Chapter 1

The First Historical Horizon

The Author and the Audience

I will lift up my eyes to the hills—
    from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
    who made heaven and earth.

Psalm 121:1–2 (NRSV)

PSALM 121 AND PIKES PEAK

Many of us have sung the words of this psalm in a worship service at some time. The words of the psalmist call us to juxtapose creation with the greatness of the creator who stands behind it. As I write this book, a window in my office opens onto a view of Pikes Peak, a majestic Colorado mountain that rises from a base elevation of six thousand feet to over fourteen thousand feet at its peak. It is the mountain that inspired Katharine Lee Bates to write the line "from purple mountain's majesty" in her poem "America the Beautiful" in 1893. Almost every time I look upon this mountain my heart is lifted up to the Lord in praise, and the words of this psalm echo in my mind.

However, is that what the psalmist had in mind as he composed this psalm? Are these the associations that would have been formed in the minds of the Jewish pilgrims as they sang this song walking to Jerusalem for one of their religious festivals?

The actual words of the psalm are fairly easy to understand. However, reading the Psalms involves more than just understanding the words printed on the page. They evoke our thoughts and call for a response. In particular, Psalm 121 appears to have been written to elicit or affirm the ancient pilgrims' trust in YHWH as they made their way to or from Jerusalem. But if this psalm calls for our response to trust the Lord for protection, then the meaning of this psalm exceeds the definitions of the words on the page.

The first stanza ,"I lift up my eyes to the mountains," creates a vivid image in our mind. As we picture this scene in our imagination, the associations we make with how we view the natural environment are also evoked. The grandeur of the Rocky Mountains or the Alps inspires our imagination—as they have the work of countless artists. We see God's creative handiwork in nature. In our office we even have a panoramic picture of Pikes Peak with the words of Ps 121:1–2 in calligraphy below it.

How would the ancient Jewish pilgrim have been moved by this psalm? The first clue that we are given is that this psalm is part of a larger collection of psalms (120–34) entitled "Songs of Ascent" or "Pilgrimage Psalms." They were most likely written for use during pilgrimages to Jerusalem for one of the prescribed feasts. Jerusalem is located on the top of a mountain, surrounded by other hills, especially to the north and east. Pilgrims would have approached Jerusalem by roads that either followed the valleys between these hills or led up one of the long ascents from the coastal plain or the Jordan River valley. Reciting the psalm in this context, they would have naturally formed associations with the mountainous terrain they were ascending.

How would they have looked upon these mountains? Would the first thoughts that crossed their minds have been about the beauty of God's creation or some other association? Perhaps they would be asking God for some help as they grew weary from the journey? Or would they have been worrying about their personal safety from bandits hiding among the hills (see Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan for an example of this, Luke 10:29–37)? If the second association was the one that came to their mind when they recited this psalm, then the message is quite different from the one we perceive. For them, the scene of journeying up through the mountains to Jerusalem could have called to mind the possibility of their suffering misfortune on the way. As a result, the second line, "from where will my

help come?" asks the faithful to consider where they place their trust for protection.

If we look outside the Psalms we can find clues to another option that is perhaps equally valid. As the pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem the psalmist called for them to look at the mountains they were passing. As they gazed upon these hilltops they may have caught glimpses of the small temples, sanctuaries, or altars dedicated to other gods—the "high places" that are frequently denounced in the Old Testament. This idea fits nicely with the overall thrust of Psalm 121 as well. As the travelers made their way to worship at the temple in Jerusalem, the first line calls them to look upon the high places and temples to foreign gods on the hills. This leads to the question in the second line, "where does my help come from?" In this case the pilgrim looks upon the sanctuaries of the foreign deities and asks, does my help come from them? The expected response is, "No, my help surely does not come from any of those gods. My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of the heavens and the earth!" It turns their eyes from these pagan shrines and reaffirms Israel's monotheistic dedication to YHWH.

