

PAPIAS AND THE GOSPELS:
ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF HIS TESTIMONY IN EUSEBIUS' *H.E.* 3.39

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Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, was the author of the five-volume *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord* in the early second century. His testimony is exceedingly important for our understanding of early Christianity and the origin of certain New Testament writings because of the very early date of his writing and the several unique facts which his writings preserve. Significantly, however, Papias' testimony flies in the face of prominent scholarly views concerning the origins of the Gospels, and has in recent years often been ignored or rejected by skeptical academia.¹

The purpose of this paper is first to determine, as close as possible, precisely what Papias records about the origins of the Gospels, and, second, to assess to what extent such a statement coheres with our understanding of the development of the various Gospels. After a close study of Papias' words on the Gospels, preserved in Eusebius' *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39, we will conclude that Papias provides evidence for eyewitness testimony behind at least three of the canonical Gospels within one generation of the apostles. And, more controversially, we will postulate that Papias' writings on the nature of the Gospels in fact derived from a desire to defend the Fourth Gospel against those who believed the Synoptics, and not John's Gospel, preserved the correct ordering of the events of Jesus' life and ministry.

Methodological Problems in Assessing the Evidence of Papias

There are several caveats that must be admitted up front regarding the study of Papias. These methodological problems suggest that while the evidence from Papias is not enough to lead scholars to any definitive conclusions, it can nevertheless provide a unique

¹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 13.

testimony that, when interpreted and used correctly, contributes to our understanding of the composition of the Gospels.

The central methodological problem is that precisely zero copies of Papias' *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord* are extant today. We are entirely dependent on other sources which reference or quote Papias' writings. As a result of this problem, several other issues present themselves.

First, there are questions as to which fragments properly belong in a collection of his writings, hence the diversity of fragments in different editions of Papias.² However, the fragment preserved by Eusebius in *H.E.* 3.39, which contains the most complete and most important statements of Papias' unique insights and is the basis for this study, is considered by all editions to rightfully belong within the collection.³

Second, once the authentic fragments have been identified, there is still the problem of whether these fragments are word-for-word citations of Papias' writings or mere paraphrases. Some fragments merely report, secondhand, information about Papias and what he believed or wrote. Identifying the nature of each fragment is therefore problematic, though fortunately “the greatest reliability can be ascribed to the paraphrases by Eusebius.”⁴ Thus the crucial fragment which this paper is examining is most likely a faithful representative of the words of Papias. But, as will be seen below, when debates turn on exegetical minutiae, not having the exact words of Papias makes certainty about his statements impossible.

Third, there is the problem that we have no context for any of the statements of Papias. Whether certain fragments are exact quotations or just paraphrases, it is impossible to know if Papias himself affirmed the things that he is cited as having written. Particularly when Eusebius reports that Papias was quoting John the Elder, we have no knowledge of whether or

² See, for instance, the chart which lays out which editions include which fragments in Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 730.

³ Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 730.

⁴ Ulrich H. J. Kortner, “The Papias Fragments,” in *The Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, ed. Wilhelm Pratscher and trans. Elisabeth G. Wolfe (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 164.

not Papias agreed with what John said. While that may be a probable assumption, it must be noted up front that it is by no means a certainty.

Fourth, because so little of Papias' work is preserved, we have precious little understanding of the theological biases which undoubtedly shaped his work. The ideal of a detached, "objective" historian was no more possible in the second century than it is in the twenty-first. We will return to this problem at the conclusion of this paper.

Papias and Oral Tradition

Papias provides a significant clue in the search for the original form and purpose of what would become the canonical Gospels when he says that he sought information "from a living and active voice" ($\tauὰ παρὰ ζώσης καὶ μενούσης$), which he found to be more profitable than that found in books.⁵ Many have taken this statement simply to mean that Papias, and the early church, considered oral tradition superior to written records; the assumed uncontrolled and communal nature of such oral tradition has led to skepticism regarding the veracity of the Gospel accounts, particularly among form critics. But this statement, properly understood, actually points out the importance of individual eyewitness testimony as the basis for the Jesus tradition and the need for its eventual preservation in written form.

