

“What is Truth?”

A Consideration of the Idea of *Aletheia* in the Fourth Gospel

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1. Introduction

“What is truth?”¹ Pilate’s question in John 18:38 has lost none of its pertinence and may even have gained new relevance in a world of fake news and increasing polarisation between liquid relativism and violent fundamentalism. This last aspect is probably beyond what the Evangelist² could have imagined, but while there seems to be broad scholarly agreement that truth is a key theme in John,³ the exact meaning of the term *aletheia* (ἀλήθεια) has been, and to a certain extent remains, disputed.⁴

¹ All biblical quotations are from the NRSV Anglicised Edition. Unless otherwise stated, all references are to the Gospel of John.

² Limitations of space and time prevent me from going into questions of authorship. Throughout the essay I will use the name John, “the author” and “the Evangelist” interchangeably, conscious of the fact that the identity of the author or authors of the Gospel is still a matter of dispute. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Anchor Bible 29, 2 vols. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), 1:LXXXVII–CII, and Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody: Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers LLC, 2003), 1:81–139.

³ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1:499. Brendan Byrne, *Life Abounding: A Reading of John’s Gospel* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014), 33. C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 170. Ignace de la Potterie, S.J., “The Truth in Saint John,” trans. John Ashton, in *The Interpretation of John*, ed. John Ashton, *Issues in Religion and Theology* 9 (London: SPCK/Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1986), 53. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2009), 187.

⁴ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1:499–501. Ignace De la Potterie, *La vérité dans saint Jean*, 2 vols. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977), 1:5. De la Potterie, “The Truth in Saint John,” 53. Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:418.

To the modern mind, truth is perhaps above all *facts*: propositions proved through scientific experiments or logic, events we can show actually happened. While the factual element is not completely absent in the Fourth Gospel,⁵ it takes no more than a quick glance at central passages to become aware that the idea here is richer and deeper than empirical data.

So, what is truth for John? What does it mean and how does it fit into the theological vision of this gospel? Through an examination of possible linguistic and cultural backgrounds followed by an analysis of how the word is used in the text, this essay will seek to throw some light on the matter. I will concentrate on the noun *aletheia*, and only touch on its cognates *alethes* and *alethinos* if context justifies it. Likewise, I will limit myself to the Fourth Gospel and leave questions concerning the understanding of *aletheia* in the rest of the New Testament aside.

2. Background discussions: The term and its meaning

One obvious starting point for a consideration of *aletheia* in the Fourth Gospel, is the term itself. Words are rarely neutral. They carry not only a lexical meaning, but associated facets of meaning conferred by their cultural context. The background out of which a text emerged will therefore be significant when it comes to understanding the way an author uses a specific word.⁶ In recent Johannine studies, three main lines of interpretation have dominated.⁷

⁵ Dodd, *Interpretation*, 170. Donald Cobb, “La vérité dans l’évangile de saint Jean,” *Théologie évangélique* vol. 12, n. 2 (2013), 60, https://fite.fr/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ThEv2013-2-Verite_ds_Jean.pdf, accessed on 26 November 2022.

⁶ De la Potterie, “The Truth in Saint John,” 53. Dodd, *Interpretation*, 133. Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:339. Ben Witherington III, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1995), 1.

⁷ De la Potterie, *La vérité*, 1:5–18. De la Potterie mentions a fourth school, which he calls “pré-comparatistes”, where the question of background and cultural context is not very present. He also refers to scholars of an

For a long time John was considered a “Greek” or “Hellenistic” gospel, marked by the philosophical culture of the Greeks, especially Platonism, and its vocabulary was interpreted accordingly.⁸ C. H. Dodd, following Rudolf Bultmann, argues for a definition based on common Hellenistic usage of the word.⁹ He claims that *aletheia* signifies “ultimate reality—that reality which stands above the world of phenomena, and is eternal while they change and pass away.”¹⁰ This ultimate reality, he writes, “is manifested in Christ, who, as Logos, is Bearer, not only of the divine χάρις but also of the divine ἀλήθεια and through whom this ἀλήθεια is revealed to men.”¹¹ To say that Christ *is* the Truth, then, is to say that Christ is ultimate reality.¹²

