

CHAPTER ONE—THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TRUTH IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

“What is truth?” Pilate asked Jesus, as he sought to determine his guilt or innocence in John 18. While commentators have disagreed over the inflection of Pilate’s enigmatic inquiry, the answer is not an elusive one. According to the Evangelist truth is the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, the God-man. Furthermore, in this definition of “truth,” certainly one of the major themes of John’s Gospel, one can see what in the author’s judgment is its dominant theme, namely, revelation. If people are to know anything at all about God and his ways, God must first take the initiative in revealing such knowledge. Berkhof explains: “God is first of all the subject communicating knowledge to man, and can only become an object of study for man in so far as the latter appropriates and reflects on the knowledge conveyed to him by revelation. Without revelation, man would never have been able to acquire any knowledge of God.”¹

For the Evangelist, the object of this revelation is the person and work of Jesus Christ. Of all the key words in John (for example, love, life, light, truth) the idea of revelation stands behind them all because it is absolutely foundational. I. de la Potterie argues: “Si le thème fondamental de la doctrine paulinienne est plutôt celui de la rédemption opérée par le Christ, on peut dire que, dans la théologie de saint Jean, c’est l’idée de *révélation* qui est vraiment centrale: Dieu s’est révélé en Jésus Christ, pour nous communiquer la vie divine.”² The proof of this centrality in part seems to come from the simple observation that two of the most significant words for revelation—*apokalyptō* and *dēloō*—are not found in the Gospel. (The most common word, *phaneroō*, occurs only six times.)³ Instead, one finds a rather unlikely word—*martyrs* (and the

¹L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939, revised edition), 34.

²Ignace de la Potterie, *La Vérité dans Saint Jean*, two vols. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977), I: 2. “If the fundamental theme of the Pauline doctrine is rather that of the redemption operated by Christ, one can say that, in the theology of Saint John, it is the idea of *revelation* which is truly central: God is revealed in Jesus Christ, in order to communicate to us the divine life.”

³Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, two vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1: 338.

verb, *martyreō*)—to express the Johannine content of revelation.⁴

A second proof of this centrality is the importance of the idea of truth and the intimate relationship it has with the concept of revelation. This observation is not based on simple frequency, for the word group (*alētheia*, *alēthēs*, *alēthinos*, *alēthōs*, and *alētheuō*) occurs less than other key words or themes in John. Nevertheless, no other word has such a broad yet substantive significance over the entire course of the Gospel. Concerning this connection between revelation and truth, de la Potterie says that “ce soit le mot *alētheia* qui exprime avec le plus de plénitude le thème johannique fondamental de la révélation.”⁵

God has spoken definitively in his Son, and of the four Gospels which recount the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, the Fourth Gospel most powerfully communicates the doctrine of the incarnation and the importance of that divine disclosure. Moreover, the fact that it is of God necessarily proves that the content of that revelation is truth, and will consequently demand the same characteristic—in knowledge, speech, and action—from God’s people.

1. TRUTH IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

The word group does occur in the first three Gospels, but not nearly as frequently as it does in the fourth. Also, as is true in John, the verb, *alētheuō*, is not used by Matthew, Mark, or Luke. In the Synoptic Gospels, the most common is the noun, *alētheia*. In each of its seven occurrences it carries the general idea of veracity, as opposed to falsehood. The second, *alēthōs*, is used eight times, each time serving its usual adverbial function.

Next, with two occurrences, comes the adjective, *alēthēs*. Like *alētheia*, it too points to that which is truthful, over against that which is false or misleading. The Greek text of Matthew 22:16 gives us both words, used to show veracity: “And they [the Pharisees] sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the

⁴James Montgomery Boice, *Witness and Revelation in the Gospel of John* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970), 15.

⁵de la Potterie, *op. cit.*, I: 3. “...it is the word *alētheia* which expresses to the fullest the fundamental Johannine theme of revelation.”

way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any.” Neither the disciples of the Pharisees nor the Herodians really believed this about Jesus. They were merely attempting to set him up for a fall with this insincere question about the paying of taxes to Caesar. The word “truthful” is the translation of *alēthēs*, and “truth” is *alētheia*. Both of them are concerned with veracity, the first referring to Jesus’ character and the second pertaining to Jesus’ teaching. Because Jesus has integrity, he is one who always teaches what is right regardless of external pressure to do otherwise. By paying Jesus this malicious compliment they were making it seemingly impossible for him to answer their subsequent question without angering either the Pharisees or Herodians.

The last word is the adjective *alēthinos*. It also often conveys the idea of veracity, but nearly as often it is rendered “true” in the sense of “real” or “genuine.” Its only occurrence in the Synoptic Gospels is in Luke 16:11, in which Jesus is teaching his disciples about “true riches,” as opposed to mere material possessions.

Anthony Thiselton confirms precisely what this survey suggests: not only does the word group occur relatively infrequently, but when it does occur it does not even come close to matching the theological richness found in John’s Gospel.⁶ This undoubtedly accounts for the lack of attention that has thus far been given to truth in the Synoptic Gospels.

2. TRUTH IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

When one looks at *alētheia* and its related words in John’s Gospel, one does not merely observe that they are found more often. In the case of *alētheia*, while John still uses it to show veracity, it takes on a much fuller and, therefore, unique meaning. As the word occurs twenty-five times, it is difficult to define it in such a way so as to include every aspect of John’s usage. But it is at least a correct starting point to say that truth is the divine revelation of the incarnation,

⁶Anthony C. Thiselton, “Truth (*alētheia*),” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, ed. Colin Brown (Exeter: The Paternoster Press and Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 883.

life, death, resurrection, and return to the Father, of Jesus Christ—testified to by various witnesses—the effects of which are applied to believers by the Holy Spirit, with the result that every aspect of their conduct be consistent with the truth of this revelation.

When the remaining words are examined, it is found that their usage is similar to that of the Synoptic Gospels. *Alēthēs*, found thirteen times, is used to denote veracity. (John 6:55 is the only exception, which seems to understand Jesus' flesh and blood as real or genuine food and drink.) The third most frequently used word is *alēthinōs*, with nine occurrences. They are nearly evenly divided between the normal understanding of “veracity,” or of that which is “real” or “genuine.”

The last word is *alēthōs*—seen seven times—and it is used adverbially, as well as in the sense of “real” or “genuine.” However, depending on the passage, there may not be much difference between the two. In John 4:42, after the Samaritan woman had gone back into town to tell others of her conversation with Jesus, some of the residents went to Jesus and confessed, “It is no longer because of what you [the woman] said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed [truly] the Savior of the world.” The adverbial sense is clear, but there may also be present the idea that others have come along purporting to be saviors, but that the true or genuine Savior has now arrived. John 6:14 and 7:40 both speak of Jesus as the prophet who was expected to come. Again, both could be understood adverbially, but it is also possible that while others have come along who looked like the promised prophet (for example, John the Baptist), Jesus Christ is the real or genuine prophet. It seems that although the two adjectives and the adverb are used similarly in John and the Synoptics, in John they take on an added significance because of the unique force of the Johannine conception of *alētheia*. They point to the grace and truth that came through Jesus Christ, and seek to give illumination to that divine revelation.

