

# THE HERMENEUTIC KEY

## On the Order of the Divine Dialogue



### PREFACE

This essay is not a work of biblical criticism in the modern sense. It does not concern itself primarily with questions of authorship, dating, or the history of redaction, though these are not without their use. Its concern is prior to all of these: it asks what disposition the reader must bring before the text can speak at all.

The question is not new. The Fathers of the Church understood, as perhaps no subsequent age has understood so clearly, that Sacred Scripture is not a monument to be inspected but a voice to be received. To read it rightly is already an act of submission, not to the interpreter, not to a method, but to the One who speaks through it.

What follows is an attempt to name the structure of that reception: the order, irreversible and given, within which alone divine speech becomes audible and human response becomes possible. This order is called here the Hermeneutic Key, not because it is a technique, but because it is a reality, the reality of how God and man stand in relation to one another, as Scripture itself reveals them to stand.

The argument moves in stages: from the initiative of God, through the exposure of man, through the insufficiency of human response, to the mediation of Christ, and finally to what is required of the reader who would enter this order rather than substitute one of his own devising. Two case studies from Scripture are offered, not as exhaustive demonstrations, but as illustrations of the key being turned. The essay concludes with a reflection on what this order demands of all who approach the sacred page.

Those who find this account too severe are invited to examine what they place in its stead, and to ask whether that alternative begins with God or with themselves.



## I. GOD SPEAKS FIRST

To read Sacred Scripture rightly, one must first accept a fundamental truth: the initiative does not belong to man, but to God. This is the key, not a method to be mastered, not a perspective to be adopted, but an order to be received.

In the beginning, before any human word, before any human movement toward the divine, God speaks.

*"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."*

(Genesis 1:1, DR)

Creation itself is already a form of speech, an act of will, of order, of intention communicated outward. Man does not emerge into silence and then, through some native capacity of reason or desire, reach toward a God who waits to be discovered. He emerges into a world already spoken into being, already charged with meaning not of his making. The first thing man hears, if he listens, is not his own voice but the echo of another.

This establishes the first and governing principle:

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*Man does not begin the dialogue.*

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The consequences of this principle are larger than they may at first appear. If God speaks first, then God is not the conclusion of human inquiry. He is not the answer that emerges when philosophy has asked its deepest question, nor the projection of human longing onto the face of the cosmos. He is the One who is, and who reveals Himself. The difference is not merely theological: it is the difference between a religion that begins with man reaching upward and one that begins with God reaching down.

The great intellectual temptation of every age is to domesticate this priority, to retain God as a concept while reversing the direction of initiative. When God becomes the conclusion of an argument, He becomes answerable to the argument. When He becomes the fulfilment of a need, He becomes answerable to the need. In both cases, the dialogue has been inverted: man speaks first, and what he calls 'God' is the resonance of his own first word.

Scripture permits no such inversion. From the first verse of Genesis to the final vision of the Apocalypse, the pattern is unbroken: God acts, God speaks, God summons. Man's task is not to initiate but to receive, not to discover but to be found.

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## II. MAN IS REVEALED

The second movement in the order of the Divine Dialogue is not man speaking, but man being revealed. There is a difference, and it is crucial.

After the fall, when the rupture between God and man has already occurred, when man has already attempted the first great inversion, the desire to 'be as gods, knowing good and evil' (Genesis 3:5, DR), God does not withdraw. He comes. He calls:

*"Adam, where art thou?"*

(Genesis 3:9, DR)

This question is not asked for information. God knows where Adam is. It is not the question of one who is absent or confused. It is the question of one who knows exactly where the other stands and who insists, by the very act of asking, that the other come to know it also. The question is a summons, a call to stand forth, to cease hiding, to become visible in truth.

Man's response to this summons reveals something essential about his condition after the fall. He does not come forward freely. He does not say: here I am, I have sinned. He says:

*"I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked: and I hid myself."*

(Genesis 3:10, DR)

Three movements: hearing, fear, concealment. This is the structure of fallen man in the presence of the divine address. He hears, which is to say, the word of God reaches him. But what it produces is not approach but retreat. Fear, which in its disordered form is not the beginning of wisdom but the flight from truth. And then the attempt to make oneself invisible: to exist without being seen.

