

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# What is truth? A Johannine theological epistemology

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## Abstract

This essay begins with Pilate's question – 'What is truth?' – and notes the way it sets us up to long for a second-person experience of Jesus. I argue that this longing is met in the literary function of the Beloved Disciple, which prepares us for our own second-person encounter with Jesus. This raises some puzzles: can the Spirit convey to us a second-person encounter with Jesus? How do we know we have been so addressed by Jesus? Given John's above/below dualism, what does such an encounter mean for our theological language? I answer these questions in turn.

**Keywords:** Beloved Disciple; epistemology; John; theological language; Trinity

In John 18:38 Pilate asks Jesus the question, 'What is truth?'<sup>1</sup> He doesn't wait for a response; Pilate has no time for truth, only for the political problem that he is facing.<sup>2</sup> Yet, we know from the Gospel's prologue that the one standing before Pilate is the creator Logos. In this sense all the truths that sustain Pilate's life and position belong to the one in front of him: how to build structures that stay standing, how to discipline a body of men to enforce unwanted rule, how to produce and transport food so that such men are ready for vigorous action. All that Pilate is about to do to Jesus depends on these sorts of truths. But this intelligibility of the world below is no help for the plight that John has told us Pilate is in. And, in classic Johannine irony, it is Pilate who is in trouble (see 19:11).<sup>3</sup> And he was already in trouble: Pilate is in darkness (1:5), and he is born from below (3:3).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Though I start with the same text as Francis Bacon, my concern is very different.

<sup>2</sup>This dismissive attitude would have been compounded by resentment at the way Jesus has put him in the dock. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2nd edn (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), p. 332.

<sup>3</sup>This is driven home for all the players in Jesus' execution by the absence of any kind of theatrical suffering on Jesus' part. We know that the things being done to him are horrible, but we never get the sense that Jesus is in anything less than full control. On the difference of the Johannine passion narrative from the Synoptics, see R. Alan Culpepper, 'The Theology of the Johannine Passion Narrative: John 19:16b–30', *Neotestamentica* 31/1 (1997), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup>Both are epistemic problems. The 'enlightenment' of φωτίζει in John 1:9 is clearly epistemic, and the juxtaposition of flesh and spirit whereby the one of spirit is born ἀνωθεν gives the one so born access to heavenly things (John 3:12). Karl Olav Sandnes, 'Whence and Whither a Narrative Perspective on Birth Ἀνωθεν (John 3:3–8)', *Biblica* 86/2 (2005), p. 156. See also Cornelis Bennema, 'Christ, the Spirit and

So, the truth that John is interested in is the person Jesus and his testimony that the world – including Pilate – is loved (John 3:16).<sup>5</sup> This truth is standing before Pilate, offering him the chance at second-person knowledge of the truth. Pilate dismisses the chance.

### Second-person knowledge and the Beloved Disciple

Let me explain what I mean by second-person knowledge. In contrast to ‘third-person knowledge’, which is knowledge *that* something is the case, second-person knowledge is knowledge *of*. Thus, second-person knowledge has an important characteristic: there is a unique *quale* attached to our experience of someone.<sup>6</sup> Eleonore Stump makes this point by constructing her own version of ‘Mary the colour scientist’. The original thought experiment was designed to demonstrate the existence of *qualia*, such that someone who knew all true propositions about a colour would learn something new upon actually viewing that colour for the first time.<sup>7</sup> In Stump’s version the fundamental insight is that second-person experience cannot be reduced to knowledge-*that* but that there is also a knowledge-*of*.<sup>8</sup>

Pilate experiences the knowledge-*of* of speaking to Jesus. His problem is that he doesn’t want to encounter the knowledge-*that* which accompanies this person’s presence, or at least he wants to experience as little of that knowledge-*that* as possible. The narrative implies that he is not successful in this evasion (see John 19:11).<sup>9</sup>

But Pilate’s encounter with Jesus ‘becomes the ultimate catalyst for audience members to stop the vacillating and make the decision for themselves’.<sup>10</sup> For the reader who comes to identify Jesus as the truth, the experience is deeply frustrating.<sup>11</sup> We who have

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the Knowledge of God: A Study in Johannine Epistemology’, in Mary Healy and Robin Parry (eds), *The Bible and Epistemology: Biblical Soundings on the Knowledge of God* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), pp. 110–12.

