

The Bible

The Bible, what a book. It took over a thousand years to write, and it weighs in at over a thousand pages, so you're not likely to get through it in a weekend. It's actually many books that have all been squashed together. Oh, and it happens to be the world's' bestselling book, ever.

And if you're a Christian, it isn't just a book, it's the book. Scripture. The Word of God.

Which is a tricky thing to understand. It's not that Christians think that it was sent directly by special courier. It was certainly written by humans, but "all scripture is God-breathed".

So, in the writing of the Bible, God made himself known to humankind - which is called Revelation. The question is, how exactly? Was it General Revelation, in which he divinely inspired the authors, but allowed them to write in their own style?

Or Special Revelation - dictating the passages into the authors' minds, which means they are God's own words? It's a question that's been hotly debated for the last two thousand years.

And it's not just how the words arrived on the page that gets argued over. Just as hairy is the question of how they should be understood. There are a few schools of thought.

If you're a literalist, or fundamental Christian, it's straightforward. The Bible was written by God, and that's that. So if Genesis says that the Earth was created in six days, it was. And when it says that God created the first man from the dust of the ground, and then sculpted one of his ribs to create the first woman, well that's the way it went down.

For conservative Christians, the authors of the Bible were all influenced by God, but they were writing using the ideas, and the metaphors, of their time. Conservatives don't see a conflict between Bible teaching and modern science, they believe that the Bible is relating to a deeper truth. For example, they think that even if life is a result of evolution, the universe and its laws are still God's creation, and humanity still holds a unique place in it.

For the symbolists, the Bible isn't supposed to be understood as a history of actual events. It doesn't matter whether or not you believe that Jesus had medical superpowers when he cured people with leprosy, because the meaning is a spiritual one, that Jesus showed there was no limit to love and compassion.

And those who interpret the Bible as myth, focus on the way that Bible stories are a product of their time, and so show the way the world was understood in a pre-scientific age. In this view, Bible stories were never meant to be taken literally, but they are still hugely powerful myths that give us great insight into how the human mind works.

So, there might not be much agreement about what the Bible means, but it's certainly a book that will keep everyone talking.