The second principle follows:

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*Man does not naturally enter into dialogue, he evades it.*

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Even when cornered by the divine question, even when evasion is no longer possible, man does not speak truthfully. He speaks partially: 'I was afraid because I was naked.' He speaks defensively: when pressed further, he blames the woman, and she blames the serpent. The dialogue that God initiates is answered with a series of deflections. Man is present in body but absent in truth.

This is the condition that any adequate hermeneutic must consider. The problem of man before Scripture is not only that he is ignorant. It is that he is concealed, from God, and therefore from himself. He does not lack information so much as he lacks honesty. He can read the words and, by reading, avoid what the words are saying. He can engage the text

intellectually and remain untouched by it personally. He can become a scholar of the divine address without ever standing forth in response to it.

The question ‘Adam, where art thou?’ is asked on every page of Scripture. It is the presupposition of every prophetic summons, every parable, every beatitude. To read well is to hear that question addressed to oneself and to resist the reflex of concealment.



### III. THE INSUFFICIENCY OF MAN’S RESPONSE

It would be possible, at this point, to draw a merely moralistic conclusion: man must try harder. He must be more sincere, more diligent, more willing to stand forth in truth. And there is something in this, the call to repentance is not without content. But it does not yet reach the depth of the problem.

The deeper issue is not that man is insincere but that sincerity, however genuine, is not sufficient to restore what has been broken. This is among the most countercultural claims that Scripture makes, and it requires careful statement.

Modern sensibility tends to treat sincerity as self-validating. If a man seeks God honestly, if he prays with genuine desire, if he brings to the sacred text an open and willing heart, surely this is enough. Surely God, if He is good, will meet such effort with acceptance. The logic is intuitive, and it is wrong.

It is wrong not because God is indifferent to sincerity, but because sincerity is a description of the quality of a human act, not a description of its sufficiency. A man can be sincerely mistaken. A man can sincerely offer what is not his to give. A man can sincerely speak words that, however honestly meant, cannot cross the distance that separates him from God, not because God refuses to receive them, but because the distance is real and man’s voice, unassisted, does not reach.

*“Without me, you can do nothing.”*

(John 15:5, DR)

This is the third principle, and it cuts more deeply than the second:

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***Man cannot complete the dialogue he did not initiate.***

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The rupture of the fall is not merely a moral infraction that a sufficiently sincere contrition can undo. It is an ontological disorder, a disordering of man’s very being in relation to God. Man is exposed, in God’s sight, but not restored. He speaks but not reconciled. He reaches, but the reaching does not arrive.

No effort, no achievement, no interior disposition, however admirable in its kind, is sufficient to reconstitute the broken dialogue from the human side alone.

This is not a counsel of despair. It is the ground of hope. For if man could complete the dialogue by his own effort, then what Christ does would be, at most, a useful assistance, a supplement to human striving. But Scripture presents Christ as something entirely other than a supplement. He is the one in whom the broken dialogue is not assisted but fulfilled.

#### *A note on modern hermeneutics*

It is worth pausing here to observe what happens to the reading of Scripture when this principle is forgotten. When the interpreter approaches the text as one who is himself sufficient, who brings to it a competent reason, a trained method, an autonomous subjectivity capable of extracting meaning, the text is effectively domesticated. It becomes raw material for the interpreter's conclusions rather than an address that makes claims on the interpreter.

The great tradition of historical-critical scholarship has produced much that is genuinely valuable in understanding the human dimensions of the text: its languages, its sources, its literary forms, its historical settings. None of this is to be scorned. But when method becomes the master and the interpreter becomes the arbiter of meaning, when no voice is allowed to speak that has not first passed through the filter of autonomous reason, then the divine initiative has been inverted. Man has placed himself first, and God has been reduced, at best, to a topic.

