

III. John's First Epistle – Rethinking the Messiah and Life in Him

John's first epistle doesn't present any sort of neat structure. This is clear from the fact that scholars and commentators have come up with all sorts of outlines and structural arrangements, all while admitting that their arrangement doesn't do full justice to the text. So Westcott: "*No single arrangement is able to take account of the complex development of thought which it offers, and of the many connections which exist between its different parts.*" This lack of tidy structure perhaps reflects the spirit and orientation of the document; John wasn't writing a carefully crafted systematic treatise, but a spirited challenge and earnest plea to fellow Christians who were wandering from the truth as it is in Jesus. He wrote as a *father* out of a heart burdened by loving concern, not as a well-reasoned theologian. Consistent with this intent and orientation, some have detected in the epistle a kind of oscillating movement that spirals upward toward a climax. That is, John goes back and forth between what is true (who Jesus is and what it means to know Him) and what the truth implies and demands (what life in Christ entails), always building on what he has already established. Whereas Paul tended in his epistles to partition these two dimensions (*indicative* and *imperative*) into a "doctrinal" section followed by a "practical" section, John here wraps them together into an organic, dynamic, escalating whole.

A. John's Prologue (1:1-4)

Some scholars believe John penned this letter as a clarification and defense of his gospel account. Gnostic ideas and influences were infiltrating the Christian community well before the end of the first century and there's little doubt that those with Gnostic leanings found support for their views in a particular reading of John's gospel. Among other things, he emphasized the themes of light and darkness, life and death, flesh and spirit, and these were core concepts in Gnostic mythology. It may have been that some Gnostic Christians even pointed to John himself as an apostolic authority sympathetic with them and their doctrine. Whatever the case, this epistle clearly confronted false notions about Jesus as God's Messiah – notions consistent with the aberrant Gnostic concept of "the Christ" embraced by the Cerinthian and Docetic Christians.

Another evidence that John wrote this epistle with his gospel account in view is the fact that he began it with a prologue that echoes the one in his gospel. The present one is much shorter and more concise, but it highlights several of the same themes. Anyone familiar with John's gospel finds his prologue coming to mind when reading the opening statements of this epistle.

1. The thing that immediately stands out with John's prologue is its awkwardness. The first three verses (possibly the first four) are one long sentence and the four relative phrases ("what was from the beginning, what we have heard.." etc.) that begin it are grammatically ambiguous. That is, they can function either as subjects or objects of a verb – either one of the verbs in the passage or an implied one. So also verse 2 appears to be a parenthesis that interrupts the main flow of thought. Scholars have structured these verses in various ways, but a few things seem clear: First, verse 2 is indeed a parenthetical statement that clarifies the phrase, "word of life." Second, this parenthesis leads into verse 3 which continues John's main thought. Third, the verb "*proclaim*" in verse 3 goes with the relative phrases in verse 1, which function as its objects. (The verbs in the second verse function together within the parenthesis.) Hence the flow of John's thought:

“We proclaim to you what we have experienced regarding the Word of life – that is, what was from the beginning, what we ourselves have heard, seen with our eyes, scrutinized and handled. This life – the life of the eternal realm which existed with the Father and was then revealed to us – was manifested in the world and we observed it and testify to it, now proclaiming it to you. And we do so in order that you would have fellowship with us – us whose fellowship is with the Father and His Son, Jesus the Messiah. When you share in this fellowship our joy will be complete. This is our purpose in writing to you.”

2. John began this correspondence the way he began his gospel account, namely by associating Jesus with “*the beginning*” (cf. John 1:1). In his gospel, it was the divine *Logos* that existed in the beginning; here, John only referenced an indefinite entity – “*that which was from the beginning.*” So also he didn’t mention incarnation – the *Logos* becoming flesh – as he did in his gospel prologue, but implied it by declaring that he (and others) had heard, seen, scrutinized and touched that One. Throughout John used a neuter pronoun, (*what* was from the beginning, *what* we have heard, *what* we have seen...”), which itself alludes to the non-human *Logos* he introduced in his gospel prologue. But one does not see, hear and touch a spiritual *Logos*, but rather a *fleshly* one. By speaking in this way, John hinted at two truths: the widely accepted truth of an eternal *Logos* principle and the shocking and astonishing truth of an incarnate, *human* *Logos*.

As noted, the *Logos* was a concept woven into the philosophy and religious formulations of John’s day. It wasn’t unique to Gnostic thought, but even outside of Gnostic circles no one imagined that the *Logos* (whatever one’s exact understanding of it) could assume physical form, let alone be embodied as a human being. Humans can embrace the *Logos* as eternal truth and be transformed by it, but it always remains distinct and separate from them. In the Graeco-Roman world, an incarnate *Logos* was a contradiction in terms.

