

This book is for you if...

- you are looking for an understandable way into the Bible;
- you want a clear structure arranged into six monthly topics;
- you want to choose for yourself what to read and when to read;
- you want questions to focus your responses to the readings;
- you would like to create your own Bible commentary in the book or online;
- you are curious about what other cultures of the time were saying;
- you like maps and illustrations and timelines;
- you have questions like: What does 'Word of God' mean? and What are the best Bible films?
- you want to think about the Bible in a group;
- you want to end up seriously informed.

What they say about Rev Andy's books

Bible in Brief

"There has never been a sustained and powerful renewal of Christian faith without a renewed engagement with the Bible. Andy Roland provides a practical introduction to a lifetime relationship with the word of God."

Rt Revd Richard Chartres, former Bishop of London

"This book does what few others do - it offers a very helpful guide for those looking for a brief overview of the Bible and its story."

Rt Revd Graham Tomlin, Bishop of Kensington

"I wish I had read this book fifty years ago. Andy Roland paints with a broad brush, and shows how the different parts of the Bible relate to each other. He tackles difficult subjects with both brevity and clarity. Key passages in Scripture are identified, and helpful questions asked about each to aid reflection. An excellent brief account of the Bible story and its importance today."

Dr James Behrens, barrister

Discovering Psalms as Prayer

"In 'Discovering Psalms as Prayer' Andy Roland weaves together the wisdom of a faithful, personal pilgrimage with practical guidance for reading the psalms. It will be a gift to those wanting to make that discovery for themselves. We are in his debt."

from foreword by Revd David Runcorn,
author of Spirituality Workbook, Choice,
Desire and the Will of God etc.

BIBLE IN BRIEF

An easy way to enjoy
the greatest book
ever written

Rev Andy Roland



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Table of Contents

Introduction	9
How to use this book	13
Using the book with a group	14
The Bible - a bird's eye view	19
Month 1 CREATION TO COMMANDMENTS	24
Week 1 Beginnings	26
Week 2 Abraham, Isaac, Jacob	30
Week 3 Joseph & the move to Egypt	34
Week 4 The Desert Experience	38
The Other Side: Stories from Babylon	42
Creation and Flood	44
Month 2 HISTORY OF ISRAEL & JUDAH	46
Week 1 Prophetic leaders & the first king	48
Week 2 David and Solomon	52
Week 3 Divided Kingdoms	56
Week 4 Exile & Restoration	60
The Other Side: Rival Empires	64
Month 3 THE PROPHETS	68
Week 1 The Fall of Israel	72
Week 2 The Fall of Judah	76
Week 3 Speaking from Babylon	80
Week 4 Hope and Disappointment	84
The Other Side: Prayers of the Peoples	88

Month 4	LAW, PSALMS & WISDOM	92
	Week 1 The Law	94
	Week 2 Devotional Psalms	98
	Week 3 Psalms and Sayings	100
	Week 4 Suffering and futility	104
	The In between	108
Month 5	JESUS	118
	Week 1 Starting up and teaching	120
	Week 2 The mission intensifies	126
	Week 3 The final challenge	130
	Week 4 John's Gospel	134
	The Other Side: Jewish Schools of Thought	138
Month 6	APOSTLES & THEIR LETTERS	146
	Week 1 Acts of the Apostles	150
	Week 2 Paul's letter to new Christians	154
	Week 3 Paul's letter to Christians in Rome	158
	Week 4 Other letters	162
	The Other Side: Roman Reactions	168
	BONUS FEATURES	
	The World's Greatest Book?	172
	Chapter and Verse	175
	Which Bible?	176
	Scientists on the Bible	179
	Film recommendations	180
	Illustrations	185
	What has been missed out?	187
	Andy Roland - a brief biography	188

Introduction

When I was at university, I made a new commitment of my life to God. For me that involved a new wish to study the Bible.

A particular help to me then was a small green paperback, published by the Bible Reading Fellowship in 1957, entitled "Seeing the Bible Whole" by Stephen Neill. It gave an overview of the Bible in four months: two months for the Old Testament and two for the New. Each passage had a page of commentary. It was a great way to get to grips with the whole Bible.

Sadly it is now out of print. As far as I know, nothing has replaced it as a way of giving an overview of the Bible in the Bible's own words.

This booklet is offered as an attempt to fill the gap. It is offered primarily to two kinds of readers:

- those who want to read the Bible for the first time but don't know where to start. Many start at Genesis 1 and get bogged down in Exodus with the ten plagues of Egypt and the exhaustive description of the Tabernacle or Tent of Meeting with its "blue, purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen". The aim of this book is to give an overview of the Bible, including most of the famous stories, showing where they fit in to the whole.
- The book is also for Christians who would like to get to know the Bible better, or who know part of the Bible quite well, usually the gospels, but would like a way into the less familiar parts like the Old Testament prophets.