Analysis

By way of background, it is worth noting that Papias was a part of "the third Christian generation, and therefore the generation that had been in touch with the first Christian generation, the generation of the apostles."⁶ Papias clearly indicates that his interviews took place in the past ($ποτέ$; "then"); thus, we can assume that regardless of which decade Papias actually wrote his volumes, "he speaks *about* an earlier period in his life, the time during which

⁵Eus, *H.E.* 3.39. Cf. Papias 3.4, in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 735.

⁶Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 13.

he was collecting oral reports of the words and deeds of Jesus.”⁷ This pushes Papias’ evidence back into the late first century, which will have profound implications for our analysis below.

Papias groups the identities of the people he interviewed, whose “living and active voice” he captured in his volumes, into various categories, but the Greek syntax is murky at exactly this point. In particular, there is a question as to whether the “elders” are the same as “the Lord’s disciples.” The word “elder” (*πρεσβύτερος*) can refer to either a person of advanced age (as in Luke 15:25; James 8:9) or a leader in the early church, as distinguished from an apostle (cf. Acts 15:2, 4, 6; 16:4; Tit 1:5).⁸ This ambiguity in meaning is precisely what has caused such different interpretations of Papias’ statement here, which will be an issue when we discuss Papias’ relationship to the Fourth Gospel below.

Papias seems to set off two names, those of Aristion and the “elder” John,⁹ in their own separate category, as indicated by a shift in tenses. Whereas the previous group is described with an aorist tense verb (*εἶπεν*), these two are described with a present tense verb (*λέγοντιν*). This seems to imply that the previous group was dead, but that Aristion and John were still alive.

Putting all of that together, Papias interviewed his sources at a time when all the disciples of Jesus except for Aristion and John were dead. According to Bauckham, this must have been sometime around 80-90 AD, which was also most likely the time when Matthew and Luke were written.¹⁰ Even if these Gospels were composed earlier, there is no reason to think Matthew and Luke could not still be alive at this time.

With all this in mind, we now return to the issue of Papias’ “living and active voice.” He is not merely referring to some kind of uncontrolled oral tradition; instead, he is speaking of “the voice of an informant - someone who has personal memories of the words and deeds of Jesus

⁷ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 14.

⁸ BDAG 862 s.v., compare 1 and 2.

⁹ At this point, the exact identity of this elder John is irrelevant; it is enough to know that Papias describes him and Aristion as “disciples of the Lord” (*οἱ τοῦ κυρίου μαθηταί*). We will return to the issue of John’s identity at the end of this paper.

¹⁰ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 20.

and who is still alive.”¹¹ In particular, then, he is speaking of the witness of Aristion and John, for only those two could be said to be “living and active.” This is even more clearly the case when the word μενούσης, a participle from the verb μενω, is taken to mean not merely “active” but with its more full meaning “remaining alive” or “surviving.”¹² A parallel usage is attested in 1 Cor 15:6, when Paul writes that many witnesses of the Lord’s resurrection were still alive through his day (μένουσιν ἔως ἡρτι).¹³

Therefore, we can conclude from Papias that the Gospel traditions were not independent of the living witnesses in his day. But with these final living witnesses to Jesus soon to die, Papias sought to collect their testimony and preserve it for later generations. Papias was not the only one to do this, of course; “it is surely not accidental that this was also the period in which the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John were being written.”¹⁴

Evaluation

This understanding of Papias challenges what many scholars, particularly form critics, believe, which is that the Gospels were the result of collective and anonymous transmission.¹⁵ While collective oral tradition might indeed have been important to early Christianity, Papias notes the unparalleled importance of individual testimony, showing the flaw in the assumption that “collective memory *excluded or took the place of* individual named informants and guarantors of tradition about Jesus.”¹⁶ And when these informants were passing from the scene, it makes sense that their testimony would be increasingly preserved in written form, whether in Papias’ volumes or in the canonical Gospels.

