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Revelation and Truth in Johannine Theology

David J. Hawkin

The heart of the Gospel of John lies in its theology of revelation: the Father is revealed in the Son. This message is expressed in unambiguous terms in the Prologue and continues throughout the Gospel. The Word was made flesh and we have beheld the glory of the Father in the Son (John 1:14). The Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ, and although no one has ever seen the Father, the Son has made him known (John 1:17-18). The Prologue, then, besides stating that the Son reveals the Father, also links the revelation to *alētheia* or truth. This is a relationship which receives further thematization throughout the rest of the Gospel. This is especially so, for example, in 8:31ff., where ‘truth’ is carefully interwoven with the ‘word’ of Jesus which gives eternal life (John 8:51). The identification of truth and the revelation of the Father through the Son is stated most explicitly, however, in John 14:6, ‘No one comes to the Father except through me...I am the way, the truth and the life’.

Yet, despite what the Gospel says, it is not completely clear how we are to understand truth in the Gospel of John and how it helps us to grasp the revelation of the Father. C.H. Dodd speaks for many commentators when, in his *Johannine Epistles*,¹ he defines *alētheia* as ‘the ultimate reality as revealed in Christ’. In *The Interpretation of the Gospel of John*² he describes *alētheia* as ‘the eternal reality as revealed to men— either the reality itself or the revelation of it’. Dodd is giving *alētheia* in the Fourth Gospel the sense that it generally has in Greek thought where it means ‘reality’ as opposed to ‘appearance’. Rudolf Bultmann, similarly to Dodd, understands *alētheia* against a hellenistic background. Bultmann, however, thinks that the author of the Fourth Gospel has creatively used *alētheia* to give revelation a distinctively Johannine meaning. Bultmann’s article on *alētheia* in Kittel’s *Wörterbuch* is the best concise statement of his thoughts on this.

In this complex piece of writing, Bultmann argues that *alētheia* develops out of hellenistic dualism, and it is this which determines its unique use in John. For John, *alētheia* denotes ‘divine reality’, a reality which is different from that in which humans find themselves. Moreover, *alētheia* discloses itself and thus

becomes revelation. Thus Bultmann accepts completely the Greek background of *alêtheia*, but attempts to modify its interpretation in the Johannine writings. He maintains that when John sets up the antithesis between truth and falsehood (*alêtheia* and *pseudos*) as in 8:44, he is not setting up a cosmic dualism. Rather, *alêtheia* and *pseudos* are to be understood as genuine possibilities of human existence. Bultmann says—

Alêtheia is thus the reality of God which is, of course, opposed and inaccessible to human existence as it has constituted itself through the fall from God, i.e., through sin, and revelation is a miraculous occurrence beyond the reach of the being which is alien to God. Yet in revelation there is disclosed to man the true possibility of his own being when, in face of the Word of revelation which encounters him, he decides to surrender himself.³

Thus Bultmann finds in the Johannine concept of truth a justification for both his existential hermeneutic and his dialectical theology. Similarly to Karl Barth, Bultmann sought through dialectical theology to secure both God's divinity and his revelation. He eschewed all attempts at natural theology and Schleiermachiian neo-Protestantism. God is only known through revelation. Humans, mired in sin, can have no knowledge of God except by revelation freely given by God himself. There is no human proof of God, only God's proof of himself, the proper response to which is trusting faith. In the Johannine revelation we are faced with the decisive act of faith.

Are Bultmann and Dodd right? Does *alêtheia* refer to eternal or divine realities, as in hellenism? Or is it far more complex? For although the Fourth Gospel is written in Greek and draws from a hellenistic environment, its language has a Semitic flavour and its message is imbued with Jewish religion and culture. Is it possible that the author was writing in Greek, but thinking in Hebrew? In Hebrew there is no exact equivalent for *alêtheia*. The Septuagint renders the Hebrew word *emet* as *alêtheia* and yet the two words do not have identical meanings. *Emet* primarily has the connotation of 'trustworthiness' or 'steadfastness' and is used as an attribute of God in this sense. In Hebrew *emet* is, in other words, moral rather than intellectual.⁴

Moreover, Ignace de la Potterie has shown that apocalyptic and sapiential literature of the post-biblical period illuminates the meaning of *alêtheia* in the