Against this, there are those who, like Raymond E. Brown and Craig S. Keener, see the primary backdrop to the Fourth Gospel as Jewish.¹³ This view has become dominant in recent years and several nuances have developed within the same school. One current tends to consider

eclectic mind, working with a combination of Greek and Semitic understandings of the Johannine vocabulary. As these are not among the main currents today, I have chosen to leave these out of this essay, given the limitations of space and time. For the same reason, I have also opted for setting aside a discussion of the relationship between John and gnostic writings, as there seems to be broad consensus in contemporary scholarship that while the two do indeed use much of the same vocabulary, the meaning in John differs radically from the gnostic meaning. See Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:161–169; and C. K. Barrett, “The Theological Vocabulary of the Fourth Gospel and the Gospel of Truth,” in C. K. Barrett, *Essays on John* (London: SPCK, 1982), 50–64.

⁸ De la Potterie, *La vérité*, 1:7–11.

⁹ Dodd, *Interpretation*, 176–177. So also Leon Morris, *Jesus is the Christ: Studies in the Theology of John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989), 119.

¹⁰ Dodd, *Interpretation*, 177–178.

¹¹ Dodd, *Interpretation*, 178.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1:LXIV. Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:418. Keener also refers to Kuyper, Van der Waal, Boice, Lindsay, Schnackenburg and Albright as being of this persuasion.

aletheia as more or less equivalent to the Hebrew *'emet* (אֱמֶת), conveying ideas like faithfulness, steadfastness, trustworthiness.¹⁴ It thus has a moral dimension lacking in the Greek/Hellenistic meaning.¹⁵ Still working within a Hebrew framework, Ben Witherington III, in his commentary *John's Wisdom* and elsewhere, makes a compelling case for the Jewish sapiential literature as the main key to John's thought and vocabulary.¹⁶

This emphasis on wisdom concurs with what Ignace de la Potterie contends in his magisterial study *La vérité dans saint Jean*. De la Potterie argues convincingly for an understanding that respects the Jewish provenance of the Fourth Gospel and at the same time concedes that *aletheia* here takes on a slightly different meaning than *'emet*. He turns to the Greek text of the Septuagint and the inter-testamental literature, especially the Qumran scrolls. In addition to the wisdom literature, then, he poses Jewish apocalyptic as the immediate background for the understanding of *aletheia* in John.¹⁷ Here, it means “righteousness or rectitude rather than faithfulness” or “revealed truth, the teaching of wisdom”, understood as “the divine plan”.¹⁸

¹⁴ E.g. Köstenberger, *A Theology*, 187.

¹⁵ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1:499.

¹⁶ Witherington, *John's Wisdom*, 18; 20. Bultmann, Brown and Keener all recognise the influence of the sapiential current, with slightly differing emphases. Rudolph Bultmann, “The History of Religions Background of the Prologue to the Gospel of John,” trans. John Ashton, in Ashton (ed.), *Interpretation*, 20–25. Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1:CXXII–CXXV. Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:350–360.

¹⁷ De la Potterie, *La vérité*, 1:18. “The Truth in Saint John,” 54. Ashton is of the same view, see John Ashton, “Intimations of Apocalyptic,” in John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 383.

¹⁸ De la Potterie, “The Truth in Saint John,” 54.

It seems to me that, in the end, all we can do is make an educated guess at the exact idea the author, redactors and original audience had.¹⁹ Given the overall history and theological thrust of John's Gospel, I find convincing that the main backdrop to the Evangelist's use of the term should be the Jewish Scriptures, including and especially the wisdom literature, as well as the apocalyptic inter-testamental writings. This, however, need not exclude that a Greek audience will have understood it within their own cultural framework and that this influenced interpretation in subsequent centuries.²⁰ Hellenistic influences are also found elsewhere in the Judaism of the time.²¹

Like the term *logos*, the term *aletheia* will probably have given Greeks associations different to those of a Jewish audience, even if the author may originally have used it mainly with a Jewish interpretation in mind.²² Keener may be somewhat alone in claiming that “[t]he aborted dialogue of John 18:37–38 even suggests that John is aware of competing cultural epistemologies or understandings of truth.”²³ However, he is not the only scholar to have noted that the Evangelist may have been aware of the different shades of meaning when he chose his

¹⁹ Cf. Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B., *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina Series 4, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 16.

