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### Dissertation on Truth

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 \* The ~~paraphrase~~ ~~lessons~~ ~~readings~~ should be assigned to class members; in making selection special ~~should be used~~ to suit the needs to the class and subject. For the present lesson and as a sample selection St John 18: 33-38 is proposed. The subdivisions of the lesson analysis may be used as lesson assignments.

# 1

## Dissertation on Truth

Taking up the terms of our title in the order in which I have placed them we come to the first member, the truth. Logical order of procedure requires that we say something of truth at the very beginning of our treatise.

“What is truth?” inquired Pontius Pilate of Jesus of Nazareth when the latter had just told him that it was his mission in life to bear witness unto the truth (John 18:37-38). *Jesus was silent. On a previous occasion he had said, “I am . . . the Truth and the Way”* (cf. John 14:6).

“Thou stirrest the question of questions,” says a standard commentary on the Bible, when dealing with this passage, “which the thoughtful of every age have asked, but never man yet answered.”<sup>1</sup>

Another writer of note, also a modern—1875—commenting upon the question Pilate asked the Christ, remarks: “Often and vainly has that demand been made—often and vainly has it been made since. No one has yet (i.e., to the time of his writing, 1875) given a satisfactory answer.” Then by way of historical illustration of this assertion, our author goes on to say:

When, at the dawn of science in Greece, the ancient religion was disappearing like a mist at sunrise, the pious and thoughtful men of that country were thrown into a condition of intellectual despair. Anaxagoras plaintively exclaims, “Nothing can be known, nothing can be learned, nothing can be certain, (science) [sense] is limited, intellect is weak, life is short.” Xenophanes tells us that it is impossible for us to be certain even when we utter the truth. Parmenides declares

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At the bottom of the contents page for this chapter, Roberts gave the following instructions: “The selection of these scripture lessons should be assigned to class members in advance; in making selection special reference should be made to suitableness to the lesson’s subject. For the present lesson and as a sample selection St. John 18:33-38 is proposed. The subdivisions of the lesson analysis may be used as lesson assignments.”

<sup>1</sup>Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *Commentary*, comment on John 18:37-38.

that the very constitution of man prevents him from ascertaining absolute truth. Empedocles affirms that all philosophical and religious systems must be unreliable, because we have no criterion by which to test them. Democritus asserts that even things that are true cannot impart certainty to us; that the final result of human inquiry is the discovery that man is incapable of absolute knowledge; that, even if the truth be in his possession, he cannot be certain of it. Pyrrho bids us reflect on the necessity of suspending our judgment of things, since we have no criterion of truth; so deep a distrust did he impart to his followers, that they were in the habit of saying, "We assert nothing; no, not even that we assert nothing." Epicurus taught his disciples that truth can never be determined by reason. Arcesilaus, denying both intellectual and sensuous knowledge, publicly avowed that he knew nothing, not even his own ignorance! The general conclusion to which Greek philosophy came was this—that, in view of the contradiction of the evidence of the senses, we cannot distinguish the true from the false; and such is the imperfection of reason, that we cannot affirm the correctness of any philosophical deduction.<sup>2</sup>

This rather settles the matter so far as the antique world is concerned; and the remark of the same writer with reference to time since the Christ, that "no one had, as yet, given a satisfactory answer to Pilate's question, What is truth?," would seem to settle the matter equally as well for the modern world. However, it is only proper that we should consider some of the attempted modern definitions of truth. The one which appears to be most simple, and yet most comprehensive, is that to be found in *Webster's Dictionary* for 1927, and especially under the numeral "4" [1c] of this noted work, viz: "Truth is . . . conformity to fact or reality; exact accordance with that which is, or has been, or shall be. . . . The character (i.e., characteristic of truth) is its capability of enduring the test of universal experience, and coming unchanged out of every possible form of fair discussion" (Sir J. Hershel).<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Herbert Spencer, author of the *Synthetic Philosophy*, and one of the first intellects of the English race, gives as a definition of truth the following:

Debarred as we are from everything beyond the relative, truth, raised to its highest form, can be for us nothing more than perfect

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<sup>2</sup>Draper, *Conflict between Religion and Science*, 201–2.

