

A Bird's Eye View of the Bible

SECOND EDITION

Doug Rowston

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A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE BIBLE Second Edition

Published by
Grace & Peace Books
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First published 2014 by MediaCom Education Inc
This edition published in 2022

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ISBN 978-0-6453288-3-7

Subjects: Bible – Reading.
Bible – Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Title.

Dewey Number: 220.61



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

*The second edition of this book
is dedicated to my grandchildren*

Samuel

Cody and Jesse

Sophie

Tyler

Billy

*with whom I have enjoyed
reading stories from the Bible.*

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The front cover photograph was taken early on a Sunday morning by the author through the window behind the altar of a Franciscan church on the Mount of Olives. The church has a dome in the shape of a tear and is called Dominus Fleuit, which is Latin for “The Lord wept.” It commemorates the occasion on which Jesus wept over the city in Luke 19:41.

The photograph on page 15 was taken by the author in the Samaritan synagogue in Nablus. The young man was proudly showing visitors the revered copy of the Samaritan Pentateuch. Samaritans treasure this scroll as an ancient and authentic version of the first five books of the Bible.

The photograph on page 115 was taken by the author in the Anglican Church of St Augustine at Victor Harbor. The stained glass window portrays Christ the King. The angelic message sums up the New Testament: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever.” (Revelation 11:15)

Review by Rev Dr Stephen Spence

It seems to me that there are more Christians who own multiple copies of the Bible than those who have actually read it! Often, this is not from a lack of trying. Many have eagerly committed themselves to the task of reading through the Bible but have lost their enthusiasm somewhere before the end of Leviticus. What these Christians need is a guide who can lead them through the Bible, showing how the various parts fit together into a single whole. Dr Doug Rowston provides just such a guide. His book *A Bird's Eye View of the Bible* provides a user-friendly approach to reading through the Bible in a way that gets the reader all the way to the end with the satisfaction of not just completing a task but of now seeing the Bible as a single story of God and his relationship with his creation.

A Bird's Eye View of the Bible is a reading guide rather than a commentary or an academic introduction to the Bible. It is aimed at the traveller who has never completed a journey through the whole Bible. Young people who want to know what the Bible is about will certainly benefit by using *A Bird's Eye View of the Bible*, but so too will adults whose understanding of the Bible comes largely from preachers rather than from reading it for themselves. *A Bird's Eye View of the Bible* works by encouraging the reader to actually read the Bible in twenty-five sections without ever letting them get bogged down in the details. Rowston is the ideal kind of guide for the inexperienced Bible reader. He is able to point out the must-see parts, providing enough detail to keep the reader engaged, and showing how each section's sights are connected to each other.

What makes *A Bird's Eye View of the Bible* a particularly useful resource for individuals and small group study is that Rowston does not let the reader fall into the trap of reading the Bible just for the sake of reading it. Through his comments, questions for reflection, and a prayer to conclude each chapter, Rowston continually reminds us that reading the Bible is not an end in itself. We read in order that we might 'believe in Jesus and that, through faith in him, we may have life.'

Introduction to the Second Edition

The first edition of *A Bird's Eye View of the Bible* has had a rightful place in introducing and even reintroducing people to the Bible. Different people have read it individually and various groups have worked through it. As it has been used alongside the Bible, a word of advice has proved helpful. You can read it from beginning to end if you wish. In so doing you will read selections from the Bible both chronologically and topically. Or you can read the parts of the Bible story that are more interesting to you. In doing this you will read some parts in the Old Testament, and other parts in the New Testament. Afterwards you can fill in the gaps of your knowledge of the Bible story by reading the rest.

The second edition of *A Bird's Eye View of the Bible* makes a trio of major changes. One change is the addition of the section about the Storytellers of Israel. Ruth, Esther and Jonah are no longer left out of the Bible's narrative. Readers are now introduced to most types of literature in the Bible. Another change is the incorporation of the appendix of the original into the body of the book. Readers have the choice of extended passages or short selections to be consulted within the content of this guidebook. The last change is the addition of the afterword about believing in God and the Bible. The afterword informs readers about the overall picture, the detailed picture and the personal picture of reading the Bible.

