

# The Biblical Concept of Truth\*

by Henri Blocher

---

---

We are somewhat reluctant, let us concede, to cast doubt upon certain basic notions such as the concept of truth. As soon as we begin to think, such basic ideas always seem to be already there, fundamental, at once given and giving. We would prefer to think of them as innate ideas, immune to every challenge. It is only with difficulty that we can lift them onto the examining table and agree really to examine a question like, "What is truth?"

Nevertheless we have to do it, because Pilate is not the only one to ask it. Many different concepts clash, and evangelical theologians are often reproached with ignoring this fact.\*\* Is it necessary to understand truth as the classical tradition and the "common sense" philosophy do, as an identity between thought

---

\* Translation of an essay by Henri Blocher in *Themelios* Vol. IV:2 called, "La Notion Biblique de Vérité." English by H.O.J. Brown.

\*\* Professor Blocher is using the word "evangelical" in the English sense. It refers to a Bible-believing, i.e. theologically conservative theologian.

and what really is? This would make truth something objective, a conformity between one's judgment and the object being evaluated, that is to say to the object in its "essence" as reason discovers it. Or should we say, on the contrary, inasmuch as we are talking about a free existence, as Kierkegaard did in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, that *truth is subjectivity*, that it is characterized by the intensity of one's personal engagement by the *how* of passionate faith much more than by the *what* of orthodox belief? Is truth to be measured by the internal consistency of its thought, by its universally valid rigor of construction (idealism) or is it to be defined flatly as "whatever succeeds" (pragmatism)? Let us put the question to Holy Scripture itself.

We do not want to harbor any illusions. We shall not hope to obtain a mathematical definition by using some sort of a neutral method. At this level, especially because the Scripture does not treat the concept of truth *ex professo*, our inquiry hopes only to bring into a clearer light, i.e., into its own proper light, the central meaning which the Bible has in mind when it says "the truth." We want to be better able to discern certain traits which are already familiar to us in order to honor them. At the same time we must be aware of the danger of this undertaking: exegesis runs the risk of turning into *eisegesis*, that is, into fraudulent importation into the Scripture of points of view which are foreign to it. It is naive and direct eisegesis if we impute to the Bible a ready-made notion of truth which we take for granted to be the only acceptable one; there is also an indirect eisegesis, and a more subtle one, if we impose upon the Bible certain dilemmas which it does not itself know. Thus for many modern people, truth is supposed to be either "living," or "doctrinal," either "theoretic," or "existential;" they demand that the Scripture

make a distinction without asking themselves if the Scripture wants to make such a distinction. In order to avoid this trap, if possible, it would be useful to reflect upon our means of research, to review the tools of our study; if we are conscious of their value and of their limitations we shall be more on our guard.

## METHOD

Our inquiry will begin with *the word itself*. In order to define the notion of truth, it is necessary first of all to know the biblical words which are used to express it; it is necessary to look into their etymological sense, which suggests the idea in its earliest form. It is necessary to look at related words of the same linguistic family. This is the current procedure and it is satisfactory. It is easy and profitable to follow it because we are well-armed in this lexicographical field. However, we must be careful not to fall into a typical kind of excess. Let us not forget that the norm of our faith is not the linguistic material as such, but the usage made of it by the inspired discourse. What is the decisive authority?

The decisive authority is the teaching of Scripture and not its vocabulary; the sentence, and not the word! If God prepared a language in Israel for his word, nevertheless, the "Hebrew mentality" does not for that reason take on the authority of divine revelation.

On the level of the individual word and of language we are irresistably lead to compare the Hebrew word '*emeth*, truth, with the equivalent Greek word, *aletheia*. We must be careful in this respect not to develop too symmetrical a contrast which would make the antithesis between these words artificially hard. Not all differences are oppositions and they do not all exclude convergence.

The systematic kind of anti-Hellenism which has become quite widespread in the last thirty years, seems to be basically a kind of Hellenism in reverse inasmuch as it is true that one remains the disciple of someone if one confines oneself only to contradicting him. A kind of a reaction to this extreme view is beginning to appear today. On this point as on the preceding point it would be well to reflect on the ideas of James Barr, the very daring of which has a certain value, (*The Semantics of the Biblical Language*, Oxford, 1961).\*

The *use of the word* thus is to be the primary subject of our study, in principle in any case. Statements about truth and the more numerous statements which use the word and place the concept of truth in action ought to give us what we are looking for. To analyze them will be fruitful and will lead us to solid conclusions. Nevertheless, here too we have to recognize that there are limits: the vein is not as rich as we could hope because the examination which we will make is not always entirely conclusive. The same affirmation about truth can often be reconciled with quite different ideas and good specialists do not always interpret it in the same way. Thus, when Paul declares that he can do nothing against truth (II Cor. 13:8), Bultmann understands it to mean "against wholesome doctrine" and Vrieling, "against loyalty and fidelity." Prudence is a virtue . . .

It is here that it is important for us to pose a thesis of great methodological importance. The Scripture does not suggest in any way duality or a radical multiplicity of truth (the word truth is never used except in the singular). Thus we should be on the look out for a *unified* conception, one which will reconcile in a *harmonious way* the diversity

of uses. We say we should be looking for it, because we cannot demand it a priori: perhaps when we have finished our investigation it will be necessary for us to be satisfied to have identified a number of heterogeneous ideas distributed through the various parts of Scripture. But we should be looking for it without any false embarrassment. If a concept can be discerned which will be capable of taking into account the whole range of uses of the word, then this concept will surely receive the priority.

