

I occasionally get questions about one of the most interesting but least known Christian authors of the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, a man named Papias (writing in 120 CE? 140 CE). Many readers consider him particularly important because he claims to have known and interviewed the companions of disciples of Jesus' own apostles (it's a bit confusing; but Jesus had his apostles; after his death they themselves had disciples; Papias knew people who knew these disciples of the apostles); moreover, Papias is the first author to mention a Gospel of Matthew and a Gospel of Mark. Pretty important.

Unfortunately, we don't have his writings - only a few quotations of them, here and there, among the writings of later church fathers. But these quotations are highly fascinating.

There has never been a definitive, full-length study of Papias until now. (Well, until the near future.) My friend and former student and Stephen Carlson has been working for years on the Papias fragments. Stephen did his PhD in New Testament at Duke and is now a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry at the Australian Catholic University. I asked him if he'd be willing to write a couple of guest posts on what he's coming up with for his book, to titillate our interest, and he was. So will have two posts, one today, and one tomorrow. He will be happy to respond to comments/questions.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Papias in Fragments

I am thankful for the opportunity that Prof. Ehrman has given me to preview a bit of my forthcoming work in the Oxford Early Christian Texts series on Papias of Hierapolis. This early second-century commentator in Asia Minor wrote five books of *Exposition of Dominical Oracles* that has survived only in the form of scattered quotations by his readers. Now, one might think from this that he would be yet another obscure writer from the first centuries of early Christianity like Athenagoras, Dionysius of Corinth, or Apelles. That is not true. Scholars and laypersons alike are fascinated by this character. In fact, according to a search I made of this very blog, his name appears in the body or comments of 123 different posts over the years. That's a lot of mentions for someone whose work has almost entirely vanished!

The reason for this is that, the few times Papias was quoted, it was for really interesting things. He was quoted by Irenaeus of Lyons in Gaul (c. 185) for a tradition about the afterlife supposedly from Jesus himself. He was quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea in Palestine (c. 325) for comments about some books that would eventually become part of the New Testament as well as his own relation to oral tradition. He was quoted by Apollinaris of Laodicea in Asia Minor (c. 375) for the gruesome example of the traitor Judas. And he was quoted by Andrew of Caesarea in Cappadocia, also in Asia Minor, (c. 625) on the fate of the fallen angels. Yet, out of all that has survived of his work, it is his statements on the writing of Mark and Matthew that have attracted the most attention. They are not just the earliest surviving statement of any kind outside of the New Testament on the origins of these two gospels, but they are also the most detailed before the fourth century.

Unfortunately, Papias's statements do not come down to us intact and in context. Papias's work is lost, after all. Rather, they have been preserved for us because Eusebius quoted them in his Church History like this:

**14** . . . We now need to add to these statements of his a tradition which he set forth about Mark who wrote the gospel as follows: **15** And this is what the elder would say: Mark, who had indeed been Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately but not in order as much as he remembered about what was either said or done by the Lord. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but later, as I said, Peter, who would give his teachings as needed, but not, as it were, making a compilation of the dominical oracles, so that Mark did not fail at all by writing some of them as he recalled. For he took care of one thing, to omit nothing of what he heard or falsify anything among them. **16** So then these things were reported by Papias about Mark, but about Matthew these things were said: So then Matthew compiled the oracles in the Hebrew language, but each interpreted them as they could. (*Church History* 3.39.14-16).

The length and detail of this passage make it virtually irresistible for critics to bypass the layers of embedded discourse and treat this comment about the Gospels of Mark and Mathew as if they were a self-contained block of a tradition. It is not. The elder's comment about Mark was presumably uttered not out of the blue but within some larger discourse context. This context is lost to us. Indeed, what the elder said is not by any means intact, but extracted, edited, and embedded by Papias into a different context of his own creation. Furthermore, Papias's presentation of these remarks also does not come down to us intact, but only as preserved by Eusebius—and Eusebius's agenda is different from Papias's. Eusebius too extracted, edited, and embedded this statement into a context of his own making. We have to be cautious in interpreting it. As one scholar put it, "Papias says only what Eusebius wants him to say." As a result, the most famous statement in antiquity about the origins of Mark and Matthew is a joint production of three different people, living at three different times, with three different purposes: the elder, Papias, and Eusebius. All of them have contributed to this passage in their different ways, and all of them had different purposes for discussing their writings. If we are to make sense of this, we will have to do what scholars of fragmentary works have long known. We must deal with the fundamental issue of context.



[Papias. How Do We Know His Context? Guest post by Stephen Carlson](#)  
[Did Jesus Pray "Father Forgive Them" from the Cross?](#)