

For the sixth edition of my New Testament textbook I have written twelve new “boxes.” These are side-line discussions of interesting and relevant (if a bit tangential) issues of some importance for various aspects of the study of the New Testament. I will post several of these, including these two here. If these generate any questions, let me know, and I can follow up on them.

The two are about the Gospels: the first has to do with the ongoing nature of oral traditions (which did not stop with the writing of the Gospels!) and the second with how scholars have determined the dates of the Gospels.

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## **Box 5.2 Another Glimpse Into the Past**

### **The Church Father Papias and the Ongoing Oral Tradition**

Oral traditions about Jesus did not cease to circulate as soon as the Gospels were written. On the contrary, we have solid evidence that the traditions continued to thrive for a very long time indeed. Hard evidence comes in the writings of a second-century Christian named Papias, the author of a five-volume work called “The Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord” written sometime between 120-40 CE. The book no longer survives, except as it is occasionally quoted by later church writers. In one of our surviving quotations, it is clear that Papias loved hearing oral accounts about Jesus from people who were expected to know the truth — more than reading books about him. Notice the final line of this passage: rather than being interested in Gospels, Papias preferred orally-delivered reports from people who had been companions of the “elders,” who, in turn, had known the apostles. Here is what he says:

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