

Now that Stephen Carlson has said a few things about Papias, in this post he is going to explain why it is so hard to know what Papias is actually saying in the fragmentary quotations of his writings that we have. (Even though people / scholars quote them all the time as if we can tell exactly what he means.) It all has to do with putting them in context. But what if you don't know the context?

This is the second of his two posts. And he leaves us with a cliff hanger. If you want to hear more, let us know!

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Context, Context, Context

Continuing the discussion, scholars of fragmentary texts wrestle with the difficult problem of context. As we all know, context is the key to interpretation. Like any other text, the quotations that constitute our fragments of Papias are not self-interpreting just by reading them as stand-alone statements. Readers need context to make sense of them, since their interpretation does not lie exclusively within the text. In fact, it is clear from Eusebius's quotation that some key terms within the Mark testimonium point outside of itself and need additional resources to be understood. For example, the statement begins with a reference to someone called "the elder": "And this what the elder used to say." Who is this person? Another example occurs in the middle of his remarks: "For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but later, as I said, Peter." What did Papias (or is it the elder?) say earlier and when? Next we get the statement that Peter "would give his teachings as needed, but not, as it were, making a compilation of the dominical oracles." What are these dominical oracles? They must be important because they are mentioned in the title of Papias's five-volume book project, *Expositions of Dominical Oracles*. Identifying what these key terms refer to is essential to understanding the statement as a whole, and Eusebius does not gloss them for us. We have to look beyond the bounds of the quotation for guidance as to what Papias could have meant.

This general hermeneutical problem is particularly acute for fragments, because they are texts taken out of their original contexts and placed into new ones. Shorn of their former context, fragments lose their connection to the meaning they once held, and, embedded in a new context, fragments are redeployed to do work the original author may have never contemplated. Certainly, Eusebius was interested in learning about the origin of his Gospel of Mark, but was that really Papias's interest (or the elder's)?

Like so many others, this was the statement that drew my attention to Papias. I had been (and still am) fascinated with the Synoptic Problem—how the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were sources for one another—and I thought that if we could only understand what the earliest Christians said about the origins of the gospels we can leverage that into our solution. Well, since then I've lost some confidence about the viability of this approach, but I did become convinced, even before I came to Duke where I took the opportunity to study with Prof. Ehrman, that the key to understanding any particular fragment of Papias lies in understanding generally what Papias was trying to do in his books, and this entails understanding specifically what each person who had actually read and quoted Papias was trying to do with him.

Now, the fragments of Papias have been edited and translated many times before. In fact, Prof. Ehrman himself has done so for the Loeb Classical Library in his edition of the Apostolic Fathers. Another good example is an update of the famous Lightfoot-Harmer edition of the [Apostolic Fathers](#) by Prof. Michael W. Holmes. (My personal favorite is an edition in Italian by Enrico Norelli.) When you compare these two English editions, however, you will notice that have a different number of fragments: Prof. Ehrman has 16 while Prof. Holmes has 28. This difference isn't because one was so much better at finding the fragments than the other but because they have different editorial philosophies. Prof. Ehrman's edition was minimalist, generally printing only those items that told us something about the text of Papias's. On the other Prof. Holmes's edition was maximalist, also printing items that talk about Papias even if they don't inform us about the text of work.

My own approach to the fragments is both minimalist and maximalist, in fact more maximalist in one sense than Prof. Holmes and more minimalist in another sense than Prof. Ehrman. Like scholars of fragmentary works in classical studies, I make the distinction between testimonies and fragments and print two separate series of them. My notion of testimonies is reception-oriented and comprehensive: I look for any mention of Papias that informs us about the reception of Papias—how people thought of his life, thought, or work, no matter how unreliable, as long as they are referring to the right Papias. (There is another Papias who has sometimes been confused with our Papias!) My notion of fragments on the other hand is author-oriented and strict: I look at this wide array of testimonies and, understanding how Papias was received throughout antiquity and the middle ages, identify which witnesses seem to possess independent and reliable knowledge of Papias's text, paying particular attention to when and where his quotations actually begin and end.

To this end, I have been scouring centuries of Christian literature, from the second to fifteenth, in Greek, Latin, Syriac, and, with help, Arabic and Armenian, looking for any mention of Papias I can find. As of this writing I have found almost a hundred of them. (I hesitate to put an exact number on them because I keep finding them, including one last week.) These testimonies are being edited for my edition of Papias's fragments. Not all of them of course are reliable or useful as witnesses of Papias; most in fact are not. Many of them merely repeat what someone else had said earlier, sometimes with distortion. After filtering out the unreliable witnesses and those which don't really have anything new to say about the text, I have winnowed this mass of information down to fifteen fragments plus the title, ten of which are found in a single chapter of Eusebius. My edition arranges these fragmentary bits and pieces of his work in the order I think they stood in his text. Only after all this work was done was I ready to assess the genre of Papias's work, that is, what kind of work did Papias write. And the result surprised me. I had expected the first commentator on Jesus traditions in the Gospels but instead I got something else.



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