Related themes should also not be ignored. Biblical positions on Revelation, on the problem of knowledge, on the Word of God, on the place which doctrine should take, could not possibly fail to affect the concept of truth. We find the Scripture treats the related (and parent) concepts more explicitly than that of truth. Therefore, it will be proper to accommodate the concept of truth to the other concepts and not vice-versa. Thus, we would have to say that a "truth" which would result in a devaluation of doctrine would be too much in opposition to the point of view of the New Testament on this point for us to imagine that it really was what the authors intended.

Finally we must consider the question of the *fundamental motif*. An initial choice concerning God, concerning the world, concerning man orientates and governs all our thoughts; the concept of truth is too primordial not to be affected by it.\* (Truth, according to the Scholastics, is a transcendental: it has the same amplitude as Being.) The same notion of truth cannot be attached on the one hand to the Greek dualism of form and matter, or to the modern dualism of nature and liberty and to the Trinitarian and creationist monotheism of Scripture. The radical antithesis between these

---

\* See also W.F. Albright, *New Horizons in Biblical Research* (London, 1966). —Ed.

---

\* This conviction is supported by the epistemological analysis of Herman Dooyeweerd. —Ed.

motifs certainly will also evoke a profound difference on the subject of truth.

Our inquiry will concentrate its efforts on the first levels of the study, but this will not prevent us from casting at least a glance over the whole vast horizon of the problem.

## TRUTH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The word "truth" in our versions of the Old Testament almost always corresponds to the Hebrew word *'emeth*. By contrast *'emeth* is not always translated truth; it is often rendered fidelity or faithfulness. This second translation (often disputed) gives us a first insight into the connotation of the word. The Greek version of the Bible, the Septuagint, in addition to *aletheia* some times translates *pistis* (fidelity, assurance) and *dikaioisune* (justice).

The light of etymology: We all know the root *'mn*, from which we get our word *'emeth*. It is with us at the present in the form of the word *Amen* (the God of truth of Isaiah 65:16 is literally "the God of Amen"). This word originally suggested stability, solidity, firmness. The columns of the Temple (II Kings 18:16) carry a name which attests this original concrete meaning: they are the *'omenoth* (from the same root). By a very natural transition, the verb gives in the causative a very current meaning of primary importance: it means to rest upon, to rely upon and consequently to believe. (The prophet Isaiah plays on this word when he says: "If you do not believe, you will not be established," Isaiah 7:9.) The *Jerusalem Bible* imitates this play on words very cleverly in French: "Si vous ne tenez à moi, vous ne tiendrez pas": If you do not hold to me, you will not hold; one can get roughly the same play in English. As far as the derivative noun *'emunah* is concerned, it designates faith, confidence,

fidelity. In its linguistic family the Hebrew word for truth is thus found closely attached to faith: it is the foundation which is worthy of faith, the support which responds to the confidence which has been placed in it, the stable support which will not tremble, the immovable rock of refuge, the path which takes you to your goal. A French word gives us this psychological atmosphere and the ideas associated with *'emeth*, the word *sûreté*, which has a meaning with many of the same associations.

## SECULAR USAGE

Truth is first of all a human matter, affecting men in their daily affairs. It is related to the character of individuals, to those on whom one can count: the "men of truth" chosen to be judges, are not scientists or speculators, but men of integrity, true, men of confidence (Ex. 18:21). Then, from the character we go on to behavior: "To do" the truth, that is to remain firm in your paths or ways, firm and faithful in your line of conduct without suddenly leaving your trusting partner in the lurch. In consequence, it is the *word* which is of primary interest for truth. By the word people are brought into association with each other, they become allies and they promise to support each other; the truth of their relationship will be concretely speaking, the truth of their words, in contrast to perjury and false oath (Jeremiah 5:1-3). The choice place for truth is the word (Zech. 8:16).

When a word communicates a knowledge of facts—facts to come, facts in the present, facts in the past, it is not sure (reliable) unless it corresponds to these facts, unless there is a permanent correspondence which is valid for the other person as well as for me if he trusts my word and therefore commits himself. As a result and in a secondary

way the conception of correspondence with what is real also characterizes *'emeth*-truth in the Old Testament on certain occasions; one would have to be very partisan to deny it. When his brother told him of the existence of Benjamin, Joseph demanded that they produce the child in order to be able to test the "truth" of what they had said (Genesis 42:16). Because the facts were in accordance with the descriptions which had been given to her, and she could verify it, the Queen of Sheba cried out, "It was truth, that word which I heard!" (I King 10:6). These examples cannot be disputed.

A certain particular secular usage takes on a special importance, namely the judicial use of the word. Some people even see in this the real origin of the Hebrew idea of truth. (This thesis, difficult to prove, can at least invoke the capital role of *law* for the mentality of Israel.) Inasmuch as a related word without doubt designates a contract (*'amanah*, Nehemiah 11:23), *'emeth* serves for the *established* conclusion of a careful inquiry into facts, a conclusion which is worthy of judicial acceptance (Deuteronomy 17:4). It is frequently found associated with justice and judgment (Jeremiah 4:2); truth is supposed to characterize the verdict of the judge (Ezekiel 18:8; Zechariah 7:9). Thus the concept of truth is enriched by a new nuance: truth reveals itself as the *norm*. Thus as the aspects of strength and the stability which are evoked by its etymology reinforce and amplify themselves, we see that the concept of certainty (*sûreté*) becomes attached to the concept of *obligation*.