Fourth Gospel. In this literature *alêtheia* is moral, as in the Hebrew Bible, but indicates ‘uprightness’. La Potterie notes that important Johannine phrases such as ‘doing the truth’ (John 3:21), ‘in spirit and truth’ (John 4:23f), and ‘in truth’ (John 17:19) have no parallel in hellenistic literature. These phrases do, however, have parallels in such books as *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and in some of the writings found at Qumran. Moreover, in some apocalyptic literature *alêtheia* refers to revealed truth, as in Daniel 10:21 where the plan of God is written in the ‘book of truth’⁵ (cf. Wis. 3:9; IQH 7, 26f.; IQH 6, 6). In the Fourth Gospel ‘to speak’ often signifies revelation as in, for example, John 17:17, ‘thy word is truth’ and John 8:40, ‘I told you the truth which is from God’. In Hellenistic and Gnostic dualism, on the other hand, *alêtheia* is not a word which is heard, but the divine essence seen or contemplated upon arrival at the spiritual goal (CH 8, 3). La Potterie concludes that in the Fourth Gospel *alêtheia* is not ‘an object of intellectual research, but the essential principle of the moral life, of sanctity’⁶. Thus in John 17:17 the phrase, ‘sanctify them in the truth’, essentially means, ‘Set them on a course of holiness by the [power of the] saving word of revelation’. Expressions such as ‘doing the truth’ and ‘walking in the truth’, have a rich, distinctively Johannine connotation which emphasizes the power of the *alêtheia* which abides in us.

La Potterie’s work is extremely significant, for he has shown that those, such as Bultmann, who interpret *alêtheia* in the Greek sense of ‘reality’ are off the mark. As Hans Küng says—

John, although using very different terminology, is speaking of the same distinctive feature as Paul when he calls Jesus the way, the truth and the life and illustrates this with images of Christ as the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate, the true vine, the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep. Jesus here is evidently not a name which must be constantly on our lips, but the way of life’s truth which must be practised. The truth of Christianity is not something to be ‘contemplated’, ‘theorized’, but to be ‘done’, ‘practiced’. The Christian concept of truth is not —like the Greek—contemplative-theoretical, but operative-practical. It is a truth which is not merely to be sought and found, but to be pursued, made true, verified and tested in truthfulness. A truth which aims at practice, which calls to the way, which bestows and makes possible a new life.⁷

Statements about truth in the Fourth Gospel are not, then, metaphysical statements. To say that Jesus is the way because he is truth, as in John 14:6, or to say that the Father and Son are one, as in John 10:30 (cf. 10:38; 14:10, 11, 20; 17:11, 21, 22), is not to make a statement about a unity in essence but to claim that there is 'unity of action'.⁸ As Jey J. Kanagaraj says, 'John presents Jesus as the one who had seen the Father and his works and he is sent to reveal precisely the same God by doing the same works'.⁹ What our study of *alētheia* has shown is that in Johannine theology the unity of the Father and the Son is central and that christology and ethics are inextricably bound together. Moreover, its importance in Johannine theology indicates how important it was for the community which produced the Gospel.

With this in mind, let us take another look at the Johannine schism. There is now a scholarly consensus that the Johannine literature (that is, the Fourth Gospel, the Johannine Epistles and Revelation) comes from a distinctive Johannine community. I John 2:19 tells us that this community split, evidently over christological and ethical beliefs. The first epistle of John is written in response to the beliefs of the schismatics who have now left the community. In reading I John we can discern that the schismatics seem to have made seven basic affirmations. These can be reconstructed from the Epistle as the writer uses three formulaic expressions to attribute views to the schismatics. In 1:6, 8 and 10 the writer introduces the beliefs of the schismatics with the expression, 'If we say...'. These three verses read,

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not do the truth... (1:6f).

If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us... (1:8f).

If we say we have not [ever] sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us (1:10).

In 2:4, 6, and 9 the writer introduces further beliefs of the schismatics by the introductory formula, 'He who says...'. These three verses read—

He who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked (2:6).

He who says he is in the light and hates his brother still is in the darkness still (2:9).

He who says 'I know him' but disobeys his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him (2:4f).

Finally, in 4:20 the writer sums up the crux of the matter with a single use of the formula, 'If anyone says...'. This verse reads—

If anyone says, 'I love God', and hates his brother, he is a liar (4:20).

These statements enable us to reconstruct the beliefs of the schismatics. Central to their beliefs was the idea that they could have direct communion with God without the mediation of Christ. They claimed to 'walk in the light', by which they meant that they had received mystical enlightenment. This was not predicated on a historical revelation and did not imply ethical conduct. The schismatics also appear to have believed that this mystical-communion meant sinlessness and there was thus no need for the redemptive activity of Christ. When they spoke of 'knowing' Christ, they did not mean the earthly Christ but rather the power of mystical enlightenment.

Much of the discussion about the schismatics has thus revolved around whether they were of a gnosticising type. If the schismatics did hold gnosticising beliefs their ethical stance would be entirely explicable. They were illuminated by a mystical knowledge which was independent of the earthly Jesus. As Jesus' earthly life had no salvific importance, neither has ours, ethical conduct was irrelevant. Discussions of the gnosticising tendencies of the schismatics then lead to a discussion about what kind of gnostics existed in this period, and whether the gnostic influence came from outside the community, and so on. Such discussions tend to obfuscate the central issue which is addressed in the Epistle. The central issue hinges on the understanding of revelation. The author of I John understands revelation in the same way in which the author of the Fourth Gospel understands it. The schismatics understand it differently. The key to the Epistle's understanding lies in its first six verses. Here, in words that echo the opening of the Fourth Gospel, the writer of the epistle first emphasizes hearing, seeing, and touching, and then in verse 6 says, 'If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and we do not do the truth'.