²⁰ De la Potterie, *La vérité*, 1:29–39 mentions Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor and Augustine as examples of patristic exegesis and theology marked by a Platonist understanding. See also e.g. Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura super Ioannem*, Chapter 1, Lecture 8, for a later example. (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1–5*, trans. Fabian Larcher, O.P. and James A. Weisheipl, O.P., with introduction and notes by Daniel Keating and Matthew Levering (Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 73–78.).

²¹ E.g. Philo. Cf. Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:175.

²² Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:399. Witherington, *John's Wisdom*, 19. Cf. Moloney, *Gospel of John*, 5.

²³ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:418.

words.²⁴ A closer look at how *aletheia* is used in the Gospel will give more insight into how best to understand this particular one.

3. The term in the text

Having examined the background, let us now turn to the immediate context of the word: the text itself. As pointed out by Brown, *aletheia* is a “favourite Johannine term”, occurring twenty-five times in this gospel, compared to only seven times in all the Synoptics together.²⁵ Its first occurrence is in the prologue (1:14) and the last is Pilate’s question in the passion narrative (18:38).²⁶ It is connected, either textually or lexically, to other central themes, such as glory, judgement, light, word, spirit, life, knowing, remaining, witnessing.²⁷ It stands in opposition to untruth or lie,²⁸ and thus finds its place in a series of dichotomies: light/darkness, life/death, spirit/flesh, above/below, faith/unbelief to name the most important.²⁹ In the following, we will consider the relationship between *aletheia* and two other terms that in a particular way throw light on the former’s place in John’s theology: *logos* (word) and *pneuma* (spirit).

²⁴ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:418–419. Keener himself here refers to Everett E. Harrison and C. K. Barrett.

²⁵ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1:499.

²⁶ Lars J. Danbolt and Øystein Wang, *Begynnelser: Johannesevangeliet som fortelling, dialog og drama* (Follese: Efrem forlag, 2020), 209.

²⁷ Danbolt and Wang, *Begynnelser*, 206. Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:419. De la Potterie, *La vérité*, 1:3. See e.g. John 1:14; 4:24; 5:19–38; 8:12–20.31–59.14:17; 15:26;16:13–14; 17:17.

²⁸ Dodd, *Interpretation*, 170–171. Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:419. Keener refers to C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, Second Ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 167.

²⁹ Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 36.

3.1 Word and Truth

In *La vérité dans saint Jean*, de la Potterie shows the close connection in John between *aletheia* and what we could call “verbal vocabulary”: the noun *logos*, as well as the verbs *lalein* and *legein*, both meaning to speak or say.³⁰ This is seen at the very beginning, when in 1:14 the incarnate Word (or the glory of the incarnate Word, depending on the analysis of the phrase)³¹ is said to be “full of grace and truth”. Apart from this, the clearest examples include 17:17: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth”, 8:31-32: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”, 8:40: “now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told (*legein*) you the truth that I heard from God” and 8:42: “But because I tell (*lalein*) the truth, you do not believe me.”

This association of word and truth is interpreted by de la Potterie as speaking against a Hellenistic understanding of truth as divine reality to be contemplated. Rather, we have to do with a truth that is spoken and heard.³² Chapter 8 is the part of the Gospel where the words *logos* and *aletheia* appear together most frequently,³³ and seven of the twenty-five occurrences of *aletheia* are found here. The word in question is Jesus’ word, the words he speaks which he has heard from the Father (8:29.31.37–38.40.43.47 cf. 3:11.32).³⁴

One could object that there is much vocabulary of knowledge and seeing in John. In 3:11 and 32 Jesus is said to testify, not only to what he has heard, but what he has *seen* above, and the Evangelist states that “we have seen his glory” (1:14). However, the glory contemplated

³⁰ De la Potterie, *La vérité*, 1:39.

³¹ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1:14.

³² De la Potterie, “The Truth in Saint John,” 55.