<sup>5</sup>Whether the οὐτως ... ὅστε construction refers to infinite degree, or the lifting up of the Son of man, the salvific death of the Son is in view in specifying this love. See Robert H. Gundry and Russell W. Howell, ‘The Sense and Syntax of John 3:14–17 with Special Reference to the Use of ὅπως ... ὅστε in John 3:16’, *Novum Testamentum* 41/1 (1999). We do have to say that, though Pilate is loved, his rejection of the truth and sin is part of the mechanism by which God’s love for the world is demonstrated.

<sup>6</sup>Eleonore Stump calls this Franciscan knowledge of persons. It is worth noting that she argues, by way of example, that God’s special presence in the eucharist offers us Franciscan knowledge of God. I will argue that such a presence is available to us via a ‘Spirited’ reading of John’s Gospel. See Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), pp. 51–6.

<sup>7</sup>In Stump’s version Mary is locked in a room, having never had second-person interaction with another human being. She studies and learns all true propositions about people and their communication. In the process she learns all true propositions about her mother, including about her interior life. But one day she is rescued and united with her mother. Does she not learn something new in the process? *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>8</sup>David Redelings notes the importance of ‘knowledge-of’ in John’s Gospel in David A. Redelings, *The Epistemological Basis for Belief According to John’s Gospel: Miracles and Message in their Essentials as Nonfiction Ground for the Knowledge of God* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), p. 663.

<sup>10</sup>Sheri Brown, ‘What is Truth? Jesus, Pilate, and the Staging of the Dialogue of the Cross in John 18:28–19:16a’, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 77/1 (2015), p. 86.

<sup>11</sup>Stump’s argument that stories make ‘it possible, to one degree or another, for a reader or listener to simulate what it would have been like for her if she had been a bystander in the second-person experience revealed in the story’ is an important one, and one I will be returning to in a pneumatological context. But what I am foregrounding here is the way in which this is *not* like having a second-person experience of Jesus. Eleonore Stump, ‘Second-Person Accounts and the Problem of Evil’, *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 57/4 (2001), p. 755.

never stood before Jesus want to fill Pilate's absence as he walks away. But all we can do is make the identification that Pilate fails to make.

This frustration is not the final word in John. The book appears to be structured in such a way as to offer us the opportunity for our own second-person encounter with Jesus. This is seen in the rhetorical function of the repeated allusions to the Beloved Disciple. While there has been extensive discussion of the identity of this figure, no problem-free proposal has been put forward.<sup>12</sup> All that is clear is that the disciple is the witness who conveys a true account of Jesus to the 'we' who seem to be those presenting the Gospel in its final form (John 21:24).<sup>13</sup>

Harold Attridge suggests that the key question is this: why does the Gospel seem to go out of its way to conceal the identity of its authoritative witness? He finds his answer in the way the puzzle of the Beloved Disciples causes readers to return to the text and, ultimately, to identify with him. After noting that the Beloved Disciple is present at the Last Supper, crucifixion, and empty tomb, reacting as the model disciple in each case, Attridge argues that:

The Beloved Disciple is, in effect, everything that a perfect disciple should be ... by putting oneself in the place of the Beloved Disciple, one begins to know what it means to abide with Jesus, one encounters history as the Fourth Gospel wants its audience to do, not through an exploration of the past as an objective event frozen in the past, but as an engagement with a person who embodies a transformative Truth and is vitally present in the words of a timeless drama.<sup>14</sup>

Attridge's proposal makes sense of some of the difficulties surrounding the Beloved Disciple. Chief among these is what occurs with the Beloved Disciple at the empty tomb. The Beloved Disciple's belief makes very little narrative impact.<sup>15</sup> Mary is left weeping.<sup>16</sup> And the content of the disciple's belief is mysterious: the ascription of belief is immediately followed by 'for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead' (John 20:9).<sup>17</sup>

The Beloved Disciple's lack of narrative impact makes sense if he represents the insertion of the present into the past. The fabric of the past cannot be changed by the present. And – if Attridge's proposal is right – the reader has already read the Gospel through many times trying to understand the mystery of who this figure is. John 20:9 doesn't apply, because readers know that Jesus had to rise from the dead, and that he in fact did so – and they have to some extent have experienced its consequences.