In both of these cases the association formed by the scene of looking up to the mountains is negative. These associations stand in stark contrast to the positive connotations contemporary readers construe when looking upon or thinking about mountains. What is interesting about this particular psalm is that while the way in which the earliest readers would have understood the reference to the mountains and the way we perceive the same reference today are almost diametrically opposed, the basic affirmation of the psalm remains the same: both the Jewish pilgrims of old and contemporary worshippers are called to place their confidence in God as their protector. As creator, God keeps watch over us—at all times and in all places.

THE HORIZON OF THE AUTHOR AND THE ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

Psalm 121:1–2 illustrates the value of understanding how the way a text was perceived in its original context can play a part in our interpretation of a text. It raises our awareness about just how different our reading of a text may be from the way it was read by those for whom it was first written. At the same time, it exposes us to alternative readings of the text that may not naturally occur to us. In this way, our understanding of the text is corrected and expanded.

Investing the time and energy necessary to grasp how a particular text in the Bible was originally understood can be time consuming. However,

there are three reasons why it is important for us to dig into the historical, cultural, and religious background of a passage.

First, as we study how a text's author and original readers would have understood a biblical passage we realize that we may be reading the text in an inappropriate manner. When we read Psalm 121, or any passage for that matter, we do not come to the text with a blank slate upon which the message will be inscribed. Rather, we always approach what we are reading with a number of expectations and preunderstandings. Some of these are very helpful. Having a preunderstanding about Israel's history and religion gives us a basic theological framework from which to read the Psalms. In some cases our preunderstanding can play a significant role. For example, being familiar with the story of King David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:1—12:25) is almost essential if we are to understand Psalm 51. Knowing the basic contours of the history of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures allows us to place the various books in an appropriate context so that we can pick up on the various historical and intertextual references made in those texts.

At other times our preunderstanding can cloud our understanding. Most of us have listened to countless sermons, attended Bible studies, and read various books on the Bible. All of these experiences contribute to our preunderstanding of the Bible. It is like the Sunday school teacher who asks their young charges, "What is grey, has a bushy tail, eats nuts, and lives in a tree?" Immediately all of the five- and six-year-olds enthusiastically raise their hands and chime out, "Jesus!" Why? Because they have learned that the correct answer to just about any question in Sunday school is "Jesus." Their previous experiences have created a preunderstanding of what the correct answer to any question in this class should be.

Every time we approach a text we bring with us certain presuppositions and expectations. This is true not only for us, but was also true for the original audiences of the various biblical texts. If we do not attempt to have a basic understand about their preunderstandings and expectations we will continue to naïvely think that the way *we* read the Bible is the way it has always been read.

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In order to read a text the little black marks that are printed on the page must be linked to the reader's background knowledge. The background knowledge you as a reader bring to this book includes the mastery of the Roman alphabet, the English language, and the associated reading skills to understand what I have written. But even this may not be enough. Even if I approach a text like Psalm 121 with the skills and knowledge that all my contemporaries possess in order to read or communicate effectively I

still may not be able to read a biblical text appropriately. The reason is that I may associate what I consider to be the literal meaning of the passage with my contemporary preunderstandings. I will be reading the Bible in a naïve manner. A more adequate reading requires more than knowing what the words on the page mean. It also requires knowing something about the network of ideas and beliefs that the author and the original audience associated with those words and concepts.

Studying the author's or the intended audience's network of ideas and beliefs—what is often called the original horizon of understanding—is not a static event but a journey. As we study the historical, cultural, and religious contexts in which a text was written we begin to realize some of the differences between how a passage may have been received by the people it was originally written for and how we read it today. In the case of Psalm 121, we noticed that there is a gap between what we think the text means and the way it would have been understood by the Jewish pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem. A distance opens up between us and the text. Psalm 121 becomes unfamiliar and a little strange. Until we invest the time and energy into this type of study we are naïve in thinking that we read the psalm in the same manner as the author or early pilgrims did. In reality we were only repeating, in an unexamined manner, *what we assume the text means*.

The second reason why it is important to try to understand how the text would have been received by its original audience is that studies along this line challenge how we understand the biblical stories. As we begin to perceive just how great the historical, cultural, linguistic, and religious differences are between us and the people to whom the Bible was originally written, new possibilities for understanding the text and its relevance for us are opened.