³³ De la Potterie, “The Truth in Saint John,” 56.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

by the disciples is the glory of the *Word incarnate*.³⁵ What they have seen is not “divine reality”, but “God in action” manifested in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Another aspect of the connection between word and truth, which also rings true with a Jewish backdrop, is the association between word, truth and *Torah* in Second Temple and early rabbinic writings.³⁶ Something similar is seen e.g. in Psalm 119 (118).³⁷ This motif is explicitly present in the prologue: “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (1:17), but both Brown and Witherington also refer to it in relation to 8:32, where the truth known through Jesus’ word is said to be liberating. They quote the text *Pirqe Abboth* 3:15, where the study of *Torah* is described as setting people free.³⁸ Witherington further shows how *Torah* in Baruch and Sirach is identified with divine Wisdom, just as Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is portrayed as Wisdom incarnate.³⁹ This agrees with Brown who rightly states that “in Johannine theology Jesus is both the Word and the truth”⁴⁰ (cf. 1:14 and 14:6), a point to which we will return below.

3.2 Spirit and Truth

Nowhere in the Gospel is the Spirit said to *be* truth in the way Jesus says “I am the truth” (14:6),⁴¹ but several times during the last discourse, Jesus speaks of the Paraclete as the “Spirit

³⁵ De la Potterie, *La vérité*, 1:26; 36; 78. Moloney, *Gospel of John*, 40–41.

³⁶ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:361. Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, 49; 53.

³⁷ Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, 177.

³⁸ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1:355. Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, 177. *Genesis Rabbah* 92:1; *Numeri Rabbah* 10:8 and *Pesiqah Rabbah* 15:2 all speak of the same, see Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:750.

³⁹ Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, 49; 53–55.

⁴⁰ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 2:765.

⁴¹ However, in the First Epistle of John, we find the expression “the Spirit is truth” (1 John 5:6). De la Potterie, “The Truth in Saint John,” 59. *La vérité*, 1:31.

of truth”. The world cannot receive this Spirit, “because it neither sees him nor knows him.” The disciples, however, know him, because he abides with them, and will be in them (14:15–17). Jesus will send from the Father “the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father” and he will testify on behalf of Jesus (15:26–27). Finally, “[w]hen the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (16:12–14). The role assigned to the Spirit here, guiding the disciples into fuller truth and declaring to them what is to come, seems to support the view that *aletheia* in the Fourth Gospel is connected to wisdom (learning to live) and revelation (coming to know).⁴²

The words spirit and truth are also associated in chapter 4, when Jesus tells the Samaritan woman about worship in “spirit and truth” (4:23–24). Keener reads “Spirit and truth” here as a *hendyadis*, based on similar instances in the Gospel, and considers its meaning to be approximately the same as “Spirit of truth”.⁴³ He highlights the connection truth–Spirit–Jesus, and explains that this link “emphasizes the importance of divine inspiration in the worship activity, while grounding it in the historical person of Jesus.”⁴⁴

4. The *A-lehteia*

From what has been said so far, it seems fair to conclude that for John, truth really is intertwined with that other great theme of this gospel which is revelation. “The idea of truth is truly at the heart of John’s theology,” writes de la Potterie. “This is easy to explain, because

⁴² De la Potterie, “The Truth in Saint John,” 61–63. Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:574. Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, 19; 250–253.

⁴³ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:618.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

John's theology is a theology of revelation."⁴⁵ Indeed the word itself suggests as much: *aletheia*, the un-veiled/un-concealed.⁴⁶ The verb *apokaluptein* and its cognate noun *apoklupsis* are not found in the Fourth Gospel, except in a quotation from the Greek text of Isaiah in 12:38.⁴⁷ However, de la Potterie argues that the verb *lalein* and thus the phrase *ten aletheian lalein*, to tell/speak the truth, functions as a technical term for revelation, similar to the "thus says the Lord" of the Old Testament.⁴⁸

Dodd's interpretation does indeed include the revelatory aspect. He sees it as "divine reality *as now revealed to men*."⁴⁹ He also allows for the personal aspect.⁵⁰ What seems to be the weakness of his argument is that in the biblical context God is known not as "reality" or "essence", but through God's saving acts.⁵¹ If we concede that there is continuity, or at least succession within one and the same history of salvation, between the gift of *Torah* and the gift of grace and truth (or simply "the gift of the truth"⁵²) as 1:17 suggests,⁵³ there seems to be no

⁴⁵ De la Potterie, "The Truth in Saint John," 63.