<sup>12</sup>James Hamilton Charlesworth, *The Beloved Disciple: Whose Witness Validates the Gospel of John?* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995).

<sup>13</sup>Harold W. Attridge, *History, Theology, and Narrative Rhetoric in the Fourth Gospel* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2019), p. 46. It is also clear that the figure is identical with the disciple mentioned in John 21:22; see ch. 3 of Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

<sup>14</sup>Attridge, *History, Theology, Narrative Rhetoric*, pp. 65–6.

<sup>15</sup>Dorothy A. Lee, 'Partnership in Easter Faith: The Role of Mary Magdalene and Thomas in John 20', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 17/58 (1995), p. 39.

<sup>16</sup>Kelli S. O'Brien, 'Written That You May Believe: John 20 and Narrative Rhetoric', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67/2 (2005), p. 297.

<sup>17</sup>The difficulty generated by this verse means some textual witnesses place it after verse 11, and some change the pronoun to 'he'. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 987–8.

The one exception to the general pattern of passivity of the Beloved Disciple is the question recorded in John 13:25. This wouldn't invalidate the thesis, if the question could be shown to be of the highest existential import for all disciples of Jesus. And it can. The reader reclines next to Jesus at the Last Supper, and asks him about his eternal destiny: 'Lord, who is it?' And the bread is passed elsewhere: 'no one will snatch them out of my hand' (John 10:28). Even here the Beloved Disciple makes little narrative impact. There is no sense that the answer he is given is conveyed to the rest of the disciples. Peter, who so rashly cuts off Malchus' ear in the garden, doesn't so much as lift a finger to stop Judas.

There are some difficulties with Attridge's proposal. No doubt Kelli O'Brien is correct when she holds that, by the standards of the Fourth Gospel, genuine belief entails witnessing.<sup>18</sup> But I think she is mistaken to see this as a sign of the imperfection of the Beloved Disciple.<sup>19</sup> Rather, in the episodes that Attridge has highlighted, the Beloved Disciple represents the perfection of the first part of the epistemic transformation of the believer: responding to second-person knowledge with belief. And the truth is that the Beloved Disciple does witness (John 21:24). In fact, what we have is the Beloved Disciple describing his own epistemic transformation, and in that very act bringing that belief to perfection through the act of witnessing. This is how 'the Beloved Disciple can be both an empty set and a disciple par excellence'.<sup>20</sup>

John 21:23–4 is an interpretive crux for my position. Verse 24 is fairly straightforward. Once the reader has encountered Jesus in the second person as the Beloved Disciple, verse 24 would be true reflexively: the reader is now in a position to 'testify to these things' to themselves and to 'know that his [own] testimony is true'. As such, verse 24 brings the reader into the act of witnessing. Verse 23 is more difficult. It is hard to see how an editor trying to present the Beloved Disciple as idealised receptacle would include verse 23. But this is not the only function of the Beloved Disciple in John. The editor has made a literary decision that requires balancing grounding the authenticity of the Gospel's witness and at the same time universalising that witness. Here the scales tip in the former direction.

There is also a literary question. Is the anonymous passivity of the Beloved Disciple something that genuinely draws us to identify with him? O'Brien argues that 'experience suggests that readers tend to identify with heroes in stories, those about whom they know the most, rather than with featureless characters'.<sup>21</sup> But this is a story where it is impossible to identify with the hero: something the storyteller seems at pains to tell us. Moreover, the kind of identification being discussed here is not mental fantasy, but a mode of making the story present. This isn't the reader experiencing the story as, say, Peter, but experiencing the story as *themselves*. For this reason, precisely the kind of anonymised passivity that we see with Beloved Disciple is required – because this story needs to be done *to us*.

