

Different ways of understanding the Bible

All Christians believe that the Bible is the word of God, and that it is a source of authority for their beliefs, decisions and behaviour. There isn't one single way to understand the Bible – different Christians read it and think about it in different ways. Here are some examples:

I understand the Bible literally – I think that it is an accurate, factual record of what happened.

The Bible is the story of how God communicated with humans, which helps us to know how to live our lives. But it is also a record of how people on earth have expressed their experiences of God in different ways.

The Bible is a sacred text and has authority, but I don't believe that everything in it is literally true. For example, in places there are symbolic stories and poetry. I think that we can hear God through these, and that we don't need to believe they are factual accounts.

The Bible is a way of helping us to remember important events.

Different parts of the Bible need to be understood in different ways – for example, I might read Genesis as a symbolic account of creation, the book of Job as if it is a novel, and the gospels as historical accounts of the life of Jesus.

The Bible was written by humans, and in the different books you can see how their culture influenced how and what they wrote. I think that the Bible is God's message to us, but that we need to 'translate' it into modern situations as well as into modern languages.

While this appears to be very diverse, there are some common threads through all of these Christian interpretations of the Bible. One is that all Christians believe that the Bible is inspired by God. Many believe that God inspires them to understand the Bible better, in a similar way to the belief that he inspired the writers of the different books in what they wrote.

Can you see any other similarities between these statements?

Thinking back across all of the work you have done on this topic, summarise the different sources of authority for Christians. Do you think there is one (or some) which is more useful to them than the others? Try to use at least three examples in your answer.

