

PAPIAS: POLEMICIST AGAINST WHOM?

Scholars have argued again and again that there is a polemical intent in the prologue of Papias' *Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord* (Eusebius, *HE* 3, 39, 1-7). Unfortunately, it is not clear against whom Papias' criticism is directed, and the speculation on the subject has certainly not produced anything approaching general agreement. Moreover, it is not even clear that Papias knew some of his supposed antagonists.

For instance, Bartlet was surely correct (against Lightfoot) to doubt the connection of "Papias's book with the developed *gnosis* of the historical founders of systems, such as Valentinus and Basilides and Marcion."¹ After all, both Irenaeus and Eusebius are silent "as to any grave 'heresies' having been dealt with by Papias."² Moreover, Papias' "attitude to *gnosis* seems less severe than we should expect after A.D. 115."³ It is not, however, even clear that Papias was writing against Gnostics at all, even those who lived *before* 115. Again, it is not easy to determine whether Papias was against the Gospel of John when it is not absolutely certain that he even knew the fourth Gospel.⁴ Finally, Bauer's argument from silence concerning Papias' relationship to Luke and John has rightly failed to inspire universal confidence.⁵

In view of all this, it is no wonder that Munck has suggested that Papias' words "are so conventional that it seems unreasonable to seek opponents outside of the religious community of which Papias himself was a member."⁶ Schoedel quotes Munck with approval and sees no reason why one may not describe Papias' remarks as "rhetorical flourishes . . . having no more precise polemical intent than, say, the prologue to Luke's Gospel."⁷ Perhaps these scholars are right. At any rate, those who wish to continue the quest to identify Papias' opponent with some precision might be well advised to suggest someone whom

¹ Vernon Bartlet, "Papias's 'Exposition': Its Date and Contents," in *Amicitiae Corolla: A Volume of Essays Presented to James Rendel Harris*, ed. H. G. Wood (London, 1933) p. 21; William R. Schoedel, *Polycarp, Martyrdom of Polycarp, Fragments of Papias*, Vol. 6 of *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Robert M. Grant (Toronto, 1964-68) pp. 91-92, 100.

² Bartlet, *op. cit.*, pp. 21 and 33.

³ Vernon Bartlet, "Papias," in *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, ed. James Hastings (New York, 1908) Vol. 2, 313.

⁴ Werner Georg Kümmel, in his completely revised edition of Paul Feine and Johannes Behm, *Introduction to the New Testament*, tr. A. J. Mattill, Jr. (14th ed. rev.; Nashville, 1966) p. 171.

⁵ Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia, 1971) pp. 184-88, 290.

⁶ Johannes Munck, "Presbyters and Disciples of the Lord in Papias," *Harvard Theological Review* 52 (1959) 230.

⁷ Schoedel, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

Papias most certainly knew. Perhaps they should also seek to interpret Papias' words in a less conventional sense, that is, in a way that might indicate a more sharply defined polemical intent. It is to these tasks that we shall now turn.

One of the most persistent and, in my view, one of the most helpful theories concerning the object of Papias' criticism is at least as old as F. C. Baur's *Paulus* (1845). As Munck puts it: "F. C. Baur maintained that a man who attached so much importance to the tradition of Jesus' teaching and person must be thinking of Paul and his followers when he speaks of 'those who recall strange commandments.'" ⁸ More recently, Annand has suggested that in Papias' prologue "one seems to catch a hint of the old unhappy dissensions between the Judaisers of the Jerusalem Church and Paul."⁹ More recently still, Robert Grant has mentioned Paul as the one Papias may have had in mind.¹⁰

Useful as these comments are, we need to go on to suggest the *way* in which Papias had come into contact with the Pauline materials. I shall argue that Papias encountered Paul in the person and writings of Polycarp of Smyrna and that Polycarp had done something with the Pauline corpus which caused Papias' polemical reaction.

This hypothesis has at least one advantage: Papias knew Polycarp. About this fact, at least, there can be no reasonable doubt. Even if Irenaeus had not described Papias as a companion of Polycarp,¹¹ it would still be clear that Papias and Polycarp lived at the same time and in the same general area. Moreover, they could hardly ignore one another. As Lightfoot puts it, "Two names stand out prominently in the Churches of proconsular Asia during the age immediately succeeding the Apostles — Polycarp of Smyrna, and Papias of Hierapolis."¹² Finally, it should be stressed that Hierapolis "stood at the meeting-point of two great roads," and one of these roads went northwest to Smyrna.¹³

The tone of Papias' prologue suggests a reason for regarding Polycarp as the object of the polemic. Bartlet points out that the tone is mild compared with the attacks upon Docetism which we find in both Ignatius and Polycarp. He then suggests that when Papias wrote, Ignatius had not yet sharpened "the Asian Churches' sense of the gravity of Docetism."¹⁴

⁸ Munck, *art. cit.*, p. 230.