However, while *alētheia* (and the rest of the word group) certainly occurs much more often in the Fourth Gospel, and while it takes on a far richer meaning than it does in the Synoptic Gospels, this does not mean that the first three Gospels are less concerned with communicating

truth. Generally speaking, as compared to John, they are more interested in laying out a detailed account of the ministry of Jesus. Unlike John, they do not focus on a particular area (Jerusalem), but include events in Galilee, the North, the rest of Judea, and Perea. And along with this emphasis on the entire ministry, they will naturally record more actual events, as opposed to the longer, more private, and reflective discourses.⁷

But simply because these discourses are absent does not mean that the synoptists do not know about their content, and certainly not that they considered them unnecessary or unimportant. Regarding the incarnation, it is true that it is the Fourth Gospel that declares Jesus to be God (1:1, 18; 20:28). But in Mark 2:1-12 (and the parallel in Matt. 9:2-8 and Luke 5:18-26) Jesus tells a paralytic that his sins are forgiven. And when the scribes hear this they reason “in their hearts,” “He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?” Not only did Jesus know what they were thinking, but to prove that he did indeed have such authority, he healed the paralytic in front of everyone. Though not with the same theological depth as John, the synoptists clearly understand and teach that Jesus Christ is God come in the flesh. “The Synoptic Gospels present in seed form the full flowering of the incarnational understanding that would develop only later; but the seed is there, the entire genetic coding for the growth that later takes place. If John lets us see a little more of the opening flower, it is in part because he indulges in more explanatory asides that clarify for the reader what is really going on.”⁸

Just as the difference in the usage of *alētheia* does not mean that the Synoptic Gospels are less concerned with communicating truth, so it is also not the case that the Fourth Gospel is less concerned with accurately representing historical events. For John, the truth of the person and work of Jesus Christ is not some metaphysical apprehension of the mind, or an existential awareness appropriated by subjective experience. It is the fact—testified to by various witnesses—that the eternal Word “became flesh and dwelt among us” (1:14). It is the same

⁷D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 19.

⁸*Ibid.*, 164-165.

commitment to historical accuracy that John continues in his first Epistle:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ (1:1-3).

It is true that John chose to focus more on the longer discourses, as opposed to discussing the extensive ministry of Jesus. But this by no means proves that John was to any degree indifferent toward historical integrity. Rather, it seems that he wrote his Gospel as a kind of supplement to the other three that had already been written. It would be expected, then, that the material discussed would be different, obviously allowing for needed overlap owing to the fact that it is the same message that each author was trying to communicate in his own way. There is external confirmation of this in Eusebius' *Church History*. He refers to a work no longer extant known as *Outlines*, written by Clement of Alexandria. Clement said that the Gospels containing the genealogies were written first, followed by Mark. "But, last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel [Gospel of Mark], being urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel."⁹ Furthermore, it must be concluded that John's unique approach to the historical reality of the Christ-event is consistent with his stated purpose in writing his Gospel: "Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and believing you may have life in His name" (20:30-31).

⁹Eusebius, *Church History*, Book VI.XIV, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series, vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, reprint), 261.

3. ALĒTHEIA AND `EMET

When one begins to consider the relationship between John and the Old Testament (a relationship which not all commentators perceive equally), a comparison of the Greek and Hebrew words for “truth” must be made. As opposed to *alētheia*, the various meanings of which have already been pointed out, `emet has several denotations, in the following lexical order: reliability; stability and continuance; faithfulness; truth; and the idea of truth used adverbially (such as “truly” and “in truth”).

Two observations need to be made. The first is that there is certainly the presence of overlap, and the context of the particular passage in question is crucial for determining the specific nuance of the term. The second is that from this list of possible renderings, to be sure there are occasions when the Hebrew `emet will look quite similar to the Greek *alētheia*. But although this is true, it is also true that the majority of the occurrences of `emet indicate ideas of reliability, stability, and faithfulness, rather than of veracity or of that which is real or genuine. This emphasis is not unexpected, for reliability and faithfulness are central to the very character of God himself, as manifested principally in the establishing of his covenant with Israel. And because this is who God is, he will never say or do anything that is false. These differences in vocabulary, and the consequent issue of the background of John’s understanding of truth, have been the subject of extensive analysis for over 150 years.

4. HISTORY OF THE DEBATE

In de la Potterie’s comprehensive study, he observes four periods in the modern history of the study of truth in the Fourth Gospel.¹⁰ Those commentators of the first period do not even consider the background which would have influenced the Evangelist’s view of truth. Their work can be characterized as a brief summary of the passages which talk about truth, assuming

¹⁰For the full treatment of the debate, see de la Potterie, *op. cit.*, I: 5-18. Although his study was published in 1977, very little has been published since then, suggesting that, at least for now, the intense attention to this theme has greatly subsided, thus maintaining his historical survey as current.

the ordinary understanding of it. Because of the lack of exegesis, one finds rather general and vague descriptions. A few commentators, however, do go slightly beyond this, producing definitions reflecting both Greek and Hebrew leanings.¹¹

Beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, commentators began to realize that the Johannine theme of truth cannot be understood properly without addressing the issue of the background which lies behind and contributed to John's thinking. Students have tended to move in one of two directions. The first, which constitutes the second period and was followed by the majority until around 1960, was that John was influenced by the Greek idea of reality, or, more particularly, by Hellenistic dualism.¹² The second, composing the third period, opposed the

¹¹A. Tholuck, though still rather general, does go further in speaking of truth as "die wahre Religionserkenntnis" (*Commentar zu dem Evangelio Johannis* [Hamburg: Friedrich Perthes, 1828], 48). H. J. Holtzmann and W. Bauer look a bit more Platonic in calling truth the "true knowledge of God" (*Evangelium des Johannes*, Hand-Commentar zum Neuen Testament, IV, 1 [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1908, third edition], 46). Chr. E. Luthardt argues that *alētheia* is to be understood as the truth of being, certainly a more Platonic idea (*Das johanneische Evangelium*, two vols. [Nürnberg, 1875-1876, revised edition], II: 75). Fr. Lücke goes further in the Greek direction in saying that truth is the perfect essence or substance of God and his desire to reveal himself (*Commentar über die Schriften des Evangelisten Johannes*, two vols. [Bonn, 1840-1843, revised edition], I: 347). T. Zahn's is something of the Hebrew concept: "die stetige Ubereinstimmung zwischen Wort und Tat, die Treue und Zuverlässigkeit" (*Das Evangelium des Johannes ausgelegt* [Leipzig: Deichert, 1921, revised edition], 86). A. Schlatter makes statements that fit both traditions. There is more Greek affinity when he describes truth as that which is real. But when he goes further, his idea looks more Hebrew. He maintains that truth is a characteristic of one who does not deceive, whose word and action are consistent (*Der Evangelist Johannes* [Stuttgart: Calver, 1930], 28). Frederic Godet attempts to combine the prevailing ideas into a single definition of "truth": "The second feature, *truth*, is the reality of things adequately brought to light. And, as the essence of things is the moral idea which presides over the existence of each one of them, truth is the holy and good thought of God completely unveiled; it is God *revealed*" (*Commentary on John's Gospel* [Grand Rapids: Kregal Publications, 1978, reprint], 274).

In 1911 Büchsel wrote an article that until 1964 was the only study devoted entirely to John's view of truth. Unlike others before him, he does deal with particular texts ("Der Begriff der Wahrheit in dem Evangelium und in den Briefen des Johannes," *Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie* 15, 3 [1911]). This was also done five years later by W. Lütgert (*Die johanneische Christologie* [Gütersloh, 1916], 172-180). But both of these works are still quite general, and they do not produce, as de la Potterie observes, "une idée précise et organiquement une, qui permet d'expliquer tous les textes" (*op. cit.*, I: 7).¹²Rüling, in describing truth as "the Being" and that as one is under the truth one obtains the knowledge of true wisdom of all things, is echoing those authors from the past who gave a more metaphysical and Platonic definition. But this new emphasis on background meant that the Evangelist's greatest debt was to Plato and the classical age ("Der Begriff *alētheia* in dem Evangelium und den Briefen des Johannes," *Neue kirchliche Zeitschrift* 6 [1895]: 625-648). This approach was generally shared by J. Grill (*Untersuchungen über die Entstehung des vierten Evangeliums*, I [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1902], 201-206), H. J. Holtzmann (*Lehrbuch der neutestamentlichen Theologie*, II [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1911],

emphasis on Greek influence. Instead, commentators sought to understand truth from the background of the Old Testament or from later Jewish tradition.¹³ Out of this third category has come a view, owing to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran. The goal has been to show how the usage of *’emet* in Qumran writings is consistent with Jewish apocalyptic and sapiential works and, indeed, with the Bible itself. Attempts have then been made to show the continuity between this Jewish background and John concerning truth.¹⁴ Other authors have

422), and E. F. Scott (*The Fourth Gospel: Its Purpose and Theology* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1943, revised edition], 253).