Making a similar point to O'Brien, Richard Bauckham insists that in the figure of the Beloved Disciple 'we find an emphasis on exclusive privilege that is precisely not representative'.<sup>22</sup> But this objection is easily dealt with. In the first place, John can be

<sup>18</sup>O'Brien, 'Written that you May Believe', p. 297.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Bauckham, *Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, p. 83. A similar response is possible to Bauckham's identification of the superiority of Peter's call. See Bauckham, *Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, ch. 3.

read as democratising this exclusivity in the direction that 3:16 would indicate: all the world can now experience Jesus' love as the beloved. In the second place, this exclusivity has its own narrative logic: the reader as believer is in a position to know more than the characters in the story, and so to possess a more perfect faith (perhaps reaping the blessing of those who have believed without seeing, as per John 20:29). There is no need to drive a wedge between ideal disciple and ideal witness in the way Bauckham does.

Finally, the blessing for those who have believed without seeing itself raises some difficulties. Does this not run counter to an expectation of the second-person experience of Jesus? It is true that Jesus' words 'create a means by which the God of Israel becomes tangible to the bodily senses; they render the Father accessible in the somatic realm'.<sup>23</sup> But in his earthly ministry he could be touched, and even after having risen from the dead a hand could be placed in the spear wound. By contrast, the Spirit's mediation of the word does not provide the full sensory access to Jesus that was characteristic of his earthly ministry. One can hear Jesus, but only 'see' him in a metaphorically extended sense.

As such, the blessing for those who have not seen is perfectly compatible with a second-person experience of Jesus in the guise of the Beloved Disciple. But this does raise an important question: given that it is the Spirit who ministers to the post-resurrection community (John 16:13–15), can the experience of being addressed by the Spirit convey the *qualia* of a second-person experience of Jesus? Is this what Jesus means when he identifies the coming of the Spirit with his own coming (John 14:15–19)? If not, then there would seem no sense in which we who live after the ascension can encounter Jesus in the second person as we are addressed as the Beloved Disciple. We would simply hear the Spirit speak Jesus' words to us.

### Spirit, Word and truth

In order to address this question, it must first be seen that *qualia* belong to the person, not the nature (though, of course, they are informed by nature). If we allow classical christology to do some work here, then we can say that the properties or *idiomata* of nature are communicated to the person. Following the Boethian definition of person as an 'individual substance of a rational nature', this means that it is *individuated* nature which we encounter in the person.<sup>24</sup>

That it is the individuated nature to which *qualia* must belong is seen by considering what would happen if *qualia* belonged to nature *simpliciter*. I would then experience the same *qualia* in each human being of which I had second-person experience. But the intuition of Stump's modification of 'Mary the colour scientist' seems to hold here: even if I knew all true propositions about Thomas Aquinas, I would still learn something new upon meeting him.

The result of this is that being in the Spirit's presence cannot be the same as being in the Son's presence. So, the question is this: can the Spirit give us the Son? The self-effacing character of the Spirit's ministry is well documented.<sup>25</sup> But does 'self-effacing' extend to presenting us with another divine hypostasis?

<sup>23</sup>Deborah Forger, 'Jesus as God's Word(s): Aurality, Epistemology and Embodiment in the Gospel of John', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42/3 (2020), p. 276.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae* (hereafter *ST*), 1.29.1; <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/sth1001.html>.

<sup>25</sup>Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (London: Epworth Press, 1965), p. 10.