We are familiar and comfortable with Psalm 121 because we subconsciously assume that the psalmist saw the splendor of creation the same way we do. We tend to read Psalm 121 as if it had been written by someone alive today, who thinks, believes, and evaluates the world the same way we do—that is, until we raise questions like this. When we begin to realize that the early Jewish pilgrims probably did not look at the mountains the same way that we do, the message of the psalm becomes foreign and no longer fits into our preconceptions.

We are, in a certain sense, alienated from the psalm and we must wrestle with its message in ways that we have not had to before as we try to incorporate this new information into how we understand the psalm. In the process a transitional space is created—between how we previously understood Psalm 121 and how we will come to understand it. This transitional space opens the possibility not only for us to gain a new understanding of

the psalm, but also for the text to address us in ways we had not considered before. Our thoughts are provoked, our interest is awakened, and we think about what this poem may mean to our lives in fresh ways. We not only come away from our study with a deeper or better understanding of the text, but we may also realize new possibilities for how we orient ourselves within the world. In the case of Psalm 121, I now no longer read it only in terms of how the majesty of the mountains inspires my thoughts to praise God, but also in terms of how it comforts me with a message of God's protection in dangerous situations and calls me to guard my mind from the enticements of false religions.

Finally, this type of research is crucial because the communication processes through which the Bible has been passed down, interpreted, taught, and applied, from when the text was originally written until we read it today, may have been *distorted* somewhere along the line, perhaps due to changes in cultures and languages that have taken place over time. Psalm 121 was originally written in Hebrew. The early church read it in Greek, then Latin. And finally, we read it in English. Because the transmission of any message from one language to another is never perfect, there is the possibility that distortions may occur in the process of transmitting the Bible from the original authors to later readers.

At the same time there is also the possibility that elements of *domination* may have entered into the transmission of the biblical text. How someone interpreted or translated the Bible may have been intentionally or unintentionally used either to support or to suppress a particular teaching, practice, institution, or group of people. Perhaps one of the best-known examples of domination is how Americans in the Confederate states interpreted the New Testament in a manner that supported slavery.

As I write, there is an energetic debate taking place over a recent Bible translation, Today's New International Version (TNIV). For the sake of our discussion I will consider only one issue and only a few of the points in regard to how questions of distortion or domination have been raised in this debate. One of the hottest topics concerning this translation is the decision the translators made to eliminate "most instances of the generic use of the masculine nouns and pronouns" found in the Greek text. As an example, in the TNIV Luke 17:3 is translated as, "If any brother or sister sins against you, rebuke the offender; and if they repent, forgive them." If we were to follow a word-by-word, literal translation from the Greek, then we should not include "or sister," since that word or its

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equivalent is not in the Greek text. Those who claim that the translators of the TNIV have fallen prey to the spirit of political correctness argue that the word "brother" is a generic term and can refer to both men and women, and since it is not an offensive term it should be maintained in the translation, since that is the way it was originally penned. They fear that translation practices such as this lead down a slippery slope where theologically significant gender references, such as those to the various members of the Trinity, will also be removed. On the other hand, those who defend the validity of the TNIV translation claim that while the Greek word *adelphos*, which is used in Luke 17:3, can mean "brother," in other instances it is used to refer to a fellow believer (who could be male or female, cf. 1 John 2:9–11); thus the translators tried to get across this idea when they translated the Greek word *adelphos* as "brother or sister." They claim that the use of inclusive language, when appropriate, by the TNIV translation committee is a welcome improvement on the NIV translation, and that a failure to make these changes would reflect a capitulation to a male-dominated mind-set that has influenced the church and biblical translation for too long.

From the committee's perspective, to continuing the practice of translating nouns like this as exclusively masculine in English Bibles represents an instance of domination in the communication process that should be rectified. Those who criticize the TNIV claim the same thing from the opposing position, namely that our current climate of political correctness has become the norm by which the Bible is interpreted and thereby introduces a distortion into the translation.