Similar to this, others saw a connection between John’s view of truth and that of Alexandrian idealism, as seen in Philo (J. Réville, *Le quatrième évangile, son origine et sa valeur historique* [Paris, 1902], 151, 203; and A. Aall, *Geschichte der Logosidee in der christlichen Literatur* [Leipzig, 1899], 81).

C. H. Dodd does not want to attach John’s idea of truth to a particular philosophy. Instead, he argues for the background of what he calls the “Platonic tradition,” finding parallels in the Hermetic literature. He suggests that the term *alētheia* “rests upon common Hellenistic usage in which it hovers between the meanings of ‘reality,’ or ‘the ultimately real,’ and ‘knowledge of the real’” (*The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953], 171, 177). R. H. Lightfoot agrees when he writes: “It should, however, be noticed that ‘truth,’ as the word is used in this gospel, where it occurs twenty-five times, is nearer to the meaning which its Greek equivalent had acquired in the first century, viz. ‘reality,’ the knowledge of which is eternal life, than to the meaning of its Hebrew equivalent, ‘reliability’” (*St. John’s Gospel* [Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956], 86-87).

Rudolph Bultmann also belongs to the Greek tradition, but he is more specific than Dodd. He argues that the Evangelist’s background is that of Hellenistic and Gnostic dualism, particularly Mandaeism. He expresses this conviction in referring to truth as “the divine reality” (*The Gospel of John*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971], 74). This must be seen in the context of a cosmological dualism, so central in Hellenistic and Gnostic teaching. Unlike Plato, who taught that reaching the true being occurred through entering the world of ideas by means of thinking, Hellenism rooted true being in the divine. One can get there, not by mere mental achievement, but by either an ecstatic experience or divine revelation (see R. Bultmann, G. Kittel, and G. Quell, “*Alētheia, alēthēs, alēthinos, alētheuō*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. I, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964], 239-240).

¹³H. H. Wendt, for virtually every occurrence of “truth” in John, treats it in a moral sense. (The only exceptions are John 5:33; 16:7; and 4:24, where the idea is simply “verity.”) Thus, the word always carries the sense of “fidelity” and “good and right moral action” (“Der Gebrauch der Worte *alētheia, alēthēs, alēthinos* im Neuen Testament auf Grund des altt. Sprachgebrauchs,” *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 56 [1883]: 541). E. Hoskyns and N. Davey, while more objective than Wendt, are nevertheless too general: “Truth, in short, is knowledge of God through Jesus; such knowledge of God as through Jesus makes men veritably Sons of God” (*The Riddle of the New Testament* [London: Faber & Faber, 1931], 43).

¹⁴See I. de la Potterie, “L’arrière-fond du thème johannique de vérité,” in *Studia Evangelica: Papers presented to the International Congress on “The Four Gospels in 1957” held at Christ Church, Oxford, 1957*, ed. Kurt Aland, F. L. Cross, Jean Danielou, et al (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1959), 277-294; K. G. Kuhn, “Die in Palästina gefundenen hebräischen Texte und das Neue Testament,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 47 (1950): 192-211; W. Grossouw, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New

tried to connect the Evangelist's view of truth with the Essenes.¹⁵

The fourth period is concentrated in the middle of the twentieth century, although its first proponent is witnessed one hundred years earlier. De la Potterie describes it as an eclectic period because students sought to take the general ideas of both Hebrew and Greek conceptions of truth and merge them together into a logical whole. Typically, however, when this kind of blending was performed the tendency was to fall too much to the Greek side.¹⁶

Testament,” *Studia Catholica* 26 (1951): 294-297; and R. E. Brown, “The Qumran Scrolls and the Johannine Gospel and Epistles,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 17 (1955): 403-419; 559-574. S. Aalen's well-known contribution roots John's concept firmly in the Old Testament, as opposed to any kind of Greek background. He does recognize, however, that one cannot simply apply the Old Testament idea of faithfulness to every passage in the Fourth Gospel to fully understand the Johannine meaning (“‘Truth,’ a Key Word in St. John's Gospel,” in *Studia Evangelica, vol. II: Papers presented to the Second International Congress on New Testament studies held at Christ Church, Oxford, 1961, part I, The New Testament Scriptures*, ed. F. L. Cross [Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1964], 6).

¹⁵See H. Kosmala, “Hebräer—Essener—Christen: Studien zur Vorgeschichte der frühchristlichen Verkündigung,” in *Studia post-biblica*, 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959); Jürgen Becker, *Das Heil Gottes: Heils- und Sündenbegriffe in den Qumrantexten und im Neuen Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964): 217-237; and O. Betz, “Die ‘Wahrheit’ in den johanneischen Schriften,” *Excursus in Offenbarung und Schriftforschung in der Qumransekte, Wissensch. Untersuch. zum Neuen Testament*, 6 (Tübingen, 1960). Betz also shows the similarities between John's view of truth and the Essenes. But in comparing them, he also shows how they differ.

¹⁶H. G. Hoelemann suggests that the biblical concept of truth be understood as “[die Begriffe] des Seyns und der Beharrlichkeit” (“Die biblischen Grundbegriffe der Wahrheit. Akademische Amts-Antrittsvorlesung,” in *Bibelstudien*, I [Leipzig, 1859], 13). But as one goes further, it is discovered that his elaboration in terms of being and nonbeing sound more Greek than Hebrew. J. Blank (“Der johanneische Wahrheits-Begriff,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 7 [1963]: 163-173), R. H. Strachan (*The Fourth Gospel: Its Significance and Environment* [London: SCM Press, 1941, revised edition]), J. Leal (“Evangelio de San Juan,” in *La Sagrada Escritura: Texto y Commentario pur profesores de la Compania de Jesús, Nuevo Testamento*, vol. I [Madrid: BAC, 1961]), and E. C. Blackmann (“Truth,” in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* [London: SCM Press, 1950], 269-270) also attempted the same synthesis. These contributions, too, are insufficient because they are not characterized by both a careful analysis of the texts and a study of the various possible backgrounds. For the most part, they are merely concerned with dealing with the secondary works of their predecessors, trying to reach some kind of compromise between the Greek and Hebrew approaches.

Two other theses have tried to deal better with the actual texts, as well as with the various schools of thought that dominated the period. The first is that of J. Lozano (*El concepto de verdad en San Juan* [Salamanca: Calatrava, 1964]). He suggests that the best understanding of “truth” in John is that of “la realidad divina del Envío de Cristo al mundo por el Padre” (152). Though somewhat similar to that of Bultmann, he differs in treating the Johannine truth from a more Christological perspective. But even with this important distinction, one needs to ask if his emphasis on “divine reality” really captures the sense of Jesus' mission, or of his prayer for believers' sanctification in John 17:17. He certainly deserves credit for dealing with such a wide body of thought (Old Testament, Hellenistic Judaism, and gnosticism). But it is questionable whether reliance upon all of this material to explain truth in John is proper. De la Potterie asks the crucial question: “Est-il vraisemblable qu'un écrit si profondément unifié comme le IV^e

De la Potterie introduces his direction by way of a summary statement regarding the overall approach to truth in John. Either one seeks to derive John's view from the Old Testament (with its emphasis on faithfulness) or from Greek influence (with its emphasis on reality as that which is revealed). De la Potterie notes that a wealth of material exists from the intertestamental period that has received far too little attention in the quest to understand the Johannine conception of truth.¹⁷

5. LEADING REPRESENTATIVES

5.1 GREEK BACKGROUNDS

By far the two most dominant proponents of Greek influence on the Fourth Gospel are C. H. Dodd and Rudolph Bultmann, and the contributions that have had the greatest impact are *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* and *The Gospel of John*, respectively.¹⁸

evangile puisse être le résultat d'un ensemble d'influences venant d'horizons culturels si divers? S'il fallait expliquer la théologie johannique de la vérité par un tel assemblage d'éléments disparates, ne serait-elle pas quelque chose d'artificiel, sans âme et sans profondeur" (*La Vérité dans Saint Jean*, I: 16)?

