

# A study of the Introduction of First John

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People routinely recommend the book of First John to those new to the Bible or new to Christianity as the starting place to read in the Bible. Yet many people find the first four verses difficult to understand. There are so many things going on in these verses that go unnoticed by many students of the Bible. In this solemn, yet emphatic but stately opening, one may read these verses without understanding the reasoning behind many of the things said or the effect they had on the original readers of the epistle because of their cultural distance from the New Testament.

Although this article is about the first 4 verses of First John it also mentions some of John's other writings. For the sake of those unfamiliar with the books of the Bible, I will discuss his writings with brief comments to avoid confusion when mentioning other books. His first book is The Gospel of John which presents the life of Jesus Christ from more of a theological perspective than the other gospels by Matthew, Mark, and Luke as he focuses on Jesus Christ as the Son of God. John also wrote 3 letters or epistles referred to as First John, Second John, and Third John. These were letters to churches who knew the apostle John. He is also author of the final and last book of the Bible, Revelation which has to do with the end times.

As one studies First John one must recognize and understand the figures of speech that permeate these 4 verses if they aim to understand the passage. Understanding these figures of speech reveal much about how the author has fashioned his message together and help us to understand what he is trying to accomplish in his introduction. This article looks closely at the way the author has constructed this passage to assist people in understanding it better and appreciate what it says, what it means, and the emphasis with which it is said.

## The First verse of First John

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—

1 John 1:1<sup>1</sup>

## There Are Two Figures of Speech in Verse One.

First John begins with a five-fold repetition of the Greek word ὃ at the beginning of the phrases. Translators usually translate the Greek word ὃ as “what” or “which” and sometimes as “that which.” The repetition of this word “what” seems strange to our understanding, but it serves as a figure of speech (Anaphora) where a series of sentences or clauses begins with the same

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word. Anaphora “emphasizes with great solemnity the subject of the epistle which is opened thus in so stately a manner.”<sup>2</sup> See footnote<sup>3</sup> for examples of other verses that use anaphora.

It is necessary right away to consider another figure of speech (hysteresis of gender) which relates to the same  $\delta$  previously discussed. Hysteresis of gender uses a non-gender word in place of a gender specific word. What or which ( $\delta$ ) is the non-gender word used instead of saying “Him who,” which is masculine. John uses hysteresis of gender to enhance a person’s interest as he prepares to introduce “the Word of Life.” Despite the ambiguity introduced by hysteresis of gender, neither a masculine nor a feminine pronoun would have worked as well as the neuter  $\delta$  because the word “life” (ζωή) is feminine while the word “word” (λόγος) is masculine. John does not use the pronoun “Him” until 1 John 1:5 where it becomes clear to the reader that  $\delta$  (what or which) is a Him.

### The beginning

First John begins with the phrase, “What was from the beginning.” Now one must face the question of which “beginning” the author intended. The possibilities include the beginning of the Christian era, the birth of Christ, the giving of the law of Moses, the creation of the world, or even before the creation of the world. The discussion below covers the most likely choices.

This phrase resembles Genesis 1:1 which may provide some help in understanding John’s use of “the beginning.” The beginning in Genesis goes at least as far back as before the creation of the universe. John’s Gospel also starts with “in the beginning” and may indicate a time earlier than “the beginning” in Genesis. It speaks of a beginning when only God existed before the creation of anything. (John 1:1-3),

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

John 1:1–3

John wrote his Gospel between 30 to 40 years before writing First John. His readers were likely familiar with John’s gospel associated the two beginnings as meaning the same thing. The “from the beginning” in First John suggest the beginning before the creation of anything as in the Gospel of John.

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<sup>2</sup> Bullinger, E. W. (1898). *Figures of speech used in the Bible* (p. 205). London; New York: Eyre & Spottiswoode; E. & J. B. Young & Co.

