

Church History and Evidences
Notes: Church “Fathers”: Papias

I. Church “fathers” and their writings: Papias

A. Papias of Hierapolis

1. **Papias** was a Greek Apostolic Father, Bishop of Hierapolis (modern Pamukkale, Turkey), and author who lived c. 60–163 AD. It was Papias who wrote the *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord* in five books. This work, which is lost apart from brief excerpts in the works of Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 180) and Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 320), is an important early source on Christian oral tradition and especially on the origins of the canonical Gospels.
2. Very little is known of Papias apart from what can be inferred from his own writings. He is described as "an ancient man who was a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp" by Polycarp's disciple Irenaeus (c. 180). Eusebius adds that Papias was Bishop of Hierapolis around the time of Ignatius of Antioch. In this office Papias was presumably succeeded by Abercius of Hierapolis. The name Papias was very common in the region, suggesting that he was probably a native of the area.
3. Eusebius refers to Papias only in his third book, and thus seems to date him before the opening of his fourth book in 109. Papias himself knows several New Testament books, whose dates are themselves controversial, and was informed by John the Evangelist, the daughters of Philip and many "elders" who had themselves heard the Apostles. He is also called a companion of the long-lived Polycarp (69–155). For all these reasons, Papias is thought to have written around the turn of the 2nd century.

B. Writings

1. The work of Papias is dated by most modern scholars to about A.D. 95–120. Despite indications that the work of Papias was still extant in the Late Middle Ages, the full text is now lost. Extracts, however, appear in a number of other writings, some of which cite a book number.
2. Papias describes his way of gathering information in his preface:
 - a) I shall not hesitate also to put into ordered form for you, along with the interpretations, everything I learned carefully in the past from the elders and noted down carefully, for the truth of which I vouch. For unlike most people I took no pleasure in those who told many different stories, but only in those who taught the truth. Nor did I take pleasure in those who reported their memory of someone else's commandments, but only in those who reported their memory of the commandments given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from the Truth itself. And if by chance anyone who had been in attendance on the elders arrived, I made enquiries about the words of the elders—what Andrew or Peter had said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples, and whatever Aristion and John the Elder, the Lord's disciples, were saying. For I did not think that information from

the books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice.

3. Papias, then, inquired of travelers passing through Hierapolis what the surviving disciples of Jesus and the elders—those who had personally known the Twelve Apostles—were saying. One of these disciples was Aristion, probably bishop of nearby Smyrna, and another was John the Elder, usually identified (despite Eusebius' protest) with John the Evangelist, residing in nearby Ephesus, of whom Papias was a hearer; Papias frequently cited both. From the daughters of Philip, who settled in Hierapolis, Papias learned still other traditions.
4. Eusebius concludes from the writings of Papias that he was a chiliast, understanding the Millennium as a literal period in which Christ will reign on Earth, and chastises Papias for his literal interpretation of figurative passages, writing that Papias "appears to have been of very limited understanding", and felt that his misunderstanding misled Irenaeus and others.
5. Irenaeus indeed quotes the fourth book of Papias for an otherwise unknown saying of Jesus, recounted by John the Evangelist, which Eusebius doubtless has in mind:
 - a) The Lord used to teach about those times and say: "The days will come when vines will grow, each having ten thousand shoots, and on each shoot ten thousand branches, and on each branch ten thousand twigs, and on each twig ten thousand clusters, and in each cluster ten thousand grapes, and each grape when crushed will yield twenty-five measures of wine. And when one of the saints takes hold of a cluster, another cluster will cry out, "I am better, take me, bless the Lord through me." Similarly, a grain of wheat will produce ten thousand heads, and every head will have ten thousand grains, and every grain ten pounds of fine flour, white and clean. And the other fruits, seeds, and grass will produce in similar proportions, and all the animals feeding on these fruits produced by the soil will in turn become peaceful and harmonious toward one another, and fully subject to humankind.... These things are believable to those who believe." And when Judas the traitor did not believe and asked, "How, then, will such growth be accomplished by the Lord?", the Lord said, "Those who live until those times will see."
6. On the other hand, Papias is elsewhere said to have understood mystically the Hexaemeron (six days of Creation) as referring to Christ and the Church.
7. Eusebius, despite his own views on Papias, knew that Irenaeus believed Papias to be a reliable witness to original apostolic traditions.
8. Modern scholars have debated Papias' reliability. Much discussion of Papias's comments about the Gospel of Mark and Gospel of Matthew is concerned with either showing their reliability as evidence for the origins of these Gospels or with emphasizing their apologetic character in order to discredit their reliability. Yoon-Man Park cites a modern argument that Papias's tradition was formulated to vindicate the apostolicity of Mark's

Gospel but dismisses this as an unlikely apologetic route unless the Peter-Mark connection Papias described had already been accepted with general agreement by the early church. Casey argued that Papias was indeed reliable about a Hebrew collection of sayings by Matthew the Apostle, which he argues was independent of the Greek Gospel of Matthew, possibly written by another Matthew or Matthias in the early church. 9. Others argue Papias faithfully recorded what was related to him but misunderstood the subjects of narrations he was unfamiliar with.