



From Atheist to Theist (Part 33)

Did the Apostle John Write 3 Letters?

By

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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.

We started sharing the evidence that can lead an atheist to theism and Christianity several years ago ([click here to read the first article in this series](#)). We've most recently been looking at evidence for the reliability of the New Testament writings.

So far we've looked at –

- The Gospel Accounts
- Paul's Writings
- James' Writing
- Peter's Writings
- John's Writings (1 John)

We move now to the 2nd and 3rd Letters ascribed to 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.

2 John

“The Elder, To the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all those who have known the truth, because of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever: Grace, mercy, and peace will be with you from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love.” 2 John 1:1-3

Internal Evidence

The author of 2 John did not identify himself as the Apostle John, but as ‘the Elder’ (ho presbyteros). The term was used for someone of advanced age and was used in Jewish and Christian groups for an older person who had a position of authority or influence. They were also an example of strong moral character. In the case of the Apostle John, he would have been the last of Christ’s Apostles still alive and an elderly man at the time of the writing of 2 John (believed to be late 1st century AD).

The greeting, ‘To the elect lady and her children,’ does not give a specific identity to the recipients of the letter. The author may have written to a woman and her children or to a local church (elect lady) and members of that church (her children). The Greek word for ‘lady’ is kyria, which is the feminine of kurios (lord, master, sir). The Greek word for ‘children’ is teknois (child, descendant, inhabitant).

The author ends the short letter with –

“Having many things to write to you, I did not wish to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full. The children of your elect sister greet you. Amen.” 2 John 1:12-13

The term ‘elect sister’ may have referred to the sister of the woman the author was writing to or another church. It may be that the author lived near the woman or the church he mentioned as ‘elect sister.’ His desire was to visit and share more thoughts with the ‘elect lady’ and her ‘children.’

The term 'elect' is the same word the Apostle Paul used in his letters – *eklektē* (chosen out, select out, elect by personal choice).

The Greek word translated 'sister' is *adelphēs* (sister, woman in an assembly).

Major Points in 2 John

The author included three major points in his letter which are similar to what we read in 1 John –

1. Walk in Christ.
2. Obey His commandments.
3. Beware of deceivers.

The “walk in Christ” the author mentioned in 2 John is “in truth” and “in love.”

The commandments the author mentioned in 2 John are similar to the ‘walk’:

“I rejoiced greatly that I have found some of your children walking in truth, as we received commandment from the Father. And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another. This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it.” 2 John 1:4-6

That is similar to what the author of 1 John wrote:

“Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments.” 1 John 2:3

In that context the author of 1 John mentioned the importance of loving the ‘brethren,’ not just in word or tongue, “but in deed and in truth.”

The author of 1 John also wrote – “Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him.” (1 John 3:24)

Another major point in 2 John is to “beware of deceivers.” That is also similar to what the author of 1 John wrote –

“For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward. Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.” 2 John 1:7-11

“Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might

be made manifest, that none of them were of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.” 1 John 2:18-23

The theology of 2 John is consistent with that of 1 John and the Gospel of John.

Language and Style

The language and style of 2 John are similar to 1 John and to the Gospel of John. However, some scholars believe the person who identified himself as ‘the Elder’ in 2 John was not John the Apostle.

External Evidence

Early Church Fathers quoted from 2 John and credited the Apostle John with authorship –

“These are they against whom the Lord has cautioned us beforehand; and His disciple, in his Epistle already mentioned, commands us to avoid them, when he says: “For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Take heed to them, that ye lose not what ye have wrought.” And again does he say in the Epistle: “Many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God; and every spirit which separates Jesus Christ is not of God, but is of antichrist.” These words agree with what was said in the Gospel, that “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” Wherefore he again exclaims in his Epistle, “Every one that believeth that Jesus is the Christ, has been born of God; ” knowing Jesus Christ

to be one and the same, to whom the gates of heaven were opened, because of His taking upon Him flesh: who shall also come in the same flesh in which He suffered, revealing the glory of the Father.” Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, Book III, Chapter 16.8

“And John, the disciple of the Lord, has intensified their condemnation, when he desires us not even to address to them the salutation of “good-speed; “for, says he, “He that bids them be of good-speed is a partaker with their evil deeds; ” and that with reason, “for there is no good-speed to the ungodly,” saith the Lord. ” *Against Heresies*, Book I, Chapter 16.3

The Seventh Council of Carthage was called by Cyprian of Carthage in the mid-3rd century to consider the baptism of heretics (Lapsi – excommunicated church leaders and members because of heretical beliefs and actions). 87 bishops voted on the baptism of heretics. One of them quoted from 2 John –

“Secundinus of Ceditas said: Since our Lord Christ says, ‘He who is not with me is against me;’ and John the apostle calls those who depart from the Church Antichrists-undoubtedly enemies of Christ-any such as are called Antichrists cannot minister the grace of saving baptism. And therefore I think that those who flee from the snares of the heretics to the Church must be baptized by us, who are called friends of God, of His condescension.”

