

# The Gospel of Matthew, John the elder and the Papias tradition: A response to R H Gundry

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## Abstract

*As far as the origin of the Gospel of Matthew is concerned, most modern scholars tend to discount the testimony of Papias. The major exception in this regard is R H Gundry, who argues that the tradition transmitted by Papias was delivered to him by John the disciple of Jesus. For Gundry the apostolic source of this tradition thereby guarantees its reliability, in which case we can be confident that Matthew, the disciple of Jesus, was the author of the Gospel that bears his name. Gundry's arguments are, however, not altogether convincing. It will be shown that not only is his reading of the Papias tradition questionable, but also that he overstates the reliability of Papias' source.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The clear testimony of the ancient Christian church was that the disciple Matthew wrote the Gospel of Matthew. The earliest unambiguous statement to this effect was made by Irenaeus around the year 180, who said that Matthew composed a Gospel (εὐαγγέλιον) for the Hebrews (Ἑβραίοις) in their own dialect (τῆ ἰδίᾳ αὐτῶν διαλέκτῳ) while Peter and Paul were preaching in Rome (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1; cf too Eusebius, *Church History*, 5.8.2). It is generally agreed that Irenaeus' source for this information was Papias, the Bishop of Hierapolis, who wrote about the origins of the Gospels of Mark and Matthew in

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the early part of the second century.<sup>2</sup> After the witness of Irenaeus, the belief that the disciple Matthew had written the Gospel that bears his name went unchallenged in Christian circles for many centuries. It was not until the rise of Biblical criticism in the eighteenth century, when longheld church assumptions and traditions were questioned and tested according to the evidence, that the tide began to turn away from the view that the disciple Matthew wrote the first book of the Christian canon. This trend continued in the following centuries, and the dominant view in modern Matthean scholarship is that the author of this Gospel was not the disciple of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> These scholars maintain that the internal evidence of the Gospel itself points against apostolic authorship, while the external evidence of the Church Fathers is far from trustworthy.

There is, however, one vocal critic of this scholarly consensus. Over many years and in a number of publications, R H Gundry has maintained that we should not dismiss so easily the witness of the Church Fathers in general and the testimony of Papias in particular. In his major commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Gundry argued for the reliability of Papias' claim that Mark was indeed the interpreter of Peter who recorded that disciple's memoirs (Gundry 1993:1026-1045). Similarly, in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, he defended the Papias tradition (or his understanding of it) that the disciple Matthew was the author of this text (Gundry 1994:609-622). More recently, Gundry has restated his views in a chapter that appears in a major collection of his essays (Gundry 2005:49-73).<sup>4</sup>

In this study I wish to confine the discussion to Gundry's defence of the Papias testimony concerning the origin of the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>5</sup> Gundry himself suggests that there are three basic steps in his argument (Gundry 2005:50). The first of these is to establish the early date of Papias' writings, which Gundry assigns to around the beginning of the second century. The second is to determine the precise meaning of Papias' words. Here Gundry maintains that Papias did indeed refer to the canonical Gospel of Matthew and not to another early Christian document. His third step is to verify the reliability

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<sup>2</sup> One exception to this rule is the judgement of Albright & Mann (1971:clxxix) that Irenaeus had access to information independent of Papias.

<sup>3</sup> See the chart of the opinions on the authorship of Matthew's Gospel in Davies & Allison (1988:10-11). Of the fifty or so scholars listed, only four in the twentieth century supported the view that the disciple Matthew was the author of the Gospel.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, I will make reference to this article in my discussion of Gundry's work on the grounds that it is his most recent statement.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that some of Gundry's arguments apply equally to his analysis of Papias and the Gospel of Mark, so the following discussion has a bearing on that topic as well. But the question of Marcan authorship also raises separate issues, and these will not be considered here.

of this tradition. Gundry makes a case that Papias' direct source, John the elder, was none other than John the disciple of Jesus. This apostolic witness confirms the trustworthiness of the tradition that Papias transmitted. The following discussion will examine the arguments of Gundry in these three steps.

The first of these, the very early date of Papias' composition, is the least controversial. It will be maintained that Gundry's evidence in favour of this proposition is not conclusive, but that this finding does not significantly affect his overall case. Much more problematic are his arguments in the second and third steps. Neither his interpretation of the meaning of the Papian tradition, nor his defence of the reliability of the Bishop's source stands up to close scrutiny. The inevitable conclusion that arises from this examination of the Papian tradition and the Gospel of Matthew is that Gundry fails in his attempt to defend its trustworthiness and accuracy. Consequently, the modern scholarly consensus that the disciple of Jesus did not compose the Gospel of Matthew remains intact and unaffected after Gundry's challenge.