The Hermeneutic Key does not suppress critical inquiry. It subordinates it, insisting that the tools of scholarship remain in the service of reception rather than substituting for it.



## **IV. CHRIST THE MEDIATOR**

Into the rupture between divine speech and human evasion, between the call that goes forth and the response that cannot arrive, enters Christ.

*“For there is one God, and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”*

(1 Timothy 2:5, DR)

The word ‘mediator’ must be understood in its full weight. A mediator is not merely a messenger, not merely a teacher, not merely an example. A mediator stands between two parties who cannot themselves close the gap that separates them, and accomplishes what neither party, acting alone, could accomplish.

Christ mediates not by explaining the distance between God and man but by crossing it, from both directions simultaneously. He is, as the Councils defined, true God and true man: not a hybrid, not a compromise, but both in their fullness and without confusion. This means that in Him, the divine address and the human response are, for the first time since the fall, held together in a single person.

To understand what mediation means here, it helps to hold two sides of it in view at once.

Consider what the mediation actually involves. On the side of reception: Christ receives the call of God not as man generally receives it, with fear, evasion, partial response, but with the total and unreserved obedience of the Son. In Gethsemane, when the weight of what obedience requires becomes fully apparent, He does not hide. He does not deflect. He says: 'not my will, but thine be done' (Luke 22:42, DR). This is the response that Adam could not make, that no son of Adam has made: the response in which the hiding ceases and the self stands fully forth in truth before the Father. And this obedience is not merely the act of a moment. It runs across the whole movement of His life, in the hidden years, the public ministry, the passion, not as the effortful compliance of one who struggles against a reluctant will, but as the expression of who He is: the eternal Son, whose being is gift, whose existence is oriented wholly toward the Father.

On the side of offering: what Christ brings to the Father is what man cannot bring. The Letter to the Hebrews insists on this at length. The sacrifices of the old covenant were unable to take away sin because they were offerings from the creaturely side alone, the blood of bulls and goats, not the blood of the Son. What is offered must be commensurate with what is owed, and what is owed exceeds all creaturely capacity to repay. Christ's offering is commensurate because He Himself is the offering, and He is not merely creature.

This establishes the central principle of the essay:

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*Christ does not assist the dialogue, He fulfils it.*

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And the consequence for every human reader of Scripture:

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*Man, united to Christ, does not invent a response to God, but participates in His.*

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This participation is not metaphorical. It is effected sacramentally, through Baptism by which the believer is incorporated into the Body of Christ, through the Eucharist by which that incorporation is sustained and deepened. The one who reads Scripture as a member of Christ's Body reads it from within the fulfilled dialogue, not from outside it, looking in. He has been given a standing that is not his own, the standing of the Son, and from that standing the words of Scripture sound differently than they do to one who approaches from outside.



## V. THE RESTORED ORDER

From what has been established, the true order of the Divine Dialogue can now be stated clearly:

**God speaks → Man is revealed → Christ mediates and fulfils**

This order is not symbolic. It is not one theological option among several. It is the structure of reality as Scripture reveals it: the actual sequence in which God and man stand in relation to one another, and the actual point at which that relation is healed.

To invert or collapse this order is not simply to make a theological error. It is to misread everything that follows, because every part of Scripture presupposes this structure. The Psalms are the prayer of one who has heard the divine address and is learning to respond from within Christ's own prayer. The prophets are the echo of divine speech pressing into human history and calling man forth from his hiding places. The Gospels are the record of the mediation itself, the Word made flesh, walking the earth, doing in history what the order of the dialogue required. The Epistles are the account of how those incorporated into Christ learn to live within the restored order.

When man becomes the starting point, God is reduced to a response, a God who reacts to human initiative rather than one who acts from His own freedom and love. When sincerity is substituted for truth, dialogue becomes projection, man speaking into a silence that returns his own voice dressed in divine language. When Christ is removed from His mediating role, religion becomes effort, the strenuous and ultimately futile attempt of the creaturely to close, from the creaturely side, a gap that only the Creator can close.