Which side is correct? They both have valid points. If we are attempting to produce a literal word-by-word translation, then the use of a masculine pronoun in the English translation should be preferred. However, the idea of a literal translation is fraught with problems. No two languages line up with words that correspond to each other on a one-to-one basis (with the possible exception of indexicals such as a person's proper name or numbers). If the goal is to produce a dynamic equivalence (which aims for understandability, not a word-for-word translation), then we need to ask, did Luke intend for only men to be included in the reference to *adelphos* in 17:3, or would women have been included also? Would the female members of Luke's audience have perceived that they were included in his use of this term when they read his gospel? I think the answer to both of these questions is yes. As a result, the use of the phrase "brother and sister" is an appropriate translation that communicates clearly to contemporary readers how it would have been understood by Luke's original audience. This example demonstrates that questions about distortion or domination are

not just part of an academic debate, but are as relevant to us as the question of which version of the Bible we choose to read or teach from.

The point of this discussion is not to resolve the disagreement over the TNIV. Rather, I hoped to illustrate the third reason why we need to study how a text would have been received by its original audience. In the process of transmission from the first readers to the present, elements of distortion or domination have crept into how the Bible is read and taught, and even into the text itself, elements which need to be raised to consciousness and examined if we are interpret and apply the text in an appropriate manner.

In the next chapter this question will be revisited when we consider how words shift meaning over the course of time. In particular, we will look at William Tyndale's translation for a case in point of how powerful this type of study can be.

TWO PRIMARY QUESTIONS

Two questions should jump to the forefront when we are studying the original horizon of understanding.

The first question is: *what did the author and the original audience believe?* Or to put it differently: *what were the presuppositions that they brought to the text?* Sometimes this type of study is spoken of as looking "behind" the text. This is an apt metaphor, since it illustrates that the goal is to look "behind" the written page to see where the author's ideas came from, how the terms used were used by other writers, and what the average person believed about these concepts. The answers to this type of investigation are often found in word studies, the examination of historical evidence, and comparing the text under examination with other texts (especially from within the biblical canon).

What did the author and the original audience believe? How did the author employ these expectations and beliefs in the text?

The second question is: *how did the author employ these expectations and beliefs in the text?* Did the author affirm, negate, correct, or expand those beliefs and ideas? In contrast to looking "behind" the text, the second question is often referred to as looking "inside" the text. How did the author use these particular terms or concepts in this particular passage? What clues are embedded in the text that would enable us to make these types of determinations?

We might compare these two questions to the work that detectives would do in a blackmail case. To answer the first question, the detectives would interview friends of the intended victim, potential suspects, their

background and history, and gather any other relevant information that might help them solve the case. But in relation to the second question, the detectives would focus their attention on the actual blackmail letter itself: What is said in the letter? How is it said? What other clues can be gleaned from the manner in which it was written that may help them to crack the case?

THE ORIGINAL HORIZON OF UNDERSTANDING: BEHIND THE TEXT

One of the strengths of the traditional approach to the study of the Bible, often referred to as the historical-grammatical approach, is its concentration on the meaning of words, the grammatical relationship between those words, the literary structure and style of that particular text, and the historical elements of the text in order to determine what the author was trying to communicate.

Since there is an abundance of excellent books that cover most of this material there is no need to duplicate their work here. Instead, I will simply refer the reader to three of them. *Understanding and Applying the Bible* by J. Robert McQuilken is the most accessible of the three. Written with the lay reader in mind it includes reproductions of the actual pages from the various sources, such as lexicons, to help the reader actually see what is being discussed. A workbook with exercises that follow the book's material is also available. The second book, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, is by three professors at Denver Seminary—William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard. While this text was written as a seminary-level textbook and includes a certain amount of Greek and Hebrew, it is not overly technical and gives an overview of almost every aspect of the conventional approaches to biblical interpretation. Finally, for those who prefer a bit of a challenge, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* by Grant Osborne goes into greater depth, especially with regard to some of the philosophical issues behind the various principles of interpretation. Like the second book mentioned, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* was also written with the university or seminary student in mind.