Before we examine Gundry's arguments in detail, it is necessary first to set out clearly what Papias attests. The Bishop recorded his information about Matthew and Mark in a five-volume work entitled *An Interpretation of the Oracles of the Lord*. This multi-volume document unfortunately has not survived. Fragments of the text, however, have been preserved in the history of the early Church written by Eusebius in the early fourth century. In *Church History* 3.39.15-16, Eusebius quotes the words of Papias in relation to Mark and Matthew. With regard to the latter the original Greek text reads, Ματθαῖος μὲν οὖν Ἐβραΐδι διαλέκτῳ τὰ λόγια συνετάξατο ἠρμήνευσεν δ' αὐτὰ ὡς ἦν δυνατὸς ἕκαστος. This short Greek passage bristles with difficulties and is open to a number of translations and interpretations, but it is usually translated into English in the following way(s); "Matthew then compiled (or put in order) the oracles (or sayings) in the Hebrew (or Aramaic) language, and each person translated them as each was able." It is the reliability of this tradition that Gundry seeks to establish. We may now assess his three steps and their constitutive arguments.

## 2. THE DATE OF PAPIAS' WRITINGS

Gundry begins his discussion by noting that it was common practice in the past to put the date of Papias' text around the year 130, that is during the reign of Hadrian. He then declares that more recent studies have opted for an earlier date in the first decade of the second century (see Yarbrough 1982:181-191; Körtner 1983:225-226). Gundry agrees with the revised dating on a number of grounds (Gundry 2005:50-51). First and most importantly is

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the evidence of Eusebius. The Bishop of Caesarea places Papias during the time of Polycarp and Ignatius of Antioch (*Church History* 3.36.1-2), and he discusses him immediately after Clement of Rome (*Church History* 3.39.1) but prior to the persecution by Trajan (*Church History* 4.2). Furthermore, in his *Chronicon*, Eusebius puts a number of figures in chronological order – the apostle John, Papias, Polycarp and Ignatius. In addition to this evidence, Gundry cites other factors that point to an early date – Papias' failure to mention any Gnostic threat, his acquaintance with first century figures of note (e.g. the daughters of Philip the apostle) and his comparatively undeveloped terminology. Gundry then examines the alternative dating of Papias' work by Philip of Side (c 430 CE), who suggested a time near the end of Hadrian's reign (c 130 CE). He dismisses this tradition on the grounds that Philip wrote more than a century later than Eusebius, and was a notoriously unreliable historian who garbled much of the information he received from Eusebius (Gundry 2005:51-52).

In response the point can be made that Gundry's confidence in Eusebius may be misplaced, since both of his charges against Philip can be made of Eusebius as well. While Gundry is right to view Eusebius as much earlier than Philip of Side, it should not be forgotten that Eusebius lived some two hundred years after the time of Papias. Moreover, the great church historian himself was not beyond error. He includes clearly fictitious material in his work. Perhaps the most famous or infamous example of this is his narration of the exchange of letters between Jesus and King Abgar of Edessa (*Church History* 1:13.1-9) (Brock 1992:212-234). We may add to this that Eusebius was hardly a careful transmitter of the source material he possessed. He was quite prepared to rewrite his sources extensively if it suited his theological or ecclesiological purposes (Barnes 1981:104-141; Franke 1995:72). In the light of these considerations, the veracity of Eusebius' claim that Papias was a contemporary of Clement, Polycarp and Ignatius cannot be guaranteed. It has been suggested that Eusebius may not have been sure where to place Papias chronologically. His placement of Papias alongside Clement and the others may therefore be no more than a guess (Sellew 1992:124). One may, however, go even further than this. Eusebius may well have had an ulterior motive in dating Papias so early. Since he believed that Papias was a man of small intelligence on account of his millenarian beliefs (*Church History* 3.39.8-14), he could easily have assigned him to a very early date in order to convey the impression that the information he transmitted was accurate.

I do not wish to labour this point. The precise date of Papias' writing, be it in the early second century or some two or three decades later, is not of major importance. Even if Papias composed his work during the time of

Hadrian, as Philip attests, it is quite possible that he initially learnt this information, as Gundry and Eusebius suggest, very early in the second century. Gundry's case is not threatened or weakened at all by the later date. We may therefore leave the issue of dating and proceed to the more controversial elements of Gundry's discussion.

### 3. THE MEANING OF THE WORDS OF PAPIAS

An issue that arises immediately from the words of Papias is whether or not he was referring to the canonical Gospel of Matthew or to another document composed by the disciple Matthew. There are two points of interest in this regard. First, unlike Irenaeus, who used the word "Gospel" (εὐαγγελίον), Papias mentioned the oracles or the sayings (τὰ λόγια) that Matthew compiled. This raises the possibility that Papias was not alluding to the *Gospel of Matthew* at all but was in fact referring to a different text. If that was the case, then Irenaeus mistakenly assumed that Papias was alluding to the Gospel, and the later church simply and uncritically followed his lead.