<sup>3</sup>This definition of truth is not found in Mr. Webster's first edition of his *Dictionary*, 1806; but is found in the two-volumed edition of 1828 published by S. Converse, New York, and in all subsequent editions. [Roberts's definition of truth is found verbatim in Webster's dictionaries for 1828, 1924, and 1927; however, it is altered in the 1901 version to: "Abstractly, conformity to fact or reality; the property in a conception, a judgment or proposition, a belief, an opinion, of being in accord with what is, has been, or must be."]

agreement, throughout the whole range of our experience, between those representations of things which we distinguish as ideal and those ⟨perfections⟩ [presentations] of things which we distinguish as real.<sup>4</sup>

John Fiske, the interpreter of Spencer's *Synthetic Philosophy*, defines absolute truth in these terms: "Truth . . . ⟨is⟩ the correspondence between the subjective order of our conceptions and the objective order of the relations among things"; but he insists that for this absolute truth "we can have no criterion. . . . We can have no criterion of Absolute Truth, or of truth that is not correlated with the conditions of our intelligence."<sup>5</sup> With David Hume and others he accepts the theory that uniformity of experience is a sufficient criterion for contingent truth, but not of universal or absolute truth.<sup>6</sup>

With the Hindoos, "Truth is that which is." This [is] the significance of their word for truth according to Max Müller;<sup>7</sup> and for simplicity and comprehensiveness, comes more nearly exactness than the more labored definitions of the Western world. And yet, in reality, comes short of being complete since it takes no account of that "which has been" or that "which shall be," the becoming, the continual birth of truth.

Quite unnoticed by the writers of the modern world, however, a book was published in 1830 purporting to be the revelation of an inspired scripture abridged from larger authoritative writings had among the ancient peoples of America, in which one of their inspired teachers is represented as saying:

He that prophesieth, let him prophesy to the understanding of men; for the Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be; wherefore, these things are manifested unto us plainly, for the salvation of our souls. (Jacob 4:13)

Again, in 1833, but unknown to Mr. John W. Draper, who in 1875 declared that no satisfactory definition of truth had yet been written; and before either Mr. Spencer or Mr. Fiske had written their definitions of truth, there had another voice spoken upon this subject which claimed for itself a divine authority to speak upon this and

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<sup>4</sup>Spencer, *First Principles*, 141. In passing it might be asked if the reader can suppose the Christ making an answer to Pilate like Spencer's?

<sup>5</sup>Fiske, *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy* 4:102-3. [John Fiske (1842-1901) was an American historian and philosopher who promoted and popularized the theory of evolution in the United States.]

<sup>6</sup>Fiske, *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy* 4:71, cf. 105.

<sup>7</sup>Müller, *India*, Lect. 2, p. 64.

kindred questions, and this is what it said of truth: “Truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24).<sup>8</sup>

If this is spoken with a divine sanction, under inspiration of God, then it ought to be the completest definition of truth extant among men.<sup>†</sup> I hold it to be so. It deals with truth under several aspects: relative truth; absolute truth; and truth in the “becoming” or unfolding; and truth in the sum.

It may be objected to this definition of truth, that it is defective in that it appears to make truth dependent upon knowledge. “Truth is *knowledge* of things as they are.” The answer to this objection would be that at this point the definition deals with relative truth only. “Truth can only be relative to us,” says S. Barring Gould, “because we are relative creatures, with only a relative perception and judgment. We appreciate that which is true to ourselves—not that which is universally true.” In other words, to each individual, knowledge of things as they are and as they were, and as they are to become, will be to him the truth and the fullness thereof, though not necessarily all the truth that is. This will be each man’s truth, or relative truth.

There is truth, however, beyond relative truth, and independent of any individual’s knowledge of it. To illustrate: America existed though all Europe was without knowledge of it for ages, until Columbus discovered it in fact. The power of steam always existed, but men did not know it until modern times. So also with the mysterious force

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<sup>8</sup>It might be thought that the definition of truth above taken from the Doctrine and Covenants is suspiciously near to the definition given by Noah Webster in the edition of his *Dictionary* of 1828, and in subsequent editions, and therefore in common use throughout the United States five years before the date of the revelation of May 6, 1833, from which the definition of truth in the text is taken. Webster’s definition of truth is: “*Exact accordance with that which is, or has been, or shall be.*” While Joseph Smith’s definition is: “*Truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come.*” The uniqueness of Joseph Smith’s definition, however, consists in regarding truth as the *knowledge* of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come (i.e., as they shall be). All which is worked out in the discussion of the text and lifts, as I trust will be seen, the definition of the revelation far beyond the definition of the *Dictionary*.