¹¹ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 27.

¹² BDAG, 631 s.v., 2.

¹³ Cf. also John 21:22-23.

¹⁴ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 29.

¹⁵ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 36.

¹⁶ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 34. Italics original.

Indeed, an independent attestation to Papias' method comes from the prologue to Luke's Gospel, in which the Evangelist remarks that the sources for his material included "eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (αὐτόπται καὶ ὑπηρέται γενόμενοι τοῦ λόγου; Luke 1:2). According to Bock, this most likely refers to a single group of people who carefully transmitted their testimony concerning Jesus, and in so doing "he stresses the reliable basis on which these accounts rested."¹⁷ Like Papias, Luke is interviewing the "living and active voice" available to him in order to ground his report in eyewitness testimony.

With the heyday of form criticism in the past, scholars are today more apt to give weight to Papias' claims and to consider the notion that eyewitnesses were not just the source of oral tradition but "people who remained accessible sources and authoritative guarantors of their own testimony throughout the period between Jesus and the writing of the Gospels."¹⁸ More work needs to be done in this area, but Papias' testimony deserves to be taken seriously.

Papias and the Gospel of Mark

Concerning the Gospel of Mark, Papias quotes John the Elder (τοῦ πρεσβυτέρου Ἰωάννου), who identified Peter as the source of Mark's Gospel. This is, in fact, the earliest attestation of this identification.¹⁹ The details of this passage, however, are much-debated, and require further analysis. Papias' point, I will argue, is that the preservation of Peter's testimony makes Mark's Gospel in fact eyewitness testimony, though (significantly for my later argument) Mark orders his material in an episodic rather than a strictly narratival form.

Analysis

First, there is Papias' claim that Mark was Peter's "interpreter" (έρμηνευτής). This word and its cognate verb, however, can mean either "to help someone understand a subject

¹⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 1.57-8.

¹⁸ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 241.

¹⁹ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 203.

matter by making it plain” or “to render words in a different language.”²⁰ In other words, “to interpret” can either mean “to explain” or “to translate,” and it is between these two options that we must decide what Papias means in regards to Mark. While Peter may have had a rudimentary command of oral Greek, “it is obvious that the Galilean fisherman Simon will never have learnt enough Greek to have been able to present his teaching fluently in unexceptionable Greek.”²¹ It would be understandable, then, that Mark’s help was needed in translating Peter’s teachings into satisfactory Greek. This fact may even account for the rougher nature of the Greek of Mark’s Gospel, if indeed Mark’s “translation” preserved some of Peter’s rough diction and syntax.

The next piece of evidence is Papias’ statement that Peter “gave his teachings πρὸς τὰς χρείας.” The interpretive problem here centers on the meaning of the phrase πρὸς τὰς χρείας. The normal translation of this phrase is “according to need,” and suggests that Peter adapted his teachings in accordance with the needs of his audience.²² But the word χρεία also occurs in ancient handbooks of rhetoric, and is defined in Aelius Theon’s handbook as “a concise and pointed account of something said or done, attributed to some particular person.”²³ Taylor, who first made this connection, went on to argue that “the definition exactly fits the detachable little stories, of which so much of Mark consists.”²⁴ According to this view, then, Peter is the source of the many χρεία of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel.

This latter interpretation of χρεία better contrasts with Papias’ next claim, which is that Peter “had no intention of giving an ordered account (σύνταξιν) of the Lord’s sayings.” That is to say, this interpretation “helps to elucidate the subsequent admission that Peter was not making a compilation (σύνταξις) of the dominical oracles and that Mark did no wrong in writing

²⁰ BDAG, 392 s.v.

²¹ Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 50.

²² So the translation of Holmes, as well as the view of BDAG, 1088, s.v. χρεία 2b.

²³ R.O.P Taylor, *The Groundwork of the Gospels* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), 76.