### *On the unity of the two Testaments*

This order illuminates also the relation between the Old Testament and the New. A persistent and damaging error treats the Old Testament as a preliminary stage, a record of human seeking after God, valuable as spiritual prehistory but superseded by the fuller revelation of the New. The Hermeneutic Key corrects this at the root.

The Old Testament is not a record of man seeking God. It is a record of God speaking to man, calling man forth, and of man's repeated failure to stand in the open before that call. The Law does not represent a human attempt to reach God by moral effort; it is the divine address in codified form, given not because man was capable of keeping it but because man needed to know what he could not keep. The prophets are not religious geniuses who ascended to divine insight; they are those seized by the divine word, often against their own inclination, and compelled to speak what they did not choose.

The New Testament is not a different religion grafted onto the Old. It is the fulfilment of what the Old Testament pointed toward without being able to provide: the one adequate human response to the divine address, offered by the one who was both the divine speaker and the human respondent. When Christ says, 'I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil' (Matthew 5:17, DR), He is describing precisely this: the order was always the same; what was lacking was the response that the order required, and He alone provides it.



## **VI. THE KEY TURNED: TWO ILLUSTRATIONS**

It is one thing to state a hermeneutical principle; it is another to show it working. What follows is not intended as exhaustive exegesis but as demonstration: two passages from Scripture read within the order of the Divine Dialogue, to show what the key opens when it is correctly applied.

### *The Twenty-Second Psalm*

*"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*

(Psalm 22:1, KJV)

This psalm has attracted enormous scholarly attention, most of it concerned with its authorship, its original cultic setting, its literary genre, or its relation to the passion narratives of the Gospels. These are not trivial questions. But they are secondary to the question that the Hermeneutic Key compels: who is speaking here, and from what standing?

The surface answer is David. The deeper answer, recognized by the Fathers and confirmed by Christ's use of the opening verse from the Cross, is that this is a voice within the larger dialogue, a human voice, genuine in its anguish, but one that finds its fullest utterance in the mouth of Christ. The cry of dereliction is not merely a prediction of the passion. It is, within the structure of the Divine Dialogue, the moment at which the accumulated weight of human evasion, concealment, and failure to respond is taken up into the one who does respond, and the taking up is experienced as abandonment, because what is being borne is precisely the distance that sin has opened.

The psalm does not end in abandonment. It ends in vindication, in proclamation, in the gathering of nations. This movement, from dereliction to glorification, is not the movement of a man who has found his own way through despair to hope. It is the movement of the dialogue restored: God speaks into the depth of human abandonment, Christ responds from within it, and the response becomes the ground on which all who are in Him can make their own.

Read within the order of the Hermeneutic Key, Psalm 22 is not primarily a poetic expression of the experience of suffering. It is the record of the dialogue at its most extreme: God permitting the experience of His own absence, man (in Christ) standing in that absence without evasion, and the dialogue being restored precisely through the fullness of the bearing.

### ***The Road to Emmaus***

*“And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded to them in all the scriptures the things that were concerning him.”*  
(Luke 24:27, DR)

The Emmaus episode is the most explicit hermeneutical instruction in the New Testament. Two disciples, walking away from Jerusalem, carry with them a knowledge of the Scriptures that has not yet been opened to them from within. They know the texts. They can recite the hopes. But they cannot read them rightly, because they do not yet know from where they are to be read.

Christ walks with them as a stranger. He does not begin by revealing Himself. He begins by asking what they are discussing, another divine question that is not asked for information. He allows them to state their interpretation of events: they had hoped that He was the one who would redeem Israel (Luke 24:21, DR). Their hope was correct in its object but wrong in its order: they had expected a redemption that operated on their terms, a Messiah who would fulfil their political and religious expectations rather than subvert them.

Christ's response is not to correct a theological misunderstanding. It is to reorder the reading. He begins at Moses, moves through the prophets, and shows that the entire movement of the Old Testament is oriented toward the necessity of the Cross, that the suffering was not the contradiction of the hope but its fulfilment. He does not give them new information; He gives them the order within which the information they already have becomes legible.

