library Bulletin*).

While *The Dartmouth Bible* was initially met with some criticism among more conservative reviewers, it was also lauded by several major presses and universities as a substantive and lasting achievement. One critic claimed that *The Dartmouth Bible* was "the Bible of a new religion," labeling this redacted canon as the sacred text of "the sect of secularism of which not Confucius but confusion is the prophet" (Doherty: 213). At the same time, the religion editor for *The Chicago Tribune* called it "magnificent" (Evans) and the dean of Princeton's University chapel declared that *The Dartmouth Bible* had "given fresh meaning to 'inspiration'"

(Aldrich: 17). The *Saturday Review* took a particularly favorable view of the text, capitalizing on the marketing opportunity provided by an upcoming religious holiday:

If Santa Claus were to dump everything from his bag this Christmas and fill it instead with copies of the “Dartmouth Bible” everyone would get what he wants and needs, and this twenty-fifth of December would be the most religious since a night in Bethlehem on the fourth year before the Christian era (Sugrue: 11).

Perhaps the most favorable review came from Unitarian minister and political activist Arthur Powell Davies, who published his praise for the volume in the Sunday edition of *The New York Times*. Davies acclaimed this text as “far and away the best presentation of the Bible for the average reader,” adding, “to those who have wished for a readable Bible . . . the *Dartmouth Bible* is the volume for which they have been waiting” (18).

Making the Bible Readable

“Reading, like any human activity, has a history,” Paul Saenger writes. In his study of the emergence of word separation in written texts during the early medieval period, Saenger explains that as the format for the written word has changed and varied over time “so, too, have the cognitive skills necessary for its deciphering” (1). Texts printed in *scriptura continua* (without spacing) demanded extensive training programs and practices of oral recitation to ensure that readers were breaking up words in the proper way. The move to differentiate words by placing spaces between them altered the “neurophysiological process of reading,” making it easier and faster to consume texts and making it possible for readers to do so silently (13). Recalling this history helps us remember that as textual design and textual technologies change over the course of history – as texts are vocalized, surrounded by commentary, translated into vernacular languages, or remarketed as audiobooks – the mental work of reading also changes, as do the social and cultural expectations for what constitutes “readability.”

Take, for example, the Bible *The New York Times* implicitly deems “unreadable” in comparison to *The Dartmouth Bible* in the review above. The vernacular English translation that later solidified into the King James Version was translated with the intention of rendering the Bible in language that the average ploughboy could read and understand. Four centuries later, the readability of this text appears to have diminished, or else what we mean when we call something “readable” has changed once more. Here, readability is no longer a matter of intelligibility; after all, the King James Version is the exact translation *The Dartmouth Bible* uses as its source – taking half of its contents word for word. Instead, readability is recast in relationship to the time and tastes of the reading public: by reducing a previously unreadable text to half of its size (and removing some of its more inscrutable contents), the words of the King James Version have once again become readable.

If an old text becomes readable in a new world by way of subtraction, it is worth considering what elements might be lost in translation. In the case of short Bibles, we can examine this work of subtraction in two different ways: first, by thinking about these abbreviations as a subspecies of the wider phenomenon of literary abridgment, and second,

by examining the shrinking down of a scriptural text – a text many readers see as being inspired by God – as a particular and eccentric case.

The Aesthetics of Abridgment

In some respects, the efforts that Chamberlain and Feldman made to abbreviate the Bible are not dissimilar from the thousands upon thousands of literary abridgments of classic texts that have been sold with remarkable success over the past century by publishers like Doubleday, Reader's Digest, and Omnibooks. Even novelists like W. Somerset Maugham tried their hand at literary abridgement – reducing classic texts like *Wuthering Heights*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, or *Moby-Dick* down to their essential parts. “There is no reason why the reader should have patience with the defects of a novel,” Maugham writes – citing the tendency of serial novelists to pad their books with fluff or of romantic period authors to fill their text with “interminable descriptions” of everything in sight (48). “Everybody skips,” Maugham continues, “but to skip without loss is not easy . . . it is surely better that they should have their skipping done for them by someone of taste and discrimination” (49). So Maugham worked with the Winston Publishing Company in the 1950s to produce perfected, abridged versions of these classic novels – freed by an expert from their besetting flaws.