**Our Prophet also taught that “Intelligence is the light of Truth”; or the power by which truth is cognized and absorbed, and which he holds forth as Eternal, uncreated and uncreatable, therefor Eternal as truth itself—a parallel existence with Truth: Intelligence—Truth! The Existence—Truth; and the Light of Truth which discerns it—Intelligence.**

<sup>†</sup>“List of Points on Doctrine in Question by the Committee [of the Quorum of the Twelve],” written before May 15, 1930, noted: “The superiority of the Prophet’s definition questioned.”

called electricity—it always existed, but not until recent years did men know it as a force that could be utilized. And so as to many other forces and truths in God’s universe that are now existing and have always existed, but man as yet has no knowledge of them. This means merely that the storehouse of truth is not yet exhausted by man’s discoveries. There are more truths in heaven and earth than are yet cognized by man, or dreamed of in human philosophies.<sup>a</sup> It may be, however, that running parallel with those existences and their relations, as yet unknown by man—there may exist intelligences that cognize such existences and such relations. To recur to one item in the illustration above, America existed though all Europe was without knowledge of it until discovered by Columbus; but America had inhabitants, intelligences of her own that knew of the existence of these Western Continents which were their habitat. And so it might be if one could be transported to Mars. There is much we do not know about Mars. Has it an atmosphere and oceans for instance? Has it continents and mountain ranges and rivers? Is it inhabited? If so, are the inhabitants of it highly intellectual? If so, what is the present status of their civilization? All these questions relative to life on Mars may yet be answered affirmatively, but our Earth inhabitants as yet do not humanly know of them; but the intelligent inhabitants on Mars (if there be such) would know of these things, and a thousand more that are unknown to us. And so in like manner as to the most distant planets and planetary systems. Everywhere things exist may be paralleled by existing intelligences that cognize them; and so in the last analysis of the matter, wheresoever there are existences *there may be intelligences* to cognize them, perhaps control them, dominate them, and through them work out a sovereign will.

All this as to relative truth. This definition under consideration, however, also deals with universal or absolute truth. When you say that truth is that which is, that which has been, and that which is to be in future, you circumscribe all there is or can be of truth. You make it “the sum of existence”: You will include the past, present, and future of all existences—their “sum”; and this is truth: The “sum” of existences, past, present, and yet to be.

It may be said that the absolute truth as here set forth is beyond the grasp of the finite mind. That is conceded, but because finite mind can not comprehend the sum of existences, the absolute truth, it does not follow that the definition is at fault, or that it can be displaced by one meaning more or less. Reflection upon the definition here presented

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<sup>a</sup>A paraphrase of *Hamlet* I.v.166-67: “There are more things in heaven and earth, / Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

will develop the fact that it is a self-evident proposition, it may not be proven by any other thing; but the statement itself is its own proof. The proof is in the fact.

One other reflection on this definition. Note the words: "Knowledge of things . . . as they are to come." This presents a view of truth seldom if ever made. With it is given the idea of movement. Truth is not a stagnant pool, but a living fountain; not a Dead Sea, without tides or currents. On the contrary it is an ocean, immeasurably great, vast, co-extensive with the universe itself. It is the universe bright-heaving, boundless, endless, and sublime! Moving in majestic currents, uplifted by cosmic tides in ceaseless ebb and flow, variant but orderly; taking on new forms from ever changing combinations, new adjustments, new relations—multiplying itself in ten thousand times ten thousand ways, ever reflecting the Intelligence of the Infinite, and declaring alike in its whispers and its thunders the hived wisdom of the ages!

Truth, then, is that which is; which has been; which shall be; it is the sum of existence; and knowledge of so much of all this as each individual intelligence possesses is his<sup>b</sup> truth, his measure of himself and of the universe.

Some years ago the question was submitted to the writer for a special article in the Christmas issue of a leading western publication, "What Is the World's Best Hope"—for a given year?

