This is the second part of Stephen Carlson’s guest post on the important but now-lost work of the early-second century Christian author Papias. In the previous post he talked about the mind-boggling abundance of wine and wheat there would be in the kingdom, based on Papias’s reporting of a “word of the Lord.” Now he explains that saying, and in doing so develops a bold way of understanding what kind of book Papias actually was trying to write. Most of us have long assumed it was a kind of commentary on Jesus’ teachings. But was it?

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Scholars have long noticed that this fertility tradition has important links with the late first-century Jewish apocalypse 2 Baruch 29.5 (“Also the earth will give its fruits, one in ten thousand. And one vine, there will be on it a thousand twigs. And one twig will make a thousand clusters, and one cluster will make a thousand grapes, and one grape will make a kor of wine.”). Yet there are some important differences. The numbers do not quite match up (with a thousand instead of ten thousand) and there is no mention of an analogous production of wheat. These new elements have been traced to a common Jewish style of exegesis of the Hebrew text of the final clause of Gen 27:28, “an abundance of wheat and wine”, in which the Hebrew word for “abundance” (rav) can be read or interpreted as the Hebrew word for “ten thousand” (ribbo). Now, Irenaeus’s knowledge of the Hebrew language was poor and it is unlikely that his contemporaries had any better knowledge, so it is likely that Irenaeus derived this application of the fertility tradition to a passage in the Hebrew Bible read messianically from his source. Furthermore...

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