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## §1 *The Word of Life (1 John 1:1–4)*

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Just as the Gospel of John begins with a prologue (John 1:1–18), so do the letters. In both, the Word (*logos*) is the central theme. Here too the Elder introduces some of his principal concerns: the reality of the incarnation, eternal life, and fellowship with the community of believers.

The tone of the prologue is authoritative: the author speaks with the first generation of Christians (“we”), emphasizing his solidarity with apostolic “orthodoxy,” and he repeatedly uses verbs of personal experience (v. 1: “heard,” “seen,” “looked at,” “touched”; v. 2: “seen,” “testify”; v. 3: “seen,” “heard”) to underscore his direct connection with the incarnation of the Word. Thus, it is evident from the beginning of the epistles that such an emphasis is necessary because of the crisis situation of the readers: false teachers who do not have the author’s authority are dividing the community and are threatening its central truth: Jesus the Christ, God’s Son, come in the flesh (1 John 2:18–19, 22–23; 4:1–2; 2 John 7; cf. John 1:14).

**1:1** / The exact subject of the prologue is not clear. The author speaks about it in several ways. He uses the neuter pronoun *ho* (which the NIV translates as **that which** and **which** in v. 1, and as **what** in v. 3), and he describes it primarily in terms of its appearance (*ephanerōthē*, twice in v. 2). He says it is **concerning the Word** (a masculine noun) **of life**. Then, in v. 2, he calls it **the life**, a feminine noun, and **the eternal life**.

The original readers of the letter, who not only knew the prologue to the Gospel of John but were familiar with the author’s vocabulary and style, would have had no difficulty in identifying the subject as God’s **Son, Jesus Christ** (v. 3), **the Word** who “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14), who is also **the life** (John 14:6). All of these ways of speak-

ing of Jesus highlight the inseparability of the person, his message, and the experience of the Christ event.

**From the beginning**, while containing an allusion to “in the beginning” (John 1:1; Gen. 1:1), refers here to the **beginning** of the Christian movement, the teaching and experience of Jesus, which led to the formation of his disciples (John 15:27; 16:4) and ultimately to the founding of communities of Christians throughout the Mediterranean world. The author uses the expression elsewhere in the letters: **from the beginning** the Johannine community has had a command to follow (2:7; 2 John 5–6), a message (“what you have heard,” 2:24) to heed and to allow to abide in them (1 John 3:11), and the “fathers” have known him who is **from the beginning** (2:13–14).

Four verbs in the perfect and aorist tenses and two nouns referring to parts of the body emphasize as concretely as possible the physicality of **the Word of life**: **heard, . . . seen with our eyes, . . . looked at, . . . our hands have touched**. The polemical context of these assertions is the denial of the incarnation made by the Elder’s opponents (4:3; 2 John 7).

The NIV, in order to make the rough Greek sentence more clear to the modern reader, introduces the main verb from v. 3 (**we proclaim**) into v. 1. The **Word of life**, who was thus apprehended by our physical senses—**this we proclaim**.

**1:2** / The emphasis in v. 2 is on the communication to the recipients of this Word of **eternal life**. Note the progression in time of the verbs. **The eternal life was with the Father** (*pros ton patera*; cf. 1 John 2:1: “we have an advocate,” *pros ton patera* and John 1:1: “and the Word was,” *pros ton theon*). Next he **appeared** (or was manifested) **to us**. Therefore, **we have seen** him, and now are able to **testify**, and **proclaim to you** what we have thus experienced. This same kind of progression in revelation and communication is also found at the opening of the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:1), where we have a sequence of God—Jesus Christ—angel—John—his servants.

**1:3** / Verse 3 summarizes what has been said in vv. 1–2 and then moves on to a new affirmation. The author (and the apostolic community he represents, hence the **we**) **proclaims** this message about the **Word of life**, in order that those who hear it might join “the circle of salvation,” i.e., those who **have fellowship with God** (which, according to John 17:3, is eternal life). It is

essential to be in **fellowship with** the author, because the author is in **fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ**. The Elder's opponents, the secessionists—those who have left the community (2:19) and are antichrists (2:18), false prophets (4:1), deceivers (2 John 7), and liars (2:22)—are not in fellowship with the author, and they no longer have either the Father or the Son (2 John 9; cf. 2:22–24). They are outside the “circle of salvation.” It is evident here that **fellowship** (*koinōnia*) is not simply a matter of love and hospitality (though for the Elder it is also that), but is primarily a matter of eternal life and death.

**1:4** / There is a textual problem in v. 4. Does the author write **to make our joy complete**, or to make *your* joy complete? Some MSS, the ones on which the KJV was based, not the best or earliest ones, have the more understandable “your joy,” and in John 16:24 Jesus tells his disciples to “Ask . . . and your joy will be complete.” Copyists, knowing this verse, and favoring what is easier to understand, would have more likely altered the original “our” to “your” than vice versa. (The difference between “your” and “our” appears even less in Greek than in English.) Thus, most translators believe that the harder-to-understand reading, **our joy**, is more likely to be what the author actually wrote.

What, then, does the author mean? Writing is another form of proclaiming the message which he has been describing in vv. 1–3. What he and the founding generation **testify** and **proclaim** to all who would hear (so that they might have mutual **fellowship** with God), the author now **writes** about to his own community, that group of Christians for which he has special responsibility. To do so gives him **joy**; it is fulfilling (NIV: **complete**), because it extends the circle of fellowship to others and keeps in the circle those who may be tempted to leave it (and follow the secessionists). To **write**, then, about this Word of life meets not only the original readers' needs but the author's as well.

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### Additional Notes §1

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**1:4** / On the textual problem, see Metzger, *Commentary*, p. 709.