I try not to repeat blog posts from just a couple of years ago, but in this case I can’t resist.

In the last post I talked about the two accounts of Judas Iscariot’s death in the New Testament, one in Matthew and one in Luke, and argued that even with their intriguing and important similarities, there were also striking differences, some of which, in my judgment, simply cannot be reconciled. But we have other accounts from Christian antiquity that are at least equally interesting, even if more obviously legendary. Still, they are worth considering and thinking about; it’s not at all clear that the authors of these accounts thought they were as humorous as most readers today do.

One of these accounts is reasonably well-known to biblical scholars, from the writings of Papias (we’ve talked a lot about him over the years on the blog; just do a word search for Papias and you’ll see). Almost *nobody* knows about the other — including New Testament experts — except for a few specialist scholars.

Papias was a proto-orthodox church author who wrote a five-volume book called An Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord in about 120-130 CE (it is hard to know exactly when) This must have been a very large book indeed (five volumes!) and to our very great regret, it has been lost. We don’t have it. All we have are snippets of quotations from it by later church fathers, starting with Irenaeus (around 180 CE) and especially the church historian Eusebius (early fourth century).

We aren’t sure why exactly the book was not copied for posterity. My guess is that most readers didn’t much like it. The later church fathers didn’t think highly of Papias, in part, it appears, because he held to a literal understanding of what would happen at the end of time, that there would be literally a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. This is a view called Chiliasm, and it was rejected by later church fathers who realized that in fact the end was not coming “soon” with a literal return of Jesus from heaven to set up a kingdom here on earth. Anyone who thought so was a theological simpleton.

But Papias whole-heartedly advanced this view, and this may be why later writers (and scribes) thought his work was unsophisticated and possibly naïve. Eusebius at one point says that Papias was a “man of very little intelligence.” Not exactly an endorsement.

In any event, among the few quotations we have of Papias in later authors is one that deals with the death of Judas. It doesn’t coincide ....

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