Finally, rarely but significantly, we find an association between truth and *witness* which ties together all of our threads. In the "forensic" framework we find the key conception of truth as a sure and reliable word (Proverbs 14:25; cf. 12:17).

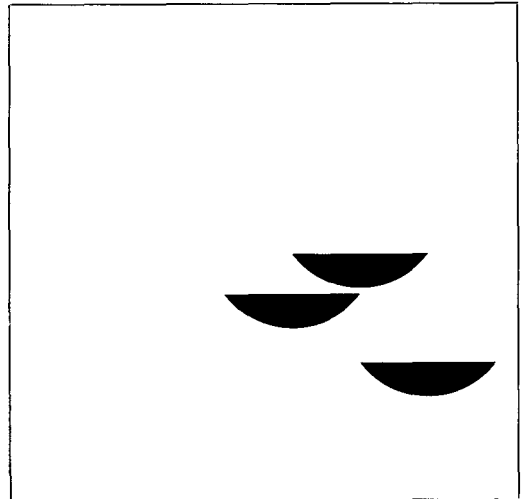
If the profane usage of *'emeth* gave a useful direction to our study, the religious usage of the word takes up much more place in the Old Testament. Truth is not in the very first rank of religious concepts in the Bible like that of justice, for example; however, it is close to the first rank, and the language of Hebrew piety makes a great deal more of the real solidarity between truth and justice, peace and love than of the distinction between these concepts.

*'Emeth* is above all an attribute of YHWH, the God of Israel. He is the "God of truth" (Ps. 31:6; Jeremiah 10:10); he keeps *'emeth* forever (Psalms 146:6). This brings to mind the stability of his moral behavior, the fixed nature of his eternal plan "which remains from age to age" (he is not a man that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should repent). In addition, we are pointed even more directly to the certainty of the help which he offers, he alone. The texts which we have just finished citing show this. True God, YHWH is true God by contrast with the gods of the pagans, those beings of falsehood and of vanity, those "non-beings" incapable of saving. After having given him this title, Psalm 31, which exalts the salvation of God, opposes him to the nothings of deceit (Psalm 31:7). In a diatribe against idolatry, Jeremiah magnificently gives YHWH the three titles of "true God," "living God," and "eternal King" (Jeremiah 10:10). In the last case, the truth of God is not confined to the exclusion of the lying of the Baals. It also affirms itself over against all pretense of man; all human power is nothing but "flesh" and woe to everyone who takes the flesh for his help... Psalm 146 celebrates the divine *'emeth*, having denounced rightly those who trust in man (Psalm 146:3). God alone is sure, God alone is true!

The judicial note is affirmed here too, when we hear of the *'emeth* of the "Judge of all the earth": his judgments are truth (Psalm 111:7,8). He is a true witness (Jeremiah 42:5). The conception of the covenant in addition ranks alongside of this idea. It is within the covenant that the truth of God works and reveals itself: God keeps his obligations, and he demands a similar obedience: he punishes infidelity (thus truth should characterize man too as a partner of God, Psalm 15:2). The conceptions of the covenant are constantly being associated with the typical relationship between *'emeth* and *hesed*: even on the mountain, which is also a high point of revelation, in the very intimate revelation which is given to Moses (Exodus 34:7) and in many Psalms, among them the prophetic 85th Psalm which seems so to be in the spirit of John and which recalls the Exodus when it again takes up the famous formula "grace and truth." The associated term *hesed* is as interesting as the word *'emeth*; it has been the subject of even more numerous studies. In this word we find passion and justice combined, the pity of the heart and the respect for a contract. We might try to translate it as faithful love, or even better, as generous loyalty. Let us ask whether these two terms, divine faithfulness or certainty and generous loyalty correspond as quasi-synonyms, or whether they are precisely to be differentiated.

First of all, there seems to be a greater interest in the overlapping than in the distinction of these terms: the two concepts interlock and influence each other; however, subsequent evolution distinguishes them a bit more precisely: it accentuates in the word *hesed* the sense of redemptive mercy and in *'emeth* the normative certainty for our understanding. Their association at least contributes to bringing into closer association the truth of God and his covenant.

Even more than in human words, it is in the Word of God that the truth of God is concentrated and condensed. Psalm 119 insists and declares forcefully: the *ros*h of thy Word is *'emeth* that is to say the principle, the foundation, the sum, the totality, the essence of thy Word is truth (Psalm 119:160). This affirmation holds good for the three forms of the revealing word and for each one separately: the Torah of Moses, the oracles of the prophets and the teachings of the wise. For the law, it occurs so frequently that we naturally call the law "the law of truth" (Mal. 2:6). The prophetic proclamation, of which nothing will fall to earth, is not less "truth" (II Samuel 7:27). In the great trial of all peoples before YHWH, he calls the witnesses to appear so that it will be possible to repeat or to state those predictions which have been accomplished: *'emeth* (Isaiah 43:9, 10). Revealed wisdom has truth as its synonym (Proverbs 23:23) and this holds true for all of its maxims (Proverbs 8:7; Ecclesiastes 12:12). Thus we are moving towards a more limited and more precise conception of truth, that of truth as a body of doctrine. This line rejoins the prophetic line in Daniel: *'emeth* seems here to designate at one and the same time authentic religion overthrown