²⁴ Taylor, *Groundwork*, 76.

down single items” in this form.²⁵ A synonym of σύνταξιν occurs earlier in this statement, when Papias notes that Mark accurately recorded Peter’s words, though “not in order” (οὐ μένοι τάξει). Mark, in other words, “was content simply to reproduce Peter’s teaching as accurately as he could from memory.”²⁶ If Peter had “presented the Jesus tradition in a disordered way by literary and historical standards and was uninterested in a collection of ‘words of the Lord’ with a good literary or chronological arrangement,” then Mark can be forgiven for writing his Gospel in a similarly disordered manner.²⁷

In summary, “Papias portrays Mark as no more than a translator scrupulously accurate in reproducing Peter’s oral testimony.”²⁸ This interpretation fits well with the clear apologetic thrust of Papias’ statement; no doubt Papias was in his day “anxious to claim Mark’s gospel as a source of apostolic authority.”²⁹ The exact opponents Papias is rebutting is not clear, but given his argument, it appears that some may have objected to Mark’s Gospel because Mark was not an eyewitness to what his book records.³⁰ Because Mark had carefully and without error preserved Peter’s teaching, even leaving it in a disordered fashion, Papias could claim that Mark’s Gospel, while not being itself eyewitness testimony, was as close to that quality of a source about the life and teachings of Jesus as possible.³¹ Nevertheless, Papias strives to make clear, Mark’s Gospel is disordered, a point to which we will return.

Evaluation

Papias’ statement on the Petrine basis for Mark’s Gospel should be considered credible. In terms of internal evidence, the frequency with which Peter’s name appears in that

²⁵ Ralph Martin, *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 82.

²⁶ Martin, *Mark*, 81.

²⁷ Hengel, *Mark*, 49.

²⁸ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 210.

²⁹ Martin, *Mark*, 83.

³⁰ Martin, *Mark*, 80.

³¹ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 210.

Gospel (a total of 26 times) and the apparent use of an *inclusio* referencing Peter which frames the Gospel (cf. Mk 1:16; 16:7) point to the importance of Peter's testimony in Mark's account.³² Mark's Gospel also appears to be told, to a large extent, through the eyes of Peter, with various instances of "internal focalization" centering the text on Peter's perspective (cf. Mk 14:72).³³ Moreover, the clear use of Mark in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, as well as the use of the Second Gospel in the life of church, only makes sense if people believed that "the work of Mark was from the beginning bound up with the authority of the name of Peter."³⁴ In our day, this note stands against the claims of form critics who argue that Mark is a patchwork of anonymous oral tradition about Jesus.

Papias, however, might be overstating his case that Mark merely recorded Peter's words as related to him; Mark's Gospel surely shows signs of a deliberate structure and plotting. Mark's so-called "sandwich" technique of placing one story within the first and second halves of another story (cf. Mk 11:12-25) is but one example of Mark's editorial work.³⁵ That Mark has put his "own personal theological stamp" on his Gospel is clear.³⁶

But does this not contradict what Papias said and nullify his claims? Not necessarily. First, Papias was perhaps "measuring [Mark's Gospel] against the highest standards of literary historiography, and by these standards it compared badly with the Gospel of John, which, while it lacks the stylistic skills of a Plutarch, is much more chronologically precise and much more obviously a continuous narrative whole than Mark's Gospel is."³⁷ This explains both the existence and nature of Papias' defense of Mark's Gospel. Second, Mark's Gospel is clearly in the style of oral composition; its short *χρεία* would have been easy to memorize and repeat. True,

³² Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 124-27.

³³ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 179-80.

³⁴ Hengel, *Mark*, 52.

³⁵ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 229-30.

³⁶ Hengel, *Mark*, 52.

³⁷ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 232.