While abridgements like these were particularly popular with readers in the mid-twentieth century, publishers continue to market series of abridged classics. One recent example, the Orion Compact Editions, promises readers the full experience of classics like *Anna Karenina* in “half the time.” The publishers of these pint-sized classics explain their wider project in language strongly reminiscent of Chamberlain and Feldman's description of *The Dartmouth Bible*. “Many of us just don't have the time to read books over a thousand pages long,” they said. “We lead busy lives. There's work and kids and all the things” (Searls 2009a: 37). Given these constraints, the editors at Orion offer condensations of great literary classics that they claim retain “all the elements of the originals: the plot, the characters, the social, historical and local backgrounds and the authors' language and style” (Searls 2009b: 9).

When Orion published *Moby-Dick in Half the Time* in 2007, Adam Gopnik wrote a piece on the project in *The New Yorker* to clarify what he calls “the aesthetics of abridgement.” Rather than offering a predictable screed against any attempt to better Herman Melville's great American novel, Gopnik encourages his readers to see that this abridgement is “skillfully done.” The anonymous editor has not entirely ruined the text; instead, “it is, by conventional contemporary standards of good editing and critical judgment, improved.” Gone are the long philosophical digressions, the lengthy scientific explanations, and the seemingly irrelevant side-characters. “What the Orion ‘Moby-Dick’ says about the book is what a good critic or professional editor would say about the book. It's what they did say: there's too much digression and sticky stuff and extraneous learning. If he'd cut that out, it would be a better story.”

But this term, “better,” is where Gopnik would like readers to pause. “The compact edition adheres to a specific idea of what a good novel ought to be.” It commits to the literary ideal it knows and recognizes – the adventure story – and refigures it in a familiar form. *Moby-Dick* is remade in the “contemporary aesthetic of the realist psychological novel” by siphoning off all the metaphysical speculations or the famously endless studies of whale anatomy. *Moby-Dick in Half the Time* “turns a hysterical half-mad masterpiece into a sound, sane book.” The

result is less sloppy, less muddled, but it is also devoid of the narrator's earnest, unremitting attempts to get his mind around the "uncommon bulk" and "unwonted magnitude" of the creature they are pursuing by whatever means he can (Melville: 198-99). Without these digressions, we stick closer to the chase, but lose the raw operations of a mind at work – the interpretive labors that make this leviathan text what it is (Melville: 470).

The striking opposition between the aesthetics of the novel and that of the abridgment led one writer to compose a new text made entirely of the bits and pieces of the novel that *Moby-Dick in Half the Time* left on the cutting room floor. This rejoinder text – named “; or the Whale” for the words abridged out the half-size title (Searls 2009b) – foregrounds in all of its texture and strangeness the question that haunts all efforts at textual condensation: “what elements of the original do we want to abridge for?” (Searls 2015).

If abridgement moves a text toward something better – “something that we already know about and approve” (Gopnik) – the narrator of *Moby-Dick* is trying to sail in exactly the opposite direction: keeping the reader suspended in the “most curious and contradictory speculations” with no sense of where they might lead, aiming at the unknown, the “howling infinite” that exceeds and exhausts all attempts at comprehension (Melville: 197, 117). “In landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God,” Melville writes; but not if you read the compact edition, from which these words have been quietly expunged (Melville: 117).

In the last several decades, narrative theorists like Martha Nussbaum have argued that the form of the texts we read is not a neutral vehicle for content. We cannot extract a lesson about human character from a Henry James novel by way of paraphrase, or understand what Dostoevsky meant about love or beauty without those minor characters and side conversations that an abridgment would quickly discard. “Style itself makes its claims,” Nussbaum writes – the form of a text “expresses its own sense of what matters” (3). Novels like *Moby-Dick* make certain claims on the time and attention of their reader precisely by way of their seeming digressions that a paraphrase of their plots would not. They require their own distinct cognitive processes: demanding that a reader learn to interpret complex situations or multiple intertwined plots and decipher what is important, what is telling. They also create opportunities for a reader to arrive at conclusions that are later questioned or contested by new revelations. Ideas are not merely presented, in other words, but *represented* – structured to bring about “certain activities and transactions” between a reader and a text that are themselves integral to the way this text structures meaning (Nussbaum: 5).