The relationship between the Son and the Spirit implied by John's Gospel might be illumined by drawing on a natural phenomenon that we all experience in which one person conveys the *qualia* of another: storytelling. As Stump writes: 'a story gives its reader some of what she would have had if she had had unmediated personal interaction with the characters in the story while they were conscious and interacting with each other'.<sup>26</sup>

If we focus on narrative, rather than drama, then this mode of making the second-person present is through speech, or through the written word. This clearly comports with John's own understanding of how the Son is present to us: abiding in the Son means having the Son's words abiding in us (15:7). Jesus says that the Spirit 'will testify on my behalf' (15:26), and this testimony has a special shape: 'He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you' (16:14–15). The Spirit's testimony is the presentation of all that is Jesus'. And it is clear that this is the same thing as Jesus coming to the believer (14:18). As the Son is the Logos, his being spoken is a mode of presence that is different from the normal experience of presence-through-narrative.<sup>27</sup>

So, we have the creaturely experience of one human being conveying a facsimile of being in the presence of another human being through narrative, of the Son's presence to the believer as words and of the Logos as spoken by the Spirit. Putting this together, we can say that when the Spirit speaks the truth to us, it is the Logos who is spoken – and this without doing violence to the Spirit's person (given that we have a human analogue for just such a phenomenon). The Spirit can thus speak the Logos and – without ceasing to be the Spirit – present the Son to us. Thus, when the Son breathes on the disciples and says, 'receive the Holy Spirit', the breath contains the Word (John 20:22).<sup>28</sup> The Son breathes the Spirit who presents the Son: *Logos* giving *pneuma* giving *Logos*.

There is a mutuality between Son and Spirit here which isn't captured by the more intellectualised models of the Trinity such as Aquinas'. For him the Son as Word signifies 'an emanation of the intellect' (*emanationem intellectus*).<sup>29</sup> Instead John pushes to understand the Word as spoken. The Father speaks, and his breath contains the Word which gives the breath form.

Jürgen Moltmann argues that

the Holy Spirit has from the Father his perfect, divine existence (*hypostasis, hyparxis*) and receives from the Son his relational form (*eidosis, prosopon*). Although the procession of the Holy Spirit's divine existence must emphatically be ascribed to the Father *alone*, yet it must be equally firmly recognized that this form or visage is moulded by the Father *and by the Son*.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Stump, 'Second-Person Accounts and the Problem of Evil', p. 755.

<sup>27</sup>Bultmann, reflecting on John 16:13, uses the language of Jesus' words spoken by the Spirit as 'efficacious'. If this is understood as argued below – that it convicts the world of the truth of the words – this is true enough. But the mechanism by which this conviction happens is the presence of the Logos – and not merely his words – in the speech of the Spirit. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, p. 575.

<sup>28</sup>And the Word as ground of the new creation that the Spirit proclaims, calls forth the image of Gen 2:7. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI*, p. 1037.

<sup>29</sup>Aquinas, *ST* 1.34.2.co.

<sup>30</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1981), p. 186.

This analysis fails to take into account the fact that it is the Logos himself who is in the Spirit as Word. The Word is himself in the breath. The Son does not simply mould the Spirit as outside agent.<sup>31</sup> If we take this model with complete seriousness, John's Gospel pushes in the direction of both a *spirituque* and a *filioque*.<sup>32</sup> There is an interdependent reciprocity between Son and Spirit.<sup>33</sup> As such, we need to modify the trinitarian *taxis*.<sup>34</sup> Instead of the Holy Spirit being known simply by the fact that he is from another via the attribute of *procession*, he would also be known as sharing in the filiation of the Son, and thus also have the attribute of *common filiation*. And the Father's attribute of *filiation* would become *common filiation*.

But when does the reader know that they have been addressed by the words of Jesus? In John's Gospel there is no marvelling at Jesus' authority in teaching, as in the synoptics.<sup>35</sup> Nicodemus enters into extended discourse with Jesus only to leave with no or an ambiguous faith.<sup>36</sup> Being addressed by the truth in John is a non-coercive experience. Yet it is clear that Jesus' witness is efficacious in drawing those whom the Father has chosen (John 17:6). This efficaciousness holds even when those who refuse believe are considered. In this case, Jesus' proclamation is efficacious as judgement (John 3:19, 36).