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 6:12 “against” or 1 Corinthians 13:4 “all things”, 1 Corinthians 13:8 “whether”, 1 Corinthians 13:9 “in part”, 1 Corinthians 13:11 “as a child”

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## How to Convince an Audience in the Bible Era

In today's thinking, we understand something has merit once we examine the primary resources, study peer review writings of scholars in the field that support the idea and examine dissenting scholarly views. But for people during New Testament times, ideas were most convincing and carried more weight if they were very old and well established. In their minds, the older the idea was the truer it was. Therefore, a convincing idea had to have an ancient heritage. John gives the ancient heritage of "what was from the beginning." John reinforces this idea in 1 John 2:7, "Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard."

Each of the authors of all 4 gospels utilized this concept of using an ancient heritage to demonstrate its convincing trueness. Matthew's genealogy goes back to Abraham the patriarch, that God called from his homeland to journey to the land of Israel. This satisfactorily convinced his Jewish audience who were the descendants of Abraham of its trueness. Luke's genealogy traces the heritage of Jesus all the way back to God. The gospels of Mark and John as well as the epistle of 1 John goes back to "the beginning."

## What is credible evidence?

A person's credibility as a witness increases when they have witnessed the things they testify about. John provides the apostles credentials as witnesses with 4 types of evidence they had witnessed. We will soon learn of the reason John presents 4 types of evidence. The first type of evidence is that they had heard. For ancient people, evidence of something heard was not very convincing, in fact they considered it likely false. Some authorities threw out evidence of things only heard.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless it is evidence worth mentioning when accompanied with other evidence. The second type of evidence is that they had also seen. Evidence seen by someone was stronger than evidence only heard and qualified as evidence in the Greek world.<sup>5</sup> The third type of evidence is that they had looked at it. To "have looked" (θεάομαι) could mean that they had either had "an intent look at" it or that they have seen it and were impressed.<sup>6</sup> Being impressed does not enhance the credibility of the evidence but having an intent look at it does. One can safely assume the meaning of having an intent look at it best fits the context. Having an intent look at something is more involved than simply seeing and qualifies as stronger evidence than the previously presented types of evidence. The Fourth type of evidence is that they had touched (ψηλαφάω) it. This is more than a simple touch or poke. They had felt it or

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<sup>4</sup> Arnold, C. E. (2002). Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Hebrews to Revelation. (Vol. 4, p. 183). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 445). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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handled it. They actively participated in their interaction with Jesus during His ministry on earth. This was the best evidence of all four types presented.

This four-fold evidence of the apostles not only satisfies the requirements of satisfactory evidence, but it also serves as complete evidence because “four was the number required for rhetorical completeness among the Greeks.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, John has presented acceptable and complete evidence to his audience to support what he has to say.

One may notice the increasing strength of each type of evidence as the verse progresses. The gradual ascent is the figure of speech Anabasis. Along each step along the way John has the reader thinking, “That was good, but this is better.” In this way, John brings his audience with him as he presents Christ.

### **The Word of Life**

John has proved his message is convincing, credible, and complete. They are now ready to move ahead, but John has a hurdle to cross that his audience may not be quite ready for and he cannot fully reveal his subject yet. He says, “Concerning the Word of Life.” Although this does not fully reveal Jesus Christ, it is an explosive statement for 2 reasons. First, because he has said he is talking about deity, even saying he had touched deity. Secondly, he has said it with great emphasis. I will explain both reasons.

The phrase, “Word of Life” is a Hebraism. A Hebraism is “a characteristic feature of Hebrew occurring in another language.”<sup>8</sup> This Hebraism is “genitive of quality” and is also recognized as the figure of speech “Antimereia of the Noun.” Antimereia of the Noun enhances the phrase “Word of Life” with a strong emphasis.<sup>9</sup> Even though both words are nouns, antimereia of the noun causes the word “life” to function as an adjective to say, “Living Word.” This gives the phrase great emphasis and places it as the center piece of the verse.

The Word of Life coupled with the first phrase “what was from the beginning” is a clear reference to the divine word or “divine message”<sup>10</sup> which speaks of deity with “Word of Life” as His title.<sup>11</sup> This revelation is so volatile that the author interrupts his sentence with another

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, R. E. (2008). *The Epistles of John: translated, with introduction, notes, and commentary* (Vol. 30, p. 161). New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Merriam-Webster, I. (2003). *Merriam-Webster’s collegiate dictionary*. (Eleventh ed.). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.