I confess to an ambition at the time to give an answer that would be worthy not only as the "World's Best Hope" for the specified year, but for all years; all ages and for all time, since the answer was to relate to the whole world. As I thought upon the nature of my answer, the world seemed to rise above the horizon of my consciousness. All the continents and islands; all the seas and oceans—the world's highways between the great divisions of the land; all the nations were before me, all the tribes and the races of men, with all their hopes and fears and varied interests, ranging from barbarism to civilization; all their ambitions, great and small, together with all their plots and counter-plots, race pride and national pride; all their activities in trade and commerce; all their plans for peace and their preparations for war; all the fierce struggle for existence, both among savage men and civilized. Also all their philosophies and all their religions; their relations to time and eternity, their hopes of immortality and eternal life—all this arose before me and was to be considered when making my answer.

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<sup>b</sup>Roberts underlined this word and put an X in the margin, probably indicating that this gendered expression was to be reconsidered.



In fixing upon the answer that would be the “world’s best hope”—the world thus conceived—it stood as follows:

THE WORLD’S BEST HOPE IS THE WORLD’S CONTINUED PROGRESS IN KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH.

That answer was adequate, I shall venture to say as the “world’s best hope” for any given year, or any series of years, or for any age or series of ages.

Necessarily the answer so given demanded a definition of truth, and then the definition of truth was given substantially as in the foregoing pages of this chapter: Truth is that which is, and all that is, or has been, or shall be—Truth, **is** the sum of existence!

Then, as now, this brings us face to face with the infinite; for truth thus conceived is infinite, unlimited, and since progress in the infinite must necessarily be without limits, there is no end to the progress of intelligences in that infinite, the truth. Man, oh, blessed thought! may ever be learning and coming to a knowledge of truth that is infinite. As truth is infinite, one may not look for finality in respect of progress in that which is infinite. Each goal attained in the truth will be but a new starting point; an end that but marks a new beginning; while the ultimate of truth will always be like the horizon one pursues over the ocean—ever receding as one approaches it. One may conceive of the existence of the infinite, but may never hope to encompass it; and hence eternal progress for intelligences which possess innate power to cognize truth.

***Workers in the field of truth.*** But now this continued progress in truth—in knowledge of the truth—what a work it is! And how many are active in it! Some are seeking it by the perusal of the printed tomes of past ages, in the musty manuscripts of old libraries and monasteries. Some of this class are even now pushing back the horizon of recorded knowledge into ages before books were known, and are removing mountains from buried cities to get at the libraries of inscribed clay tablets, the hieroglyphic-covered stone monuments, and engraved plates of bronze and gold. Such is the branch of knowledge men call history and archaeology. They are seekers after truth, after knowledge of things as they have been. Others are reading the story of the earth’s formation in its various strata. They are studying the flora and fauna of bygone ages, seeking to determine the life-forms that once abounded in the earth. Others listen to every tremor of the earth and watch the rise of mountain chains, the slowly sinking shores in other parts, and note the very changing contour of oceans and continents. By their patient observation they seek to learn the forces that have been

operating in past ages, and that have fashioned the earth to its present form and excellence.

Others are in the laboratories to deal with substance and its elements. These elements they group and analyze, pursuing substance beyond the realm of the senses, down to the mystic borderline where matter seems to shade off into energy, and energy drifts back into what is recognized as matter, until the bewildered students of substance are wondering if in the last analysis of things it will not be found that matter and energy are really one—spirit?

Others still make a study of the heavens. They turn their telescopes upon the fixed stars, and measure their wonderful distances from the earth and from each other. They resolve mist and nebulae into congeries of worlds undreamed of by men of former times. Nay, more; by the aid of photography, which man by his skill has converted into the “wonderful eye of science,” he photographs and brings within the realm of his knowledge distant universes, if one may be allowed so to speak. Universes that no human eye has ever seen, even aided by the most powerful telescopes; and thus to some purpose indeed he makes “the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament to show his handiwork; where day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge.” Surely “there is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard, and their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”

Coming back from the contemplation of the heavens to things within our own world, we find some men pursuing truth in the practical affairs of life, seeking to determine the right relationship of individuals to each other; also the relationship of the individual to society, and society to the individual. Others are seeking to determine the just principles on which the products of man’s industry shall be distributed. Others seek to determine the just laws of trade and commerce, and the right attitude of nations toward each other. Others, still, are seeking truth by utilizing what, in general terms, we call natural forces, and applying them to industrial and commercial activities. To locomotion on land and sea; to the production of light and heat and mechanical power; thus increasing the supply of the world’s necessities, conveniences, comforts, luxuries, and adding to its progress in material ways, until it would seem that millennium conditions dreamed of by saints, sang of by poets, and predicted by prophets, would not only be realized but surpass all the excellence of anticipation, even of inspired anticipation.