Most commentators recognize that the writer is here being deliberately anti-docetic and wishes to stress the humanity of Jesus. But what is missed is how

these emphases are tied to *alētheia* in verse 6: the schismatics do not 'do the truth'. The expression 'doing the truth' is one found in the Fourth Gospel (John 3:21) and is, as La Potterie has pointed out, a Semitic expression. By introducing the expression at the very beginning of his epistle, the author of I John is carefully setting his argument in the context of a non-hellenistic view of truth. Truth is to be done, not contemplated. Christ's revelation of the Father was truth because he reveals not his essence (what the Father is), but what he does. Thus he can say in 2:4, 'He who says, "I know him", but disobeys his commandments, is a liar and the truth is not in him'. And in 2:21 he can say, 'I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and know that no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?' Here he is making it quite clear that 'to know the truth' is not to know God metaphysically, but to know him through the concrete revelation of Christ. The *alētheia* of God is divinely communicated to humans and demands concrete obedience and action. The author of I John has the same distinct notion of *alētheia* as the writer of the Fourth Gospel. And this is why he sees the connection between christology and ethics as so vital. The writer of I John has been criticized for giving no concrete ethical injunctions, but rather making vague requests to his readers to 'walk just as Christ walked', to be pure 'just as Christ is pure', and to act righteously 'just as Christ is righteous'. But those who criticize I John for this failing are like the inept Athenian who, in Plato's *Republic*, when asked to define justice, lists the actions of a good man. Socrates rightly condemns this approach as inadequate, for he wanted a heuristic definition, one which would apply to all places and all times. Similarly, the author of I John knows that giving lists of moral actions will not adequately describe the power of *alētheia* which is made available through the revelation of God in Christ.

The author of I John is separated from his schismatic adversaries by a wide gulf. What separates them is nothing less than the understanding of the central affirmation of Christianity that God revealed himself in Christ. The schismatics seem to have had a Greek understanding of *alētheia* in which the revelation was the reality of God. To know God was to know this reality. Such knowledge came through mystical experience and eschewed the earthly realm which was, in hellenistic dualism, imperfect and intractable. The author of I John affirms that the revelation of God is Christ himself. God has entered into our realm of experience, and he is to be found in our relationships with other people. Moreover, the truth of the revelation of God does not, like the ideas

of the Greek philosophers, stand independent of the messenger. Verba docent, exempla trahunt—Words teach, examples carry us with them. To be ‘in the truth’ and to ‘do the truth’ is to follow Christ. On the other hand, the ultimate reality of hellenistic dualism is, if we may borrow a phrase from Shakespeare, ‘sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought’ (Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1). Such a view of ultimate reality does not lead to the realization that to be truly human is to find oneself by loving others.

In conclusion we should note an irony. In Bultmann’s thought the Johannine and Pauline literature form the two central pillars of his theology. He is, moreover, firmly in the tradition of Irenaeus as a great defender of the centrality of ‘the Word became Flesh’ in Johannine thought. Yet he never saw clearly that *alētheia* in John reflected a Hebrew worldview rather than a Greek one. (He was able to press *alētheia* into the service of his existential philosophy only by ignoring this fact.)

Moreover, as has been pointed out by many critics, Bultmann’s existentialism is individualistic and introspective and lacks concrete engagement with the world.¹⁰ In fact, one might argue that Bultmann has more in common with the Johannine schismatics than he has with the author of I John! But that is an argument which must wait for another day.

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ENDNOTES

1. C.H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946), p. 145.
2. C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1963), p. 177.
3. R. Bultmann, “*Alētheia*” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (ed.) Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 239.
4. J. Gibley, “Aspects of Truth in the New Testament,” in *Truth and Certainty*, (ed.) E. Schillebeeckx and Bas van Iersel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), p. 36f.
5. Ignace de la Potterie, ‘*La Verità in San Giovanni*,’ *RivBib* 11 (1963), p. 5. See also his magnum opus: *La Verità dans Saint Jean* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977).
6. La Potterie, “*La Verità in San Giovanni*,” p. 20.
7. Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1977), p. 410.

8. Karl-Joseph Kuschel, *Born Before all Time: The Dispute over Christ's Origins* (London: SCM, 1992), p. 388.
9. Jey J. Kanagaraj, *Mysticism in the Gospel of John: An Inquiry into its Background* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 250.
10. See David J. Hawkin, *The Johannine World: Reflections on the Theology of the Fourth Gospel and Contemporary Society* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 32ff.