Mark has edited his material, but he has preserved its distinctively oral character, and it is this, in contrast to a more literary organization, which Papias comments on.³⁸

Papias and the Gospel of Matthew

Eusebius, after giving Papias' statement on the origin of Mark's Gospel, then notes Papias' understanding of the composition of Matthew's Gospel. Though Papias' comments on Matthew are shorter than those on Mark (merely one sentence), they have caused more confusion and skepticism than perhaps any of his other claims. I will contend, however, that Papias is primarily concerned with proving that Matthew's Gospel, like Mark's, is not chronologically arranged.

Analysis

The conjunction οὖν (“therefore”) at the beginning of Papias' statement on Matthew demands some kind of prior statement on which this claim builds. There are two likely explanations for this. First, there is the explanation that Papias' comments on Matthew immediately follow his comments on Mark. Gundry, who describes the presence of the conjunction as “immensely important for synoptic studies,” concludes that “Matthew wrote his gospel for the precise purpose of bringing order out of chaos in Mark,” which is “astonishingly early external evidence that Mark wrote first and that Matthew knew Mark's gospel and wrote his own view of it.”³⁹ The second explanation is that Eusebius has omitted some intervening material. Bauckham suggests “redundant” personal background on Mark or things that conflicted with Eusebius' own ideas as likely candidates for omission.⁴⁰

The second, and most significant, interpretive problem is how to explain Papias' comment itself. Here is Papias' claim:

³⁸ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 233-34.

³⁹ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 614.

⁴⁰ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 222.

Therefore Matthew put the oracles (*λόγια*) in an ordered arrangement (*συντάξατο*) in the Hebrew dialect (*Ἐβραΐδι διαλέκτῳ*), and each person interpreted (*ἡρμήνευσε*) them as best he could.⁴¹

Does this mean that Matthew originally wrote his Gospel in Hebrew (that is, Aramaic)? Perhaps. As noted earlier, the verb *ἐρμηνεύω* can mean “to interpret” either in the sense of “to explain” or “to translate.”

Gundry takes the former view, arguing that the phrase “as best he could” makes more sense in terms of a person’s ability to understand and exposit Matthew’s Gospel.⁴² Arguing from the lack of the definite article in the phrase *Ἐβραΐδι διαλέκτῳ* and the scarcity of people capable of translating Aramaic to Greek in the late first century Gundry suggests that “a Hebrew dialect” means “a Hebrew way of presenting Jesus’ messiahship,” which fits with Matthew’s unique focus on Jewish features in his Gospel.⁴³

Bauckham chooses the latter interpretation, arguing from the parallel to Papias’ comments on Mark’s Gospel; just as Mark translated Peter’s oral Aramaic into written Greek, so Matthew wrote in Aramaic or Hebrew and others then translated his Gospel into Greek.⁴⁴ This is the natural reading of Papias’ statement, and it fits with the notion that there were many different translations and adaptations of Matthew’s Gospel (including, possibly, the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* and the *Gospel of the Ebionites*). Therefore, Bauckham reasons, Papias mentions this multiplicity of “Greek Matthews” so that he might “show that none of them could be presumed to preserve accurately the ‘order’ (*συντάξις*) of the original Hebrew or Aramaic Matthew.⁴⁵ This word *συντάξις* was, of course, also used in Papias’ comments on Mark’s Gospel.

⁴¹ Eusebius, *H.E.* 3.39. Cf. Papias 3.16, in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 741.

⁴² Gundry, *Matthew*, 619.

⁴³ Gundry, *Matthew*, 619-20.

⁴⁴ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 223.

⁴⁵ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 224.

Suppose, as argued above, that Papias was to some extent arguing for the authority of Mark's Gospel (despite its lack of συντάξις). It then makes sense that Papias would contrast it with Matthew's Gospel, the most popular Gospel in the early church, by contending that Matthew's work, though originally having συντάξις in the original Hebrew or Aramaic, had lost its συντάξις in the various Greek translations. According to Papias, while both Mark and Matthew lacked συντάξις, "unlike Mark's scrupulosity in translating and recording no more or less than Peter said, the translators of Matthew had made major alterations to the apostle's text."⁴⁶ Mark, therefore, could be said to have preserved a more accurate record of apostolic testimony than Matthew.