by the proud horn (Daniel 8:12), and more often the exact knowledge of the heavenly project (Daniel 10:1,21; 11:1). How is it that in all of these writings the Word of God is *'emeth*? The Word of God is truth because by means of this word YHWH reveals himself without any evasiveness: he makes himself known with assurance; he gives us his *Name*. Above all, by his word God gives human life its stable foundation and its sure direction: "Send forth Thy light and Thy truth that they may guide me" the Psalmist prays (Psalm 43:3). He unveils his designs which are accomplished infallibly in the facts. In reply, he demands our Amen, the recognition and obedience of faith.

#### COMMENT: 'EMETH AND ALETHEIA

The comparison with the Greek idea shows us the original aspects of *'emeth*-truth and may serve as a springboard for a more general commentary.

For the Greeks, truth is *aletheia*, and etymology suggests in a very eloquent way its central meaning. With its privative prefix *a*, the word comes from *lanthano* not to see, from which the river *Lethe* gets its name, the river of forgetting. Truth is the bringing of being to the light of knowledge; it is the unveiling in thought and in word of the essence of the thing; it is the expression by our discernment of that which is real in a thing, of that which is unchanging (related thereby to the kingdom of the divine) and not of those things which are preceptable and changing (that is the kingdom of non-being, *me on*). We are reminded of the Greek understanding, developed by Plato, Aristotle and their tradition. It seems to be most typical of and most faithful to the original intuition expressed by the etymology of this word, and this heritage has been harvested by Christian thinking.

The differences with *'emeth* strike us at once, but it is necessary to note that they do not necessarily signify an irreconcilable opposition. There are also certain resemblances which we can discern, but it is necessary to point out how much the perspectives differ from one another.

We notice first of all a restriction of the field: *aletheia* is not interested in anything but knowledge, while *'emeth* is the basis for life. On the other hand, we must say that the cognitive aspect, even if it is secondary, certainly belongs well and truly to "Hebrew" truth and that its importance tends to increase in the course of the Old Testament, in particular in the Wisdom literature: the difference of amplitude does not imply that there is a categorical opposition.

A further contrast appears and one that is more decisive: *aletheia* is related exclusively to its object; it is impersonal. *'Emeth* certainly characterizes its object, but it is primarily attached to its subject and its proper place is the relationship between *persons*. The two ideas are opposed like the quest for the idea and the giving of a name. There is more here than a nuance; it is an antithesis of spiritual choices which reveals itself, despite the common priority of the object and the common accent on the word. We must see, nevertheless, that this antithesis does not prevent the two conceptions from overlapping and even from coinciding for all useful purposes in the area of everyday communications. We have seen in the Old Testament that there is the concept of a correspondence with reality.

J. Murphy O'Connor says quite correctly, "Here we see that the meanings of *'emeth* and of *aletheia* correspond to one another but with a slight difference of accent. For a Semite, the truth of a statement is an extension of the truth of the one who makes the statement. For

a Greek, the reference is first of all to the truth of the object rather than of the subject who is making the statement." ("La 'Vérité' chez Saint Paul et à Qumrân," *Revue Biblique*, LXXII: 1 [January, 1965], 32). We would only add as far as the Old Testament is concerned, that in addition to being an extension of the truth of the author, the truth of that which has been expressed corresponds to the expectation of the person who receives the statement, corresponds to his concern and to his need.

From a third point of view the two conceptions seem to meet in associating truth to a stable, permanent, real being opposed to the non-being of the lie. This meeting is not illusory but it is necessary to unmask a certain concealed ambiguity. For the Greeks, permanent reality is the abstract form which is not involved in the process of becoming. For the Old Testament it is the effective intervention of God in history (the living God of Jeremiah 10:10!). The truth of the prophets when dealing with reality does not disdain the particular and the preceptible; it takes into account all the fulness of historical experience and its eternity is not the dreaming timelessness of the Greeks. The polemics against non-being changes its sense; it is no longer a question of depreciating the terrestrial order, but of denouncing sin. Here we see that divine truth is opposed to the idol. For the Bible the idol is the false god served by the pagan, but for Plato, *eidolon* is the phenomenon, the appearance which is not really real.

We can also examine another point. If the etymology of *'emeth* ignores the idea of manifestation, of unveiling, which is expressed by the Greek term, the idea of unveiling is nevertheless a biblical term. The verb *galah*, to reveal, says it expressly, and it also bears upon the concept of truth. From both aspects, we call it light. Is this a resemblance? Here too, let us notice the distinction!

The unveiling takes place in two opposed ways, here by the power of natural reason, which gradually ascends to the divine, there by the gracious initiative of the grace of the Lord who condescends. For the Greeks, man discovers Being; in the Bible, God reveals *himself* to man.