Each month has its own overarching theme, and each week can be used as self-contained set of readings, for example, the reigns of David and Solomon, (Month 2, week 2).

You absolutely do not need to start from the beginning and go on to the end, though I hope it will make sense if you do so. Start at something that grabs your attention or curiosity and you can then read backwards or forwards from that point. It is probably helpful to take a complete week at a time.

If you're not sure how the numbers showing chapters and verses work, this is explained in the Bonus Features section "Chapter and Verse" on page 175.

The Other Side

You will also see that at the end of each month's readings there is a section called "The Other Side". These are writings from the surrounding cultures of the time. It can really help our understanding of the Bible if we can place the Jewish and Christian scriptures in the wider overall context.

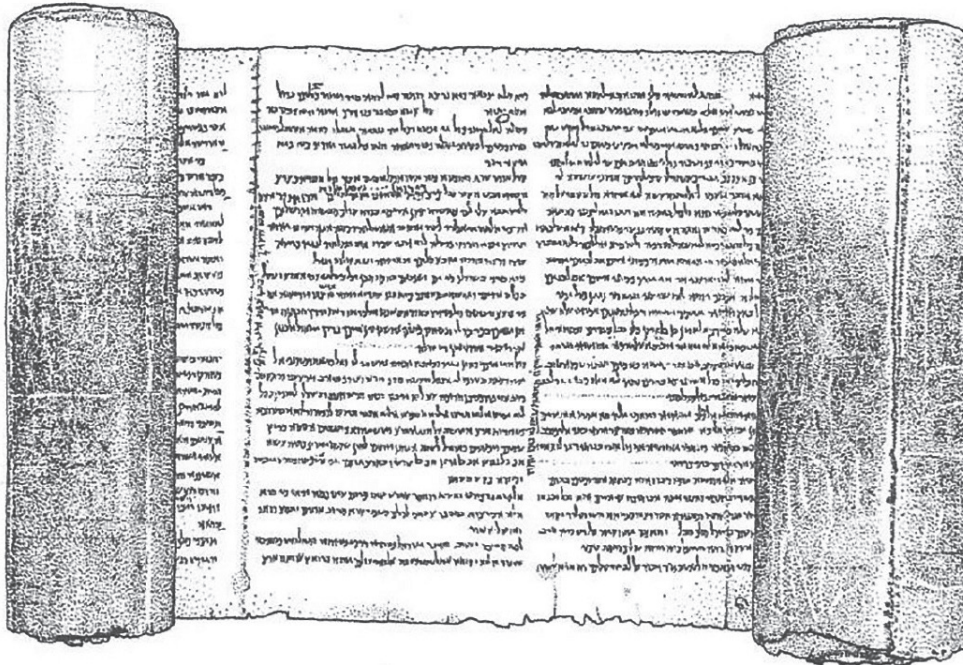
- After Genesis and Exodus there are extracts from the the Babylonian stories of the Creation and the Flood.
- After the history section there are quotations from the Assyrian and Babylonian annals
- After the section on the prophets come examples of prayers from the nations surrounding Israel.

The prophets also spoke against the worship of Baal. Until an ancient temple was excavated in Ras Shamra in northern Syria around 1930 nothing was known about it. Now we have a long poem about the death and resurrection of Baal as a fertility

god, from which I quote a few stanzas, and other prayers from the nations surrounding Israel.

- There is a gap of about 400 years between the end of the Old Testament as most people know it and the New Testament. It included the Maccabean Revolt of 167 BC in which Israel amazingly defeated the mighty Seleucid empire and became a self-governing state for over 100 years. A contemporary account is given in the fourth section, together with other passages from the same time.
- In the New Testament, a lot is said criticising the Pharisees. It is instructive to read some of the things the Pharisees actually said; as well as contemporary accounts of other Jewish parties. These make it clear how scandalous Jesus must have seemed in the eyes of many of his contemporaries.
- Finally, after the letters from the Early Church we have examples of what the normal Romans really thought of this new sect - not good.

The main virtue, I believe, we need in approaching the Bible – or indeed religious scriptures and faith in general – is curiosity. Don't be afraid to explore.



Isaiah scroll from the Dead Sea Scrolls

How to use this book

To get the most out of this book, you can use the 4 Rs:

READ

RESPOND

REFLECT

RECORD

Read

- You can read through the passage once, then look back at any particular verses that interest you;
- or you can read it through quickly once and slowly a second time;
- or you can read it slowly, pausing at any verse that speaks to you;
- or just read it anyway you like!
- Read any explanatory notes that are provided.