<sup>9</sup> Bullinger, E. W. (1898). *Figures of speech used in the Bible* (p. 502). London; New York: Eyre & Spottiswoode; E. & J. B. Young & Co.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, R. E. (2008). *The Epistles of John: translated, with introduction, notes, and commentary* (Vol. 30, p. 306). New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, R. E. (2008). *The Epistles of John: translated, with introduction, notes, and commentary* (Vol. 30, p. 165). New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

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sentence to explain its possibility. The injected parembole has emphasis simply because it could not wait its turn to find its own place for a sentence but had a sense of immediate urgency.

### Verse 2, The Parembole

and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you  
the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—

1 John 1:2

The parembole includes the entirety of verse 2. This figure of speech has two characteristics. One is that it is an insertion or parenthesis in the middle of a sentence. The other characteristic is that it has all the elements required of a complete sentence and could stand alone as a sentence. It may not seem like the verse meets the second criterion in English translations, but it does in the Greek. One should be able to find a complete thought in verse 2 even though the first Greek sentence of First John includes the first 3 verses.

John anticipates his hearers may be wondering how he could have possible heard, seen, looked at, and touched deity. His parembole answers this anticipated concern with, “The life was manifested, and we have seen.” The repetition of the word “life” from verse 1 along with its prominent position in the parembole give it an emphasis. The life became such that one could hear, see, observe, and touch it, though it had not always been visible.

### Manifested, Testify, and Proclaim.

The Greek word “manifested” (φανερώω) has two possible definitions and uses the meaning “to become visible” rather than the alternative “to become known.”<sup>12</sup> Note the manifestation comes before the seeing. First Timothy 3:16 is a good verse for comparison of the use of the word “manifested” (φανερώω) where it is translated as “revealed.”

The words testify (μαρτυρέω) and proclaim (ἀπαγγέλλω) are closely related in concept, but one can easily separate them by purpose and relative time. To testify is to speak from one’s own experience or personal knowledge or to bear witness.<sup>13</sup> It indicates the source of the information presented is from past events. The purpose of testimony is to convince the audience based on experience. On the other hand, to proclaim is to make something relating to the “present or future” “known publicly.”<sup>14</sup> The apostles are making the eternal life known publicly as they proclaim it.

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<sup>12</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 1048). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>13</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 617). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>14</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 95). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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## The Eternal Life

John identifies the life as the eternal life which is the subject of their testimony and proclamation. One should note that here “eternal life” designates an ever existing being in all of eternity. The Bible usually uses the phrase “eternal life” to represent the final state of the Christian and that is the way many commentators understand it here; however, the context clearly shows “the eternal life” is equated with Jesus. The context of the phrase determines its meaning.

Interestingly though, the phrase “eternal life” appears forty-one times. Twice it is writing using the emphatic form (in the second attributive position with the two articles which gives it an emphatic sense). Here “eternal life” refers to deity and in 1 John 2:25 it refers to the afterlife.

John elaborates on the eternal life, “Which was with the Father.” The Father can only refer to God. The Jews understood God’s relationship with them as one of Father. “... we have one Father: God.” (John 8:41) The Greek word for “with” (πρὸς) implies not only a physical proximity but also a relationship of communication with the Father, to be in company with.<sup>15</sup> This continues to bring John 1:1 to mind where “the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” But here in verse 2 John is still not ready to fully reveal his subject but continues to build the suspense. Even the relationship between the Father and the eternal life remains vague to keep us wondering exactly what he is talking about.

He repeats the word “manifested” which places it prominently in one’s thoughts with emphasis. “Manifested to us” is the whole point of this preface to explain their interaction with deity. They have seen and witnesses the “Word of Life,” the “Eternal Life.”

## Verse 3

what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.