In favour of the possibility that Papias had another text in mind is the fact that no contemporary Christian document describes any of the Gospels as τὰ λόγια. Rather, when the expression is used in these texts, it refers either to the words of God (Heb 5:12; 1 Pt 4:11; 1 Clement 13:4; 19:1; 53:1; 2 Clement 13:3; cf 1 Clement 62:3) or to prophetic oracles from the Old Testament (Ac 7:38; Rm 3:2) (Manson 1949:17-18). The closest parallel to the purported Papias usage is found in the epistle of Polycarp (7:1) where τὰ λόγια is used in relation to Jesus. This passage mentions the sayings of the Lord (τὰ λόγια τοῦ κυρίου), but there is no suggestion that any of the Gospels is intended. Therefore, any contention that Papias did use τὰ λόγια as a synonym for εὐαγγελίον must concede that his usage was unique in early Christian literature (France 1989:58).

The second issue concerns the testimony that Matthew compiled his Gospel in the Hebrew or Aramaic language, which was then later translated by others as best they could. This too seems not to apply to the canonical Gospel. Matthew shows no signs of having been translated from a Semitic original. On the contrary, it is widely accepted that the evangelist used the Greek Gospel of Mark and a Greek recension of Q as the basis for his own account of Jesus' life and teaching (France 1989:62-64; Nolland 2005:3). R T France offers the explanation that the Patristic tradition confused the Greek Gospel of Matthew with certain Semitic Gospels that were also associated with Matthew the disciple; in this way it was assumed that Greek Matthew was a translation from a Semitic original (France 1989:64-66). The problem with

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this explanation is whether such confusion could have arisen as early as the time of Papias in the first decade of the second century.

Other scholars approach the problem differently. W D Davies and D C Allison, for example, contend that it is not always easy to determine whether an ancient text is a translation or not. These commentators point out that some of the great scholars of the church – Eusebius, Origen, Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus – all accepted that Greek Matthew was a translation of a Semitic original. Consequently, they ask whether it is too difficult to believe that Matthew was originally an Aramaic document which was translated into Greek and then expanded by the addition of Greek Mark and other traditions (Davies & Allison 1988:12).

In response to this argument, it can be conceded at once that it is often very difficult to determine whether a given text is the result of a translation. Some translators are very free in rendering the original text into the new language so that little clue remains of the original, while others are less free and tend to retain certain idioms and grammatical constructions from the original language. The Jewish literature of this period that was translated from Hebrew or Aramaic into Greek provides evidence of both types of translation. But none of this applies to the canonical Gospel of Matthew. In this particular case, as noted above, we possess one of the evangelist's Greek sources, the Gospel of Mark, and in the case of the Q material, we suspect a second. It may well be true that some parts of the Gospel have an Aramaic substratum, which might well have their origin with the disciple Matthew, but this concession in no way confirms the Papias tradition. A very clear distinction still would need to be made between the follower of Jesus who collected the Aramaic material and the evangelist who combined this source with the Greek texts of Mark and Q. Finally, the witness of the Church Fathers should not be pushed too far. The history of the church is replete with examples of intelligent and educated people holding false and in some cases ridiculous beliefs simply because they inherited them from their tradition and accepted them without question (Brown 1997:210).

How does Gundry respond to each of these two points? With regard to τὰ λόγια, Gundry does not really address the relevant issue. There is no acknowledgement at all of the problem that Papias used τὰ λόγια in a unique way. But while Gundry is silent on this point, other scholars have realised the difficulty and have tried to address it. R T France suggests that, no matter how idiosyncratic it may have been, Papias did indeed refer to Matthew's Gospel with the term τὰ λόγια. In order to substantiate his point, France examines Papias' earlier reference to Mark. The Bishop relates that Mark learnt from Peter "the things either said or done by the Lord", though he did not write them in the proper order. This failing of Mark is explained soon after when

Papias recounts that Peter himself did not intend to make “an ordered collection of the oracles of the Lord” (τῶν κυριακῶν...λογίων). For France the first reference, with its emphasis on both Jesus’ teachings and deeds, must refer to the Gospel of Mark, and this expression is used interchangeably with “the oracles of the Lord” (France 1989:58). France also makes the point that the work of Papias, entitled λογίων κυριακῶν ἐξήγησις, seems to have included narrative material, and this too confirms that Papias used τὰ λόγια in a broader sense than merely sayings or oracles (France 1989:59-60).

