Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Week 1 – Introduction & Genesis Part 1

Better Bible Reading means:

1. Asking Better Questions.

a. The world **BEHIND** the text (or the Historical-critical world): what are the historical, social, political, and religious realities that produced the text? Who wrote this? When, where, and for whom? What social conflict, power struggle, or crisis prompted it? What sources or traditions lie beneath it? This methodology includes Source criticism, Redaction criticism, Archaeology, Ancient Near East *comparanda* (A.N.E.). Examples of the world BEHIND the text would be: how the Gospels reflect a Post-70 CE trauma after the destruction of the Temple, the tensions between Jesus-followers and synagogue communities, and how Paul's letters reflect "Gentile" inclusion debates, Apocalyptic expectations and Greco-Roman patronage systems (or Hellenized Judaism). Scholars insist that texts are historically conditioned, not timeless dictation.

b. The word **OF** the text (or the Literary/Narrative world): the internal logic or how the text relates to other passages of Scripture, and at times, how the text intersects with passages from the same book. How is the text at work as a greater "story" or argument? For example, Matthew presents Jesus being born in Bethlehem to explicitly connect this to Micah 5:2. This is called fulfillment citation or a rhetorical device within the narrative at work to fulfill Scripture and mold Jesus to better fit the Davidic Messiah profile. Scholars insist meaning is not only in origins, but also in the text's internal world.

c. The world **IN FRONT** of the text (or the reception community): how does this text address modern ethical issues? Whose voices are centered or marginalized by traditional readings? How does this text function in communities today? How meaning is received, negotiated, resisted, or reimagined. Other key methods would include Feminist / Womanist / Postcolonial criticism, Liberation and Queer theology. Examples might be how the Exodus narrative was read by enslaved people as a liberation text. Or, how Romans read through Feminist / Womanist / Postcolonial lenses might expose power dynamics. Scholars insist texts do not speak in a vacuum; readers participate in meaning-making.

Ignoring any one of these approaches leads to distortion! Ignoring the **world behind** → naïve literalism. Ignoring the **world of** → proof-texting. Ignoring the **world in front** → moral irrelevance.

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2. Awareness of Biblical Counter-testimony or the idea that the Bible contains tensions and speaks against itself with multiple, sometimes opposing voices about God, justice, suffering, and salvation—and that these tensions are not mistakes to be erased or "flattened" to an overarching narrative, but intentional and theologically meaningful. For example, God is just and rewards righteousness (e.g., Proverbs: righteous → blessed, wicked → punished). The counter-testimony would resist this "flattening" of the sacred text (e.g., Ecclesiastes/Job presents righteous suffering). Other examples of Biblical Counter-testimony might include Conquest narratives vs Prophetic critique (e.g., Joshua: God commands genocide and taking of land / Hosea & Micah desire mercy). Biblical Counter-testimony is not a flaw, it is a feature that preserves honest faith allowing the Bible to be an ongoing, generative dialogue, rather than an authoritarian decree. Awareness of biblical counter-testimony serves as ethical responsibility and antidote for apologetics like "the Bible says" and "the Bible is clear," and gives space for intelligent nuance rather than uncritical certainty.

3. The "J.E.D.P." – proposes that the Torah, or written books (Pentateuch – Genesis, *Bereshit* – creation / Exodus, *Shemot* – liberation from Egypt, covenant / Leviticus, *Vayikra* – worship, holiness laws / Numbers, *Bamidbar* – wilderness journey / Deuteronomy, *Devarim* – Moses' final teachings) along with the Oral rabbinic teachings (Mishnah and Talmud), is not the work of a single author (e.g., Moses), but is a weaving together of four major source traditions (authors), edited over centuries. Each letter names a distinct source, identified by language, theology, style, and concerns: **J**-Yahwist, **E**-Elohist, **D**-Deuteronomist, and **P**-Priestly.

4. Marcus Borg's and Walter Brueggemann's Pre-Critical Naïveté → Critical Phase → Post-Critical Naïveté (or "second naïveté").

Pre-Critical Naivety – reading the Bible literally and unreflectively. Here the text is assumed to be historically accurate, internally consistent, and divinely dictated (i.e., "The Bible says it, that settles it"). This is common in childhood faith and conservative religion. This stage offers **certainty**, but at the cost of complexity and respect for the diversity of the sacred text.

Critical Phase (or Historical-Critical Scholarship) – a necessary but destabilizing recognition of counter-testimony (or contradiction) and the cultural and ideological interests of biblical authors. Many people get stuck here in skepticism or cynicism as they experience a loss of certainty. This phase can feel like faith loss, but it is actually the beginning of faith transformation.

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Post-Critical Naivety – here the Bible is not taken literally, yet seriously. The recognition of metaphor and poetry is not utilized to demean the text, but rather embraced as "truth-bearing." In essence, beyond the impositions of historical accuracy and projections of literalism, our faith becomes flexible, imaginative and humble. Here the text is honored as sacred and spiritual, without denying its complexity.