Standing in the midst of all the varied seekers after truth, is he who seeks it by faith and prayer; by appeals to God; by the pursuit of it

through holy thinking and righteous living; by faithful vigils of the night and words and deeds of charity through the day; who now and then pauses in the solitude of mountain tops, or of desert plains, or silent cloister, or in the crowded streets; and fancies—nay, hears the whisper of the still small voice which tells him that good angels and God labor with him, confirming his work by giving him assurances that his faith is not vain, and that his spiritually touched mind really sees God and angels as his co-laborers, and not mere phantoms, creations of the subjective mind. These are, par excellence, seekers after truth, since they seek the truth at the very source of it, by communion with, and service of God. These are your prophets—world teachers in the ways and in the things of God, seekers after truth and teachers of it, with whose services the world may not dispense without sustaining great loss.

Such is the great and varied host of seekers after truth, and as we contemplate them from the departing days of passing years, we shout to them with all our voice, and say, “success to you!” The world’s best hope for all time is your continued progress! Seek on, and let each one bring to the service of man that which he shall find of the truth, confident that the world’s progress, the advancement of civilization, man’s best welfare, and God’s greatest glory will be in exact proportion to your success. Legends, venerable for their age, you may destroy; myths, though beautiful, you may discredit; creeds, formulated on misconceptions of truth, may crumble at your touch; half truths, dear to some, you may rend from men’s belief. With all these there may go much to which the world has become attached, and your work at times may seem iconoclastic; but in the end all will be well, nothing will perish but that which is false and evil. Truth alone will ultimately survive and endure; and truth, as one of your own poets has said, “though the heavens depart and the earth’s fountains burst, Truth, the sum of existence, will weather the worst.”

I say again, the “world’s best hope” for all ages to come is the continued progress of man in the knowledge of the truth—man’s progress in “the knowledge of things as they are, and as they have been, and as they are to come.”

All this concerns our present undertaking, the discussion of the Truth, the Way, and the Life; and since our accepted definition of truth is knowledge of that which is, the next logical step in the development of our theme must be, what does man know? And that will be the subject of a few succeeding chapters. However, in closing this opening chapter on truth, I shall do so by quoting an ode to truth, inspired by

the definition of truth given in Joseph Smith's revelation of May 6, 1833, and quoted in the text:

TRUTH

O say, what is truth? 'Tis the fairest gem  
That the riches of worlds can produce;  
And priceless the value of truth will be when  
The proud monarch's costliest diadem  
Is counted but dross and refuse.

Yes, say, what is truth? 'Tis the brightest prize  
To which mortals or Gods can aspire:  
Go search in the depths where it glittering lies,  
Or ascend in pursuit to the loftiest skies;  
'Tis an aim for the noblest desire.

The scepter may fall from the despot's grasp,  
When with winds of stern justice he copes;  
But the pillar of truth will endure to the last,  
And its firm rooted bulwarks outstand the rude blast,  
And the wreck of the fell tyrant's hopes.

Then say, what is truth? 'Tis the last and the first,  
For the limits of time it steps o'er:  
Though the heavens depart, and the earth's fountains burst,  
Truth, *the sum of existence*, will weather the worst,  
Eternal, unchanged, evermore.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>The author is John Jaques, member of the LDS Church; b. 1827; d. 1902; assistant church historian. *Latter-day Saint Hymns* (1927), no. 191; italics added.

Further references recommended by Roberts for this lesson: Dummelow, ed., *Commentary on the Holy Bible*; D&C 93. For a discussion of Roberts's logic and epistemology, see pages 597-99. Interestingly, Roberts's unreserved estimation of human ability to know truth was tempered in Draft 1, page 1 of *TWL*, where he had quoted but then deleted Joseph Smith's statement:

Could we read and comprehend all that has been written from the days of Adam, on the relation of man to God and angels in a future state, we should know very little about it. Reading the experience of others, or the revelation given to *them*, can never give *us* a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God. Knowledge of these things can only be obtained by experience through the ordinances of God set forth for that purpose. Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject. (Smith, *History of the Church* 6:50)

Perhaps Roberts sensed some tension between his undertaking of *TWL* and this statement of the Prophet.