

**Review: Radmacher's Intro to 1 Jn: Gnosticism; "What was from the beginning" in 1 Jn 1:1 Compared with "In the beginning" in Jn 1:1; Kenosis**

Radmacher, Earl D. "The First Epistle of John." In *The Nelson Study Bible*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 2137–38:

**Historical Background.** Gnosticism was a problem that threatened the church in Asia Minor during the second century A.D. Gnosticism was a teaching that blended Eastern mysticism with Greek dualism (which claimed that the spirit is completely good, but matter completely evil). This teaching was present in the church in a seminal form during the latter years of the first century. By the middle of the second century it had become a fully developed theological system, which included Gnostic gospels and epistles. John recognized the danger of Gnosticism and wrote to counteract its influence before it could sweep through the churches of Asia Minor. Based on the concept that matter is evil and spirit is good, some Gnostics concluded that if God was truly good He could not have created the material universe. Therefore, some lesser god had to have created it. According to them, the God of the Old Testament was this lesser god. The dualistic views of Gnosticism were also reflected in the prevalent belief that Jesus did not have a physical body. This teaching, called Docetism \dō-sē'-ti-zem\ [δοκεῖν, *dokein*: to seem], claimed that Jesus only appeared to have a human body and never actually suffered pain and death on the Cross. (pp. 2137-38)

Another heresy that John addressed in this letter and personally confronted at Ephesus was Cerinthianism [Cerinthus \si-rin'-thas\]. This heresy taught that Jesus was just a man upon whom the "Christ" descended at His baptism, that the Christ then departed from Jesus just before His crucifixion.

**Purpose and Themes.** John most likely wrote this letter with two purposes in mind—one pastoral and one polemical. John's pastoral purpose was to promote fellowship (1:3). But for believers to have true fellowship, they needed to understand the true nature of God (1:5; 2:29; 4:7; 8). Thus the pastoral purpose naturally leads to the polemical purpose (2:26), which was to protect his readers against the deceptive ideas of false teachers. If the believers were deceived by false doctrine, they would eventually lose their unity, which is possible only in the love of Christ. Evidently some deceivers had arisen among the believers (2:18, 19, 26). If Christians could sort out truth from falsehood, they would be able to maintain their unity in the faith and have an opportunity to show love to their fellow believers (3:11). For John, a person's behavior was naturally a result of that person's belief.

In accordance with John's purpose, fellowship dominates the first portion of this letter (1:5-2:27), while assurance of salvation dominates the remainder. In addition, John develops theological ideas in the letter through explicit contrasts, such as walking in the light or in darkness, children of God or of the devil, life or death, love or hate. With these contrasts John was attempting to draw a clear line between true and false teachers.

John was writing to believers who were dealing with a particular type of false teaching, the contagious heresy of early Gnosticism. He wrote this letter to encourage them to abide in what they had heard from the beginning so that they could maintain their fellowship with God and their love for fellow believers. (p. 2738)

1. John was dealing with what had proved to be a very successful attack on biblical theology by both the Docetic \dō-sē'-tic\ and Cerinthian \cē-rin'-thi-an\sects of Gnosticism.
2. Some of the applications that emerged from these sources included behaviors that expressed the trends of the sinful nature: (1) ascetics, who reached the conclusion they never sinned and (2) antinomians, who claimed they did not possess a sinful nature. The former were self-righteous and the latter were free to do as they pleased.

3. The outline of chapter one is in three parts: (1) John makes a transition from verbal to written communication (vv. 1-3), (2) he introduces characteristics of the spiritual life (vv. 4-7), and (3) he addresses the war between Illusion and Reality (vv. 8-10).

#### VI. 1 John, Chapter 1:1:

1. For the first few decades of the Church Age there was no written canon. Doctrine had to be taught orally and this was accomplished primarily by the apostles and later by those who were trained by them.
2. In the first three verses John reviews what he has taught orally and their content stresses those characteristics of the incarnate Christ that identified Him as true humanity.
3. This is in opposition to the Docetic idea that the Lord only seemed to have a human body but really did not since things material are evil.

**1 John 1:1 - [NASB] 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—**

4. The Greek Orthodox Church's interpretation of this verse led them into the heresy of iconolatry, the worship of images and icons. This was obviously not John's intent. He is taking issue with the Gnostic idea that some asserted did not occur, it only seemed to occur.
5. The verse begins with the relative pronoun subject, **ὅς, hos**, translated "What." It refers to the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ from the Virgin Birth through the crucifixion.
6. The next word is the imperfect active indicative of the verb, **εἶμι, eimi** translated "was."
  - imperf.: Progressive of description: denotes action in progress in past time, vividly represented as actually going on in past time.
  - active: Jesus Christ produced the action during the First Advent by functioning in the prototype spiritual life in status quo kenosis.
  - indic.: Declarative: indicates the reality of the true humanity of Christ.
7. From the manger to the cross, the Lord was dependent upon the prototype spiritual life which consists of the filling of the Holy Spirit plus utilization of the other seven problem-solving devices, the exceptions being number one, rebound and number 10, occupation with Himself.
8. The point at which this began is mentioned next with the propositional phrase, **ἀπ' ἀρχῆ, ap archē**, "from the beginning." Kenosis is what defined the relationship between the deity and humanity of Christ. Kenosis comes from the Greek word **κένωσις, kenōsis**, and means literally "emptying."
9. The verb form, **κενόω, kneoō**, is found in Philippians 2:7 which describes how the deity of Christ voluntarily restricted the independent use of His divine attributes in order to live among men with their limitations. In doing so He gave up the outward appearance of His deity.
10. The phrase *ap arcē* is translated "from the beginning" and refers to a specific beginning, i.e., the Virgin Birth. It does not refer to eternity past as does a similar expression in John 1:1 where John uses the phrase **ἐν ἀρχῇ εἶμι, en archē eimi**: "in the beginning which was not a beginning."

11. How can we get the extension of the translation “which was not a beginning” and contend that it refers to eternity past? An excellent explanation of this is provided by:

Yeager, Randolph O. *The Renaissance New Testament*. (Woodbridge, Va: Renaissance Press, 1979), 4:2-3:

God is not a creature who must consult watches, clocks, calendars or yardsticks or other space measuring devices. But we are. The human mind cannot grasp the concept of unlimited time and space without great difficulty. It is natural for us to speak of a point in time as “the beginning” before which there was no time and a point in space as “the beginning” beyond which there is nothing. Thus John accommodates his writing to our human limitations, but the Holy Spirit in inspirational guidance employs the imperfect tense in ἦν, *ēn* [of the verb εἶμι, *eimi*: “to be,” translated “was”] to transmit the thought with total clarity. John takes us back into the past unto a point which he arbitrarily calls “the beginning.”

John’s point is found in his use of the imperfect tense of the verb εἶμι [*eimi*]: ἦν [*ēn*], an imperfect indicating progressive description in the past at some point which human beings choose to call “the beginning.” Since ἦν [*ēn*] transmits the concept of continuous existence in the past we can say that at a time point, arbitrarily referred to by creatures of time and space as “the beginning” the Word was already existing and had enjoyed this existence “before the beginning.” Had John used the present tense of εἶμι [*eimi*] (ἔστί [*esti*]) we would translate “In the beginning *is* the Word.” In other words the conclusion would be that the Word had His beginning at the same time that time began. This would deny the eternal character of the Word. What the text says so clearly and cleverly is that men ... can go back in history as far as they like, mark a time point and call that the beginning only to find that at that moment of *time* the Word had already been in a continuous state of being. Thus the Word existed *before* the beginning, since He has always existed. With Him there is no beginning. He is eternal and everlasting.