Unearthing the presuppositions, events, and beliefs that form the network of ideas that stood behind the text requires sifting through every possible piece of evidence that we can find. This will most likely involve lexical studies of the words used in the text, background studies into the culture of that time and place, comparative studies with literature outside of the Bible, historical studies, and so on. Alongside historical and lexical background

studies there are several issues that are especially relevant in regard to the author. *In particular, we need to consider how this particular text was written as a response to a particular question or problem.* Why did the author write this text? What was his or her purpose in doing so?

Sometimes the text will answer some of these questions for us. For example, 1 Corinthians appears to be Paul's response to questions that the Corinthian believers had written to him about: questions about marriage (7:1), questions concerning virgins or engagement (7:25), issues over food offered to idols (8:1), and about the exercise of spiritual gifts (12:1). It also contains references to oral reports Paul had received about problems in the church at Corinth: problems regarding factions and divisions in the church (1:11) and sexual immorality (5:1). In other texts, such as Psalm 121, as we have already seen, we need to look at clues in the text itself to ascertain why the author composed that particular text.

As I've mentioned above, how I answer the question, *why did the author write this?* can have a profound impact on how I interpret and apply a particular passage. In 1 Timothy 2, Paul writes that women are not to "teach or exercise authority over a man." If Paul's purpose in writing this letter to Timothy was to communicate universal principles that were to be applied in every situation at all times, then it would appear that churches that promote women to positions of leadership and teaching are diverging from the pattern Paul envisioned for the church. However, if Paul was writing to address specific problems that were confronting Timothy as a leader, then the question becomes much more complex. In particular, if Timothy was faced with the threat of false teachers who were entering into the church and gaining a platform for propagating their teaching by deceiving the women in the congregation (who would not have had the same level of education as the men in that culture), then we need to ask how universally applicable this injunction was intended to be. Thus, how I answer the question, *why did Paul write this text?* or *what was his purpose in doing so?* will, to a large degree, shape how I interpret the relevance of 1 Timothy 2 in relation to women's ministry in the church today.

There are numerous other issues and questions that could be raised in regard to how the text would have been understood by the original audience. These include questions such as the relationship of the text to other texts (especially when a New Testament author quotes the Old Testament), what the literary structure of the text is, or whether the author was employing some form of classical rhetoric or argumentation to make his or her point. The discussion of any of these questions would more than exceed the limits of this book. However, for the purposes of our study, questions like the ones we have posed about how the original audience would have

understood the concepts in the text and why the author wrote the text will more than satisfy our needs at this time.

THE ORIGINAL HORIZON OF UNDERSTANDING: INSIDE THE TEXT

The difference between studying the network of beliefs, ideas, values, and word meanings "behind" the text and what we can learn from "inside" the text can be compared to learning a sport. When we moved to England I knew very little about cricket, having seen it played only a few times. Talking to others about the game helped me learn something about the concepts "behind" the game. But this was a far cry from actually watching a cricket match. Theoretically, I understood the rules of the game. However, that knowledge did little to help me follow what was taking place on the field, let alone figure out the strategy either team was using. This required the patient help of a British friend who labored to explain the finer points of the game as it unfolded. Having said that, I am still confused as to whether it was the fact that I am an American, he was a poor teacher, or the complexities of the game itself that explains why I am still unclear about cricket!

A similar principle pertains to biblical interpretation. We may have done the most comprehensive background study on a particular term, but that does not mean we are equipped to determine correctly how it was used in a passage. As readers we need to be attentive to the various literary devices and elements the author employs in the text, and the various moves he makes.

The story of Nathan and David in 2 Samuel 12 is an example of this. Nathan was sent by God to rebuke the king. Once he had been granted a royal audience Nathan seemed to beat around the bush by telling David a story about a rich man who steals a precious ewe from a poor man (we are told this sheep was like a daughter to the poor man, 12:3). As he listened, David became indignant and declared not only that the rich man must repay the poor man fourfold, but that he was deserving of death as well. David correctly perceived the injustice done—however, that was not the point of the story. Rather, Nathan had carefully crafted his story so that David saw the injustice committed (because the man did not have pity, 12:6) and was led to pronounce a judgment. Like a skillful cricket bowler, Nathan's first pitch was set up only for the second more crucial move: "You are that man!" (12:7). By using this story Nathan was able to skirt David's defenses and self-justification concerning his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband. Before David had a chance to raise his defenses he realized

that he had exercised judgment upon himself: "I have sinned against the Lord" (12:13).

