

Two questions in this week's Readers' mailbag. The first concerns the very strange tradition about how Judas Iscariot actually died, as found in the writings of the early church father Papias; the second is about modern evangelical Christian biblical scholars: how do they deal with the fact that our manuscripts contain so many textual variants? If you have a question, feel free to ask, and I'll add it to the ever growing mailbag.

QUESTION:

Papias didn't think very highly of Judas. I can't remember exactly what he said, is his version closer to Matthew or Acts? Or a different tradition altogether?

RESPONSE:

First some background. Papias is one of the fascinating and virtually unknown figures from the early church. He is normally thought to have been writing around 120 or 130 CE. His major work was a five-volume discussion of the teachings of Jesus, called Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord. We very much regret that we no longer have this book - it would have been the first known explanation of/commentary on Jesus' teachings. We don't know exactly why later scribes chose not to copy the book, but it may have been because it was either uninspiring, naïve, or theologically questionable. Later church fathers who talk about Papias and his book are not overly enthusiastic. The "father of church history," the fourth-century Eusebius of Caesarea, indicates that, in his opinion, Papias was "a man of exceedingly small intelligence" (Church History, 3.39). Not a high recommendation.

Since the book no longer survives, our only access to it is through quotations of it in later church fathers, starting with the important author Irenaeus around 185 CE, and including Eusebius himself. Some of these quotations are fascinating and have been the subject of intense investigation among critical scholars for a very long time. Among those is his extended comment about how Judas Iscariot really died.

As I have indicated in recent posts, the Gospel of Matthew indicates...

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