1 John 1:3

## What We Have Seen and Heard

Verse 3 begins with the word “what” (ὃ) and is the last of the emphatic anaphoric phrases begun in verse 1. In this verse the author reversed the order of “seen” and “heard” from verse 1 where he was increasing the level of convincing evidence. Commentators provide several explanations for this change of order, none of which I accept. Even though verse 2 is a preface, it is neither forgotten nor ignored. John is no longer concerned about the order of

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<sup>15</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 875). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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evidence strength as seen in verse one and now places “seen” before “heard” because verse 2 has highlighted the word “manifested,” which means “made visible.” The apostles have seen the manifested deity; therefore, “and seen” appears immediately after “manifested” and before “heard.” Also “heard” and “proclaim” naturally fit together as they both deal with acoustics and communication.<sup>16</sup>

### **We Proclaim to You Also, so that you too**

The repetition of the word “proclaim” (ἀπαγγέλλω) from verse 2 brings proclaim to one’s attention with emphasis. They proclaim “what we [they] have seen and heard” “to you also.” The “to you” indicates the readers and hearers of this epistle. The “also” is inclusive of others the apostles have shared the gospel message with. The author works in the word “you” twice so as to give it an emphasis “to YOU also, so that YOU too.” Commentators see an additional emphasis in “also, so that,” though grammarians disagree as to which word provides the emphasis, but it seems that the entire phrase carries emphasis.

### **May Have Fellowship with Us**

The excitement of the writer is clearly present throughout this entire passage. The reason for his excitement and his purpose in proclaiming the manifested Word of Life stems from the hope he has that the hearers may have fellowship with the apostles. John could have simply said “to fellowship with us,” but he goes to the trouble of saying “MAY HAVE fellowship with us.” John is fond of using “may have” (ἔχειν) to intensify the meaning of a verb,<sup>17</sup> as he does here. The use of “have” changes the meaning from simply stating a fact to “perhaps suggest[ing] the sense ‘to have and enjoy.’”<sup>18</sup>

Fellowship (κοινωνία) is a difficult word to define. It is a “favorite expression for the marital relationship”<sup>19</sup> which indicates the apostle’s desire for an especially close relationship with his audience. BDAG<sup>20</sup> additionally defines fellowship as a “close association involving mutual interest and sharing, association, communion, fellowship.” John will reveal the mutual interest they share soon. This fellowship is an active participation between both the giver and the receiver.<sup>21</sup> There is a Greek word (μετοχή) John could have used to indicate a more passive

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<sup>16</sup> Sometimes commentators miss the simple explanation. When a person sees commentators presenting many theories, it may be time to take a step back and entertain the idea of a simple solution.

<sup>17</sup> Brooke, A. E. (1912). *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Johannine epistles* (p. 8). New York: C. Scribner’s Sons.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., pp. 552–553). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Brooke, A. E. (1912). *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Johannine epistles* (p. 8). New York: C. Scribner’s Sons.

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fellowship.<sup>22</sup> But John clearly intends us to understand fellowship as a close relationship of two-way active participation with them.

### Indeed Our Fellowship

The second “fellowship” in verse 3 receives emphasis two ways. The repetition of the word “fellowship” from the previous clause provides emphasis for it. There is also an emphasis on the word “fellowship” indicated by the translator’s use of indeed. “And indeed our fellowship.” There is no single Greek word here meaning “indeed,” but translators derive the word “indeed” from the emphasis placed on “fellowship” by the Greek combination καὶ ... δέ. For those unfamiliar with such Greek constructions, if we fill in the blank in attempt to illustrate, it looks something like this: AND(καὶ) + “fellowship” + a sentence connector(δέ). All that to say Greek is different than English and it is the construction of the sentence with the καὶ ... δέ combination that provides an emphasis to the word “fellowship. The epistle of First John covers fellowship from several angles so we can be sure of our salvation.