In the interests of making the Bible more attractive to modern readers, the editors of *The Dartmouth Bible* used strategies of literary redaction to significantly abbreviate the canon. From diverse and sometimes tedious materials, they lifted out the substance of a more unified, engaging book that they hoped might retain the attention of a broader readership. After all, “everybody skips,” as Maugham said. The Bible that people actually read is often, in Beazell's words, a set of selections “very narrowly gleaned” from the whole. By creating a Bible comprised only of the canon's better materials, Chamberlain and Feldman offered readers an expertly curated Bible that did the skipping for them, clearing the text of its myriad stumbling blocks and making its many crooked paths straight.

But, if Nussbaum is right, by removing the Bible's difficult or obscure texts – those that stand in conflict with one another or those that risk inciting dangerous or divisive interpretations – *The Dartmouth Bible* reduces not only the contents of the Christian Bible, but also the interpretive tasks and interpretive questions this canon poses to its reader. Here there is no tension between law and grace because there is hardly any law to speak of. Here you will find no discrepancies between the witnesses to the miracles of Jesus, no prophecies that remain yet unfulfilled. Instead, this text provides its reader with a single, sweeping narrative that minimizes the intrusion of minor characters, distracting side-plots, or conflicting narrative perspectives. It relegates all interpretive complications to the endnotes and binds the harmonious material it retains into a seamless whole.

There is no consideration here or in other comparable short Bibles about whether there might be some value to the interpretive demands *The Dartmouth Bible* truncates – whether there is at last any narrative significance, any moral or spiritual instruction in those difficulties that abridgements are so eager to expel. The working assumption is that the text is “better” without these difficulties: better as a literary work, and better as a source of moral teaching. Chamberlain and Feldman believed that a more unified canon, organized around what they considered to be the Bible's central message (“goodwill and brotherhood”) would “contribute to social unity” (Chamberlain and Feldman: xvi).

Coherence and its Costs

An editorial strategy not unlike that employed by the editors of *The Dartmouth Bible* was used to redact the text of certain Bibles given to enslaved persons in the early nineteenth century. These redactions purged the King James Version of any references to freedom or liberation in order to preserve a different kind of peace. In one such Bible, which was produced for the use of literate slaves in the British West Indies, the Book of Exodus begins not in Egypt but in the wilderness, with the giving of the law at Mount Sinai (Slave Bible). And the law is all that remains of a book titled for its legendary exodus. There is no slavery in this book, no overthrowing of slave-masters, no flight from the hands of the oppressors. Instead, the text gives only a list of binding commandments. In this Bible, the commandments are immediately followed by the text of Deuteronomy 4, which adds to these laws an “An Exhortation to Obedience.”

In their redactions of the New Testament, the editors retain texts about the fruits of the spirit and righteous suffering, but remove those chapters from the epistles that outline the terms of a basic equality among the people of God or envision a world in which there will be neither “slave nor free.”⁶ The Bible given to enslaved persons in the British West Indies did not end like the Bibles of their masters with an apocalypse that shatters and vanquishes the orders of this world, but with a declaration from 1 John that the spirit of God dwells in those who “keepeth his commandments” (1 John 3:24, KJV).

⁶ This slave Bible contains three of Galatians' six chapters, for example, but carefully omits those passages that proclaim the equality of all believers before God, such as the declaration in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ there is “neither slave nor free,” or the section of Galatians 4 that proclaims that those who were once slaves will be called heirs through God.

Like *The Dartmouth Bible*, this abbreviated slave Bible removed difficulties its editors thought might obscure or confuse its reader, clearing an easier path for the untrained interpreter. By taking out all the Bible's references to liberation and social equality and preserving only its calls for obedience and submission, this slave Bible hoped to ensure a stable social order of its own. While *The Dartmouth Bible* was specifically designed, in the words of its editors "to enable the reader at all times to remain master of the text" (Chamberlain and Feldman: xvii), the slave Bible was designed to ensure its reader would remain under the hand of her master. That the editors of each text went to such great lengths to forge a textual coherence that would enable such mastery tells us something, perhaps, about what those textual difficulties prevent. "The achievement of coherence is itself ambiguous," Iris Murdoch reminds us; "coherence is not necessarily good, and one must question its cost" (147).