Evaluation

There are two issues to be evaluated here: Papias' attestation of Matthean authorship of the First Gospel, and Papias' claim for a Hebrew or Aramaic basis for Matthew's Gospel.

First, Papias' testimony is an important testimony to Matthean authorship of the First Gospel. "Papias' tradition probably dates to within half a century of Matthew's publication, and no one in the years surrounding Papias' testimony challenged Matthean authorship; nor was Matthew the most obvious name to attach to the Gospel."⁴⁷ These facts, combined with the near universal support of church tradition, make Papias a credible source in this regard. Even skeptical critics should admit that "the persistent and unrivaled character of this particular tradition calls for a higher estimate of its worth."⁴⁸

Second, the issue of a Hebrew or Aramaic "ur-Matthew" is extraordinarily complex, and depends on one's views on the synoptic problem and the existence of the Gospel source Q. How to reconcile Papias' comments with the existence and authority of the canonical Gospel of Matthew is, therefore, problematic. Four explanations are possible.

⁴⁶ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 224.

⁴⁷ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 39.

⁴⁸ Gundry, *Matthew*, 610.

The first solution would be to follow Gundry, and understand Papias to be talking of a Gospel oriented to Jewish backgrounds. This view makes sense of the likely fact that “Greek Matthew” draws on “Greek Mark.” Though, as Gundry admits (and dismisses), it is possible that, because “Aramaic Matthew” was difficult to translate, Matthew wrote a Greek version which incorporated his previous work (the so-called “M” material?) into Mark’s framework.⁴⁹

The second solution would be to argue that the *λόγια* that Matthew organized in Hebrew or Aramaic are, in fact, Q. This was later adapted, by Matthew and others, into gospel form. Papias, however, seemed to equate *χρεία* and *λόγια* in his discussion of Mark, so it is unlikely that this is what he has in mind.⁵⁰

The third solution is to simply say that Papias was confused, and that he was in fact referring to a different Hebrew or Aramaic text that had some similarities to Matthew’s Gospel. But, given that Papias received his information late in the first century from John, a confusion this soon after the writing of the Gospel is highly improbable.⁵¹

The fourth solution, then, is to consider the polemical purpose of Papias’ writings: an argument for the supremacy of the Gospel of John over the synoptics. We turn now to this idea.

A Conclusion and a Conjecture: Papias and the Gospel of John

Above, we have seen that Papias’ comments on Matthew and Mark are positive in the sense that he believes them to have apostolic authority behind them, but negative to the extent that he contends they lack *συντάξις*. Why would Papias be so eager to point out the disordered nature of Matthew and Mark?

To answer this question, we need to return to Papias’ relationship to John, the author of the Fourth Gospel. A connection between these two men is a well-attested and stable tradition in the early church. Eusebius, citing Irenaeus, describes Papias as a “hearer” of John, the

⁴⁹ Gundry, *Matthew*, 618.

⁵⁰ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 225.

⁵¹ Gundry, *Matthew*, 618.

theologian and apostle (Ιωάννην τὸν θεολόγον καὶ ἀπόστολον).⁵² Philip of Side⁵³ and Jerome⁵⁴ also attest to this fact.

Unfortunately, matters are complicated by Eusebius' aside that Papias spoke of two Johns, one the apostle and evangelist, and the other the “elder” and author of Revelation.⁵⁵ Gundry, however, makes a thorough takedown of Eusebius' reading of Papias. First, Eusebius seems to contradict himself, as in the citation from Irenaeus as well as when he notes Papias' claim that he received the “words of the apostles.” Second, he sees an appositive structure in Papias' list of eyewitnesses, in which the elders are equated with the Lord's disciples. Third, and most significantly, there is obvious motive for Eusebius to drive a wedge between Papias and apostolic authority: millennialism. As the book of Revelation was the fountainhead of early millennialism, Eusebius creatively assigned that book to a “John the Elder” and made Papias the disciple of this John, and not John the apostle and author of the Fourth Gospel.⁵⁶

There is, therefore, undoubtedly a connection between Papias and the Fourth Gospel.⁵⁷ That Eusebius does not record Papias' comments on John's Gospel is not surprising, given Eusebius' concerns about the Johannine literature and his focus on the apostolic origin of the gospels.⁵⁸ But, as suggested above, Papias' purpose in writing on the gospels was less about

⁵² Eus., *Chronicle*. Cf. Papias 1.1 in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 733.