3. John first identified this figure in indefinite terms, then associated it with “*the Word of Life.*” In this way John connected the concepts of *Logos* and *life* (vv. 1-2), echoing a central theme in his gospel prologue (ref. John 1:1-4). John’s Gentile contemporaries would have had no problem with this association; all who embraced the concept of the *Logos* agreed that authentic life – whether eternally or in this world – is obtained through one’s proper relationship with the *Logos* (as the principle of nature and wisdom). But, as with the *Logos* concept itself, John was here importing new meaning into a familiar idea.

The life associated with the *Logos* – the *Word that is life* (cf. 5:20) – is the life of the *eternal realm*, but not in the Gnostic and pagan sense. It isn’t the “life” of disembodied exaltation into the Pleroma (or some other spiritual realm), but of sharing in the life of God Himself. This life bound up in the *Logos* has become manifest in the *incarnate* *Logos* – the *man*, Jesus the Messiah, and it is in Him *as man* that human beings obtain it. Contrary to the common belief in John’s day, the life of eternity doesn’t come to humans as they shed their bodies; they enter into it precisely as fully human creatures, body and spirit, albeit in two stages (cf. John 5:24, 6:47, 54 and Ephesians 2:4-6 with 1 Corinthians 15 and Philippians 3:20-21; also Romans 6:1-11). Though perhaps lost on modern readers, John’s point here was an intentional contradiction of and challenge to the pagan “wisdom” (Gnostic and otherwise) that was already infecting the Christian community.

4. The “Word of Life” John proclaimed to his readers is the actual Logos that had come into the world in the human person of Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, this man had been put to death *and then raised to life*, not in the pagan sense of His spirit being liberated from His dead body to ascend into a heavenly realm, but in *resurrection* in a transformed physical body (John 20:19-29; Luke 24:13-43). John himself was a witness of these things, as were many others (hence the “we” of verses 1-5). He was declaring nothing other than what he had personally witnessed and experienced – not by means of a spiritual vision or philosophical contemplation, but with his own physical eyes, ears and hands (1:3a). However absurd and unbelievable an incarnate and resurrected Logos might appear to people steeped in Gnostic or Greek philosophical thought, it was the truth. And if the divine Logos is something other than what men believe it to be, *it follows that the life derived from the Logos also needs to be reconsidered*. John had come to understand that, irrespective of Gnostic and Greek notions and convictions, the life of eternity must be defined in terms of a *human being* – the human Messiah and Son of God – in whom it exists in all truth and fullness. People must know *Him* to know life as it actually is; even more importantly, they must share in Him in order to possess this life.
5. John’s goal was to call his readers back to the true Logos – the Word of Life that came into the world as the man, Jesus the Messiah. Contrary to Gnostic thinking, the Logos doesn’t impart life by imparting esoteric knowledge or wisdom, but by imparting *Himself*. Authentic life – the life of the eternal realm which God enjoys – comes through personal union with the incarnate Logos who has life in Himself (John 5:26, 6:53-54), life which He possesses together with the Father. This truth clarifies the connection John drew between eternal life in the Word of Life and *fellowship* (1:2-3). First and foremost, this fellowship is relational intimacy deriving from shared life: Humans enjoy this fellowship when they share in the divine life (John 14:1-20, 17:20-24; Ephesians 2:11-22, 4:1-6; Colossians 3; 1 Peter 2:4-10). And because the Father and Son possess this life together, sharing in the divine life yields fellowship with both Son and Father. But it also yields a new, living fellowship with all people who share the one divine life; the members of Jesus are members of one another, not intellectually or religiously, but in their persons; they are *one* as the Father and Son are one. Yet here John indicated that the fellowship between his readers and him was deficient (v. 3a). It’s possible he was unsure of their union with Christ; more probably he was pointing to the truth that Christian fellowship *in practice* requires being “of one mind” in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 2:1-4).

These were radical ideas in a world in which “life” was understood in purely personal terms as the perfection of one’s own knowledge and inward existence. People might find a kind of fellowship with those on the same spiritual journey, but not the fellowship John knew and pursued. The fellowship he spoke of isn’t a matter of common goal, knowledge or experience, but *common-union*: True human fellowship has its essence in fellowship with God consisting in union with Him in Christ Jesus by His Spirit. And this divine-human fellowship binds together in one all who share in it. Gathered up into the life of the triune God, Christians are gathered into one organism in the Spirit. In this common-union they experience the joy God ordained for them. This was the joy John knew and wanted for his readers. And like his Lord, John understood that his own joy would be complete when his joy became theirs (1:4; cf. John 15:1-11, 16:20-24, 17:6-13).