The question of the proper form in which to receive the word of God is not a new question, but it appears in new ways with new generations. In the age of print, it appeared first as a question about what could be added to this text – what maps, family trees, or expository commentary would add to the Bible's significance and value. Then, as we have seen above, it appeared as a question about what could be removed in order to make the text less offensive and less internally conflicted: more readable within the social and literary conventions of our time. Both questions, of course – the question of what we might add and of what we might remove – are variants of the same question: how do we entice and bind the modern reader to this ancient text when there are now so many texts, and so many aesthetic and perhaps even ethical reasons to leave this old text behind? "The Bible is in a rut," the translator Sarah Ruden recently quipped, in words not far from Beazell's 1913 editorial, "it seems to need professional help" (xvi).

Like so many literary editors and translators before her, including the editors of *The Dartmouth Bible*, Ruden frames the issue of modern biblical literacy as a symptom of the Bible's bad design. The text suffers from bad binding, bad marginalia, bad genealogies, and bad translation. If only those with superior aesthetic sensibilities or editorial expertise could intervene and design a better, more attractive text, one with literary language and a sophisticated typeface and without so many internal conflicts, then we could return to our old ways of reading, and the Bible would be restored to its former glory.

This story – the story told by Ruden and rehearsed at the beginning of so many self-identified literary versions of the Bible – is a story that has been told for some time. This story has sold many books and many literary renderings of the Bible, and yet, as of the 2017 publication of Ruden's book on the need for aesthetic beauty in biblical translation, it appears the problem as well as the solution are somehow still the same. And so the Bible's literary reformers continue their labors, hoping that one day their reforms might take – that there might be another prophet like Moses after all who could re-write and re-render the words of God so that the people will hear and understand and be bound to this text and this God once more.

Of course, the biblical story of Moses carries within it a subtle polemic against this particular way of thinking about the beauty or coherence of the words of God. In the Hebrew Bible, the narrative that stands as a synecdoche for the advent of divine revelation is the story of Moses receiving the law on the top of Mount Sinai in the form of two stone tablets. The

book of Exodus reports that “the tablets were the work of God, the writing was the writing of God” (32:16). But, if you remember how the story goes, this original writing is soon lost – or rather, shattered – as Moses descends the mountain to find the Israelites worshipping a golden calf and proceeds to destroy the tablets he received.

When Moses returns to Sinai, God tells him to chisel out two tablets like the first ones, explaining, “I will write on them the words which were on the first tablets, which you broke” (Exodus 34:1). Only God does not write down the words once he has repeated them – Moses does.⁷ This time, God tells Moses to “write down these words,” and the text reports that Moses did (Exodus 34:27-28). And this is the first reprinting of the Bible – words inscribed not by God, but remembered, ordered, and set down by Moses. And this reprinting is all that remained. Reprinted words, interpreted, are the beginning of the written tradition, the beginning of a body of work that Jews and Christians call scripture (see further, Sommer).

There is a Jewish interpretive tradition that says that Moses broke the first tablets not because he was angry at the Israelites for their idolatry, or because he was protecting them from being bound to condemnation by these words, but because he was afraid these tablets might fall to the same fate as the calf. That is, by breaking the tablets Moses was protecting the words that God had written on these tablets from becoming an object of worship.

In their impatience and confusion, the Israelites melted down many things and made from these diverse materials one solid, molten object – recognizably beautiful in the aesthetic conventions of their time and worthy of their communal adoration. Moses sees this and shatters the tablets inscribed by God. He later ascends the mountain again to reprint these words with his own human hands. Revelation begins, on this reading, with the destruction of an original and the retention of reprint – a copy intended to be received and held in the right way. As the story goes, this reprinted revelation was carried in the ark alongside the shards of those first broken tablets: a memory, if only poetically, of the fragile human matrix into which the words of God were spoken, the fragile world in which these words are always read, interpreted, broken open, rewritten (see Talmud Bava Batra 14b).