The second thesis is that of Yu Ibuki (*Die Wahrheit im Johannesevangelium* [Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1972]). He too takes a Christological direction. But although he maintains that John has an awareness of the dominant writings (intertestamental literature, Judaism, Qumran, and Gnostic texts), he does not feel it necessary to refer to them. The Evangelist is not borrowing from all these different sources, but, rather, uses specific formulas which get interpreted Christologically. He is similar to Bultmann in that he accepts his "divine reality." But he progresses beyond Bultmann when he says: "Das Wesen Gottes ist die Wahrheit und offenbart diese in der Sendung des Sohnes durch den Vater" (p. 309). Ibuki explains: "...die Wahrheit wiederum gleichzusetzen ist mit der Liebes- und Wesenseinheit des Logos mit dem Vater" (p. 199). This does not satisfactorily account for the richness of the term as the Evangelist employs it.

¹⁷de la Potterie, *La Vérité dans Saint Jean*, I: 17-18.

¹⁸Dodd's work continues to be the best available in terms of surveying the various suggestions for the background of John. Therefore, it will be used even in regard to the Gnostic background, particularly Mandaeism, which Bultmann espouses. Bultmann's commentary, while not cited often in his section due to the lack of a systematic treatment, should instead be consulted by the reader to see how he applies his assumption to specific texts, because both the ideas of gnosticism and Mandaeism occur dozens of times in Bultmann's exegesis.

In the first part of Dodd's book he examines the backgrounds that could have influenced John's thought. As Dodd acknowledges, it is difficult to know precisely how much Hebrew meaning exists in Greek words when dealing with Christian writings. While Dodd certainly concedes that the Old Testament is important in the Fourth Gospel, in his judgment there is only one passage where a Greek reader would have difficulty in understanding, given one's knowledge of *alētheia*. That passage is John 3:21, in which the phrase, "practicing the truth" occurs. But there are other passages where the ideas expressed do not have an Old Testament affinity, thus carrying the Greek emphasis of eternal or ultimate reality.¹⁹

Dodd discusses the various religions and philosophical movements that are potential contributors to the unique characteristics of the Fourth Gospel.²⁰ He assumes that a Hellenistic and cosmopolitan city like Ephesus is the provenance of the Gospel, suggesting that John's readers are "devout and thoughtful persons" who would connect with its particular style and content.²¹

Dodd begins with the Hermetic literature, which he describes as the "higher religion of Hellenism." Concepts such as "true light," "true bread," and "true vine" had a likeness to Platonic thought, which stressed the eternal "forms" rather than mere physical representations. The Logos of the prologue does not appear in Plato, but it is found in Stoicism, which is the channel through which it is seen in Neoplatonism. An example of this mixing of the two philosophies is the Hermetic literature, most of which dates from the second and third centuries

¹⁹An important passage for Dodd is John 18:37, where Jesus tells Pilate that he came to testify to the truth and that all on the side of truth listen to him. Dodd maintains that Jesus came to reveal divine reality to those who otherwise would not have known it. Here, it is difficult to make a distinction between "reality" and the "apprehension of reality," which is similar to the Greek use of "reality" and "knowledge of reality." This causes Dodd to reflect back to John 8:32. The truth that one must know in order to receive freedom is knowledge of divine reality. Dodd finds confirmation in popular Hellenistic philosophy, which speaks of *gnōsis* as that which liberates (*op. cit.*, 176-177).

²⁰Here it is necessary to deal only with those that are strictly Greek or Hellenistic.

²¹*Ibid.*, 9.

A.D.²²

For similarities with John, Dodd looks to two hymns of the *Hermetica: Poimandres* and *De Regeneratione*. In these two hymns can be seen the themes of light and life, both of which are elements in John's theology. Given the eclecticism of religious beliefs in the Hellenistic world, Dodd says that one must probably allow for the possibility that part of the origin of the ideas of light and life was Zoroastrianism and Egyptian religion, respectively. But what is unknown is the origin of the actual liturgical statement in the prologue: "In Him was life; and the life was the light of men" (v. 4). But Dodd also points out that the combination is found in the Old Testament (Psa. 36:9), and it is certain that the Old Testament did influence the *Hermetica*.²³

Dodd goes on to discuss aspects of the *Poimandres* and notes the parallels with John's Gospel, namely, the Hermetic references to the "divine Revealer," the "prophet," and to the "heavenly *Anthrōpos*." Dodd concedes that there is nothing to suggest a direct relationship between the writings. But he does confidently propose that the similarities suggest a common religious background. Regarding the use of *anthrōpos*, Dodd notes that there are certainly differences between the Hermetic idea and the Johannine Son of Man. But the Son of Man in John looks more like the *anthrōpos* of *Poimandres* than the Son of Man of Jewish apocalyptic.²⁴

²²*Ibid.*, 10-11.

²³*Ibid.*, 17-19. Assuming that Dodd is correct regarding the influence of the Old Testament on the *Hermetica*, it seems more likely that the Evangelist's usage of "light" and "life" comes directly from the Old Testament, as opposed to some kind of reliance on Zoroastrianism and Egyptian religion. That these two ideas are found in other religions is hardly surprising. The fact that they are distinguishing features of John's Gospel (and "life" more than "light") may well indicate John's evangelistic purpose (20:30-31).

²⁴*Ibid.*, 33, 36, 43-44. For Dodd's complete discussion on the Son of Man, see pp. 241-249. Cullmann, however, offers a contrary conclusion: "Our practice of beginning with the meaning of each title in Judaism is especially appropriate here, for when Jesus designates himself the Son of Man, he establishes a direct contact with a particular view current in certain circles among his people. We must in fact even go beyond Judaism, because, as is the case with the Logos concept which we shall consider later, this concept also was widespread (in different forms of course) in other religions. This might seem to call for a special section devoted to the Son of Man in non-biblical religions. If we nevertheless deal with the question within the framework of our investigation of the Son of Man in Judaism, it is because the non-biblical idea of this figure did not *directly* influence Jesus and the early Church. The debate about the extra-Jewish figure of a 'heavenly man' took place within Judaism, so that the connection between Jesus the Son of Man and the non-biblical Son of Man passes through Judaism" (*The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall [London: SCM Press, 1959], 138).