The moment of recognition comes not at the end of the exposition but at the breaking of the bread. This is not incidental. It means that the hermeneutical re-ordering accomplished by Christ's exposition is consummated sacramentally: the eyes are opened when the disciples are incorporated, even briefly, into the act that is the centre of the restored dialogue. The Eucharist is not an appendix to the Scripture lesson. It is the point at which the Scripture becomes fully readable, because it is the point at which the reader is placed, bodily, within the order of the dialogue.

Read within the Hermeneutic Key, Emmaus is a parable of right reading itself: beginning in darkness not because the texts are absent but because the order is inverted; re-ordered by the one who alone can re-order it; consummated in the act that makes the reader a participant in the dialogue rather than a spectator of it.

## VII. THE NARROW WAY OF READING

The restoration of the order of the Divine Dialogue is not accomplished easily or naturally. Scripture itself gives warning:

*"How narrow is the gate, and strait is the way that leadeth to life: and few there are that find it."*

(Matthew 7:14, DR)

Applied to the reading of Scripture, the narrow way requires something more demanding than method, more costly than scholarship, more sustained than any act of intellectual effort. It requires a transformation of the reader.

The first is the hardest to admit, because it strikes at the reader's sense of competence: the acceptance of not being first.

The reader who approaches Scripture as one who is already in possession of the questions, who knows what he is looking for, what will count as an answer, what the text is permitted to say and what it is not, has already placed himself first. He has made himself the measure, and the text becomes the material measured. This is the broadest and most travelled road in the interpretation of Scripture, because it is the road of least resistance. It costs nothing because it demands nothing.

The narrow way requires that the reader arrive at the text without his conclusions already in hand. Not without preparation, learning the languages, knowing the tradition, understanding the literary forms, these are genuine necessities. But the preparation must be in the service of reception, not of control. The reader must be willing to be surprised, to be overturned, to find that the text is asking a question he had not thought to ask, and that his own question, when placed beside it, shrinks.

From this follows the second requirement, which is more intimate and more costly: the consent to be seen.

The question ‘Adam, where art thou?’ does not cease to be asked when the book is opened. It is implicit in every passage, operative behind every address. To read within the order of the dialogue is to read as one who is being seen, not merely as one who sees.

This is what the monastic tradition called ‘lectio divina’ in its deepest sense: not a technique of slow reading but a posture of exposure. The reader allows himself to be read. He does not maintain the critic’s safe distance, the professional’s controlled engagement, the scholar’s manageable detachment. He stands in the open.

This costs something. To be seen is to be known, and to be known is to find oneself unable to sustain the self-presentations that ordinarily substitute for the truth. The text, read within the dialogue, has a way of returning to precisely the points where the reader is least willing to stand forth. This is not accidental. It is the divine address doing what it has always done: calling man out of hiding.

Both of these, however, stand or fall on a third requirement that underlies them, the one most difficult to articulate without sounding merely pious: the relinquishment of self-sufficiency.

It is the recognition that the reading of Scripture is not finally a human achievement.

One can read the words. One can master the languages. One can produce commentary of great erudition. And none of this constitutes, in itself, the reception of the divine address. The reception is given, not achieved. It is the work of the Spirit in the reader, not the work of the reader alone. This is why the tradition insists on prayer before the reading of Scripture, not as a pious preliminary but as a recognition of ontological fact: that what is needed for this reading exceeds what the reader brings.

The relinquishment of self-sufficiency is not passivity. It is the particular form of activity proper to one who has understood his situation: not the activity of one who constructs meaning, but the activity of one who attends, who receives, who allows what is given to arrive.

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## VIII. OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED

The account offered here will be felt by some as too restrictive, a narrowing of the human response to Scripture that leaves insufficient room for the genuine diversity of ways in which men and women across the ages have encountered the living God in its pages. Three objections deserve direct consideration.

### *Does this not flatten human agency?*

It might seem that if God speaks first, if man's response is always secondary and insufficient, and if Christ's response must be participated in rather than independently generated, then human reading becomes a merely passive affair, the reader a vessel, not an agent.