Taken in this way, this is not a parable about the dangers of reprinting writ large – the danger of getting ever farther away from some original seed of revelation. In this story, the words of revelation were reprinted from the very beginning, and in that way these rewritten words serve as a kind of blessing on all the tedious, painstaking work of translation and reproduction that follow them. But it is, perhaps, a parable about the dangers of this text becoming a better, more conventionally beautiful object, and the ways in which certain human aspects of the text graciously prevent it from cohering together into a single unified substance, prevent it from becoming molten.

Conclusion

A few months after the publication of *The Dartmouth Bible*, one of its editors – Roy Chamberlain – published an editorial in *The Chicago Tribune* with the headline: “Bible Holds Same Truth for All Men.” Chamberlain begins this essay with a quotation from Lincoln’s

⁷ This is true, at least, in Exodus’s version of these events. When the story is retold in Deuteronomy, God writes on the second set of tablets “the same words as before” (Deuteronomy 10:4).

second inaugural address, noting the president's observation that the two sides of his divided nation "both read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invoke His aid against the other." Chamberlain cites Lincoln's famous words, pointing out that the scars of this century-old conflict yet to fully heal, and both the nation and the church remain divided as ever – particularly in matters of biblical interpretation. Chamberlain's remedy for these ongoing battles over the Bible's meaning is pointed, simple, and functions like an advertisement for his newly simplified Bible:

Now that the entire Judeo-Christian heritage, the very heart of Western civilization, is under attack as never before, is it not time to rise above the battle of competing interpretations, so often narrow and outworn, which tend to divide people into camps, and to return instead with open mind and heart to "the same Bible" which, after all, is likely to outlive all its interpreters? (1950b: H5).

What is odd about Chamberlain's exhortation to the readers of the *Tribune* is that it seems to stand in direct opposition to the conceit of Lincoln's address. Lincoln's point here was that the citizens of his divided nation *did* read "the same Bible," and yet still arrived at diametrically opposed interpretations of this text they held in common – particularly on the issue of slavery. By encouraging Americans to set aside their differences and return to what he calls the "same Bible," it is as if Chamberlain imagines the existence of a canonical text that lies before or beneath interpretation: a Bible that would produce a stable consensus among its readers, binding the wounds left by intractable social divisions and yielding the kind of lasting peace that Lincoln once hoped for. Perhaps this is what Chamberlain himself hoped for when he produced a Bible sprung free of such internal tensions and divisions. By forging a sameness from the diverse materials of the canon, erasing difference and eliminating conflict, perhaps the Bible really could seem the same to all of its readers and bring, at last, a unity to all things.

Had Chamberlain carefully read Lincoln's address through to the end, he might have noticed a warning against his own rush toward unity. Lincoln knew well the dangers alluded to by the prophet Jeremiah of treating the wounds of a people lightly, of those who say "peace! peace!" when there is no peace (Jeremiah 6:14), of those who look, in Lincoln's words, for "an easier triumph." Lincoln wondered in his inaugural address if perhaps the war would have to last until "all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword." Lincoln sought not only a "lasting peace" for his people, but a "just" one. His desire was not simply for the deep sins and wounds of his nation to "speedily pass away," but that his nation would be slowly be remade by attending to those wounds. The words of the prophets reminded Lincoln that there are some things that cannot be easily or cheaply resolved under some semblance of unity. True understanding might only come by way of difficulty – by way of wrestling with inscrutable texts and intractable social evils that make heavy, enduring demands.

When B. F. Beazell campaigned for a new format for the Bible, he asked that "the vital, inspiring messages of the old Book" be "put in easy reach and comprehension" for the modern reader (693). While the short Bibles that followed certainly eased the burdens and interpretive difficulties that the old Book placed on its interpreters, making it a more aesthetically and

morally coherent text, coherence is not necessarily an improvement on the original. We must take up for ourselves the bits and pieces of the text that these short Bibles have discarded – the violence, the internal conflicts, the texts that stretch our capacity to make any sense of them at all – and consider well the costs of making this old book readable.

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