In both *De Regeneratione* and *Poimandres* is the teaching of the rebirth. The body is affected by sensual pleasures, and it must be cleansed. The only way for this needed purification to occur is for the divine to come into the body and drive out all evil desires. These divine powers at work make up the *logos*, which is formed in the individual and makes one's body divine. At this point, the individual is part of the divine mind, and is also one with the universe. Dodd proceeds to show the similarities that exist between this idea and that of the Fourth Gospel. If one is to obtain eternal life, a rebirth must be experienced in which one is transferred from the *sōma* or *sarx* to the *nous* or *pneuma*. If one is to become a child of God, the Logos must perform an inward work.²⁵

Dodd is aware of the fact that *De Regeneratione* is even later than *Poimandres*, but observes that the word for "rebirth," *paliggenesia*, is pre-Christian. He therefore concludes that, at least for the term, it cannot be said that either borrows from the other. But the similarities in the *Hermetica* are still enough that, in spite of the later date, some common background for both exists. When these common elements have been identified, one is then able to see those elements that are unique because they are the distinctive product of the Christian Gospel.²⁶

From here, Dodd proceeds to discuss Philo, rabbinic Judaism, gnosticism, and Mandaism. While Bultmann puts a great deal of emphasis on gnosticism and Mandaism (which Dodd includes conceptually with the Gnostic literature), Dodd does not believe they are significant for the Fourth Gospel. Dodd certainly acknowledges the Jewish influence on the Gospel, but he prefers the Hellenistic Judaism of Philo to that of the rabbis.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 44-49. However, it must be seriously questioned whether there really is the degree of similarity that Dodd suggests. Unlike the *Hermetica*, for John the experiencing of the rebirth does not result in some sort of shift from "body" or "flesh" to "mind" or "spirit." The Gospel knows no Platonic dualism, with its belief that all things material are evil and are to be left behind through mental contemplation of the divine "forms." It is true that one born of God experiences mind renewal (Rom. 12:2). But this is directly related to how Christians conduct themselves in a sinful world, and to how Christians must react to their own sinful inclinations that remain until the return of Jesus Christ. It has nothing to do with Greek escapism. Secondly, in the Fourth Gospel it is not the Logos which produces the rebirth, but the Holy Spirit (3:5-8).

²⁶*Ibid.*, 52-53.

5.1.2 RUDOLPH BULTMANN

When trying to ascertain the relationship between gnosticism and Christianity, difficulty abounds because of the degree of syncretism present, and the resulting differences among the various expressions.²⁷ In order to find out if any Gnostic ideas go back to John's time (since it flourished in the second century A. D.), and if any possibility exists that they contributed to John's thinking, Dodd looks at Gnostic dualism, mediators, and salvation.

Gnostics dealt with human suffering by teaching that freedom from it was found in escaping the world of matter and entering into the world of the spiritual. Dodd recounts three Gnostic stories that each explain the creation of the world and the existence of good and evil. These stories are filled with opposition: light versus darkness, good versus evil, spiritual versus fleshly, and others.²⁸

The concept of a mediator, an important religious element, is considerably different. In gnosticism, the creator is not the Supreme Being, and in several systems there are a number of supernatural beings who come down to reveal the *gnōsis*. The *logos* is not given a great deal of importance. In Basilides and Valentinus (two leading Gnostic writers), the *logos* is neither creator nor redeemer. Valentinus holds that Jesus came from the aeons (of which the *logos* is one), and in his incarnation he became a *logos*. This, however, is quite different from John, which suggests that gnosticism did not have a theology of the *logos*, but worked it into their systems because of its presence in Christianity.²⁹

Thirdly, in regard to redemption, in gnosticism it is spiritual, for it is deliverance from corruptible matter, and it comes about through knowledge. This knowledge is of Gnostic myths, which teaches the nature of the heavenly spheres, the nature of the world, and the nature of people. An individual given this knowledge will be able to resist those forces that would seek to

²⁷*Ibid.*, 98.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 103-109. The similarities are too superficial to suppose any kind of borrowing of the Evangelist from gnosticism. In addition, these ideas are certainly not foreign to the Christian tradition that was known to John before his Gospel was written. Again, the similarities are probably intentional for the purpose of communicating the Christian Gospel to Greeks.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 109.

prevent one from reaching the higher world.³⁰

But the Evangelist does not spend much time dealing with these origins that are crucial to the Gnostic salvation. Only a few verses in the prologue deal with the origins of the world and people. This treatment merely provides the background to describe the context into which Jesus came. He is the revelation, and to know him is eternal life. This knowledge unites us to Jesus Christ and produces love and obedience. This is quite different even from those segments of gnosticism that relied heavily upon Christian theology and sought to apply it to the basic Gnostic structure.³¹

Dodd gives considerable attention to Mandaeism only because of the support given to it by Bultmann. The Mandaean are not referred to until nearly A. D. 800. But some have suggested that the traditions behind Mandaeism were in existence around the first century, and may have influenced the Fourth Gospel.³²

With respect to the relationship between Christianity (and John's Gospel in particular) and Mandaeism, a two-part theory has been proposed, held by Bultmann as well as others. The first part is that the core of Mandaeism is myth and mystery,³³ derived from an Iranian view of salvation. These ideas are said to be pre-Christian, and are at the foundation of Christian doctrine.³⁴ The second part is that the rituals and myths were begun by John the Baptist, out of

³⁰*Ibid.*, 112-113.

³¹*Ibid.*, 113-114.

³²*Ibid.*, 115.

³³Commenting on the incarnation of the Logos in John 1:14-18, Bultmann asserts: "It is the *language of mythology* that is here employed. Just as the ancient world and the Orient tell of gods and divine beings who appear in human form, so too the central theme of the gnostic Redeemer-myth is that a divine being, the Son of the Highest, assumed human form, put on human flesh and blood, in order to bring revelation and redemption" (*The Gospel of John*, 61).

Though critical, Dodd puts this focus on myth in helpful perspective: "But the predominance of myth is characteristic of Gnosticism, in contrast to the *Hermetica*, where it is used sparingly, and usually transparently, and to Philo, where scriptural passages understood as allegories take the place of myth, and are constantly rationalized. It may well be that the greater Gnostic teachers, like Valentinus and Bardaisan, meant the myth to be no more than the clothing for wisdom scarcely expressible by direct speech; but it seems certain that their less intelligent followers, like the author or authors of the *Pistis Sophia*, took the myths all too literally. In Mandaeism we have the end-product of this degradation" (*op. cit.*, 101-102).

³⁴Dodd, *op. cit.*, 128. Dodd counters this by pointing out that the dates of the documents are uncertain,

whom Christianity arose.³⁵ John the Baptist and his followers called themselves “Nazarenes,” which is the name Jesus took when he broke from the Baptist sect and created a new group.³⁶

Dodd concludes that Mandaeism should be seen as essentially a Gnostic system, borrowing from various sources. The Christian influence seems to come from heretical sources, such as Marcionism. It does not have importance for the Gospel of John, as Bultmann and others maintain. It can be added to the other Gnostic literature to see how these systems have modified the biblical theme of salvation. But it does not have value as a parallel to the Fourth Gospel unless earlier material can be found.³⁷ Nevertheless, it was Bultmann’s determined position that the Gospel was to be read against this Mandaean background, with the related soteriological concept of the Gnostic redeemer myth as the closest explanation of the Johannine Christ.

5.2 HEBREW BACKGROUNDS

On the other side, those arguing for a Hebrew background—either the Old Testament itself or a more broadly Jewish background—also constitute an impressive list. But just as those who contend for some kind of Greek affinity grant a degree of Hebrew influence, so those maintaining some sort of Hebrew background acknowledge the presence of some Greek flavor.

making it impossible to establish the needed order to support this idea that the main components are pre-Christian Iranian myth.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 123-125. Contrary to this, Dodd observes that John the Baptist does not figure into the Mandaean texts the way he should to support the thesis. The Mandaean texts (two important ones are the Ginza and the Book of John) contain no historical information other than what is seen in Luke. The Fourth Gospel says that John was not the light, but nowhere in the Mandaean literature does it say that John the Baptist was the light. Finally, in the Book of John, the Baptist is often identified by his Arabic name, which is what appears in the Koran. This suggests that while John the Baptist may have been mentioned before, he does not become prominent until the Islamic period.