When we expand the discussion and when we think of the fanning-out of the different conceptions of truth, then the conception which we find in the Old Testament is distinctive in the manner in which it joins together characteristics which we do not usually find united. *'Emeth*-truth ties together in an indissoluble fashion personality and objectivity. It never loses its view of the subject, its engagement, its faith; it is always interested first of all in the dialogue of persons, but it does not depend on the subject who receives it (or rejects it); it is there and wants to be there for him, but it is also there before him. Its whole value as assurance and solidity depends on this objectivity which reinforces the normative power and which permits the integration of a realistic moment into the concept. Nevertheless, this truth claims an exclusive divine origin, and it incarnates itself in the fulness of history. Only God is true and only he possesses true wisdom and true science, which are inaccessible to man. However, his truth is not by any means a kind of a celestial Idea, a limiting notion, or an eschatological promise. It is a precise prescription, a concrete promise, a tested instruction, a prediction which is fulfilled. Personality, objectivity, divinity and historicity: it is not only that these traits combine themselves in an original fashion, but that they do so without effort, without tension and without weakening—each one of them is underlined with the greatest force.

There is a very enlightening association which imposes itself upon us, when we consider the two parallels which I



have indicated; they appear to be united by the proximity between truth and the word. It is the word which permits persons to communicate, but precisely in an objective mode, in opposition to mystical silence or to passionate delirium. Furthermore, God is known to us only by his word: this is the proof of the sovereignty of his initiative. However, he did in fact choose to speak to us in our language: this is his "historic visitation" (*paqad*), his descent to us.

## SECTION 2:

### TRUTH IN THE JUDAISM OF THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

In order to define the "biblical" understanding of truth, we are not necessarily obliged to consider the Jewish texts of the intertestamental period. However, without wishing to give them a kind of authority parallel to that of the Canon, we cannot ignore their influence, nor the allusions which many of the authors of the New Testament make to several of them. The history of the concept would develop badly if we neglected them. Here in the intertestamental period, we can see the affirmation of the evolution which had already begun in the Old Testament and which then expands and develops in the New.

### THE WISE AND RABBINISM

In the two grand currents of classical Judaism, the Old Testament conception of truth does not evolve very much. The Wisdom literature (from the Alexandrian center of Judaism), developing the sense of truth in Proverbs, insists upon its cognitive and doctrinal aspect

(Widsom 6:22). Thus these writings bring the Hebrew and the Greek concept closer together. The Rabbis, as one might have expected, exult in the law "the rule (or formulation, expression) of science and of truth" (cf. Romans 2:20; Paul with a sure hand accepts the vocabulary of the Jewish teachers without disavowing their thesis). In addition, a new factor marks the conception of truth: the usage of Aramaic. The Aramaic term *qushta* replaces 'emeth; its primary significance is "uprightness." In other words, the normative aspect of truth, the law of the word and of thought and of human conduct is emphasized by this Aramaic word *qushta*. When there is a question of 'emeth in its association with *hesed*, we see the reaction to the change of accent: Kittel notes that in order to distinguish itself from the other term (grâce) 'emeth begins to take on the significance of judgment (*din*)!

### THE DEAD SEA COMMUNITY

The heretical Judaism of the Qumran community certainly never was very important numerically, but its importance does not need to be demonstrated any more as far as the understanding of Christian beginnings is concerned. With regard to the conception of truth precisely, the manuscripts from the Dead Sea point to a remarkable change which is the direct prelude to the innovations of the New Testament. For the first time the term receives a massive utilization and the idea becomes a cardinal pivot of religious faith. In addition, while the Old Testament barely suggested it, we find that truth takes on a vigorous polemical reference in the great combat between light and darkness.

These two characteristics are related and they seem to depend upon the way in which the sect defined itself. The

“Community of the New Covenant,” as it called itself, cut itself off from an apostate Israel and from a lying priesthood in order to be the true *Israel*. If *'emeth* frequently preserves its Old Testament significance (at Qumran, Hebrew was always spoken, a Hebrew impregnated with biblical memories), the doctrinal aspect begins to stand out and truth clearly becomes, in certain passages, the special interpretation of the Torah of the Dead Sea Community. The rolls of the Manual of Discipline (I QS) and the Hymns (I QH), which are fundamental documents, contain eloquent formulas. Adherents to the Community are “volunteers for his truth” (I QS 1:11; 5:1). They have “converted” to it (I QS 6:15), and they have become its witnesses (I QS 8:6), “sons of truth” (I QH 6:29; 7:30 etc.); they “betray truth” if they leave the sect (I QS 7:19). The “Community of his truth” (I QS 2:26) is in addition the plantation (I QH 8:10) and the house of *'emeth* (I QS 5:6; 8:9; The Damascus Document, A. 3:19). It is even called “the foundation of truth” (I QS 5:5), which makes us think of what Paul called the church of the living God, the “house of God,” “the pillar and foundation of truth” (I Timothy 3:15). In addition there is often reference to the “secrets” (“mysteries”) of truth which are known and understood by the members (I QS 9:18; I QH 5:26; 10:4; 11:9,16). Finally the manual of discipline portrays the vast cosmic combat of the two spirits, the principles of light and of darkness: these are the Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Per-  
 version (I QS 3:18 ss and I QS 4). We measure the significance of this observation—an expression typical of the Dead Sea Community—when we make a second one: the title “Spirit of Truth” is found only in two places: at Qumran and in John, in the first Epistle and in the fourth Gospel. We are at the doors of the New Testament.