⁹ Rupert Annand, "Papias and the Four Gospels," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 9 (1956) 49.

¹⁰ Robert M. Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament* (New York, 1965) p. 72.

¹¹ *Adv. haer.* 5, 33, 4.

¹² J. B. Lightfoot, *Essays on the Work Entitled Supernatural Religion* (London, 1889) p. 142.

¹³ Bartlet, in *Amicitiae Corolla*, p. 17.

¹⁴ Bartlet, in *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* 2, 311.

This is an interesting idea, but it can be challenged. In view of the fact that we cannot be sure that Papias was attacking even a mild form of Docetism, we need not be convinced by the argument. The moderate nature of the polemic can be equally well explained (if not better explained) on the ground that Papias was attacking a fellow bishop with whom he doubtless had a great deal in common. Papias would not want to embarrass the churches of Asia Minor, and endanger the unity that existed, by a violent polemic. He would surely regard Polycarp as far less dangerous to authentic Christianity than the Docetists. Nevertheless, there were also significant differences between the two men, at least enough to make a gentle polemic possible.

Important dissimilarities between Papias and Polycarp have long been recognized. Most relevant for the purposes of this paper is Westcott's point that "in such a man [as Papias] any positive reference to the teaching of St. Paul was not to be expected." But "Polycarp had early rejoiced to recognize his [Paul's] claims."¹⁵ Modern scholars have also noted Polycarp's tendency to ignore the Old Testament,¹⁶ but Papias, on the contrary, "reflects on the fulfillment of Old Testament promises."¹⁷ Moreover, it seems clear that Polycarp had a collection of Paul's letters,¹⁸ and Harrison has even mentioned the possibility that Polycarp may have been involved in the formation of a primitive Christian canon.¹⁹ At any rate, Blackman writes (correctly in my opinion) that Polycarp "definitely" ranks Paul as Scripture.²⁰ In 12:1 of his epistle, Polycarp quotes Eph 4:26 and calls it Holy Scripture. Unfortunately, chapters 10-12 of Polycarp's letter are no longer preserved in Greek. Nevertheless, I remain unconvinced by the attempts to explain away what seems to be a rather clear statement.²¹ While it is true that the first half of Eph 4:26 is also found in Ps 4:5, there is no reason to think that Polycarp knew this fact. It is clear from his letter that he was well versed in the Pauline epistles but hardly in the Old Testament. Why, then, would he think a verse from Eph 4:26 came from the Old Testament rather than from Ephesians itself? Moreover, the second part of Eph 4:26 is not found in the Psalms

¹⁵ Brooke Foss Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* (6th ed.; Cambridge, Eng., 1889) p. 79.

¹⁶ Robert M. Grant, "Polycarp of Smyrna," *Anglican Theological Review* 28 (1946) 145; Schoedel, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁷ Schoedel, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

¹⁸ Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament*, pp. 102-3.

¹⁹ P. N. Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians* (Cambridge, Eng., 1936) pp. 3-7, 289.

²⁰ E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (London, 1948) p. 30.

²¹ Helmut Köster, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den apostolischen Vätern* (Berlin, 1957) p. 113; Schoedel, *op. cit.*, pp. 32, 34-35.

or in the Old Testament at all. Yet the entire verse is called Holy Scripture. Finally, I have argued on the basis of Polycarp's letter as a whole that we should expect him to regard the Pauline collection as Holy Scripture.²² If this is the case, then it seems to me that we have here the proper context, the life situation, in which to understand Eusebius, *HE* 3, 39, 4b, where Papias supposed that what is derived *ek tōn bibliōn* does not help him as much as what is derived from a living and abiding voice.