³⁶Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 108. Considering the difference between Jesus’ calling of the first disciples in John 1:35-51 and Mark 1:16-20, Bultmann offers: “The two narratives cannot be harmonized as historical accounts; indeed any attempt to do so destroys the specific intention of each narrative. Yet since the two scenes related in Mark 1.16-20 are not historical accounts, it is possible that the Johannine narrative contains reliable historical tradition, namely, the fact that there were erstwhile disciples of the Baptist among Jesus’ first disciples, who perhaps joined him when he broke away from the Baptist.” The corresponding note reads: “The historically indisputable fact that Jesus had himself been baptised by the Baptist, proves that Jesus belonged for a time to the disciples of the Baptist.”

³⁷Dodd, *op. cit.*, 130.

For Kuyper, there is a clear difference between the Hebrew and Greek concepts of truth. The Hebrew *emet* denotes the ideas of faithfulness and dependability. A similar term, *hesed*, carries the meanings, “devotion,” “loyalty,” and “loving-kindness.” Kuyper observes that when they appear together *emet* follows *hesed*, and he believes that “they become a hendiadys in which the second term intends to confirm and enrich the concept of the first. This, then, would impressively stress the concept of faithful loyalty or dependability in covenantal fellowships.”³⁸

The Greek *alētheia*, on the other hand, is “something abstract, a concept of the mind.”³⁹ This is contrasted against *emet*, which is seen as a “God-man relationship manifesting faithfulness.”⁴⁰ Kuyper does acknowledge some Greek influence, for example, in the discussions about the real or genuine vine (John 15:1) and the real or genuine bread and drink (John 6:55).⁴¹ But this is of minor significance compared to the Hebrew concept of faithfulness within the covenant relationship.⁴²

³⁸L. J. Kuyper, “Grace and Truth: An Old Testament Description of God and Its Use in the Fourth Gospel,” *Interpretation* 18 (1964): 6-7.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 15.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 15.

⁴²Two examples of this focus on faithfulness are worth mentioning. On pp. 16-17 he discusses John 17:17-19. The word “sanctify” usually denotes that of separating oneself from something for service to God. Kuyper believes that something further must be meant, since in v. 14 Jesus has already established this idea of separation by telling his disciples that the world hates them. Kuyper suggests that it should be understood as “faithful devotion to or perseverance in their mission.” Jesus prays that the disciples would be sanctified in the truth. “Truth” is the “faithfulness and dependability of God which he has manifested in Jesus Christ, his Son, and which is to be communicated through Jesus to his disciples.” Kuyper believes that the support for this view is in v. 19, where he assumes that when Jesus talks about sanctifying himself for the sake of his disciples, he is referring to his own faithfulness to his mission. Just as Jesus was faithful to his mission, so the disciples are to be faithful to theirs.

It seems that Kuyper is forcing his emphasis on faithfulness. It is true that v. 14 indicates a separation between the disciples and those opposed to the message given to them (even though *hagiazō* is not used). But it is not mere repetition that one finds in vv. 17-19. This separation from the world for service to God is only possible because of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would directly make known all that they needed (John 16:13). But in their consecration to God, they were not left to themselves to remember what Jesus had told them to do. They would receive the necessary divine help to accomplish their task of testifying to this divine revelation.

As for Kuyper’s support in v. 19, it is absolutely correct that Jesus was faithful to his mission. But it is

Finally, it must be noted that Kuyper does not discuss the particular background for John's thinking. However, it appears appropriate to conclude that his emphasis on covenant faithfulness signifies his belief that the proper background is the Old Testament specifically, rather than other Jewish branches (such as apocalyptic or sapiential writings, or the literature of Qumran).

5.2.2 LEON MORRIS

Morris' view of truth is similar, though not as exclusive. The Old Testament is certainly a major background, evidenced by the number of citations and allusions. He does not dismiss outright other contributors, mentioning rabbinic Judaism, Jewish mysticism, Qumran, and apocalypticism.⁴³ The observed similarities cause Morris to say, "But something of each is to be discerned in the background."⁴⁴ But he also says that as real as the similarities are, the differences are equally as real. Therefore, one must be careful not to attach too much significance to these other possibilities.

Morris, however, does not want to give the impression that John's thought is Jewish. Thus, he concludes: "It must be insisted that the background to John is the early Christian church. John's fundamental ideas are the basic Christian ideas."⁴⁵ It is true, of course, that John's ideas are those of the early church. Moreover, when Christian theology runs up against other religions or philosophies, John uncompromisingly defends the faith given to the church by Jesus Christ. But it seems a bit artificial to speak of Christianity as both the background and content. John

more than just a model for the disciples. Jesus' perfect obedience is the ground of salvation. Without that obedience—which human beings can never perfectly duplicate—the disciples (and all believers to follow) could never be freed from sin to serve God in true holiness.

On pp. 17-18 he addresses John 18:37-38, in which Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" Kuyper believes that the reason for Pilate's confusion was because Jesus was speaking of truth in terms of God's faithfulness, grace, and redemption (Hebrew concepts), while Pilate was only capable of grasping truth in terms of true versus false, and real versus unreal (Greek concepts). While there is certainly a difference of emphasis between *emet* and *alētheia*, it is incorrect to maintain such a strict distinction between the two. Some overlap does exist and therefore more latitude must be given to Pilate's view of truth.

⁴³Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995, revised edition), 55-56.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 58.

was a Christian, but he was Jewish in ethnicity. It would seem that this should have more significance for the Gospel than Morris gives it. It seems perfectly consistent to suggest that the background for John's Gospel is the Old Testament, but the content of his Gospel is distinctly Christian.

5.2.3 C. K. BARRETT

Barrett also prefers the Hebrew idea of faithfulness, though he certainly does not neglect the Greek understanding of *alētheia* as “real” or “genuine.” Regarding the relationship between the two terms, Barrett explains: “*Alētheia* retains in John more the meaning of *’emet*. Sometimes, as in ordinary Greek usage, it means simply that which corresponds to fact, is not false; but more characteristically it means the Christian revelation brought by and revealed in Jesus. This revelation arises out of the faithfulness of God to his own character, and to his promises, of which it is the fulfillment.”⁴⁶ While both aspects of truth are present in this definition, it seems that the emphasis is on the idea of faithfulness.

Even with favoring the concept of faithfulness, with its strong connection to the Old Testament, when Barrett discusses the various backgrounds to John's Gospel, he appears to be more interested in the similarities, rather than considering them equally with the differences. This is particularly true for apocalypticism, which is still a movement in the Hebrew tradition.⁴⁷ But it is striking that he seems to devote more attention to finding the common ground between the Gospel and the *Hermetica* than to discussing the differences.⁴⁸

⁴⁶C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978, revised edition), 167.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 31-32. The word “apocalypse” comes from *apokalyptō*, which means “to uncover.” The literature then has to do with the unveiling or revealing of that which was not known before. It can obviously refer to the disclosing of future events; but it also refers to the revealing of secrets, or “mysteries” existing in the present. Common themes here would be heaven, angels, and similar ideas. Barrett points to John's vocabulary, which describes Jesus as the Son of Man. Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, judgment, and eternal life. The present and future emphases in apocalypticism are seen in John with his recording of Jesus' introduction, “The hour is coming and now is...” although this blending is certainly unique. Barrett does discuss the eschatological differences on pp. 67-70.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 38-39. Barrett acknowledges that no direct relationship exists between John and the *Hermetica*.