5. *Theopneustos* – has been used to argue biblical inerrancy (a doctrine that wasn't fully developed until the emergence of fundamentalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries), yet is a rare Greek word appearing only once in the Bible (e.g., 2 Timothy 3:16-17 *All scripture is **inspired** by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, **17** so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work*), which disallows comparison with other biblical examples. The key word here is *theopneustos*, translated as "God-breathed" or "inspired" by some versions of the Bible, yet prior to Origen was consistently understood by the Early Church Fathers to mean "life-giving." It was also used as "life-giving" in the fifth Sibylline Oracle, the Testament of Abraham, Vettius Valens, Pseudo-Plutarch (Placita Philosophorum) and Pseudo-Phocylides (c. 1st-5th c. CE). What's the point? If God breathed or inspired every word the Bible would be fully consistent from the beginning. Instead, what we find is a generative, ongoing process of editing and human attempts to understand the sacred text's diverse, complex and even contradictory depictions of God. The Bible's power to reveal Divine wisdom, love and connection is not at the mercy of inerrancy.

The Book of Genesis Part 1

Genesis 1–11: Cosmology and Primeval History
-Creation (Genesis 1 & 2): two distinct creation traditions
-Adam and Eve: human freedom and moral responsibility
-The Flood: divine judgment and renewal
-Tower of Babel: origin of linguistic and cultural diversity

Genesis 12–50: Ancestral Narratives
-Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob and Esau; Joseph and his brothers

2 Creation Narratives: (Genesis 1 &2-3)
-Two creation accounts are preserved side by side, reflecting different traditions.

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A. Genesis 1

-Attributed to the **Priestly Source (P)**, which means the name used for God is Elohim and is portrayed as transcendent (e.g., God creates by word – "God said let there be" - rather forming man from dust by hand) and the authors desire order and structure through separation – light from darkness, land from water (e.g., consider how this might affect insularity in Jewish communities and 2 Corinthians 6 - "Come ye out and be separate from among them…What fellowship has darkness with light?").

-Likely composed or finalized during the Babylonian Exile **(6th c. BCE)** or early post-exilic period. Written for a community without land, king or temple so the text functions as theology in crisis, not scientific description, and its aim is to bring order into a chaotic, diasporic existence.

-Gen. 1:1 does NOT say "in THE beginning." This verse lacks the qualifying word "the." In Hebrew it is *berē'šît* - translated as in "a" beginning, an "intial phase" or "when God began to create the heavens and earth."

-Gen. 1:2 God's creative activity starts amid an already-described chaotic state which means there is no explicit claim of creation *out of nothing* (or creation *ex-nihilo*). This is not a later development, it is the starting condition.

-Anachronistic account - how can vegetation exist (vv.11-12) before the Sun (vv.11-14)?

-It shares genre features with **ANE creation myths** (e.g., The Babylonian *Enuma Elish*). They both begin with a pre-creation chaos – Genesis describes a *Tohu wa-bohu* or "formless empty" and a *tehom*, abyss or "the deep." The Enuma Elisha (most commonly **c. 1300–1100 BCE**) describes *Tiamat* or goddess as "primeval waters." Creation in both accounts happens by decree and by separation (binary) where order conquers ambiguity.

-Mankind is created in the image of God – *imago dei* (vv.26-27).

-The plurality of gods (e.g., "let US make…in OUR image") indicates influence of the ANE Divine Council (Ugaritic, Mesopotamian high gods included El, Anu, Marduk, Yahweh). These beings are sometimes called "sons of god(s)"

-Adam and Eve are created together, without a subjugation intent (e.g., Gen. 1:26-28 "God created THEM…gave THEM dominion…blessed THEM").

B. Genesis 2-3

-Attributed to the **Yahwist Source (J)** which means the name used for God is Yahweh and the portrayal of God is intimate, earthy, and relational. The (J) source contrasts with (P) source. (P) promotes cosmic order and structure. (J) focuses on ethics, community, and relational intimacy with God.

-The imagery of temptation, responsibility, and consequences reflect early Israelite concerns about identity, morality, and exile from their land and God's good graces.

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-Notice the anthropomorphic depictions of God (having human attributes) - forming man from dust (Hebrew *Adamah* – ground or soil), breathing into man, planting a garden for man (2:7-8). God removes a physical rib (2:21-22) - walks and can be heard (3:8).
-We also get a physical location of the Garden (e.g., Havilah, Cush, Assyria or parts of Sudan, Egypt, Iraq and Turkey, 2:11-14).
-This creation account is dated **c. 10th–9th century BCE** – which means this account is older than the Genesis 1 narrative. Why? The Genesis 1 narrative (P) re-establishes God as sovereign over chaos where the Genesis 2-3 account (J) indicates God might have lost control from the beginning. Notice the serpent is portrayed as questioning God, free from God's control and out ofline with God's intentions (3:1-5).
-This narrative subjugates the woman as fulfilling the needs of the man - the man as being created first and the woman being created from the man. The man also names the woman (2:18-23; 3:20). It also casts the woman as weak, easily influenced and at fault for tempting Adam (3:1-7) and her desire being for her husband who will rule over her (3:16).
-The man is punished for listening to the woman (3:17) which further sets up a patriarchal power structure still in place in churches today.
-How does Adam have knowledge of "father and mother?" And, how does he speak to family dynamics before there were families (2:24)?
-The serpent does not lie to the humans. In ch. 2:17 God says "for <u>in the day</u> that you eat of it you shall die." The serpent assures them they will not die as God said and tells them rightly they will see like God, having morality, the knowledge of good and evil.
-Why would God create humans in the divine image and refuse humans knowledge? Is there a divine jealousy being painted here – God not wanting the humans to live forever (3:22).