The word “our” (ἡμετέρα) is a rare emphatic Greek word occurring eight times in the New Testament. It is as intensive as the word “indeed.”<sup>23</sup> The epistle of 1 John uses it twice. “Its use both lends solemnity and helps to identify the kind of communion [or fellowship] about which the author is speaking.”<sup>24</sup>

### The Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ

John has strongly emphasized who their fellowship is with as though writing it out in bold capital letters. When we are in fellowship with the apostles, we are by extension in fellowship with those they are in fellowship with. Their fellowship and ours “... is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

John finally states his subject plainly. Everything so far has increased the intensity of our interest to prepare us for this unveiling. Any Jew would immediately recognize “the Father” as referring to God. God was a father to the nation of Israel, although having fellowship with the Father may add a new twist for them, the Father is an old idea that they readily accepted without question.

John indicates their fellowship is not only with the Father but is also “with His Son Jesus Christ.” He reveals in unmistakable language that they are in fellowship with Jesus Christ. This simple statement says so much about Jesus. He is the Son of God the Father<sup>25</sup>, which makes him equal

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<sup>22</sup> The New Testament only used this word in 2 Corinthians 6:14; partnership (NASB95), sharing, participation (BDAG)

<sup>23</sup> Smalley, S. S. (1984). 1, 2, 3 John (Vol. 51, p. 12). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, R. E. (2008). The Epistles of John: translated, with introduction, notes, and commentary (Vol. 30, p. 171). New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

<sup>25</sup> Luke 1:35, Matthew 16:16

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to God.<sup>26</sup> He is the Christ, which means the messiah or the promised one. He is the one John has spoken of from verse 1. Jesus existed “from the beginning” of everything. He became visible and the apostles seen, heard, examined, and touched Him during His life on earth. He is the “living Word” and the “eternal Life.”

### Gnosticism Combated

The fellowship of the apostles is with Jesus as well as with God. Which is important because it confronted the false teachings of Gnosticism. The Gnostics claimed that the physical world was imperfect and required a succession of different levels of beings, each able to approach the world more so than the others until one being could go to earth. Gnosticism claimed Jesus was the one on the bottom level and as such was able to physically come to earth to teach but could not approach God or heaven.

The Gnostic ideology erroneously removed all elements of deity from Jesus. In this phrase, John combats Gnosticism while giving Jesus His rightful place as deity. This passage places Jesus both in heaven and on earth. Several other New testament passages combated the Gnostic teachings that attempted to infiltrate and mislead the Christian churches. All five of John’s writings deal with Gnosticism in some fashion as do several of Paul’s writings as well as Hebrews, Jude, 2 Peter and some Church Fathers.

### Verse 4

These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

1 John 1:4

One may wonder what “these things” refer to. The possibilities are several, any of which could be the intended meaning.

- 1) The first three verses of the epistle.
- 2) The rest of 1 John beginning with verse five.
- 3) The entire book of 1 John.
- 4) The entire corpus of the apostolic writings since John has been inclusive of the other apostles in this epistle.

John gives us his purpose for writing “these things.” “So that our joy may be made complete.” This purpose may not appear very clear to someone who is not well familiar with the writings of the apostles, but 1 John 5:10 says it more explicitly in.

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

1 John 5:13

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<sup>26</sup> John 1:3

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It is the desire and life purpose of the apostles to share the gospel message with people so they can believe in Christ Jesus. This faith in Jesus Christ brings eternal life to a person through the forgiveness of sins. The satisfaction the apostles have is in knowing that the people they share the gospel with have eternal life. The Gnostics are trying to sway the Christians with their false doctrine and this concerns John and the other apostles because if this false doctrine swayed the people and they leave Christianity, the apostles could not be sure of the people's salvation.

Just as during the New Testament times, there are many false teachings going around today. A person's only defense against false doctrines is to know the Bible well themselves instead of depending on others to know it for them. This is comparable to the banker who studies real money so they can recognize counterfeits.

John has introduced Jesus in these 4 verses with an elevated level of excitement that English translations fail to capture. With much emphasis throughout, John lays the groundwork with the foundation of truthfulness so his audience can accept his message. He validates the testimony of the witnesses as acceptable and complete. He anticipates the objections of his audience as he reveals Jesus in His rightful place as deity and the fellowship we can have with Jesus Christ and the Father and the apostles gain satisfaction in the harvest of souls that come to Christ through their testimony and proclamation.