Lesson 6: Grammatical Interpretation (part 1)

I. Invitation to the Grammatical-Historical Method

A. Two-Lens Prescription: The Grammatical-Historical Method is the best two-lens prescription for reading the Bible clearly.

1. By Grammatical, we mean studying words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs & sections in their **normal** sense.

a. This includes studying small parts like words and phrases—the nuts and bolts.

b. It also covers the forms of literature used and types of arguments being made. This includes word pictures, overstatements, rhetorical questions, metaphors and figures of speech.

c. It also includes the written context of a passage, both in immediate vicinity & across the library of biblical books.

2. By Historical interpretation, we mean understanding the historical period of the writer (whether mentioned or not), cultural backgrounds, and the period of redemptive history.

a. This side of biblical study covers much more than the history of Bible times.

b. It includes many disciplines; historiography (the study of history as a science), geography, geology, meteorology, zoology, archaeology, and sociology.

3. Grammatical and historical studies inevitably **overlap.**

a. Some texts specifically refer to historical events, but they do not always explain them. The author assumes that his initial readers understood the event. Examples:

(1) **Amos 1:1** dates Amos' ministry to "two years before the earthquake," but it doesn't give a firm date. Historical & archaeological evidence indicates there was a great quake around **760** B.C.

(2) **2 Chronicles 35:20-27** discusses the death of King Josiah when he went out to confront the forces of Pharaoh at Megiddo.

(1) Pharaoh Neco II was passing through to join the Assyrians in battle against Nebuchadnezzar. Babylonian and Egyptian records reveal that this Battle of **Carchemish** was one of the defining conflicts of ancient history.

(2) The author of Chronicles does not mention these details because his original readers already knew this and didn't need it spelled out.

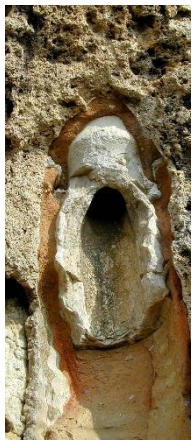
b. Historical studies can help explain unusual words and expressions. **Rare** biblical words (in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek) and sometimes debated, but studying how related forms show up in other ancient languages can provide suggestions for meaning.

B. Objections from the Monocle Factory: Some interpreters read the Bible more dominantly through one lens or the other.

1. Some conservative readers want to focus only on what the text says, not the context in which it was said. But understanding the times & circumstances in which the author wrote are very important to understanding meaning.

a. Example: **Rev. 3:14-16**. Some understand Jesus' statement about the Laodicean church being "lukewarm" to mean they weren't spiritually on fire as they should have been.

b. A historical study of Laodicea's water supply suggests that the problem wasn't the temperature per se but all the foul impurities which could not be **masked.**



(1) The water of Laodicea was notoriously foul tasting, especially to visitors, because of its high amounts of calcium. The nearby cities of Hierapolis and Colossae were renowned for their hot water springs and cold-water springs. The temperature in each masked the calcium problem.

(2) Just as there was nothing to mask the bad water taste in Laodicea, so there was nothing to mask the bad taste the church left in Jesus' mouth.

2. Some liberal readers seem to focus mostly on the historical context of the text and gloss over the words themselves. For them the message is sometimes more about what the text doesn't say, such as ancient presuppositions that supposedly influence the author.

   a. **1 Tim 2:11-14**. Some liberal readers insist Paul's teaching about male **headship** is based on ancient patriarchal customs, not direct revelation from God.

   b. They argue that Paul was merely repeated the viewpoints of his day because he wanted Christianity to be well regarded.

   c. This viewpoint not only disregards the Bible's verbal inspiration & inerrancy, it also ignores statements Paul makes that go beyond mere cultural identity markers (e.g. appealing to the order of creation).

II. Essentials for Good Grammatical Interpretation

A. **Healthy Curiosity:** The diligent student interrogates the text, asking why things are said a certain way. This requires repeated reading and is often aided by note taking.

B. **Good Translations.** Some Bible versions are more suited to study than others. If one does not know the original languages, then having several sound interpretations is useful. Noticing similarities and differences in versions often indicates areas deserving closer grammatical study.

C. **Grammatical Familiarity.** The more familiar the student becomes with grammatical terms, the better they'll be able to benefit from study tools.

D. **Reliable Study Tools.** Standard reference works and sound commentaries can help you benefit from the study of others.

III. Practicing Grammatical Interpretation

A. **Microscope & Macroscope:** Grammatical study requires the student to view the Scripture both microscopically (zooming in) and macroscopically (zooming out).

1. **Microscopic Examination — Zooming In:** The study of words, phrases, and sentences.

   a. **Genesis 1:1**. Why is meant by the plural of "heavens"?

   b. Some think this speaks of different layers of heaven: the atmosphere, outer space, and the abode of God.

   c. Others argue that the word appears to be not a plural but a rare dual form, suggesting two-ness. They argue that the term speaks of 2 parts: the atmosphere & outer space. But further study reveals that the spelling of this word is a "false dual," a plural noun that has contracted.

   d. While countable plurals are the most common, there are other uses. The one that best fits with "heavens" is a plural of complexity. The heavens are complex because of its many elements (sun, moon, stars, clouds, etc.).

2. **Macroscopic Examination — Zooming Out:** The study of arguments, literature types, and literary features.

   a. Several times in Genesis we read the statement, "These are the **generations** of …" (**Gen. 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12; 36:1, 9; 37:2**).

      (1) This phrase is used as a marker that moves Genesis along. It usually introduces whole new sections. These sections tend to alternate between slow paced stories and fast paced covered of longer periods.

      (2) This observation is not something that can be derived from word study alone but from observing large portions of the text.

   b. In many stories in the OT, the KJV famously repeats the line, "and it came to pass that …."

      (1) A single Hebrew term lies behind this phrase, a special form of the verb "to be."

      (2) This term is used to introduce new sections of narrative. The "and" functions more as a sign of introduction than to show continuation.