⁵³ Philip of Side, *Church History*. Cf. Papias 5.1 in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 743.

⁵⁴ Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 18. Cf. Papias 7.1 in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 747.

⁵⁵ Eus., *H.E.* 3.39. Cf. Papias 3.5-7 in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 735-37.

⁵⁶ Gundry, *Matthew*, 611-13. His entire discussion of this point, which features several additional arguments, is worth noting.

⁵⁷ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, accepts Eusebius' contention regarding the two different Johns, and yet he says “there should be no doubt that Papias knew John's Gospel” (225). Bauckham actually holds that Papias believed John the Elder was the author of the Fourth Gospel (226). But even a person who believed John the son of Zebedee wrote the Gospel and Papias' John the Elder wrote Revelation would no doubt concede that the Elder John was working in the so-called “Johannine school” and would have been familiar with the Fourth Gospel or early forms of what would become that work. The point is simply that however one breaks this down, Papias knew the Fourth Gospel.

⁵⁸ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 226.

proving apostolic authorship than it was pointing out the reasons for the lack of συντάξις in Mark and Matthew.

Bauckham draws the most logical conclusion: “The only reason Papias could have had for thinking that the Gospels of Matthew and Mark both lacked the kind of order to be expected in a work deriving from an eyewitness is that he knew another Gospel, also of eyewitness origin, whose chronological sequence differed significantly from Mark’s and Matthew’s and whose ‘order’ Papias preferred.”⁵⁹ This is, of course, the Fourth Gospel, and Papias’ connection with John explains his motivation for defending this Gospel against those in the early church who undoubtedly saw its chronology as conflicting, negatively, with that of the Synoptic Gospels. Apart from his personal relationship with John, Papias had good reason to prefer the Johannine account to that of Mark and Matthew. Given the precise dates, clear chronological structure, and extended narratives of the Fourth Gospel, “it is easy to see that John’s Gospel could appear to Papias much closer to good historiography than the Gospels of Matthew and Mark were.”⁶⁰

In this light, understanding Papias to be something other than an idealized “objective” historian, we are in the uncomfortable position of wondering, as with all historians, how reliable Papias’ testimony is. Yet, as we have seen, his comments can be supported by other evidence, and we have no reason to think Papias is wildly misleading us; nevertheless, he might not be giving us an entirely fair account of Mark and Matthew’s Gospels. Given that, however, it makes his testimony all the more astounding; Papias “took for granted that all three Gospels originated from eyewitness testimony.”⁶¹ Yes, Papias claims that only the Fourth Gospel was correctly *ordered*, but that by no means negates the *authority* of Matthew and Mark. “It was by comparison with John that Papias had to see the Gospels of Mark and Matthew as lacking order,

⁵⁹ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 226.

⁶⁰ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 227.

⁶¹ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 227-28.

but, not wishing to dismiss these Gospels, Papias set out to explain why they lacked order but were nevertheless of great value because of their closeness to eyewitness testimony.”⁶²

While this analysis may have raised more questions than it answered, what is clear, and what Bauckham has demonstrated so convincingly, is that Papias, within one generation of the apostles, has made a convincing case for there being eyewitness, apostolic testimony behind at least three of the canonical Gospels.⁶³ In the quest to prove the historical reliability of the gospels, we have a powerful witness in Papias of Hierapolis.

⁶² Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 228.

⁶³ Why Papias (or Eusebius) has left the Gospel of Luke out of the discussion is an entirely different can of worms. See the literature for various ideas.

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