In his sermon on poverty of spirit, Meister Eckhart remarks, “Thus we say that a person should be so poor that he neither is nor has any place in which God could work. Where a person retains a place, there he retains distinction. Therefore I beg God that he make me free of God, for my essential being is above God, since we call God the beginning of creatures.” These lines still shock. Eckhart prays to God, but to be made free of God. He urges poverty of spirit, yet claims to be above God. He implies that a common way of thinking about God, as the creator, “the beginning of creatures,” is merely conventional and possibly inadequate. Eckhart said these words in a sermon in Middle High German, possibly in Cologne toward the end of his life, in his function as a Dominican friar, a member of the Order of Preachers, which was formed to combat heresy and uphold orthodoxy in the growing cities of Western Europe. One hundred-fourteen of his sermons in Middle High German have survived. They are Eckhart’s most famous works. Manuscripts of his sermons were copied, distributed, and read during his lifetime and for decades afterwards. They formed the basis for the revival of interest in Eckhart in the early nineteenth century. Today as well books collecting Eckhart’s writings for a general audience mainly draw from the vernacular sermons. They exhibit great verve in their ideas and language.

Despite their popularity, Eckhart’s sermons are challenging for readers. Indeed, their popularity and their challenge have the same roots: the sermons’ subject matter and Eckhart’s style of preaching. Eckhart’s sermons combine vivid imagery, philosophical abstraction, and dramatic phrasing to create texts that give at once the impression of plain speech and veiled

---

1 All translations from Eckhart are my own. Translations are made from the text in the critical edition of Eckhart’s writings: Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke: Die deutschen Werke, eds. Josef Quint and Georg Steer, 5 vols. (Stuttgart, 1958—). Further references to this work will be made using the abbreviation “DW,” followed by the volume, page, and line numbers. This passage is from DW 2, 502:6–7. I will also refer to Eckhart’s Middle High German sermons by their numbers in DW, using the abbreviation “Pr.,” short for “Predigt,” the German word for “sermon.” This sermon is Pr. 52.

2 See Kurt Ruh, Meister Eckhart: Theologe, Prediger, Mystiker (Munich, 1989), 158.
hints. To gain a sense of the distinctive texts that Eckhart’s sermons are, we will first consider what they seem to be about, examine some theories for why Eckhart preaches as he does, and conclude by looking closely at one sermon, Pr. 48.

1. The Sermons’ Subject Matter

It is not always clear what Eckhart is talking about in his sermons. To be sure, certain themes and images appear frequently, such as the birth of the Word or the Son in the soul. The problem is figuring out what they mean or refer to. Let us begin by saying that Eckhart addresses the relationship between God and the human individual. This may seem obvious, since Eckhart’s sermons speak continually of God and the soul. But one problem immediately arises: as the above passage from Pr. 52, the sermon on spiritual poverty, shows, Eckhart raises questions about what the word “God” means, which complicates the bald claim that Eckhart addresses the relationship between God and the human individual. And this raises the possibility that Eckhart uses traditional words in new ways and in effect develops a theological language of his own. (He may not be consistent with this language from one sermon to the next, either.) If this is the case, then one has to read Eckhart’s sermons for a while and learn his language to grasp what he is talking about, and pocket summaries of his sermons will turn out to be misleading precisely because they depend on the standard meanings for Eckhart’s words, and not Eckhart’s own meanings.

Still, for the sake of argument, let us say that Eckhart’s sermons address the relationship between God and the human individual. This would agree with what Eckhart himself says in his most extensive description of his own preaching, at the beginning of Pr. 53. There Eckhart says, “When I preach, I take care to speak of detachment, and that one should become free of himself and of all things. Second, that one should again become formed into the simple good that God is. Third, that one should consider the great nobility that God has settled on the soul, with which a person may come wonderfully to God. Fourth, of the purity of divine nature—what brightness is with divine nature, that is unspeakable. God is a word, an unspoken word.”

---

3 DW 2, 528:4–529:2.