## SECTION 3:

### TRUTH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Truth is among the first of the concepts of the New Testament, but what kind of truth is it? The authors write admittedly *aletheia*; at the same time, they are Jews and their piety is rooted in the Old Testament. Are they thinking of *'emeth* or of *qushta*? It would appear wise not to exclude anything a priori. The two traditions must be combined. In what way are they combined? The limited significance of *aletheia* is enlarged and enriched by the associations of *'emeth*. The “Hebrew” notion is refined, made more precise and its contours are better outlined. As Vrieling, whom we have already mentioned, says with a certain amount of humor: “Japhet begins to live in the tents of Shem” (see Genesis 9:27). But opinions differ about the exact degree of Hellenization, particularly with regard to St. John, the great theologian of truth. Within the New Testament, we are struck by both the inequality and the diversity in the frequency of the use of the term in its theological weight and without doubt in its coloration, in its orientation in its whole conception. We are going to try to discern its fate in the principal groups of New Testament writings, classed not in their historical order, but in an informal way in their theological “sequence.”

### BASIC CATECHISM

In a first group, we will associate those writings which give us a common apostolic preaching, a fundamental Christian teaching without any particularly highly developed reflection (or at least without a very marked elaboration by the intelligence of faith). The Synoptic Gospels and the Acts, the Epistle of

James and the first Epistle of Peter do not make much use of the concept of truth. It is in an everyday "realistic" sense, which makes it the equivalent of "truly" and "really." We think particularly of the formula *ep'aletheia*, which may correspond to the "Amen, amen," which was favored by Jesus (Luke 4:24, 25). The Book of Acts offers us two remarkable examples. It opposes the truth of real experience to the subjectivity of vision (Acts 12:9), and the words of truth, or good sense, to the ravings of mental imbalance (Acts 26:25). James, however, uses the expression the word of truth (James 1:18) for the *Gospel* before calling it the perfect law, the law of liberty (1:21-25): it is the beginning of a more original and more important use. Luke on one occasion, with regard to spiritual riches, brings together the heavenly and the true, reserved for the children of light, and contrasts them with the unjust riches of the children of this age (Luke 16:11 cf. 8,9); a new nuance seems to be appearing.

## PAUL

In the Epistles of Paul the term appears frequently, but it is used in a very fluid way and with many different meanings. Sometimes *aletheia* has the aspect familiar from the Old Testament, namely the assurance of God who is faithful to his promise (Romans 15:8); sometimes it has rather a moral sense: it is necessary to think of veracity and of righteousness, which are opposed to malice and injustice (I Cor. 6:8; Phil. 1:18); sometimes truth is conformity to facts, as when Paul tells of having been taken into the third heaven (II Corinthians 12:6); sometimes we can say that it has the "typically Greek" meaning: the truth of God is his unveiled Being, the manifestation of that which one can

know of him, the invisible things "contemplated by the human intelligence" (Romans 1, 18-20).

However, Paul is innovating at an important point. In a deliberate way, much too often for us to speak in terms of an accidental coincidence, Paul closely ties the concept of truth to the *Gospel*. The word for truth is the Gospel of salvation (Ephesians 1:13; cf. Colossians 1:5-6). The truth of the Gospel, on which he would certainly cast no aspersions, stands or falls with the decisive doctrine of Christian liberty with respect to the Law (Galatians 2:5,14; 5:7). The one who does not change the word of God publishes the truth and commends himself in this way with the clear conscience of a man before God (II Corinthians 4:2). What is the meaning which he gives to this remarkable association between Gospel and the truth? It reminds us of many other Pauline themes: the Gospel, the fruit of promise, invites us to *faith*; this faith is the obedience of the heart to the rule of doctrine (Romans 6:17); the reality of the Resurrection which it announces attests that faith is not *vain* (I Corinthians 15:14-16); it is by the Gospel, thus it makes the principal facets of the concept of truth shine more clearly!

## THE STRUGGLE WITH GNOSTICISM

The "good fight" with the primitive forms of gnosticism engages more and more of Paul's energy in the second half of his ministry. This polemical situation affects the notion of truth, and does so in the same manner in the other epistles of the New Testament which we feel to be directed against nascent gnosticism or pre-gnosticism. Truth often is a synonym for *wholesome doctrine*, a key expression of the Pastoral Epistles: "it is the good deposit." In the two short letters to "Kyria" and to Gaius, John

repeats *aletheia* no fewer than ten times, he is talking about the "doctrine of Christ" which is being denied by the false teachers. We frequently encounter the stereotyped expression *epignosis aletheias* (for example in II Timothy 2:25), a most interesting expression. The term *epignosis* means exact knowledge, or a recognition. It is also very characteristic of this type of literature. It is used twenty times in the entire New Testament, but fourteen times in the following Epistles alone: Ephesians, Colossians, Pastorals and II Peter, to which no one will deny an anti-gnostic flavor. We should be struck by the fact, especially since this concentration does not hold for the related verb. We can risk a hypothesis: are we dealing with a *counter-slogan*? Perhaps the heretics are proclaiming "Gnosis!" the orthodox reply, "Epignosis!" an exact knowledge according to *truth* of sound doctrine and of "faithful statements" (*pistoi logoi*).

In the same perspective we should note that truth is opposed to "myths" without historical foundation (II Timothy 4:4, Titus 1:14, cf. II Peter 1:16 ff.).