This objection mistakes the nature of participation. To participate in Christ's response to the Father is not to disappear into it but to be elevated by it. The analogy is not a drop absorbed into an ocean but a branch receiving the life of the vine, genuinely itself, genuinely alive, yet dependent for that life on a source not its own. The reader who reads within the order of the dialogue is more genuinely active, not less, because he is acting from a standing that exceeds his own and from a life that is not merely natural. The diversity of reception, the variety of personal encounter with Scripture across the centuries, is the evidence of this: not a monolithic uniformity but a richness of personal encounter that the order of the dialogue makes possible rather than suppresses.

### *Does this not privilege certain readers over others?*

If participation in Christ's response is sacramentally effected, does this mean that the unbaptised cannot truly read Scripture? That those outside the visible Church are excluded from the dialogue?

The question presses on a genuine tension in the tradition, and honesty requires acknowledging that the tension has not been fully resolved. What can be said is this: the order described here is the order as it has been given and as it operates fully. That God's word reaches, in ways not fully transparent to human accounting, those who have not yet been formally incorporated into the Body of Christ, this the tradition has not denied. The order is not a wall but a door. But a door is a door: there is a way through it, and a way that is not through it, and confusing the two does not help those who are still outside.

### *Is this not simply a confessional reading dressed as a universal hermeneutic?*

This objection is the most serious, and it deserves the most careful answer. It is true that the Hermeneutic Key is not neutral. It presupposes the truth of what Scripture itself claims: that God is, that He speaks, that man is fallen, that Christ mediates. These are not assumptions that a merely historical or literary approach to the text is required to share.

But the claim of this essay is not that the Hermeneutic Key is the only possible approach to Scripture. It is that the Hermeneutic Key is the approach adequate to the nature of Scripture as Scripture, as the word of the living God addressed to man. To approach it as merely a historical document, or as the literary expression of a religious community, or as a repository of ethical wisdom, is to approach it as something other than what it claims to be. Such approaches may illuminate aspects of the text. They cannot, by their own principles, receive what the text is offering. The question is not which approach is more academically respectable. The question is which approach corresponds to the reality of the thing being approached.



## **CONCLUSION: THE ORDER AS GIFT**

It remains to say something that the foregoing may have obscured by its emphasis on what the order demands: the order of the Divine Dialogue is not primarily a burden. It is a gift.

That God speaks first means that man does not bear the weight of initiating contact with the infinite. The silence is not his to fill. The first word is not his responsibility. He is addressed before he speaks, known before he seeks, loved before he turns. The priority of the divine initiative is not a diminishment of man but the ground of his dignity: he is the kind of being who is addressed by God, which means he is the kind of being worth addressing.

That man is revealed, called out of hiding, means that the concealment he carries since the fall need not be permanent. The question ‘Adam, where art thou?’ is not a threat but an invitation: to come out of the shadow and stand in the light that does not destroy but restores. The exposure that Scripture works in its readers is the exposure of one who is being found, not prosecuted.

And then there is the mediation itself. The response man cannot make has been made. The distance he cannot cross has been crossed. What is required of him is not to accomplish what Christ has accomplished but to receive it, to enter it, to be taken up into a dialogue already fulfilled. The weight of the debt is not his to repay; it has been repaid in the one coin adequate to the price. This is not a comfortable thought for those who prefer to earn what they receive. It requires a kind of poverty that modern man, formed in habits of self-construction, finds deeply uncongenial. But the narrowness of the way is not arbitrary severity. The narrow way is narrow not because God is mean but because truth is exact. The door is the right size for man; it is only impassable for man as he imagines himself to be.

To read Sacred Scripture rightly is to enter this order. Not to master it, not to stand above it, not to evaluate it from a position of assumed neutrality. To enter it. To hear the word addressed. To stand forth in response. To allow that response to be drawn up into the one response that has already been made, and that makes all genuine human response possible.

God has spoken. Man is called out of hiding. Christ has made the answer. This is not a method. It is a reality. And it is, for those who receive it, the beginning of all true reading.

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