Finally, it is interesting to note that Barrett does not think very much of the idea that there are significant similarities with the Qumran community: “But when the passages in John which are really illuminated, and whose exegesis is in any way determined, by the Scrolls are counted up the result is extremely meagre.”⁴⁹

5.2.4 IGNACE DE LA POTTERIE

De la Potterie rejects either position which seeks to define the Johannine conception of truth in categories too exclusively Hebrew or Greek. While by no means dismissing Greek similarities, in trying to ascertain the background, de la Potterie emphasizes the various forms of Jewish thought which ideas, though seen at the end of the Old Testament period, find their fullest expression in post-biblical Judaism. To fully understand the background to, and consequently the thought in, John, one must look to the LXX, the Qumran literature, and particularly to the apocalyptic and sapiential writings.⁵⁰ Elsewhere, de la Potterie explains the relationship: “C’est dans cette double tradition qu’il faut probablement situer les écrits de Qumrân; et c’est par ce même milieu littéraire, croyons-nous, que s’explique le mieux l’emploi johannique de la notion de vérité.”⁵¹

In the wisdom literature, “truth” and “wisdom” are used synonymously. Thus, the idea of truth is not only concerned with right thinking, but also with right action or conduct. This is especially evident in Proverbs (8:7; 23:23).⁵²

However, the idea of knowing is crucial in the *Hermetica*; and even though the Evangelist never uses the word *gnōsis*, the idea is very important to him. The description of God as light and life, as well as the concept of rebirth, are shared by both. Finally, the need for mediation between God and people to occur through the *logos* is also a similar theme. Barrett does admit, of course, that John’s Logos is different in that he became flesh, as well as how each is received.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁰de la Potterie, *La Vérité dans Saint Jean*, I: 17-18.

⁵¹de la Potterie, “L’arrière-fond du thème johannique de vérité,” 278. “It is in this double tradition that one must probably situate the writings of Qumran; and it is by this same literary environment, we believe, that explains better the Johannine use of the notion of truth.” In addition to the Qumran writings, Apocrypha, and Pseudepigrapha, de la Potterie also relies upon books of the Old Testament, particularly Proverbs and Daniel.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 279.

Besides the connection between truth and wisdom, de la Potterie also emphasizes the union between truth and the revelation of mysteries, found in both the apocalyptic and sapiential literature. This must be understood in an eschatological framework. To possess the truth is to possess the revelation of mysteries concerning the salvation of God, which remains partial until the final judgment.⁵³

In the second part of his chapter in *Studia Evangelica*, de la Potterie examines specific ideas in the Johannine corpus in light of his proposed background. The most common of these is the “Spirit of truth.” De la Potterie says that the Evangelist takes this term from Palestinian Judaism (he mentions the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Qumran literature), though John certainly gives it his own meaning.⁵⁴

Another idea is that of witnessing to the truth, occurring twice in the Gospel (5:33 and 18:37). The closest parallel is the Manual of Discipline of Qumran. It has an eschatological significance, causing de la Potterie to examine the two passages in John and determine that they too are eschatological in nature.⁵⁵

⁵³*Ibid.*, 281. It is undeniable that the concept of the revelation of that which was unknown before (or known only partially) is central in John. But it must be noted that nowhere in the Gospel is the term “mystery” used to describe what has been made known.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 286-287. The fact that the term occurs in these sources, however, does not necessarily prove that they served as part of the Evangelist’s background. Given that “truth” and “Spirit” are both Old Testament terms, it is entirely reasonable to suggest that John could have used this term regardless of whether or not it appears anywhere else.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 286-287. He believes that the phrase in John 5:33 is to be seen in the context of John 1:19-28, which records the actual work of John the Baptist. De la Potterie claims: “Le Baptiste rend témoignage devant les Juifs soupçonneux venus de Jérusalem (1, 19-28); il faut comprendre non pas qu’il rend témoignage à Jésus qui est la vérité, mais qu’il a été le premier témoin de la révélation eschatologique, en faisant connaître le Messie en Israël” (287).

To be sure, in the advent of Jesus Christ a new age has dawned, of which John the Baptist is the forerunner. Moreover, it is the last age in redemptive history; in that sense it is eschatological. But it does not appear to be so in the usual sense that de la Potterie suggests, as seen in the Manual of Discipline. The work of the Baptist is not set in the context of judgment in John 1. It is set in this context in John 5, in which the phrase actually occurs. But this is expected given the Jewish opposition present at this point of Jesus’ ministry. It must be concluded that the ministry of the witness of John the Baptist is not primarily concerned with the eschatological judgment. Today is the day of grace, and salvation is offered to all who will come. John writes: “He [the Baptist] came for a witness, that he might bear witness of the light, that all might believe through him” (1:7). (It does appear that the Synoptic Gospels talk more of the eschatological judgment than John [Matt. 3:2; Luke 3:3-9]. But that is not pertinent here because the idea of witnessing to the truth is found only in John’s Gospel.)

A third concept is that of hearing the truth and then being sent to proclaim it. This is clearly not Hellenistic or Gnostic, which emphasized the need to “see” in the sense of “realize through an ecstatic experience.”⁵⁶ But the idea of hearing and then responding to a message is found in the apocalyptic literature, including Daniel.⁵⁷

De la Potterie summarizes his findings by concluding that there is a remarkable similarity with the apocalyptic writings, in which also the theme of revelation is quite strong. There is also a connection with the wisdom literature, but it is not seen as clearly. He reiterates that the two writings share some common traits, which do combine in the Qumran literature.⁵⁸

5.2.5 R. E. BROWN

In arguing for a more Hebrew understanding of *alētheia*, Brown does not reduce the background to one particular movement. He seems to be the most favorable to the Old Testament,⁵⁹ while he also recognizes some aspects of rabbinic Judaism.⁶⁰ Brown is attracted to

For John 18:37, de la Potterie maintains that Jesus is the true king and judge over those who chose to accuse him rather than to submit to the revelation that he brought. This is indeed true, but the idea that Jesus is the judge over his accusers—needed to make the eschatological argument—is not found here. The image of “king” is helpful, but it is not enough to make the case for a direct connection with the Qumranian phrase.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 291-292.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 292-293. In addition to being found in apocalypticism, it is also a biblical concept. Time and again the Old Testament prophets were told a message from the LORD and then sent to proclaim it to the people, with the intention that they respond appropriately. That the phrase itself may not be used does not matter. The ideas are clearly similar, and it seems unnecessary to make the Evangelist dependent on books outside the established canon for the phrase itself (Daniel obviously excluded).

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 293.

⁵⁹Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, two vols. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966, 1970), I-XII: LIX-LXI. Although John has fewer direct quotations than the Synoptic Gospels, the number of Old Testament allusions is highly significant. Also, several times John makes mention of Moses and the Exodus and Sinai events, indicating some important connections between God’s covenant activity then and now in the sending of Jesus.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, I-XII: LXI-LXII. For rabbinic Judaism, Brown discusses examples throughout his commentary, but here he briefly mentions some similarities that have been noted, the supporters of which can be seen in the pages cited. There are aspects like the hidden Messiah and the creative power of the Torah (which in their opinion John changes to the “Word”). In addition, Jesus’ discourses on feast days correspond to themes in the synagogue readings for those feasts. Also mentioned are parallels between John 6 and the Passover Haggadah in the Seder.

de la Potterie's focus on the apocalyptic and sapiential writings.⁶¹

Regarding the presence of Hellenistic philosophy, Hellenistic Judaism, and their relationship to the Fourth Gospel, Brown believes that it is not simply a question of Hellenistic influence, but whether that influence came through Judaism or from outside it (which he rejects). Brown asks: "Was the evangelist particularly familiar with Greek thought so that he reinterpreted the Gospel message in Hellenistic terms?"⁶² It has been suggested that the Hellenistic Judaism of Philo figures prominently in John's Gospel.⁶³ It is true that both use the *logos* idea, but John uses it far less than Philo and does not attach the biblical imagery to it that Philo does. Also, the philosophical language and allegories found in Philo are not seen in John. But they do share a common background in the Old Testament, which Brown suggests best explains the general similarities and the striking differences.⁶⁴

6. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Though not a new idea, increased attention has been given to the opinion that it is inaccurate to make such a sharp distinction between the Hebrew and Greek words for "truth." This contrast has been based primarily on the etymology of *`emet* and *alētheia*. The Hebrew term comes from the verb *`aman*, meaning "to be firm, trustworthy, faithful." The Greek word originates from *lēthō* or *lanthanō* ("to forget," "to escape notice," "to be hidden"), with the Alpha privative creating the negation, thus giving the idea of disclosure or revelation. For such a strong contrast to exist, it must be shown that the etymology played a significant role in shaping the meaning in the classical and Hellenistic periods.⁶⁵

Prior to these periods, even Homer usually uses *alētheia* to indicate that which is the opposite of lying. In the classical period, for example in Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, similar

⁶¹*Ibid.*, I-XII: 500.