Nathan's story was not about sheep stealing, but was a clever rhetorical move by which he was able to bring God's message of judgment to the most powerful man in the nation. This is a nice, clear example, because in a single chapter we have Nathan's story, its explanation, and its impact.

The issues are a bit more complicated when an explanation is not included in the text. Jesus' parables often follow this pattern. When Jesus answered the lawyer's question—"Who is my neighbor?"—with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), he was not giving a lesson on showing charity to those in need. Rather, Jesus was undermining the lawyer's preconceptions and beliefs about who was a member of his community and therefore to whom he had a social obligation. It was a subversion of the lawyer's values, not only at the level of the story as a whole, but also at the level of the characters. As a person associated with the religious class, the lawyer most likely had positive connotations of and expectations about priests and Levites and just the opposite with regard to Samaritans—preconceptions Jesus would have been familiar with and which he used to undercut the lawyer's belief system.

However, we approach this parable with contemporary preconceptions of what the story means and with Christian preconceptions about the characters, we prejudge the Levite and priest. But if we did our background study we would have discovered that these men were usually respected individuals within their communities in Israel. At the same time, the phrase "good Samaritan" would have been an oxymoron to Jesus' audience. By doing a background study and paying careful attention to how the text is written we can experience something of the same shocking and surprising turns this parable would have taken for the lawyer Jesus was answering.

At the sentence level careful attention must be given to the various figures of speech that the author used. For example, it is hard to miss the sarcasm in Michal's voice when she greets her husband, King David, after he had danced naked before the ark as it entered Jerusalem: "How the king of Israel distinguished himself today!" (2 Sam 6:20, NIV). Or the sarcasm in Paul's words to the Corinthians: "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings!" (1 Cor 4:8). Paul even teased the thought along a little farther in the next sentence when he wrote, in effect, "I wish that this were true, because I would like to get in on this" (4:9). In contrast to the Corinthians' inflated and distorted view of the spiritual blessings they had in Christ, Paul wanted them to see, instead, the fallacy of their theology when he continued to describe how God had

put the apostles on display as "men sentenced to death . . . the very scum of the earth" (4:9, 13).

Trying to determine *how* the author communicated his or her message is often more difficult than researching *what* is in the text. Often I find that students who have studied science, math, engineering, or medicine have difficulty when examining the literary features of a text. Their educational background has trained them to look for facts, which is helpful when examining background or historical material. But when we start considering the literary features of a text I get the impression that the students think I am speaking a foreign language. Becoming a careful reader is not something that can be learned by applying a set of rules. Rather, it is a skill that is learned by practice, especially when done in the presence of a gifted reader (either their personal presence or vicariously through their work).

Considerations of what is *behind* and what is *inside* a text are significant because a text does not just appear out of a vacuum. Every text evokes in its readers the literary conventions that they are familiar with from their interaction with other texts and their social and religious traditions. By examining both what is behind and what is inside a text we can gain a better understanding of how the text was understood by its original readers and the impact it would have had on them. The original impact a text had on its readers is all too easily overshadowed or erased by the impact it has on successive generations of readers. In the case of the parable of the Good Samaritan, the subversive effect this parable had on the lawyer, and on Luke's original audiences, is almost totally lost on contemporary readers who see it as a moral lesson, namely that we should follow the example of the "good" Samaritan, not the "bad" priest and Levite. We miss how this parable negated the original audiences' presuppositions about who was a member of their community and for whom God held them responsible.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

How does all this fit together, especially if all the historical information does not agree, or may even appear to be contradictory?

Let's return to the example from Psalm 121 and consider where to find some of the background information and how to deliberate the exegetical decisions about the preconceptions or beliefs that stand behind the text.