Obviously, *biblia* can mean simply "books," but it can also mean "sacred writings,"²³ and in terms of the context, "sacred writings" is, in my judgment, the more likely meaning. Certainly, questions ought to be raised, and have been raised, against the assumption that Papias is telling his readers (in a book!) that he always valued oral tradition more than written tradition. A. F. Walls shows how really difficult such an assumption is.²⁴ But if *biblia* does not mean books in general and refers to sacred writings, what sacred writings are involved? Clearly not the Old Testament, for it does not seem possible that this Jewish Christian Papias would want to put down the Old Testament even mildly.²⁵ Nor could *biblia* refer to any collection of Gospels which included Mark or Matthew. Bauer is surely right at this point.²⁶ As far as Papias was concerned, Mark "wrote accurately all that he remembered, although not in order." Mark does present dominical oracles (and this is high praise indeed), but he does not present them in orderly fashion. Matthew, too, "collected the oracles" (*HE* 3, 39, 15-16), and thus Papias would not consider attacking the content of either book. Finally, neither does it appear that a collection of Gnostic materials was the object of the polemic. If Papias had had a Gnostic collection in mind, this would have been grist for the mills of Irenaeus and Eusebius, and it seems most likely that they would have been eager to mention the fact. But they tell us nothing. On the other hand, they might be expected to be silent about a known rift between two great orthodox bishops over the canon. And they are silent. To what collection, then, does *biblia* refer? Perhaps the Pauline corpus. Papias himself, of course, does not admit that the Pauline collection is Holy Scripture, but he takes unfavorable notice of the fact that the writings of Paul are so designated by others, and especially by Polycarp and his circle.

²² Charles Merritt Nielsen, "Polycarp, Paul and the Scriptures," *Anglican Theological Review* 47 (1965) 199-216; "The Epistle to Diognetus: Its Date and Relationship to Marcion," *ibid.* 52 (1970) 77-91.

²³ Gottlob Schrenk, "Biblion," in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 1 (Grand Rapids, 1964) 617-18.

²⁴ A. F. Walls, "Papias and Oral Tradition," *Vigiliae christianae* 21 (1967) 137.

²⁵ Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament*, pp. 68-69.

²⁶ Bauer, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

The context of this passage from 3, 39, 4b also indicates that Papias may be irritated with the high (canonical?) status Polycarp accords the Pauline corpus. In 3b, for instance, Papias trains his guns on those who have much to say. Here one has only to note how large the Pauline corpus looms in our own New Testament to realize that Papias probably has Paul in mind. Moreover, in the time of Papias, the Pauline collection may have seemed even larger than it does to us. After all, there was as yet no collection of the four Gospels to provide competition.²⁷ Furthermore, as Annand asks, “. . . why should we believe that the earliest Christian writings (apart from Paul’s epistles) need have been anything more elaborate than single sheets or short treatises?”²⁸ At any rate, surely those who knew a Pauline collection could only conclude that Paul had much to say—too much to say, in the view of Papias!

In the same passage (3b) Papias indicates that there were many who delighted in those who have much to say. This would not be surprising in Asia Minor, where Paul’s influence was strong. Papias could easily feel almost overwhelmed by preachers who regarded Paul as authoritative, who therefore had (too) much to say and who were well received.

It is worthy of note that there may be an echo not of Papias’ complaint but of the answer to it in Origen’s *Expositions on the Gospel according to John* (HE 6, 25, 7–10).²⁹ Origen tells us that Paul really did not write much. Not only did he fail to write to all the churches that he taught; he only sent a few lines to those to which he wrote. Origen then goes on to make the far more obvious point that Peter did not write much either. And neither did John. In fact, John may not even have written a second and third epistle. Now it was clear to Origen that Paul wrote more than Peter and John combined. Moreover, Paul occupied an exceedingly large place in the list of New Testament books Origen regarded as universally accepted and authoritative.³⁰ It is surprising, then, for Origen to say that Paul really did not write much, unless Origen is trying to protect Paul from Papias’ complaint.

Finally, in Eusebius 3, 39, 3b it should be noted that Papias does not rejoice in those who mention *allogrias entolas*, alien commandments, commandments belonging to another. These are to be distinguished from the commandments “given by the Lord to faith.” But where are these alien commandments to be found? Surely Papias’ passionate desire for the sayings of the earthly Lord could hardly be satisfied by the Pauline corpus. Thus Paul’s teachings must have sounded to Papias like

²⁷ R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London, 1962) pp. 195 ff.

²⁸ Annand, *art. cit.*, p. 56.

²⁹ I am indebted to Robert M. Grant for suggesting the possible relevance of this passage.

³⁰ Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament*, pp. 170–73.

commandments of another. Whatever one's judgment of the *general* influence of the earthly Jesus on Paul's writings, "one must concede the relative sparsity of direct references to or citations of Jesus' teachings in the Pauline letters."³¹

To be more specific, what alien commands might Papias have had in mind in attacking Paul's letters? Perhaps he was thinking of Paul's views on virginity. It is worthy of note that in 1 Cor 7:25 Paul writes that he has no commandment (*epitagēn*) of the Lord concerning virgins. Could not this, then, be seen as an "alien command"? Paul's statement in 1 Cor 7:1 that it is good for a man not to touch a woman should be contrasted with Gn 2:18 and the ideas of the ancient synagogue, as C. K. Barrett points out.³² Moreover, there were Jewish Christians (such as Papias?) who rejected virginity, as in the Pseudo-Clementines. These documents esteem marriage greatly and really involve an attack on virginity (*Hom.* 3, 68). There is also an emphasis upon the freedom of the will in the Pseudo-Clementines (*Rec.* 5, 6; *Hom.* 11, 8). Thus Paul's views on election and predestination could well seem alien to such Jewish Christians.³³