⁶²*Ibid.*, I-XII: LVI.

⁶³Dodd, *op. cit.*, 133.

⁶⁴Brown, *op. cit.*, I-XII: LVII-LVIII.

⁶⁵Thiselton, *op. cit.*, 874-875.

understandings of *alētheia* are the most common. Representing the Hellenistic age, Epictetus and Philo use *alētheia* to signify the opposite of deception or delusion.⁶⁶ It is simply not the case that the etymology controlled the meaning.

This comes into sharper focus when the Hebrew and Greek words confront each other in the LXX. *Alētheia* is the most common Greek word used to translate *ʿemet*, but it is not the only one. At times *pistis* (which is not found in John) is used as the parallel, with the usual meaning of “faithfulness” (I Sam. 16:23; Prov. 3:3). But there are other times when *alētheia* is used for the idea of faithfulness (Gen. 24:27; Pss. 61:7; 71:22; Isa. 16:5). It is also not uncommon for *ʿemet* to be used to indicate veracity, with *alētheia* being the expected Greek parallel (Gen. 42:16; Psa. 43:3; Prov. 8:7; Isa. 43:9). So it must be observed that in the LXX there is a degree of overlap, and this overlap must be determined by the context, not by the etymology or a particular field (such as Greek philosophy).⁶⁷

The presence of overlap, however, does not suggest a perfect substitution. While *alētheia* can be used to capably convey the sense of faithfulness, and *ʿemet* can adequately express veracity, there are still aspects of each word that the other cannot quite reach. The significance of *ʿemet* for the concept of covenant faithfulness is not equaled by *alētheia*. Likewise, the ideas of what is real or genuine and revelation are seen in *alētheia* to an extent beyond the ability of *ʿemet*. Thus, Thiselton’s approach is that “John uses *alētheia* regularly in the sense of reality in contrast to falsehood or mere appearance, but that this in no way provides evidence of Gk. affinities of ideas, or of disregard for the OT tradition.”⁶⁸ Crump appears to go further when he writes: “John’s usage is not ‘Greek,’ it is ‘Johannine,’ and as we shall see it is not incompatible with an OT/Hebrew background.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 875.

⁶⁷J. Barr concludes: “The whole treatment of *ʿemet* and its relation to *alētheia* in biblical theology is damaged by two things, the etymologizing method and the way in which the results achieved by it appear to fit into the thought contrast of Greek philosophy and Hebrew theology” (*The Semantics of Biblical Language* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961], 199).

⁶⁸Thiselton, *op. cit.*, 889.

⁶⁹D. M. Crump, “Truth,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 861. He goes on to provide the needed explanation: “The

In spite of the fact that such a strict separation between the two terms is unwarranted, the author nevertheless does maintain that something of the two emphases can be seen, even though John goes beyond them both to capture the unique revelation that has come in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word. Regarding the actual background of the Gospel, it seems undeniable that it is the Old Testament which drives the Evangelist's writing. To be sure, the content is Christian; but for John this is nothing less than the correct understanding of God's covenant promises to his people. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan, and John uses the Old Testament—both quotations and allusions—to point to that revelation.⁷⁰ Given this importance of the Old Testament witness for proof of Jesus' testimony, it seems incorrect to attempt to link John's Gospel with the broader Jewish backgrounds as seen in the apocalyptic and sapiential writings, or in rabbinic Judaism. This is not to imply that no similarities exist, or that the Evangelist did not know about the movements and works produced, or even that John did not intentionally use phrases popular in these circles in order to speak to them. But considering John's view of the Old Testament, it is unlikely that anything else would have had the kind of influence so as to serve as the Gospel's background. Moreover, while it would be unwise to attempt to establish the background based on a particular part of the Old Testament, the significance of Moses is considerable,⁷¹ with John 1:17 almost acting like the thesis of the Gospel.

But it is also the author's contention that the Greek presence in the Gospel is a deliberate

incarnation of God in the Logos is presented as the supreme disclosure of the Lord who revealed himself to Moses in the giving of the Law at Sinai (1:17). Jesus shows us God as he really is. This assertion sets the stage for John's use of 'truth.' Contrary to Greek background, truth is personal, not merely intellectual; truth is acquired through the revelation of God, not through mental application; truth is not abstract, but has been individually revealed in history" (861). This description does rely upon the ideas of reality and revelation. The other half of the "Johannine" designation is the trustworthiness of this revelation, derived from the very character of the God who has given it. In defining the uniqueness of the Johannine approach, it would have been more helpful to better include this second aspect. The idea, then, would be that *alētheia* in John points to the revelation of God's faithfulness in the fulfilling of his covenant promises in Christ.

⁷⁰For a helpful discussion on the importance of the Old Testament's witness to Jesus, see Boice, *op. cit.*, 100-110.

⁷¹See T. Francis Glasson, *Moses in the Fourth Gospel* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

attempt to show the relevancy of the Christian Gospel for Greeks. There are words used in John that definitely originate in the Old Testament, but which were important in Greek thought as well. John is not crafting a Hellenized version of the Christian message. He is using terms that Greeks will better understand, even though he is using them in ways far different from those of Greek philosophy and religion. This is not to say that John's evangelistic focus is strictly Greek, nor even that it is primarily Greek. It is to say that among those who support an Old Testament background for the Fourth Gospel, the importance of evangelism for Greeks is far more significant than has been suggested.⁷² If this thesis is correct, then the idea of truth in John reaches even greater heights regarding the evangelistic purpose of the Gospel (which is at least a possible meaning of John 20:30-31). For John is able to combine the emphases of covenant faithfulness and the revelation of what was previously hidden or shadowy into a powerful and eloquent witness to Jesus Christ. Being firmly rooted in the Old Testament, he ingeniously puts forth a compelling argument for Jews, including Jewish proselytes, as well as God-fearing Gentiles, while at the same time employing terms that are also familiar to pagan Greeks, thus demonstrating that the revelation of Jesus Christ is indeed for the world.

⁷²Morris and Barrett are too general; Brown touches on it briefly, but only in the section dealing with the Gospel's value as an encouragement to believers. D. A. Carson is undoubtedly correct in his belief that John's evangelistic emphasis is on Jews and Jewish proselytes (*The Gospel According to John* [Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press and Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991], 90-91). But it does seem likely that the Evangelist is also concerned to reach Greeks who remain outside Judaism. Commenting on John's use of *alēthinos*, Aalen at least touches on the idea when he observes: "But the borrowing of even the word betrays an interest in the people who used it, a concern for their needs and situation" (*op. cit.*, 14). The tendency in Johannine studies is to conclude that the Gospel has either a missionary purpose or an edificatory purpose. Either it was addressed to non-Christian Jews and Jewish proselytes for their salvation, or to Christians for their growth. It is the present author's contention that the Gospel was written with an evangelistic interest in those who possessed an adequate enough knowledge of the Old Testament to be able to see how Jesus is the fulfillment of it. Therefore, those with little or no scriptural background or knowledge would miss a good bit of the Evangelist's argument. However, the presence of certain vocabulary and style was a deliberate attempt to reach these kinds of people, particularly in Ephesus, through Christians. The Gospel of John provided help for Christians in sharing the message of Jesus with them, if not creating a bridge for them to progress to the point of reading the Gospel on their own.