## THE EPISTLES TO THE HEBREWS

The Epistle to the Hebrews has a place apart. It does not utilize the concept of truth very much, but it does strike a new chord and it prepares the way (at this point as at other points) for the thought of John. The original usage which is sketched here certainly reflects Greek influence, but it has been taken over and reworked by historical thought: *alethinous* describes the realities (spiritual realities) of the New Covenant, contrasted to the figures (the fleshly figures) of the Old (Hebrews 8:2; 9:24).

## JOHN

The Gospel and the Epistles of John give an incomparable weight and fullness

to the concept of truth. As it does for other terms (temple, elevation), the Gospel plays upon the different possible meanings of the word. "To speak the truth," as Bultmann has well seen, has the everyday meaning, "not to lie," but also, on a second level, it has the meaning, "to proclaim the unique revelation" (John 8:40,45). We could say that the diverse traditions evoked up to this point are melted down in the Johannine crucible. The idea of truth as certainty appears to be implied in the constant invitation to *believe* the testimony: the idea of truth as unveiling is implied by the theme of *light* which the word of the invisible Father is; the idea of truth as rectitude is likewise suggested by the exhortation to *practice* the truth. Truth is opposed to *darkness* as in Qumran. However, it does not fail to be associated with the idea of *doctrine* (John 8:31,32; 16:13; I John 2:21). John, as we have seen, takes up the pair *'emeth-hesed* (John 1:14,17). He makes a distinction between grace and truth without separating them, and, meditating deeply on their duality, he lets their two threads run throughout the whole book: truth and grace correspond to light and life (John 1:4) but also to two grand concepts, "the Word made flesh" (John 1:14) and "the Lamb of God" (John 1:29), thus to two aspects of the mediation of Jesus Christ, the Revealer and the Redeemer. This gives us an idea of the wealth and of the powerful elaboration which John gives to these concepts, despite the apparent simplicity of his style.

It is necessary now to summarize some of the new developments. John, first of all, extends the usage which is introduced by the Epistle to the Hebrews: Jesus brings truth which supercedes the figures of the Old Testament: he is the true bread of heaven, the true vine of the divine vintner; he brings the truth where Moses was unable to do more

than introduce law (John 1:17); the cult of which he is the mediator is no longer tied to an external Temple, but it is in spirit and in truth (John 4:23; the interpretation which we accept for this disputed text is that of Origen). Truth is reality from on high, celestial, of the Spirit—and not that of here below. The contrast further overflows the relationship with the Old Testament. It extends to the combat with the idols; “true” light in order to illuminate every man, Jesus is the true God who drives away the lying caricatures of the pagans (I John 5:20,21).

One outstanding trait of the Johannine usage deserves to be mentioned. There is a very close association between truth and testimony. Thus, we have a confirmation of the juridical aspect of the drama of faith and of salvation (the theme of *judgment* returns again and again, judgment which is at once to come and already present). The truth of the witness of Jesus depends on this: having come from above, from heaven, he reports that which he has seen and heard (John 3:31, 33). He knows from whence he comes and he repeats that which the Father has taught him (John 8:14,26,28). This same truth attaches in the same manner to the testimony of the Apostle, who has “seen” (John 19:35; 21:24) and even “felt” the Word of Life (I John 1:1 ff.).

In addition we often encounter in John the formula “to be of God (*ek Theou*).” For John, the question which divides men is this: to be or not to be *of God*. Jesus brings truth into relationship with being *ek-Theou*, an interesting point. Whoever is-of-God, Jesus says, hears his words and believes in truth, but his adversaries do not listen to him, because they are not of God (John 8:46f.). The devil, a liar, speaks on his own account (John 8:44). The first Epistle of John establishes a similar relationship: heeding the Apostolic preaching becomes the

criterion of those who are *ek Theou* and of the Spirit of Truth (I John 4:5,6).

This theme, which we are going to see expressed in a general manner for all those who are called, is illuminated in the way it is concentrated on the person of Jesus Christ: Jesus is first of all of God; he alone comes from the Father, and in this procession from the Father, he never ceases to be one with him. The Gospel pays special attention to the relationship between the Father and the Son with regard to the truth of Jesus’ testimony. The way in which truth is rooted in God, we can say finally leads John to a trinitarian presentation. It is necessary for us to see the very foundation of truth in the personal being of God and this is without a doubt the ultimate revelation which John can make to us on our subject.

Jesus says: “I am . . . the Truth” (John 14:6). This text can easily be brandished, isolated from its context, in order to deny that truth is doctrine: “Truth is a person!” This superficial deduction simply ignores the complexity of the Johannine usage which we have just indicated. It is sure that John does not give us this word in order to downgrade the truth of doctrine (which is first of all the doctrine of Jesus), but rather to establish it, to reveal its eternal foundation. It sums up all of Jesus’ declarations which root the truth of his message in his union with the Father, who never leaves him alone, who has put everything into his hands, and all of whose works he does in equal manner (John 8:12 ff.). In the immediate context of Chapter 14, this meaning is clear. Truth, like life, is an aspect of *the way*, the theme on which our conversation turns: Jesus claims to be the way in its twin aspects of truth and of life: the mediator both of revelation and of redemption. Here we meet again our pairs: life and light, grace and truth! Jesus goes on to explain: he who has seen him, has seen the Father, because

he is in the Father and the Father is in him (John 14:9 f). Is the message of the Prologue any different? The truth of every word of God (repeatedly and under many forms!) has its foundations in this: the Son is from all eternity the word distinct from the Father and one with him. From the beginning the Word was with God and the Word was God (John 1:1). If the Word is able to spread before us the veritable image of the Father and give us the exegesis (*exegesato*) of it, it is because the Word is alone generated of God, and in this distinction he always remains in the bosom of the Father (John 1:18).

