



From Atheist to Theist (Part 31)

Challenging the Apostle John

By

Mark McGee

I'm answering a question often asked of me by atheists – What would move a strong **atheist** to become a strong **theist**? In my case the answer was **evidence** for theism, specifically for **Christian** theism.

I started sharing the evidence that can lead an atheist to theism and Christianity years ago. I've most recently been looking in this series at evidence for the reliability of the New Testament writings.

So far I've looked at –

- The Gospel Accounts
- Paul's Writings
- James' Writing
- Peter's Writings

I move now to the letters of the Apostle John.

[Just a reminder that I'm only revealing the evidence available for investigation in early 1971. A future series will look at evidence that has been discovered since that time.]

Here is a basic investigative process for determining ancient authorship:

- Internal evidence – what we find in the letter itself .. claim of authorship, historical information, geographical information, biographical information.
- Language and style – comparing writing style of other letters believed to have been written by same author (e.g. vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, idioms).
- Content – comparing the content with other letters believed to have been written by same author (e.g. theology, historical data).
- External evidence – ancient writers supporting claim of authorship, ancient writers quoting from writings in question.

1 John

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life— the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us — that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full. This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.” 1 John 1:1-7

Internal Evidence

The opening to 1 John is similar to the opening of the Gospel of John and other portions. That is one reason many scholars believe the same author wrote both.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” John 1:1

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” John 1:14

“Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.” John 16:24

“And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” John 3:19-21

1 John does not identify the author. He does refer to his readers as 'little children' nine times in the letter, which may go to the author's advanced age and the type of relationship he had with his readers. The Apostle John may have been the last apostle alive toward the end of the 1st century AD, so the reference to 'little children' may have been a demonstration of his apostolic position and deep love for them as the last representative of the original apostles of Christ.

The style of the the Gospel of John and 1 John is similar in many ways. The author wrote in simple Greek and used similar contrasting figures (e.g. life and death, love and hate, truth and lies, light and darkness).

The author identifies himself as an eyewitness of Christ –

- “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled”
- “that which we have seen and heard we declare to you”
- “we beheld His glory”

The author wrote with authority –

- “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God.”
- “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”
- “If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”
- “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”
- “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love *his* brother abides in death.”
- “My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

The author wrote with a purpose –

- “These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you.”
- “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.”

Gnosticism was a problem in the 1st century AD. Paul addressed it in some of his letters (e.g. Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus) and the author of 1 John also took on the problem facing the early Church (e.g. early [Cerinthianism](#), [Docetism](#)).

The ending of the letter also demonstrates the author's purpose –

“We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.” 1 John 5:19-21

External Evidence

The mention of keeping themselves from idols brings up the issue of when the author wrote 1 John and from where. Would the author have mentioned the keeping of oneself from idols if he had written the letter from Israel to an audience living in Israel?

Leaders in the early Church wrote that John the Apostle moved to Ephesus before the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 AD. Ephesus was well-known for its devotion to the goddess Artemis (Diana), which may be the reason for the “keep yourselves from idols” mention at the end of 1 John.

Some of the earliest Church leaders knew John the Apostle personally. Papias, Ignatius and Polycarp are three examples.

Papias was born in the 1st century AD and became bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia. Most of Papias’ writings have been lost, except for brief excerpts from 2nd century bishop Irenaeus of Lyons and 4th century Church historian Eusebius.

Irenaeus wrote this about Papias –

“And these things are bone witness to in writing by Papias, the hearer of John, and a companion of Polycarp, in his fourth book; for there were five books compiled by him.” Against Heresies, Book V, Chapter XXXIII, Section 4

Eusebius wrote this about Papias –

“And the same writer uses testimonies from the first Epistle of John ...” Church History, Book III, Chapter XXXIX, 16

Ignatius was born in the 1st century AD and became bishop of Antioch, Syria. He died about 110 AD. Ignatius wrote what appears to be a reference to 1 John 3:7a and alludes to 1 John 3:10 –

“None of these things is hidden from you, if ye be perfect in your faith and love toward Jesus Christ, for these are the beginning and end of life – faith is the beginning and love is the end – and the two being found in unity are God, while all things else follow in their train unto true nobility. No man professing faith sinneth, and no

man possessing love hateth. _The tree is manifest from its fruit;_ so they that profess to be Christ's shall be seen through their actions. For the Work is not a thing of profession now, but is seen then when one is found in the power of faith unto the end." Ignatius to the Ephesians, Chapter 14

Polycarp was born about 69 AD and lived until about 155 AD. He was the bishop of Smyrna. Polycarp wrote what appears to be a portion of 1 John 4:3 –

"For every one who shall not confess that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is antichrist: and whosoever shall not confess the testimony of the Cross, is of the devil; and whosoever shall pervert the oracles of the Lord to his own lusts and say that there is neither resurrection nor judgment, that man is the firstborn of Satan." Polycarp to the Philippians, 7:1

Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp and wrote about Papias and Polycarp in the 2nd century AD –

“Now testimony is borne to these things in writing by Papias, an ancient man, who was a hearer of John, and a friend of Polycarp, in the fourth of his books; for five books were composed by him.” [Fragments of Papias](#) from the Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord

Irenaeus also wrote about the Apostle John living in Ephesus

–

“But Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna, whom I also saw in my early youth, for he tarried [on earth] a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true. To these things all the Asiatic Churches testify, as do also those men who have succeeded Polycarp down to the present

time,-a man who was of much greater weight, and a more stedfast witness of truth, than Valentinus, and Marcion, and the rest of the heretics. He it was who, coming to Rome in the time of Anicetus caused many to turn away from the aforesaid heretics to the Church of God, proclaiming that he had received this one and sole truth from the apostles,-that, namely, which is handed down by the Church. There are also those who heard from him that John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, 'Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within.' And Polycarp himself replied to Marcion, who met him on one occasion, and said, "Dost thou know me? "I do know thee, the first-born of Satan." Such was the horror which the apostles and their disciples had against holding even verbal communication with any corrupters of the truth; as Paul also says, 'A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.' There is also a very

powerful Epistle of Polycarp written to the Philippians, from which those who choose to do so, and are anxious about their salvation, can learn the character of his faith, and the preaching of the truth. Then, again, the Church in Ephesus, founded by Paul, and having John remaining among them permanently until the times of Trajan, is a true witness of the tradition of the apostles.” Against Heresies, Book 3, Chapter 3, Section 4.

