

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Exodus: History, Hope or Myth?

Bible History moment: During the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648), reformers such as Martin Luther emphasized the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, arguing that “Scripture alone” should function as the highest authority. This stance arose in response to abuses within the church’s institutional authority, particularly the teaching power of the *Magisterium* (priests interpreted the Bible for an illiterate public), which reformers believed allowed certain doctrines and practices—such as *the sale of indulgences*—to develop without sufficient grounding in the Bible. By elevating Scripture above ecclesiastical tradition and clerical interpretation, the Reformers sought to correct these abuses and return the church’s theology to the normative authority of the biblical text.

If Scripture alone is our authority, does this leave authority in the hands of individual interpreters? Who gets to decide what is and is not literal? **The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978)** affirms that Scripture is without error in all that it affirms. In contrast, **Origen**, (3rd-century Christian theologian / Patristic father), approached Scripture through a diverse hermeneutic that suggests interpretation is occasionally literal, sometimes is non-literal but offers a moral lesson, and other times is allegorical presenting a spiritual meaning. 2 Corinthians 3:6b “not of letter but of spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” *Letter* in the Greek is *gramma*, in Latin is *litera*, both meaning “letter” or “written code or document” possibly also from the Greek *diphthera* meaning “tablet. The English term *literal* ultimately derives from the Latin *litteralis* meaning “of or belonging to letters.” How do we discern when to utilize a literal, moral or allegorical hermeneutic (interpretive lens)?

Subject: “Exodus: History, Hope or Myth?”

Text: Exodus 3:7-14

⁷Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the **Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.** ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” ¹¹But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” ¹²He said, “I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.” ¹³But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” ¹⁴God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’”

I. Exodus Overview

A. Israel’s Enslavement and the Birth/Call of Moses (Exod 1–4). The Hebrews are oppressed in Egypt, Moses is born and later called by God at the Burning Bush to lead the Hebrews out of bondage.
B. The Plagues and Confrontation with Pharaoh (Exod 5–12). Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh as God sends the Ten Plagues, culminating in the institution of Passover (e.g., Death angel sees the blood and “passes over”).

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

C. The Exodus and Crossing of the Sea (Exod 12–15). The Hebrews depart Egypt and dramatically escapes Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea (often translated “Sea of Reeds”), marking the decisive act of liberation.

D. Wilderness Journey and Provision (Exod 16–18). God sustains the Hebrews in the wilderness with manna, water, and guidance as the people begin forming a covenant community.

E. Covenant at Sinai and the Law (Exod 19–40). At Mount Sinai, God gives the Ten Commandments, and instructs the construction of the Tabernacle.

II. The Word BEHIND the Text (ANE – Ancient Near Comparanda)

A. Several figures from ANE share narrative patterns with Moses (15th c. BCE) , especially themes like divine calling, lawgiving, leadership, and miraculous survival stories.

1. Sargon of Akkad (central Iraq, 23rd c. BCE), who was placed in a basket and set on a river as an infant before rising to power—strikingly similar to the infancy story of Moses in Exodus.

2. Hammurabi of Babylon (south central Iraq, 18th c. BCE), depicted as receiving laws from the sun god Shamash, paralleling the idea of Moses receiving divine law on Sinai.

III. The World OF the Text (Navigating History, Hope and Myth)

A. Post Critical Naivete (Paul Ricoeur) - after critical analysis, instead of returning to a simple, unquestioning belief (first naïveté), the interpreter moves through historical and critical examination and then re-engages the text with renewed openness to its meaning and symbolism. In this stage, readers acknowledge scholarly criticism, yet allow the text to speak again in a meaningful, faith-informed way.

B. Regarding historical evidence, there is no direct archaeological or extra-biblical record that clearly confirms a historical Moses. The name “Moses” itself may have Egyptian roots (from *-mose*, meaning “born of,” as in names like pharaoh Thutmose, III). The name Moses **looks Egyptian linguistically**, which some historians see as a clue that the tradition may preserve a real historical memory. Yet, many historians think the Moses traditions likely developed from a combination of cultural memory, oral traditions, and later theological shaping (i.e., retrojection). A specific historical individual named Moses has not yet been verified outside the Bible.

1. Egyptian records were royal propaganda, rarely recording national disasters or humiliations. Pharaohs presented themselves as victorious, favored by the gods, which means events like defeats, plagues, or the loss of an army might simply never have been recorded publicly. Egypt existed for over 3,000 years, and only a small fraction of its administrative records survive, so many historical events—large and small—left no trace.

2. Why the slavery? The Bible’s immediate explanation for Israel’s enslavement in Egypt appears in Exodus 1:8–11, which states that “a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.”

a. Xenophobia Toward Foreigners. The Israelites were ethnically distinct, culturally different and numerous (Exodus 1:7 says they were “fruitful and prolific”).

b. The Pharaoh feared they might ally with enemies in wartime. This reflects a common ancient political concern: a large foreign ethnic group within a state could become a security risk.

c. The Israelites may have been absorbed into Egypt’s “forced labor” system. Ancient Egypt relied heavily on large labor forces for building projects. Foreign populations were often used for agricultural labor, brickmaking, and construction.

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

d. Prophetic fulfillment or retrojection? In Genesis 15:13, the prediction that Abraham’s descendants will be strangers and enslaved is widely understood as a passage written or shaped after the tradition of Israel’s enslavement and deliverance was already known. In that sense, the text projects the later historical experience of oppression and Exodus back into the patriarchal narrative as a prophetic foretelling, framing Israel’s suffering within a divine plan. Many scholars see the passage less as a literal prediction and more as a literary-theological device that interprets history after the fact.

3. Parallels with Revelation. Scholars often notice symbolic parallels rather than exact matches between Exodus and Revelation. Both texts use catastrophic judgments (darkness, plagues, death, cosmic upheaval) to portray God confronting oppressive powers—Egypt in Exodus and the oppressive empire symbolized as “Babylon” in Revelation. So while the numbers differ—10 plagues (Egypt/Exodus) vs. 7 seals (Babylon/Revelation)—the imagery of divine judgment and liberation connects the two narratives thematically.

IV. Critical Issues

A. The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart invites a critique of “free will.” If God hardens his heart - should he be punished? Should all of Egypt be punished for a select group of oppressors?

1. Romans 9:16-23 ¹⁶So it depends not on human will or exertion but on God who shows mercy. ¹⁷For the scripture says to Pharaoh, “I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I may show my power in you and that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.” ¹⁸So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses. ¹⁹You will say to me then, “Why then does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” ²⁰But who indeed are you, a human, to argue with God? Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, “Why have you made me like this?” ²¹Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use? ²²What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction, ²³and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory.

a. Intertextual passages that might critique free will:

Exodus 4:21 and 7:3, God says he will “harden Pharaoh’s heart.”

Isaiah 63:17 laments that God has caused people to stray.

Romans 11:32 says God “has imprisoned all in disobedience.”

Ephesians 1:11 describes God working “all things according to the counsel of his will.”

B. The plagues that killed the guilty also killed the innocent.

1. Why not just kill Pharaoh, his children, his army and officials?

2. Does God judge individuals or nations?

V. The World IN FRONT of the Text.

A. Is there value in the Exodus story whether it is historically provable or not?

1. Again, we have a biblical narrative of God seeing, hearing and advocating for the oppressed.

B. Apply this story to current events.

1. Who is Egypt? Who represents an oppressive Empire?

2. Who are the Hebrews? Who in our day are suffering at the hands of Empire?

C. Can the oppressed become the oppressor?