There is, of course, nothing very surprising in the suggestion that Jewish Christians might reject Paul's letters. The Ebionites did exactly that (*HE* 3, 27, 4; Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1, 26, 2), and so did the founder of the Helkesaites (*HE* 6, 38). Eusebius also tells us that the Severians rejected the Pauline epistles, too (4, 29, 5). But there are cogent reasons for thinking that Eusebius has mixed up the Severians with what Irenaeus says about the Ebionites.³⁴ If this is so, then the opponents of Paul are all related to Jewish Christianity, and the possibility that the Jewish Christian Papias also attacked Paul and his followers should not astonish anyone.

This leads us to a final point about Paul's followers. We have already seen that Polycarp may have worried Papias by giving Paul's letters canonical status. Papias may also have been upset by the use of Paul, and notably of 1 Corinthians, as a weapon in ecclesiastical power politics. Bauer calls our attention to the enormous importance of 1 Corinthians in Clement of Rome's conflict with Corinth. Indeed, beginning with

³¹ Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville, 1968) p. 55.

³² C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York, 1968) pp. 154-55.

³³ I am grateful to Dean Cyril C. Richardson of Union Theological Seminary, N.Y., for suggesting the alien commands Papias might have had in mind.

³⁴ Robert M. Grant has suggested such a possibility. Note the discussion by George Salmon, "Severus and Severians," in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, ed. William Smith and Henry Wace (London, 1887) 4, 632-33; H. J. Lawlor and J. E. L. Oulton, in their edition of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* 2 (London, 1954) 151.

Clement of Rome, the purpose of 1 Corinthians was seen to be, in the words of the later Muratorian Canon, "schismae haereses interdicens."³⁵ In turn, we should also note the great influence of *1 Clement* itself. This can be seen, for example, in Polycarp's letter and in the fact that Dionysius had it read at Corinth (*HE* 4, 23, 11).

It is interesting that, in terms of Paul's letters, Ignatius of Antioch "was most familiar with I Corinthians."³⁶ Without question, this letter is "supremely authoritative" for him.³⁷ This high estimation and use of 1 Corinthians by both Clement and Ignatius could, of course, be a factor in Polycarp's view that the Pauline corpus is Scripture; it could also be another factor in Papias' polemic. Not only does Polycarp himself make great and authoritative use of the Pauline letters in his own epistle; he also clearly indicates his admiration for Ignatius (9, 1; 13, 1-2) and his knowledge of Clement of Rome.³⁸ Thus Polycarp had connections with powerful churches which used Paul as an ally in their ecclesiastical conflicts. Since these connections appear so clearly in Polycarp's letter, perhaps the point was not lost upon Papias. Papias, then, may not only have been concerned about Polycarp's view that the Pauline corpus was Scripture; he may also have been anxious about Polycarp's relations with Rome and Antioch and the use of Paul by these churches in post-Pauline power developments.

In conclusion, while I quite agree with Walls that for Papias apostolicity is the test of authenticity³⁹ (*HE* 3, 39, 2), Papias does not seem to include Paul in his list of "sacred apostles." Paul was for Papias, as he was for others,⁴⁰ simply not an apostle in the high sense of the word, but was inferior to the Twelve. Perhaps it was difficult for Papias to tolerate the thought that Polycarp would classify as Sacred Scripture the writings of a man who was not really a sacred apostle, especially when these writings were being used as dangerous weapons in ecclesiastical power politics. Are there not sufficient reasons here to account for Papias' polemic?

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³⁵ Bauer, *op. cit.*, p. 220. Grant has called my attention to the question of ecclesiastical power politics.

³⁶ Cyril C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (Philadelphia, 1953) p. 78.

³⁷ Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament*, p. 94; Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers* 1, 57; Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 234-35.

³⁸ Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers* 1, 65-67.

³⁹ Walls, *art. cit.*, p. 139.

⁴⁰ John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul* (Nashville, 1950) pp. 117-9; Burton Scott Easton, *Early Christianity: The Purpose of Acts and Other Papers*, ed. Frederick C. Grant (Greenwich, Conn., 1954) p. 60; Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Jewish Christianity*, tr. Douglas R. A. Hare (Philadelphia, 1969) pp. 47 ff.