

Der Begriff der Wahrheit in dem Evangelium und den Briefen des Johannes

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This monograph enquires into the Johannine conception of “the truth”, the prominent occurrence of which is common to both the Gospel and the Epistles. It has long been observed that the usage of this term has peculiar features which differentiate it from that of the Pauline Epistles, where it likewise, especially in the Pastorals, attains to a certain prominence. These peculiar features moreover stand in an obvious connection with the general physiognomy of the Johannine teaching as a whole. They have for their correlate the emphasis laid on knowledge, and most likely bear some relation to the antithesis between the higher and the lower sphere, God and the world, which to so large an extent colors the Gospel. An investigation into the idea of “truth” cannot fail, therefore, to have an important bearing upon the understanding of the Johannine teaching as a whole. In the present discussion the author contents himself with ascertaining the facts of the usage without opening up the larger questions with which they are correlated. He approaches the subject from a historico-exegetical standpoint. The main interpretations thus far advocated pass in review. That of Holtzmann and Weiss, who with more or less consistency give to *αληθεια* the specialized sense of “cognition of God” or “knowledge of God”, that of Zahn and Wendt who think that, in dependence on the Old Testament idea of “Emeth”, “veracity” should be regarded as the fundamental meaning, especially in John 1:14, 17, the anti-speculative interpretation, which would give a practical import to the term making truth a matter of the heart rather than of the intellect, and in which such opposite spirits as Wellhausen and Schlatter coincide, the mystico-metaphysical view represented by Cremer and others, which places the center of the conception in the idea of “eternal reality and exclusive validity”, and the comprehensive definition of Godet which attempts to combine the various meanings, are passed in review and successively criticized. The criticism revolves about the three questions, whether *αληθεια* can be explained as meaning primarily “veracity”, whether the conception has a speculative background, and whether its content is coextensive with the knowledge of God. As regards the first point Büchsel contends against Wendt and Zahn that the allusion to the Old Testament phrase *chessed we-emeth* in *χαρις και αληθεια* in John 1:14, 17, even if it be intended, is not decisive for determining the sense of *αληθεια*. Nor can the Old Testament phrase “to do truth” or the analogy of *την δικαιοσυνην ποιειν* prove for John 3:21 that *ποιειν την αληθειαν* must mean “to practice truthfulness”. The meaning of Rev. 21:27, 22:15 points in the opposite direction, insofar as here in the phrase *ποιειν ψευδος* the word *ψευδος* cannot have the subjective meaning of “untruthful” but has the objective meaning of “untrue”. The main, and in our opinion decisive, consideration is that in 1:14, 17 the *αληθεια* which forms according to the context the object of the revealing activity of Christ in the largest sense, can not be confined to such a detailed concrete point as the veracity of God: the setting of the word here emphatically requires a broader and more comprehensive idea. It might have been added that the alleged peculiar, ethical conception of “the truth” which Wendt and others find in 3:21 can only with difficulty be developed out of the Old Testament idea of *emeth* which means “faithfulness”, “truthfulness” in particular and not the “morally right” in general. As to the third point in question, the restriction of *αληθεια* specifically to the knowledge of God, we feel that here also the author makes a good case against Holtzmann and Weiss. At the same time he rightly recognizes the element of truth in the criticized view, for while *αληθεια* has at times other content than the knowledge of God, Büchsel admits that in point of fact the cognition of God stands in the center of the idea and determines its practical importance for John. We are not so sure