So, Jesus' proclamation is efficacious, non-coercive and true. The obvious way to connect these three characteristics is to say that Jesus' proclamation is efficacious because it is true, and that the truth is non-coercive.<sup>37</sup>

How can truth be efficacious without being coercive? Truth as transcendental is convertible with goodness: what the intellect apprehends as true, the will apprehends as good.<sup>38</sup> An efficacious truth is then one that, when presented to the will by the intellect, imposes some kind of necessity on the will.

Aquinas identifies two different senses of necessity. The first is the necessity of coercion whereby one does what another forces them to do. This does not belong to the will's motion as 'the will is naturally free from coercion'.<sup>39</sup> The second is conditional necessity, a necessity of the end to be obtained: 'it is necessary to choose something,

<sup>31</sup>To use inappropriate creaturely language, the Spirit may be thought of as material cause of the Son, and the Son as formal cause of the Spirit, while the Father is efficient cause of both. Speaking more properly, I would simply use the modified *taxis* described next that affirms common spiration and common filiation.

<sup>32</sup>Boff argues for the *spirituque*, though it is not because of the Johannine notion of Spirit speaking Logos. See Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1988), p. 205.

<sup>33</sup>Alexander Golitzin, 'Adam, Eve, and Seth: Pneumatological Reflections on an Unusual Image in Gregory of Nazianzus's "Fifth Theological Oration"', *Anglican Theological Review* 83/3 (2001). Golitzin follows Boris Bobrinsky and Dumitru Staniloae in this regard.

<sup>34</sup>See Aquinas, *ST* 1.32.2.co.

<sup>35</sup>Jesus is given authority to execute judgement (John 5:27), but it is clear that the setting in which this authority is used is for those who do not believe his message.

<sup>36</sup>See Jouette M. Bassler, 'Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108/4 (1989), pp. 635–46.

<sup>37</sup>There are implications here concerning the Christian presentation of the truth without any form of coercion. For an articulation of apologetics in this direction see John G. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics* (New York: OUP, 2002).

<sup>38</sup>As Lee writes: 'It is clear that in this gospel, truth is not merely a matter of intellectual concepts but involves also a mode of behavior and relationships toward God and within the new community.' Howard Clark Lee, 'Knowing the Truth: Epistemology and Community in the Fourth Gospel', in David Edward Aune, Torrey Seland and Jarl Henning Ulrichsen (eds), *Neotestamentica et Philonica* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 255.

<sup>39</sup>*Voluntas naturaliter est a coactione libera*. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, 15.3.C; <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/qdv15.html>.

if it is required to attain this good, or if it is required to avoid this evil'.<sup>40</sup> Aquinas holds that this necessity can be imposed on the will.

This distinction does the job we need: in understanding the truth Jesus' listener recognises that, if they want the good of eternal life, they must become his disciple. Even in those that reject Jesus, this much of the truth seems to get through (John 3:2).<sup>41</sup> Jesus' proclamation presents a conditional necessity to the human will. It follows that we will know we have encountered the Son when our wills are bound by the conditional necessity of the truth. But John's Gospel portrays the need for human beings to learn to recognise the truth via signs, rather than recognising it innately.<sup>42</sup> As Jesus says in John 15:24, it is the signs that seal the guilt of the world: 'If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin.' And only when the truth is recognised as the truth does it present a binding conditional necessity to the will. Consider Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman. Jesus' first words are met with bewilderment. Then he shows that he knows who she is. Then she comes to believe that he is the Messiah. Even the words of the Word require a sign before they are recognised as true.<sup>43</sup>

What does this mean for the reader of John's Gospel? The Spirit's ministry in the physical absence of the Son will 'prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment' (John 16:8–11).<sup>44</sup> As argued above, this must be the Spirit speaking the person and work of Christ, the Logos.<sup>45</sup> The presentation of the Logos takes over the role of 'proof' that signs have in the earthly ministry of Jesus.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>40</sup>*Necessarium sit ei hoc eligere, si hoc bonum debeat consequi, vel si hoc malum debeat evitare.* Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Even if Bultmann is correct that this is an indirect question about salvation, the questioner is still confronted with the conditional necessity that Jesus' message presents, backed up by 'these signs'. See Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, pp. 133–4.