Tertullian had an allusion to 2 John 1:7-10 – “But you affirm it is ‘a human Antichrist;’ for by this name heretics are called in John.” Tertullian, On Fasting, Chapter XI

3 John

“The Elder, To the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.”

3 John 1:1

Internal Evidence

The opening to 3 John is similar in that the author identified himself as ‘the Elder.’ What is different from the greeting in 2 John is that the author of 3 John identified the recipient – ‘beloved Gaius.’ Could this be the same Gaius mentioned in the Book of Acts and two of Paul’s letters?

“So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theater with one accord, having seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians, Paul’s travel companions.” Acts 19:29

“And Sopater of Berea accompanied him to Asia—also Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia.” Acts 20:4

“Gaius, my host and the host of the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the treasurer of the city, greets you, and Quartus, a brother.” Romans 16:23

“I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius ...” 1 Corinthians 1:14

We don't know for sure from internal documents. The name Gaius (Caius) was a common name in the 1st century AD. Some scholars believe the New Testament mentions multiple men by that name:

- Gaius of Corinth
- Gaius of Macedonia
- Gaius of Derbe
- Gaius of John 3

There are several similarities between 2 and 3 John –

- Author calls himself ‘the elder’ (2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1)
- Recipients are called those whom the author ‘loves in the truth’ (2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1)
- Recipients ‘walk in the truth’ (2 John 1:4; 3 John 1:3)
- Recipients are an occasion of ‘great rejoicing’ (2 John 1:4; 3 John 1:3)
- The elder received good reports about them (2 John 1:4; 3 John 1:3, 5)
- Warnings in both letters (2 John 1:8; 3 John 1:9)
- Elder wants to visit them (2 John 1:12; 3 John 1:14)
- Other people also sent their greetings (2 John 1:13; 3 John 1:14)

The author of 3 John also mentions two other men:

“I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not

receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church. Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God. Demetrius has a good testimony from all, and from the truth itself. And we also bear witness, and you know that our testimony is true.” 3 John 1:9-12

The name ‘Diotrephes’ is found only once in the New Testament – in 3 John. The ‘elder’ wrote to ‘the church’, but Diotrephes did not receive him. Diotrephes also refused to receive other ‘brethren’ and even put some out of the church. Diotrophes also prated against the ‘elder’ “with malicious words.” Diotrephes may have been a leader in one of the 1st century churches. The ‘elder’ said he should ‘call to mind’ the deeds of Diotrephes when he visited the church.

The name 'Demetrius' is found three times –

“For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Diana, brought no small profit to the craftsmen.” Acts 19:24

“Therefore, if Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a case against anyone, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another.” Acts 19:38

“Demetrius has a good testimony from all, and from the truth itself. And we also bear witness, and you know that our testimony is true.” 3 John 12

There is no evidence from 3 John that the Demetrius mentioned in Acts and the Demetrius mentioned in 3 John are the same person, though that is possible since John may have ministered in the same city where Demetrius lived (Ephesus). It certainly would be a powerful demonstration of God's love and grace if the enemy of Christ in Acts 19 was the same person mentioned in 3 John.

The theology of 3 John is consistent with that of 1 and 2 John and the Gospel of John.

Language and Style

The language and style of 3 John are similar to 1 John and 2 John and to the Gospel of John. However, some scholars believe the person who identified himself as 'the Elder' in 3 John was not John the Apostle.

External Evidence

Early Church Fathers did not quote from 3 John. That doesn't necessarily mean the letter was not authentic to 'the elder,' but it is interesting that nothing in 3 John was quoted. One of the earliest New Testament Canons also did not mention 3 John. The Muratorian Canon Fragment (approx. 170 AD) also did not include Hebrews, James or 1 and 2 Peter.

Some scholars believe Tertullian may have had an allusion to 3 John 1:11 in *On Monogamy*, and Origen may have had an allusion to 3 John 1:14 in his *Commentary on Matthew Book XI*.

Atheist's Conclusion

My conclusion as an atheist at the time of my investigation was that 2 John was most likely an authentic letter written by an 'elder' of the early Church – maybe even the Apostle John. However, the evidence for 3 John was not conclusive because of the lack of early Church Fathers mentioning it in their writings and not being included in the Muratorian Canon Fragment.

[I now accept Johannine authorship of 3 John based on further study of the New Testament since becoming a Christian, but this series is about my conclusions as an atheist in 1971.]

Next Time

In the next part of our report we will look at the evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Revelation purportedly written by the Apostle John.

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