



Papias of Hierapolis

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Introduction

Papias was the Christian leader in Hierapolis, ancient Phrygia (Asia Minor, now part of modern-day Turkey), who was probably active in the early second century CE. While there is scant information about his life and work, he remains known for his accounts of the origins of the Gospels and oral traditions connected with the first followers of Jesus. He claimed to have acquired eschatological teaching of Jesus that did not make it into the canonical Gospels, which looked to a time when animals and humans would live in harmony and accompanied by blessings of a vast quantity of grapes and wine. Papias was known for his literal understanding of [chiliasm](#), a belief that there will be a thousand-year reign of Christ following the resurrection of the dead.

Life

Little is known about Papias's life. We only have snippets of his work quoted or referenced in the works of later Christian writers, notably the historian Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339 CE) and the theologian Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130–c. 202 CE). Papias was a leader or 'bishop' of Hierapolis who had written five books under the title *An Exposition of the Lord's Oracles*, which included stories about the origins of the Gospels. Papias was said to have received traditions about Jesus from those who had heard the apostles or could be traced back to them. He was an associate of Polycarp of Smyrna (c. 69–155 CE) and active around the same time as Ignatius of Antioch (early second century CE) (for biographical details see, e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.33.4; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.36.1–2; 3.39.1–16). From the available information and the implications of Eusebius's chronological history, it is probable that Papias was writing at the turn of second century CE, though the details have been debated.

For detailed academic discussion, see, e.g., Bartlet 1933; Schoedel 1967; Kortner 1983; Kurzinger 1983; Schoedel 1993; Norelli 2005; Hill 2006; Carlson 2017, 49–51; Shanks 2013; Carlson 2021.

Chiliasm

Eusebius noted that Papias had access to mysterious traditions attributed to Jesus (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.11). From Irenaeus, we have such an example. It is an eschatological passage looking to a time of great viticultural abundance when animals will coexist in harmony (in expected fulfilment of Isaiah 11:6–9):

*The days will come, in which vines shall grow, each having ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each true twig ten thousand shoots, and in each one of the shoots ten thousand clusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes, and every grape when pressed will give five and twenty metretres of wine. And when any one of the saints shall lay hold of a cluster, another shall cry out, I am a better cluster, take me; bless the Lord through me. In like manner [the Lord declared] that a grain of wheat would produce ten thousand ears, and that every ear should have ten thousand grains, and every grain would yield ten pounds of clear, pure, fine flour; and that all other fruit-bearing trees, and seeds and grass, would produce in similar proportions; and that all animals feeding [only] on the productions of the earth, should [in those days] become peaceful and harmonious among each other, and be in perfect subjection to man. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.33.3)*

Papias provided further details about this tradition, claiming that the “traitor Judas did not give credit” to these promises and questioned Jesus: “How then can things about to bring forth so abundantly be wrought by the Lord.” Jesus was said to have replied, “They who shall come to these [times] shall see” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.33.4).

Even by contemporary standards of exaggeration to make a point about the immensity of eschatological blessings, the promises attributed to Jesus in Papias's tradition are remarkably voluminous. Stephen Carlson has calculated that the amount of wine that would be produced here “is literally astronomical, about four times the volume of the moon” (Carlson 2017, 53). Even so, comparable imagery of vinicultural verdancy was known in early Jewish traditions (e.g., 1 Enoch 10:19; 2 Baruch 29:5–6).

Eusebius associated Papias's claims about mysterious traditions with Papias's belief in a literal form of [chiliasm](#), namely that “there will be a period of some thousand years after the resurrection of the dead, and that the kingdom of Christ will be set up in material form on this very earth” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.11–12). Eusebius was dismissive of such thinking, arguing that Papias's literal reading of the writings of the apostles was a misunderstanding and adding that Papias “appears to have been of very limited understanding” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.12–13). Eusebius's personal disdain for Papias's ideas also reflects how Papias-style chiliasm was now being pushed to the sidelines in the making of Christian 'orthodoxy' on the question of eschatology.

Sources

The earliest accounts of the life and work of Papias are from Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.33.4, and

Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.36.1–2; 3.39.1–16, available in, e.g., Coxe, Roberts, and Donaldson 1885; Lake 1926; and Ehrman 2003.

The accounts of Irenaeus and Eusebius are available online (e.g., [Irenaeus](#) and [Eusebius](#)). The major Christian theologian Jerome (d. 420 CE) includes the story of Papias in his *On Illustrious Men* (18).

For a full collection of ancient and medieval references (or otherwise) to Papias, see Carlson 2021.

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