<sup>42</sup>Hogg's argument regarding Nathaniel's faith that there is 'the absence of any sign of the sort narrated elsewhere in the Gospel' is too restrictive an understanding of signs. For it is precisely Jesus' demonstration of his knowledge of Nathaniel that occasions Nathaniel's belief. Murray Hogg, 'The Knowledge of God: John's Gospel and Contemporary Epistemology' (Master's thesis, Australian College of Theology, 2011), pp. 60–1.

<sup>43</sup>Attridge makes a parallel claim about the working of the signs themselves: 'The evangelist wants his readers to know Jesus and the liberating Truth that he brings, but the narrative he creates assumes that coming to that knowledge can be a process that first involves an encounter with the unknown, the uncertain, an encounter that may baffle but also enthralls. Like Paul's appeal to an inscription "to the unknown god" as a pedagogic device, it is worth noting that John too plays on the unknown as a step on the way to the Truth.' Harold W. Attridge, 'Ambiguous Signs, an Anonymous Character, Unanswerable Riddles: The Role of the Unknown in Johannine Epistemology', *New Testament Studies* 65 (2019), p. 288. Bannema makes a similar claim regarding the necessity of partial knowledge before coming to belief in Bannema, 'Christ, the Spirit and the Knowledge of God', p. 123.

<sup>44</sup>This is one of the most difficult passages in John's Gospel. The key point for my purposes is what 'prove' is doing. As Carson notes, there are options here: 'Does the Paraclete ... prove to the world that it is wrong, or prove to believers that the world is wrong?' I agree with Carson that the Spirit's action is upon the world. I would suggest, however, that his criticism that Schnackenberg's rendering of ἐλέγγειν περί as proving the world wrong about certain ideas is 'too coldly cerebral' does not take account of the convertibility of truth with goodness. Given the predominance of the theme of truth in the Gospel, I would therefore follow Schnackenberg's rendering. D. A. Carson, 'The Function of the Paraclete in John 16:7–11', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98/4 (1979), pp. 547–66.

<sup>45</sup>On the way this picks up on the important 'sight' language in John, see Dorothy Lee, 'The Gospel of John and the Five Senses', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129/1 (2010), pp. 119–20. Lee does not, however, pick up on the way that John's Gospel presumes that the Logos himself can be spoken by the Spirit in her discussion of hearing.

<sup>46</sup>If John 4:48 is a criticism, it is clear that Jesus still ensures that the needed signs are provided. There is no angry denouncement of the generation for seeking signs. One can concede Bultmann's thesis that signs



It is not until the Spirit works, then, that we encounter the words of the Gospel as true. In light of John's dualism of heaven above and earth below, we might say that the purely human encounter of the Gospel has no power to reach the Father above.<sup>47</sup> The world becomes bound by the words as the Spirit works, precisely because the Spirit presents the Son who is glory of the Father.

Does this mean that the words are not true before the Spirit works? No, only that the human being requires proof before encountering the words as true. For the believer, who is already convinced by the truth of Jesus' word, all scriptural truth binds their will with conditional necessity.<sup>48</sup>

### Implications for theological language and spiritual practices

If this is true of the scriptures, what does this mean for theological language? In John's Gospel theological language will only have a place to the extent that it is ordered to the love of God and the other (John 15:1–17). Its end will be practical: 'I appointed you to go and bear fruit' (John 15:16).<sup>49</sup> The completion of such language will be in drawing the reader into second-person encounter with the Son and the other in knowledge and love. It can thus only ever succeed as the Spirit quickens it, binding the will of reader by conditional necessity by giving us the Son.<sup>50</sup>

This means that the success of theological language will be largely opaque to the preacher or theologian. For even the words of the Word need a sign. It is the moment when God in his sovereignty quickens the words and draws the reader deeper into the love of God and other that theological language succeeds.

