



From Atheist to Theist (Part 35)

Did the Apostle John write Revelation?
(External Evidence)

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)
- John's Writings (2 and 3 John)
- John's Authorship of Revelation (Internal Evidence)

We move now to the **external** evidence for the Apostle John writing the Book of Revelation.

[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.

Revelation

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw.” Revelation 1:1-2

External Evidence

John the Apostle was well known in the Christian world of the 1st century AD. It's believed he was the last apostle alive after the martyrdom of James, Paul, Peter and other apostles. Some of the early Christian leaders of the 1st and 2nd century wrote about John, so we may learn from their writings what the early Church thought about the identity of the author of Revelation.

Early Church tradition says that Polycarp of Smyrna and Ignatius of Antioch were both disciples of the Apostle John. We learn something about their relationship in their letters –

“I exhort you all therefore to be obedient unto the word of righteousness and to practice all endurance, which also ye saw with your own eyes in the blessed Ignatius and Zosimus and

Rufus, yea and in others also who came from among yourselves, as well as in Paul himself and the rest of the Apostles.” Polycarp 9:1, Translated by J.B. Lightfoot

“The letters of Ignatius which were sent to us by him, and others as many as we had by us, we send unto you, according as ye gave charge; the which are subjoined to this letter; from which ye will be able to gain great advantage. For they comprise faith and endurance and every kind of edification, which pertaineth unto our Lord. Moreover concerning Ignatius himself and those that were with him, if ye have any sure tidings, certify us.” Polycarp 13:2, Translated by J.B. Lightfoot

“Ignatius, who is also Theophorus, unto Polycarp who is bishop of the church of the Smyrnaeans or rather who hath for his bishop God the Father and Jesus Christ, abundant greeting.” Introduction, Ignatius to Polycarp, Translated by J.B. Lightfoot

“I salute your most worthy bishop Polycarp, and your venerable presbytery, and your Christ-bearing deacons, my fellow-servants, and all of you individually, as well as

generally, in the name of Christ Jesus, and in His flesh and blood, in His passion and resurrection, both corporeal and spiritual, in union with God and you. Grace, mercy, peace, and patience, be with you in Christ for evermore!” Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans, Chapter XII, Translated by Roberts-Donaldson

“The Ephesians from Smyrna (whence I also write to you), who are here for the glory of God, as ye also are, who have in all things refreshed me, salute you, along with Polycarp, the bishop of the Smyrnaeans.” Ignatius to the Magnesians, Chapter XV, Translated by Roberts-Donaldson

“My soul be for yours and theirs whom, for the honour of God, ye have sent to Smyrna; whence also I write to you, giving thanks unto the Lord, and loving Polycarp even as I do you.” Ignatius to the Ephesians, Chapter XXI, Translated by Roberts-Donaldson

Another important connection for us to see is that of Irenaeus to Polycarp. Irenaeus was born in or near Smyrna about 135 AD while Polycarp was bishop there. Polycarp was a disciple of the Apostle John and Irenaeus is believed to have been a disciple of Polycarp. We have Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* (Books I-V) and some fragments of other writings.

“For, while I was yet a boy, I saw thee in Lower Asia with Polycarp, distinguishing thyself in the royal court, and endeavouring to gain his approbation. For I have a more vivid recollection of what occurred at that time than of recent events (inasmuch as the experiences of childhood, keeping pace with the growth of the soul, become incorporated with it); so that I can even describe the place where the blessed Polycarp used to sit and discourse—his going out, too, and his coming in—his general mode of life and personal appearance, together with the discourses which he delivered to the people; also how he would speak of his familiar intercourse with John, and with the rest of those who had seen the Lord; and how he would call their words to remembrance. Whatsoever things he had heard from them respecting the Lord, both with regard to His miracles and His teaching, Polycarp having thus received

[information] from the eye-witnesses of the Word of life, would recount them all in harmony with the Scriptures. These things, through, God's mercy which was upon me, I then listened to attentively, and treasured them up not on paper, but in my heart; and I am continually, by God's grace, revolving these things accurately in my mind." Irenaeus, Letter to Florinus, Translated by Roberts-Donaldson

Irenaeus also wrote about another Apostolic Father who knew the Apostle John. His name was Papias. Irenaeus wrote that Papias was a hearer of John and friend of Polycarp.

"But I shall not be unwilling to put down, along with my interpretations, whatsoever instructions I received with care at any time from the elders, and stored up with care in my memory, assuring you at the same time of their truth. For I did not, like the multitude, take pleasure in those who spoke much, but in those who taught the truth; nor in those who related strange commandments, but in those who rehearsed the commandments given by the Lord to faith, and proceeding from truth itself. If, then, any one who had attended on the elders came, I asked minutely after their sayings,—what Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by

James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the Lord's disciples: which things Aristion and the presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord, say.” Fragments of Papias from the Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord, Translated by Roberts-Donaldson

So, what do we learn about John being the author of Revelation from apostolic and early Church fathers?

“On this account also does John declare in the Apocalypse, ‘And His voice as the sound of many waters.’ For the Spirit [of God] is truly [like] many waters, since the Father is both rich and great. And the Word, passing through all those [men], did liberally confer benefits upon His subjects, by drawing up in writing a law adapted and applicable to every class [among them].” Irenaeus, Against Heresies IV, 14.3, Translated by Roberts-Donaldson

“Now John, in the Apocalypse, declares that the ‘incense’ is ‘the prayers of the saints.’ Ibid, 17.6

“The altar, then, is in heaven (for towards that place are our prayers and oblations directed); the temple likewise [is there], as John says in the Apocalypse, “And the temple of God was opened: ” the tabernacle also: ‘For, behold,’ He says, ‘the tabernacle of God, in which He will dwell with men.” Ibid, 18.6

“John also, the Lord’s disciple, when beholding the sacerdotal and glorious advent of His kingdom, says in the Apocalypse: ‘I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And, being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the candlesticks One like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment reaching to the feet, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle; and His head and His hairs were white, as white as wool, and as snow; and His eyes were as a flame of fire; and His feet like unto fine brass, as if He burned in a furnace.’” Ibid, 20.11

“And further, there was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him, that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem; and that thereafter the general, and, in short, the eternal resurrection

and judgment of all men would likewise take place. Just as our Lord also said, 'They shall neither marry nor be given in marriage, but shall be equal to the angels, the children of the God of the resurrection.' Justin Martyr, Chapter 81, Translated by Roberts-Donaldson

"John, however, in the Apocalypse is charged to chastise those 'who eat things sacrificed to idols,' and 'who commit fornication.' There are even now another sort of Nicolaitans." Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, Chapter 33, Translated by Roberts-Donaldson

"And although here upon earth he be not honoured with the chief seat, he will sit down on the four-and-twenty thrones, judging the people, as John says in the Apocalypse." Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, Book VI, 13, Translated by Roberts-Donaldson

"And John too, indeed, in the Apocalypse, although he writes only to seven churches, yet addresses all." Muratorian Canon, Translated by Roberts-Donaldson

Atheist's Conclusion

My conclusion, as an atheist at the time of my investigation, was that the Apostle John was most likely the author of the Book of Revelation.

Next Time

In the next part of this report we will look at the evidence for the Letter of Jude.

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