The first point we should note relates to the preconceptions we bring to the text, or how we would naturally read it, namely that we naturally assume the words of the psalmist—"I lift up my eyes to the mountains"—to be a reference to the splendor of God's creation as seen in the mountains.

Commentaries are often an excellent source for information on how the early Jewish pilgrims would have understood the words in Psalm 121. Leslie Allen offers three possibilities as to how this reference may originally have been heard—one positive and two negative. Firstly, in a positive sense, the phrase "the mountains" could have been referring to the heavenly heights where God dwells. In a negative sense, this phrase may be intimating either the danger of traveling through the mountains around Jerusalem or the presence of the pagan sanctuaries dotting the hilltops.[1] William Van Gemeren, in his commentary on the Psalms, reiterates the idea of the pilgrims' anxiety about the potential danger from bandits that may await them.[2] The result is that we have three exegetical possibilities from these two commentaries alone that help us grasp the possible range of options of how the original audience might have perceived the opening lines of this psalm. If we consider the wider intertextual context of the Old Testament as a whole, then all three of these possible readings can all be fairly well substantiated from other passages. This information provides us with some provisional answers regarding what may be behind the text.

There are several indicators *inside* the text of Psalm 121 that help narrow the choice between these three options. First, the Hebrew adverbial particle translated as "whence" or "from where," which starts the second stanza, introduces not only a question but a contrast as well. When the pilgrim looked on the mountains and asked "where does my help come from?" the implied reasoning was that his or her help did not come from the surroundings, but from the Lord who made heaven and earth. Second, as the reader moves through Psalm 121, God is portrayed in contrast not only to the mountains (looking to the hills in the first stanza of verse 1 as opposed to God being the creator of them in the second stanza), but also to the dangers that may come from the sun, the moon, or evil (vv. 6–7). God is depicted as the one who provides for and who protects the pilgrims from the dangers they may face on their journey. Based on the immediate context of Psalm 121, the positive connotation that the psalmist is speaking about the heavenly heights in which God dwells should be eliminated as a potential reading. Rather, the negative readings, which suggest danger from

1. Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 21 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 151.

2. Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*. The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 772.

robbers or the sight of pagan temples on the high places, fit the context within this psalm better. By alluding to dangers on the road or to pagan shrines, the psalmist is attempting to move his readers' hearts so that they affirm their trust and faith in the Lord.

SUMMARY

The late historian R. G. Collingwood compared the task of the interpreter or historian to the relationship between a tourist and his or her wilderness guide.

> [T]he historian may very well be related to the non-historian as the trained woodsman is to the ignorant traveler. "Nothing here but trees and grass," thinks the traveler, and marches on. "Look," says the woodsman, "there is a tiger in the grass." The historian's business is to reveal the less obvious features hidden from a careless eye in the present situation.[3]

One of the tasks of an interpreter is to raise to consciousness aspects of a text that may be hidden from the view of a contemporary reader.

When the guide directed the tourist's attention to the tiger crouching in the grass his perceptions of the forest were transformed. His previous assumptions about his surroundings were negated, and that situation will never appear the same way to him again, because where he once saw only grass he now sees the tiger. In the same manner, one of the tasks of an interpreter is to raise to consciousness aspects or features of a text that may be hidden from the view of a contemporary reader, to point out what is hidden from the untrained eye. The purpose of this type of study is not the accumulation of lifeless historical facts. We need to keep our eyes trained not only on the question "what did the text mean *to the original readers*?" but also on "what does the text mean *to us*?" Just as the hiker will alter his or her route once the tiger's presence is pointed out, we also need to be open to change based on what we now see in the text. As we begin to grasp the original questions or issues that the text was addressing, we begin to see how it was an answer to a question or how it addressed a situation that is very different from the questions we bring to the text today. Thus, the question *"what did the text*

3. R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 100.

originally mean?" is intimately connected to the question *"what does the text mean to us?"*

THE HERMENEUTICAL SPIRAL

Most contemporary books on biblical interpretation view the goal of interpretation as recovering the original meaning of the text by means of the historical method and stop at that point. The problem is that this approach is not historical enough. It does a great job at providing a method and structure for studying the original historical horizon in which the text was written, but provides little room for including the various interpretations that have resulted from all those who have read and applied the Bible over the centuries. This brings us to the topic of the hermeneutical spiral.