⁴⁶ Danbolt and Wang, *Begynnelser*, 207. David J. Hawkin, "The Johannine Concept of Truth and its Implications for a Technological Society," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 59:1 (1987), 5–6, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/eq/1987-1_003.pdf, accessed on 26 November 2022. See also <https://www.studylight.org/lexicons/eng/greek/227.html>, accessed on 22 November 2022.

⁴⁷ Cullen I. Story, *The Nature of Truth in "The Gospel of Truth" and in the Writings of Justin Martyr: A Study of the Pattern of Orthodoxy in the Middle of the Second Christian Century*, Supplements to *Novum Testamentum* 25 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 73. De la Potterie, *La vérité*, 1:3.

⁴⁸ De la Potterie, *La vérité*, 1:49–50.

⁴⁹ Dodd, *Interpretation*, 176. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁰ Dodd, *Interpretation*, 178.

⁵¹ Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B., "Telling God's Story: The Fourth Gospel," in Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B., *The Gospel of John: Text and Context* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers Inc., 2005), 99.

⁵² Hawkin, "The Johannine Concept of Truth," 8.

⁵³ Moloney, *Gospel of John*, 40–41.

good reason for interpreting *aletheia* there or in the following in a Hellenistic rather than a Jewish sense.⁵⁴ After all, in the Fourth Gospel, “salvation is from the Jews” (4:22).

What, then, is revealed? Witherington refers to Wisdom 3:9 and 6:22 and says that “having wisdom, knowing the truth, means knowing God’s secret divine plan for humankind and its salvation [...] the mysteries of the way God has chosen to deal with humankind and offered salvation.”⁵⁵ Keener states that “[k]nowing the truth (8:32) in Jewish parlance could refer to the truth about God (who epitomizes truth by his nature)” and that “[i]n the Fourth Gospel it characterizes [...] the divine message (5:33; 8:40, 44–46; 17:17; 18:37) epitomized by Jesus (1:14, 17; 14:6; 17:19) and the Spirit who testifies of him (14:17; 15:26; 16:13).”⁵⁶ In the life of Jesus – through his signs, in his passion, death and resurrection – the faithful love and trustworthiness of God can be seen, both in the way Jesus relates to people and in the way he relates to the Father.

5. Who is Truth?

As already mentioned, Pilate’s question “what is truth” (18:38) is the last occurrence of *aletheia* in John. It marks the end of an exchange about Jesus’ identity, where Jesus declares: “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (18:37). As is the case when it first occurs in 1:14, *aletheia* is connected with Jesus’ coming into the world, and throughout the Gospel, the

⁵⁴ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1:14 sees this as a clear case where *aletheia* should be read as an allusion to or rendering of the Hebrew *'emet*, as part of the word pair *hesed* and *'emet* used e.g. in Exodus 34:6. Given the overall context, the mention of the Law, Moses, the *doxa* and the verb *eskenosen* this is a compelling argument, even if (as Brown concedes) the first word in the pair, *hesed*, is usually rendered in the LXX not by *charis*, but by *eleos*.

⁵⁵ Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, 176–177.

⁵⁶ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:747.

revelation, the word or wisdom Jesus brings seem to converge more and more towards his own person. This Christological focus of *aletheia* in John is shown clearly by Keener in a survey of the term and its cognates.⁵⁷

Jesus statement that “[e]veryone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (18:37) is reminiscent of what he says of the good shepherd, identified as himself, in 10:3–4: “[...] the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. [...] the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”⁵⁸ By contrast, those who do not belong to his sheep, do not believe (10:26), just as in 8:47 the reason people do not hear the word of God spoken by Jesus is that they are not from God. “Being of the truth” means belonging to Jesus, being of God.⁵⁹ In 8:32, it is stated that the truth will liberate those who come to know it through continuing in Jesus’ word, but only a few verses later, in 8:36, it is the Son who liberates,⁶⁰ and in 5:33 John is said to have testified to the truth, pointing back to 1:19–34 where he testifies that Jesus is from God.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:419.

⁵⁸ Köstenberger, “What is truth,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48/1 (March 2005), 55, https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/48/48-1/48-1-pp033-062_JETS.pdf, accessed on 26 November 2022.