The Father and the Son are one *in the Spirit*. Another comforter, another divine witness, the Holy Spirit, guarantees the unity of the Father and the Son: he inspires Jesus and not in limited measure (John 3:34); he testifies of him (John 15:26). It is not astonishing then, if John makes use of the expression from the Dead Sea scrolls, Spirit of Truth (four times), and frequently associates Truth and the Spirit, and comes to say of the Spirit what Jesus said about himself: "the Spirit is the Truth" (I John 5:6). How can this be true? The Spirit seals in the heart of the believer the truth of the historic revelation of Jesus (which had been distorted by the heretic Cerinthus) with water and with blood, from baptism to the Cross. He himself is the guarantee of the truth of the Truth. Thus the unity in the trinity of the persons and their trinity in unity appears to us to be the foundation of God's communication to those outside himself; it assures us of the entire truth of the Word which has been confirmed or taught by Jesus and inspired by the Spirit.

From the vigor of *'emeth* to John's *aletheia*, the idea of truth has travelled a good distance. Nevertheless we can observe that in the New Testament and with John, the four characteristics which

had appeared in the Old Testament remain. Even more, we can find all four of them *accentuated* and in the same harmony. Is the truth of the New Testament less *personal*? On the contrary, its personal aspect is concentrated and made more precise in Jesus and in the obligation to make a decision before him, to repent, to believe! Is it less *objective*? The normative, cognitive and doctrinal aspect of truth is without doubt more important in the New Testament. The *exclusive divinity* of the truth is re-emphasized by its new association with heavenly reality and by the more clearly polemical coloration. As far as its *historical fulness* is concerned, is not this the great newness of the Good News, the Gospel of the Incarnation and the Resurrection? It is the "present truth" (II Peter 1:12), the "true light" which "is already shining," which "is true in him and in you" (I John 2:8). We can only admire this unity, and fault Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, the prisoner of his own subjectivism, who felt that he had to oppose the personal and existential *'emeth* to the truth of the New Testament, by contrast doctrinal and objective as he supposed it to be. This dissociation does not hold good either for the Old Testament nor for the New!

## SYNTHESIS

Is it possible, in conclusion, to bind in a single sheaf the aspects which we have harvested? Above and beyond a simple résumé, do we find that a unique equivalent of the concept of truth appears on our horizon? Yes, we shall courageously answer. There is a theme which is the twin of that of truth, and which has hardly ever left us: the theme of the Word. *Truth is the Word of God* inasmuch as it is his Word. It gives us his Name and the knowledge of him;

it is the foundation of our life and of our assurance; finally, it requires our obedience. As far as our words are concerned, their truth is their *conformity* to the Word of God: we are called to *confess* (*homologeō*), that is, to speak the Word of God after him.

This "definition" takes into account the most important scriptural usage of the word "truth," which can be applied to the diverse forms of the prophetic-apostolic word. It recapitulates for us the sublime trinitarian insight which John spreads before us: the Word is the title of the Son, and the Word never comes without the Spirit, the Breath which bears it. Does this hold good for the ordinary realistic use of the word "truth"? Here it is necessary to recall the status of the "real" for biblical thought: it does not constitute an independent area in *itself*, radically impersonal. Formed by the Word of God, it does not exist except as it is sustained by this Word from moment to moment (Hebrews 1:3, *et al.*). The ultimate reality of the real is in the sovereign Word of God. To speak in truth of the real is to confess this Word, and this is why we will have to render account for every vain word which we have offered ourselves (Matthew 12:36). The equivalence truth: Word of God, thus takes in the whole gamut of biblical usage and this remark explains the association between "personalism" and "realistic objectivity": thinking which is motivated by an autonomous motif can do nothing but "reify" the truth of human words or else totally cut them off from the real; the scriptural motif of the unique, trinitarian, creative God preserves and establishes a harmonious union here.

Our conclusion can be nothing else but a confession: "Thy Word is Truth," Jesus says (John 17:17). Once again the meaning is much deeper than one would think at first. O Lord, sanctify us, attach us to thyself in the sureness of an obe-

dient communion; sanctify us by thy Truth!

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SUGGESTIONS

In addition to the triple article "Aletheia" in the *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (vol. I) by Quell, Kittel, and Bultmann, to which I have often referred, the most basic work for our subject is a doctrinal dissertation presented to the University of Utrecht by Jan Hendrik Vrieling, *Het Waarheidsbegrip: een theologisch onderzoek* (Nijkerk, 1956).

In French, the article by J. Murphy O'Connor cited above puts the problem in its proper context, but seems to me to be less felicitous when dealing with its precise subject (Qumran-Paul). The linguistic family 'mn has been well studied by P. Vallotton in *Le Christ et la Foi (Nouvelle Série Théologique, No. 10, Geneva)*. There is a solid and interesting discussion on grace and truth in the article, "Grâce" by P. Bonnetain, *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible, Volume III* (1938) cols. 1255—1270.