How you read any particular passage depends on the type of story it is and how you relate to it. There is no “one size fits all”.

Respond

- Note down what bits of the passage impress you, or inspire you, or puzzle you, or infuriate you.
- Don't worry about parts of the passage which leave you bewildered.
- Concentrate on the bits that make sense to you and leave the rest for later – maybe much much later!

Reflect

- Reflect on the question provided in the text.

Record

- Write down your response to the question. Over time you will build up a record of what you have discovered about the Bible and life.

MONTH 1

CREATION TO COMMANDMENTS

(Genesis & Exodus)

This month there are three sets of beginnings:

- The world;
- Abraham's faith and family;
- The Hebrew people and religion.

Genesis 1-11 tells stories about the beginning of the world, and the beginning of human society. We do not know when it was written, but it reflects some very early oral tradition.

Some people get hung up on whether modern science contradicts what the Bible says about creation. This betrays a fundamental misunderstanding about the purpose of the biblical accounts. First, there are two accounts, not one. Genesis 1 reflects on the gradual development of the world as seen from a fertile country with access to the sea. Genesis 2 imagines creation as starting out in a desert land.

Second, the form of Genesis 1 is a poem, not a scientific account. It tells of God creating three stage sets (light and darkness, water and air, land and plants), followed by three groups of actors (sun, moon and stars, birds and fishes, animals and humans). The key concept is that, instead of an eternal conflict between the gods of order and chaos, as in other mythologies, the world which God creates is ordered and "very good".

Month 1: Creation and Commandments

Similarly, whether or not Genesis 3 is an historical event, it certainly is a contemporary one. Archbishop Michael Ramsey was once asked if he believed in original sin. He replied, "Believe in it? I've seen it!"

Whatever the details of Noah's flood, the story may well reflect a major flood or floods in what is modern Iraq about 2900 BC.

In week 2 we step onto the stage of history with the call of Abraham, his direct relationship with God mirroring that of Arab nomads today. We meet his son Isaac, grandson Jacob and great-grandson Joseph.

In week 3 we hear how Joseph was instrumental in bringing his nomadic kinsfolk to settle in north east Egypt for several hundred years, probably while foreigners ruled Egypt. When a native-born Egyptian seized power, the Hebrews became state slaves. A Hebrew, brought up as an Egyptian and called Moses, (an Egyptian name) was commissioned by God to liberate his people.

In week 4 we hear of the escape from Egypt and the nation-building experience of surviving in the desert. The Ten Commandments form the basis of a law-based society.



**MONTH 1 WEEK 1
BEGINNINGS**

These are stories of primaeval humanity, before history proper. They explore questions like: What is the world like? Why can't people live peaceably? What is the meaning of disasters?

Day 1 Genesis 1 + 2.1-3 The beginning of the world
Is the universe 'good'?
"Made in God's image" - what does this mean?

Day 2 Genesis 2.4-end Beginnings - another account
What do men and women need for life to be good?

Day 3 Genesis 3 Our fall from grace
What attitudes do we have that spoil life?

Day 4 Genesis 4 The first murder
What are the causes and consequences of violence?

Day 5 Genesis 6.9 - 7.end The story of the flood
Note: there were several stories of the flood in the ancient Middle East, reflecting some actual event.
How important is it that a remnant survive a catastrophe?

STORIES FROM BABYLON
THE GILGAMESH EPIC OF THE FLOOD

The Gilgamesh Epic was composed around 2000 – 1800 BC. Gilgamesh is desperate to find if there was a way for humans to avoid death. In the end he meets the only person to have received eternal life – Uta-pishti – who made a gigantic ark and came safely through the great flood.

The god Ea sent a message to Uta-pishti:

“Destroy your house and build a vessel... despising possessions, preserve what has life. Thus load in your vessel the seed of all creatures.”

Uta-pishti obeyed and built a vast wooden cube, sealed with pitch, 120 cubits on each side, with six decks.

All that I had I now loaded aboard her... silver... gold... yea, of the species of all living creatures... all my family, kindred, beasts, wild and domestic, and all of the craftsmen I made enter the vessel.

Swift blew the storm... it passed over the land like a battle... Even the gods were afeared at the deluge, took to flight, and went up to the heaven of Anu and cowered like dogs.

For six days and nights the wind blew, and the flood and the storm swept the land. But the seventh day arriving did the rainstorm subside. I opened a vent ... and I looked at the sea, the tideway lay flat as a rooftop. The whole of mankind had returned unto clay.