⁵⁹ De la Potterie, “The Truth in Saint John,” 53 highlights how John never applies the term *aletheia* to God. One could, however, perhaps argue for a connection between God and *aletheia* through association when passages such as 18:37 and 8:47 are juxtaposed. Further, in 3:33, God is said to be true (*alethes*) and in 7:28 and 8:26 Jesus says that the one who sent him is true (*alethinos* in 7:28, *alethes* in 8:26). In 3:20–21 doing what is true, or “doing the truth”, is paralleled to doing “deeds done in God”.

⁶⁰ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1:355.

⁶¹ It is interesting to note in passing that in the same passage, John testifies to the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit (the Spirit descends and remains on Jesus, Jesus baptises in the Spirit).

The identification of Jesus with the truth is made explicit in 14:6: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Knowing the truth is knowing Jesus, and through him, the Father: “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” (14:7). “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (17:3). However, this is not stating that Jesus is “ultimate/divine reality”.⁶² Based on the proposed Jewish background, it means rather that “in the career of Wisdom/Son of man, who came from above and returns to above” the “revelation and salvation come to the world from the Father” is embodied.⁶³

6. Conclusion

Much could still be said, but let us return to Pilate’s question: “What is truth?” Is it “divine reality as revealed to men”⁶⁴? “God’s secret divine plan for humankind and its salvation”⁶⁵? Is it “living and worshiping with integrity”,⁶⁶ “the divine message”⁶⁷ or “fidelity, constancy, faithfulness”⁶⁸? As stated at the outset, I agree with those who consider a Jewish context the most likely backdrop to the Fourth Gospel, and therefore the most enlightening when it comes to understanding its vocabulary and ideas.

Read in the light of the sapiential and apocalyptic literature of late Second Temple and early rabbinic Judaism, *aletheia* in John can be understood as the revelation brought by Jesus and embodied by him. This revelation is characterised by the following traits: Firstly, truth in

⁶² De la Potterie, *La vérité*, 1:31.

⁶³ Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, 176–177.

⁶⁴ Dodd, *Interpretation*, 176.

⁶⁵ Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, 176.

⁶⁶ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:747.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1:14.

the Fourth Gospel is revealed, not deduced.⁶⁹ It is a gift, like *Torah* was a gift.⁷⁰ Secondly, it is not propositional but personal (embodied in a person),⁷¹ just as faith is not intellectual assent to statements but trust in the trustworthiness of God and the One God sent.⁷² This links in with the idea of *aletheia* as *'emet*, God's covenant faithfulness, but does not reduce it to that alone. In the same vein, truth is relational. It has moral implications because it involves being in relationship.⁷³ It has to do with how God acts towards God's people and how the people responds. De la Potterie states it well:

“For John [...] truth is found in the word of the Father turned to mankind, incarnate in Christ, illumined through the action of the Spirit. What men are required to do with respect to the truth is not to win it by intellectual endeavor; it is to receive and enter into it in faith, to submit to it and to live by it.”⁷⁴

The truth Jesus reveals is not *that* God is (this was hardly disputed in the historical context) or *what* God is (spirit, essence, ultimate reality, being in itself), but *who* God is. To know the truth (8:32) is to know God as revealed in Jesus. To be consecrated in truth means to be “set apart”, distinguished, through living and worshiping accordingly (17:17; 3:21; 4:23–24), in relationship with this God whom one knows to be trustworthy, as Jesus did – in short: being children of God (cf. 1:12). Such an understanding of *aletheia* seems to be consistent with

⁶⁹ De la Potterie, *La vérité*, 1:25–26.

⁷⁰ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1:16. Cobb, “La vérité,” 67.

⁷¹ Hawkin, “Johannine Concept of Truth,” 9.

⁷² Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1:513. Byrne, *Life Abounding*, 355. Seán Goan, *The Sign: Reading the Gospel of John* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2018), 125. Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:326–327. Köstenberger, *A Theology*, 187.

⁷³ De la Potterie, “The Truth in Saint John,” 58. Cobb, “La vérité,” 1:67. Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:574.

⁷⁴ De la Potterie, “The Truth in Saint John,” 64.

the thrust of the entire Gospel and harmonise with how other key theological themes are understood.

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