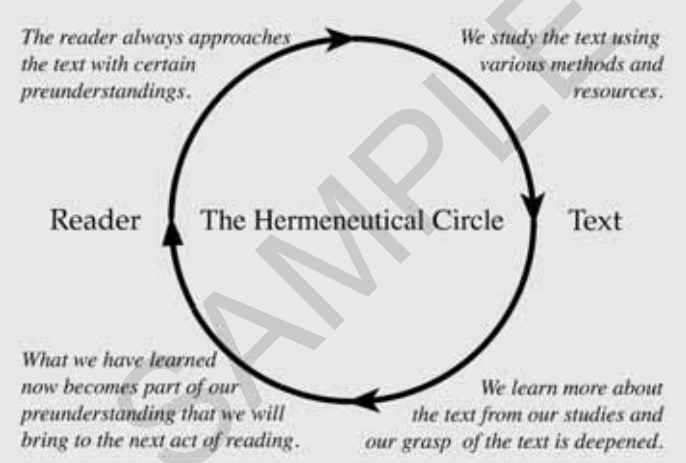

Figure 4. The Hermeneutical Spiral

Theologians like to throw around impressive terms (it's is one of the perks of the job!), and one such popular term is the "hermeneutical circle" or "hermeneutical spiral." It's hermeneutical because it concerns the philosophy of how we understand, interpret, explain, and/or apply just about anything: from texts to artworks, from the conventional symbols and signs we communicate with to our perception of the natural environment. It's a spiral or circle because every act of understanding is circular by nature. As we've already examined in this chapter, we approach every text with a certain set of presuppositions. As we read and interpret a text our presuppositions are either confirmed or corrected. The result is that we come away from our reading experience with a different set of presuppositions. These

revised preconceptions then form part of the presuppositions we will bring to that text the next time we read it. They also carry over to other books we read. We move from one understanding of a text to the next, constantly shifting, expanding, and revising our understanding. Thus many authors prefer to speak of this relationship as a hermeneutical spiral (which conveys an image of progress or development) rather than the more static idea of a hermeneutical circle.

This chapter has examined how the reconstruction of the original readers' horizon of expectations helps us to grasp how they would have understood or experienced the text. However, our reconstruction of their understanding will never be identical to their preunderstanding or experience of the text. While our goal is to get as close as possible to how the original readers would have understood or experienced the text, we need to keep in mind that our results will always be provisional. We will never reach an exhaustive or definitive understanding of the network of beliefs and values that they brought to the text. Therefore, we must keep ourselves open not only to learning more about the text, but also to the fact that someone else may have a better grasp of the text than we do.

Our reconstruction of their presuppositions will always take place within the sphere of our contemporary horizon of understanding. We will always approach the Bible with specific questions that we have been either taught to ask or that are raised by contemporary situations. Each generation of readers has brought and will bring different questions to the Bible. The answers that they find then shape the preunderstanding and questions that following generations of readers bring to the text. As a result, each generation of readers will understand the Bible differently.

This hermeneutical spiral has been going on since the day the biblical authors laid down their styli. It will continue until we are ushered into the next age. For some, this can be a rather discouraging thought. "You mean to tell me that we will never arrive at a definitive understanding of the Bible? What point is there to studying it then?" I prefer to see this as a point of encouragement and challenge. It means that we are pilgrims on a road to understanding. Each and every generation of the church is called upon to interpret the text and apply it to their situation. We do not have a definitive interpretation of the text. Rather, we are called upon to be faithful stewards of God's word, to study it, to allow it to address us in our life situations, and to help others to listen to its message more closely. Then we are to pass the text along to the next generation in a faithful manner. In the next chapter we will consider the historical aspect of the hermeneutical spiral in more detail.