Tertullian, another 2nd and 3rd century leader of the Church, quoted from or alluded to several verses in 1 John –

“But if there be any (heresies) which are bold enough to plant themselves in the midst Of the apostolic age, that they may thereby seem to have been handed down by the apostles, because they existed in the time of the apostles, we can say: Let them produce the original records of their churches; let them unfold the roll of their bishops, running down in due succession from the beginning in such a manner that [that first bishop of theirs] bishop shall be able to show for his ordainer and predecessor some one of the apostles or of apostolic men,—a man, moreover, who continued stedfast with the

apostles. For this is the manner in which the apostolic churches transmit their registers: as the church of Smyrna, which records that Polycarp was placed therein by John; as also the church of Rome, which makes Clement to have been ordained in like manner by Peter. In exactly the same way the other churches likewise exhibit (their several worthies), whom, as having been appointed to their episcopal places by apostles, they regard as transmitters of the apostolic seed. Let the heretics contrive something of the same kind. For after their blasphemy, what is there that is unlawful for them (to attempt)? But should they even effect the contrivance, they will not advance a step. For their very doctrine, after comparison with that of the apostles, will declare, by its own diversity and contrariety, that it had for its author neither an apostle nor an apostolic man; because, as the apostles would never have taught things which were self-contradictory, so the apostolic men would not have inculcated teaching different from the apostles, unless they who received their instruction from the apostles went and preached in a contrary manner. To this test, therefore will they be submitted for proof by

those churches, who, although they derive not their founder from apostles or apostolic men (as being of much later date, for they are in fact being founded daily), yet, since they agree in the same faith, they are accounted as not less apostolic because they are akin in doctrine. Then let all the heresies, when challenged to these two tests by our apostolic church, offer their proof of how they deem themselves to be apostolic. But in truth they neither are so, nor are they able to prove themselves to be what they are not. Nor are they admitted to peaceful relations and communion by such churches as are in any way connected with apostles, inasmuch as they are in no sense themselves apostolic because of their diversity as to the mysteries of the faith.” Prescription against Heretics, Chapter XXXII

“Read the testimony of John: ‘That which we have seen, which we have heard, which we have looked upon with our eyes, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life.’ A Treatise on the Soul, Chapter XVII

“John, in fact, exhorts us to lay down our lives even for our brethren, affirming that there is no fear in love: “For perfect love casteth out fear, since fear has punishment; and he who fears is not perfect in love.” What fear would it be better to understand (as here meant), than that which gives rise to denial? What love does he assert to be perfect, but that which puts fear to flight, and gives courage to confess? What penalty will he appoint as the punishment of fear, but that which he who denies is about to pay, who has to be slain, body and soul, in hell?” Scorpiace, Chapter XII

Clement of Alexandria was a bishop in the late 2nd century and early 3rd century. He quoted from 1 John many times in his writings, but what we have today are fragments of those writings. Here are two examples from his comments on 1 John –

“Chap. i. I. ‘That which was from the beginning; which we have seen with our eyes; which we have heard.’ Following the Gospel according to John, and in accordance with it, this Epistle also contains the spiritual principle. What therefore he says, ‘from the beginning,’

the Presbyter explained to this effect, that the beginning of generation is not separated from the beginning of the Creator. For when he says, 'That which was from the beginning,' he touches upon the generation without beginning of the Son, who is co-existent with the Father. There was; then, a Word importing an unbeginning eternity; as also the Word itself, that is, the Son of God, who being, by equality of substance, one with the Father, is eternal and uncreate. That He was always the Word, is signified by saying, "In the beginning was the Word." But by the expression, 'we have seen with our eyes,' he signifies the Lord's presence in the flesh, 'and our hands have handled,' he says, 'of the Word of life.' He means not only His flesh, but the virtues of the Son, like the sunbeam which penetrates to the lowest places,—this sunbeam coming in the flesh became palpable to the disciples. It is accordingly related in traditions, that John, touching the outward body itself, sent his hand deep down into it, and that the solidity of the flesh offered no obstacle, but gave way to the hand of the disciple."

“Chap. ii. I. ‘And if any man sin,’ he says, ‘we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ.’ For so the Lord is an advocate with the Father for us. So also is there, an advocate, whom, after His assumption, He vouchsafed to send. For these primitive and first-created virtues are unchangeable as to substance, and along with subordinate angels and archangels, whose names they share, effect divine operations. Thus also Moses names the virtue of the angel Michael, by an angel near to himself and of lowest grade. The like also we find in the holy prophets; but to Moses an angel appeared near and at hand.” Fragments of Clement of Alexandria, III, Comments on the First Epistle of John

Atheist's Conclusion

My conclusion as an atheist at the time of my investigation was that 1 John was most likely an authentic letter written by the Apostle John in the latter part of the 1st century AD.

Next Time

In the next part of my report I will look at the evidence for the authenticity of two more epistles purportedly written by the Apostle John (2 and 3 John).

Scripture taken from the New King James Version®.
Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission.
All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2026, Mark McGee and GraceLife