that we can follow the writer in his criticism of the so-called metaphysical view, that of Cremer, and of the allied Platonizing, Philonic interpretation of the term advocated by Holtzmann and others. The author duly distinguishes between *αληθεια* as connoting *Wirklichkeit* and *Wahrheit* and does full justice to the idiomatic sense of *αληθινος* in connection with the former. But in his legitimate revulsion from the attempt to foist the Platonic dualism upon the Gospel, he goes in our opinion too far and fails to bring out the real connection between the idea of *αληθεια* and the Johannine doctrine of the two spheres of being. *Αληθινος* is not, of course, equivalent to “heavenly”, it means nothing but “veritable”. It is, however, quite Johannine to say that this “veritableness” belongs in a preeminent sense to the realities of the world of heaven, the sphere of God. In 6:31 ff. the idea of provenience from heaven is significantly associated with the *αληθινος*-character of the bread which Jesus is and gives. This is not Platonism, but it formally resembles it in that it assigns a supreme reality and perfection to the things of the invisible world. Whether the resemblance goes so far as to involve the correlated idea of the reproduction of these higher spiritual realities in the lower physical world is a difficult question. Holtzmann has asserted this. According to his view “the true light”, “the true bread” designate the primordial embodiment of the idea of light and bread, of which all that passes under these names on earth is a mere copy. Even this would not be Platonism, nor would it necessarily prove a dependence of the Gospel on Philo or Plato, though Holtzmann thought it did. It may be hard to prove that, where the Gospel calls certain things *αληθινος* this idea of their recurrence on a lower plane is necessarily implied. But the main principle, that “veritableness” is predicated of the things of the higher world as such, does not depend on this. For the contrast between the substantial, abiding, perfect character of the higher world and the unsubstantial, ephemeral, imperfect character of the things below can be conceived without importing into it the Platonic thought that the things of sense are copies of the ideas. If *αληθινος* actually has this connotation, it becomes a further question whether the noun *αληθεια* has not also acquired in John the corresponding concrete, collective sense of “those things that are veritable” in the sense of belonging to the higher world, and whether from this objective point of view the designation of Christ as “the truth” does not receive its simplest explanation. Büchsel does not seriously consider this possibility. *Αληθεια* to him means truth in the sense of “cognition”, “knowledge”, i.e., truth as an ideal transcript of things, not the things themselves. Christ is “the truth” because He has and brings a perfect, complete knowledge of God. Even in regard to such a passage as John 1:17 the contrast between the law given through Moses and the *αληθεια* which came into being through Jesus Christ is construed in this way that Christ took the norm of “truth” and in his life gave reality to it. It will be observed that the writer here reaches the idea of “actuality”, but he reaches it in an indirect way: it is not for him expressed in the word *αληθεια* as such, but comes in through the consideration that it is essential to the truth that it should be done, embodied in practice. It would seem so much more simple to reach this result directly by saying that *αληθεια* here has not the meaning of “truth” but of “veritable things”, and that the reality of the New Testament is contrasted with the commandment and prediction of the Old Testament. In 4:23 Büchsel recognizes that the *αληθινοι προσκυνηται* are not “sincere, truthful worshippers” but “veritable worshippers”, i.e., such as realize in themselves the idea of worship. Nevertheless he seeks to explain the phrase *προσκυνειν εν αληθεια* which follows in verse 23 and verse 24 on the basis of *αληθεια* as “true knowledge of God”, and quotes and treats the phrase (pp. 46, 48, 54) as if it read *εν τη αληθεια*. In 14:6 “I am the way, the truth and the life”, the coordination of “truth” and life” with each other and the connection of these two with “the way (to heaven)” certainly suggests that Jesus is the truth in a more substantial personal sense than that He brings the truth, and that this truth which He is has special connection

with the heavenly world. In all this there is nothing too metaphysical or speculative to be ascribed either to Jesus or to John. The author, who frankly recognizes that the teaching of the Fourth Gospel bears a pronounced theological character, and does not share the modern dread of the term “speculation” as applicable to this teaching, could scarcely from his own standpoint object to the idea as necessarily un-Johannine. Αληθινος in this technical sense certainly occurs in Heb. 8:2, 9:24 and there is a trace of it even in Luke 16:11.

Of course, side by side with this special usage, if it be recognized, there remains room for the other according to which truth is the knowledge of God. And the prominence of the latter constitutes just as much a distinctive feature of the Johannine discourses as the occurrence of the former. It is interesting to observe how the author explains the emphasis placed on truth and knowledge from the peculiar fundamental character of the piety portrayed in the Johannine writings. The idea that to be put in possession of the truth about God, to know God, is in itself productive and constitutive of religion, rests on the absolutely God-centered and self-forgetting character of the religious consciousness in John. The mind is to such an extent focused in God and absorbed by God as to cease altogether reflecting on itself and its own need. The majesty of God and of Christ overpowers it. There is an approach to the mystical type of religion in this. The idea that “knowing”, through its pregnant Semitic sense becomes equivalent in John to “loving”, the author rejects. It will be observed that the above explanation relegates the soteriological element to a secondary place, for which reason we would hesitate to accept it as a central and complete solution of the problem. In general, where the writer leaves the path of simple exegesis and becomes more constructive and interpretative, his method of approaching and presenting things becomes somewhat involved and unnatural, reminding strongly in places of the peculiarities of Schlatter. It should be added, however, that it also shares with the latter the merit of intense suggestiveness, even for one who is unable to understand it fully or adopt all its conclusions.