The first and second editions of this book have been written out of my experience as a theological lecturer, a religious education teacher, a local church pastor and now an adjunct lecturer. Accordingly, I am indebted to fellow seekers after mature faith at a variety of institutions. I thank Tony Nancarrow for publishing the original edition of this book. My wife Rosalie has encouraged me to utilise the book in creative ways. I thank my brother Laurie for his conscientious checking of this edition. I am also grateful to Alan McKee for his helpful editorial advice. My desire is that people will 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest' the Bible story to experience the faith, hope and love of God who is for us, with us, and in us.

Doug Rowston

Foreword: Reading the Bible

During my time as a secondary teacher, I was often asked by students in my Religious Education classes if I had read the entire Bible. I usually replied that I read the Bible in a particular order every two or three years and that I read special books of the Bible closely for my personal enrichment at different times. The reason for reading the Bible in these ways is that, as a thirteen year old in a suburban church in Melbourne, I committed myself to follow Jesus Christ. More than sixty years later I'm still seeking to be a genuine Christian and I'm still finding direction and strength for life in the Bible through the Spirit of Jesus.

I think that sometimes we neglect the Bible to our peril, in our private reading and in our public worship. If I am pushed for time to read the Bible myself, I listen to recordings of the Bible in a modern translation. If I am asked to lead in worship, I try to make sure that sufficient time is given for the reading of the Bible.

The Bible has a simple plot in the midst of its complexity. It tells us that God creates and sustains the world, that the world loses its way and that God seeks to restore the world to its intended glory. The Bible reminds us that the Christian era begins with the paradox of God the creator within his own creation, that it continues with the crucified and risen Lord meeting us in our daily lives and that it will conclude with the second coming of Jesus.

A Bird's Eye View of the Bible follows my suggested order for reading the heart and soul of the Bible. I invite you to read the Bible alongside this book. We start with the stories of the Old Testament. Our journey goes from the Beginnings through the Ancestors, the Refugees, the Invaders, the Kings, the Northerners, the Southerners, the Exiles, the Returnees, the Worshipers, the Sages and the Storytellers, to the Rebels.

Then we continue with the stories of the New Testament. We look at Jesus the Jew who is called Messiah, Lion, Human, Bearer and Eagle; the Mission of his followers; the life and letters of Paul who is Preacher, Pastor and Prisoner. We conclude with the organisation of

the followers of Jesus (Identity) and the threats to them from within (Heresy) and from without (Persecution).

You may find the following suggestions helpful for reading the (longer) passages in the Bible or the (shorter) selections from the Bible at the beginning of each chapter of *A Bird's Eye View of the Bible*.

Set aside a regular time each day to read a passage or a selection. Younger readers may find useful the 'idea for idea' type of translations of *Good News Bible: Today's English Version* or *Bible for Today: Contemporary English Version*. Older readers may prefer the 'word for word' type of translations of *New Revised Standard Version* or *New International Version*. Or, if you are so inclined, you may enjoy the high literary style of *The Revised English Bible*. In any case, they are all good modern English translations of the Old and New Testaments. I should also mention the 'clear, brisk English' of Tom Wright's *The New Testament for Everyone*. It 'has a lovely feel to it.'

As you read a passage or a selection, answer four questions:

What does it say?

Put it in your own words.

What does it say elsewhere?

Look at a few other Bible references.

What does it say that I don't understand?

Use maps and word lists.

What does it say to me? Highlight significant verses.

In conclusion, express your thoughts in a short personal prayer.

Thomas Cranmer captured the purpose and meaning of reading the Bible in his memorable prayer:

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: help us so to hear them, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that, through patience and the comfort of your holy word, we may embrace and for ever hold fast the hope of everlasting life which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

It will be obvious that I read the Bible with great interest and that I listen to the Bible expounded with great pleasure. However, the real meaning of the Bible eludes me unless I meet Jesus, whom the Old Testament promises and the New Testament provides. The Bible is a means to an end. There is a difference between looking at the window of the Bible and looking through the window of the Bible to the world beyond. The Bible has been written in order that we may believe in Jesus and that, through faith in him, we may have life. It is my prayer that my readers will find such faith and life as they read the Bible.