Since so much hinges on meeting the Son in John's Gospel, what spiritual practices should we employ as we seek to encounter him? Do we seek it out as a general mystical experience? Jacques Maritain offers a rich meditation on mystical knowledge and shows how it follows on from the natural orders of knowing on a Thomistic scheme.<sup>51</sup> In a key passage, drawing on Teresa of Avila and Dionysius, he discusses the fate of human concepts in mystical contemplation, writing that the wisdom gained in mystical contemplation is 'a renunciation of knowledge and an ignorance ... [contemplation] joins us experimentally to a hidden God who is above all knowledge'.<sup>52</sup>

In John's Gospel, in encountering Jesus, we encounter the Logos who is the truth. Certainly, there is the non-propositional knowledge-of that accompanies knowledge-that in second-person experience. And, insofar as it pertains to a divine person, that knowledge-of is inexhaustible. But there is no sense in which the disciple renounces

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and words are both prone to misunderstanding, but hold that they are efficacious when present together. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribner, 1955), pp. 59–60.

<sup>47</sup>Using 'dualism' loosely. See the discussion in Stephen C. Barton, 'Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism', in Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (eds), *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 7–12.

<sup>48</sup>Though it should be noted that believers still have experiences where the words of scripture have a special liveness and applicability to them.

<sup>49</sup>Love, rather than knowledge, is to be the dominant characterisation of Christian theology, against Aquinas's claims in *ST* 1.1.4.

<sup>50</sup>Barth's emphasis on word as event is important, though I would disagree that this quickening of the Spirit happens only in proclamation, and that it happens only with special revelation. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), pp. 120–1.

<sup>51</sup>See part II of Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan, revised edn (Norte Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 281.

the knowledge-*that* which accompanies the knowledge-*of*. If John presents us with a spiritual practice it is *lectio divina*: the disciple is to read the Gospel again and again and in so doing encounters the living truth.

If understood in the appropriate christological key, Maritain's description of the expected work of charity in us is much closer to the truth:

The doctrine of St. Thomas, to which St. John of the Cross explicitly refers, may be summarised in these words: charity, as it increases, transforms us in God, whom it attains immediately in Himself, and since this increasingly perfect spiritualization cannot be achieved without its repercussions in knowledge, because spirit is inferior to itself, the Holy Spirit uses this very loving transformation in God, this supernatural connaturality, as the proper means to delectable and penetrating knowledge which, in turn, renders the love of charity as possessive and fruitful as is possible here below.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

At the start of this paper I looked at Pilate who glibly dismissed the opportunity to encounter the truth. Let me conclude by reflecting on one who sought truth all his life, only to dismiss all his attempts to convey it. In 1273 Thomas Aquinas had a mystical experience. Afterwards he refused to finish his *Summa Theologiae* and referred to his work as straw.<sup>54</sup> His language echoes the Apostle Paul's in 1 Corinthians 3:12. In his commentary on this passage, Aquinas notes that straw is 'easily consumed by fire' and 'transitory'.<sup>55</sup> To build with straw, is to 'erect on the foundation of faith things which pertain to arranging human affairs, to caring for the flesh and for outward glory'.<sup>56</sup>

It seems significant to me that Aquinas used a biblical image to convey the worthlessness of his own writings, and that it was precisely the *Summa Theologiae* – the project of theology as Aristotelian demonstrative science – that he refused to complete. Not even Aquinas' understanding of the analogical relationship between human theological language and God protected his work against this judgement.

Reading Thomas' judgement in light of this exploration of John's epistemology, his judgement that his body of theological work is straw is accurate because, taken in itself, it is powerless to accomplish what it is directed towards. Yet what Thomas didn't seem to see as he surveyed the labour of his lifetime are the moments when, by the power of the Spirit, the language did refer and pushed the reader further along in her journey into the love of the Son.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 359.

<sup>54</sup>Steven J. Jensen, *The Human Person: A Beginner's Thomistic Psychology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), p. 4.

<sup>55</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on I Corinthians*, 3.2.154.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 3.2.157.