France’s response is not persuasive. With respect to his first point, while it is true that most scholars accept that τῶν κυριακῶν...λογίων is a reference to the Gospel of Mark, there is no necessity to see it as such. Papias may well have been referring to two related but different things. He began with Mark writing what Peter conveyed about the teachings and actions of Jesus, and then narrowed the discussion when referring directly to Peter to make the point that he failed to give a proper order to the oracles or sayings of Jesus. There is then no equation of τῶν κυριακῶν...λογίων with “the things either said or done by the Lord”. The oracles are certainly found in the Gospel but they are not to be identified with it (Körtner 1983:154-156).

Nor does France’s appeal to the title of Papias’ work help his case. It actually underscores the difficulties associated with Papias’ usage of τὰ λόγια. If it is true that Papias’ preferred (and unique) expression for the Gospels was τὰ λόγια, then what are we to make of the title of his own composition? If he was consistent in his usage, then he must have considered his work to be an interpretation or exposition of the Gospels. More specifically, if τῶν κυριακῶν...λογίων is a reference to the Gospel of Mark, then we should expect that λογίων κυριακῶν ἐξήγησις was some sort of commentary on this text. Yet there is no evidence that that was the case (Körtner 1983:163). From what we know of Papias’ work from Eusebius and other sources, it contained sayings of Jesus and narratives about him not found in the canonical Gospels (France 1989:59-60). On the basis of this, we have to assume that λογίων κυριακῶν in his own title was not a reference to one or more written Gospel texts. This creates serious and perhaps overwhelming difficulties for France’s thesis. He is forced to the position that Papias created the neologism τὰ λόγια (and its variations) to refer specifically to the Gospels, but then when producing a title for his own work he used the same expression in an entirely different way. This proposition is not impossible, but it is inherently unlikely. Moreover, once it is conceded that Papias could use τὰ λόγια in a variety of ways, then there is no reason to assume that his use of the term in relation to the Gospel of Mark, if such it is, can be automatically applied to the Matthean reference that follows (Hagner 1993:xlv).

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Consequently, France's analysis of the meaning of τὰ λόγια for Papias offers no assistance whatsoever to Gundry.

With regard to the second problem identified above, that Matthew's Gospel is not a translation from a Semitic original, Gundry does on this occasion take up the challenge. His response is that the alleged difficulty does not exist. According to Gundry, Papias was not referring to a Semitic version of Matthew that was then later translated into Greek. On the contrary, the mention of the Hebrew (or Aramaic) dialect need not be taken in a linguistic sense. The Greek word διάλεκτος can also apply to matters of style, in which case Papias was passing on a tradition that Matthew wrote his Gospel in a Hebrew style; in short, he provided a very Jewish portrait of Jesus (Gundry 2005:67-68; Kürzinger 1960:19-38; Kürzinger 1964:108-115). In the light of this, it is necessary to modify the statement that others translated the Gospel as best they could. For Gundry ἑρμενεύω must be rendered here not as "translate" but as "interpret" or "exposit". Both the verb and its nominal cognate convey this sense elsewhere in the Papias citation. When Mark, for example, is described as the ἑρμενευτής of Peter, there is no suggestion that he was the disciple's translator; rather he is depicted as his expositor. Similarly, in the case of Matthew, the sense is that each person expounded the Gospel as each was able or to the best of their abilities (Gundry 2005:67).

While Gundry's understanding of Papias' language here falls within the category of possibility, it is not very plausible. His discussion of διάλεκτος and ἑρμενεύω in isolation from one another tends to obscure their more natural meaning when they are found together. Thus the association of Ἑβραϊδί διαλέκτω with ἑρμενεύω suggests translation of a Semitic original into Greek (France 1989:57; Hagner 1993:xliv). This remains true despite Papias giving the nominal cognate ἑρμενευτής a slightly different nuance elsewhere in the passage. Such a rendering also makes best sense of the statement that different Christians handled this text "as each was able". Papias was making the point that those who translated this Semitic document into Greek did so to the best of their bilingual abilities. Gundry's alternative interpretation, that these people expounded or interpreted the Gospel as best as they could, is far less satisfactory. Why would the evangelist's Jewish portrayal of Jesus present such difficulties that its later expositors could only explain it "as each was able?" (Hagner 1993:xliv). The Gospel of Matthew was the most favoured Gospel in the ancient church, and nobody considered it to be an especially difficult text.

There are good grounds, therefore, to deny Gundry his case concerning the meaning of the Papias tradition. That Papias referred to the Gospel of Matthew as τὰ λόγια is most unlikely, and the suggestion that the Bishop emphasised Matthew's Semitic style and not his original Semitic language does

not carry conviction. Many scholars, however, are not prepared to dismiss the witness of Papias altogether, and some have suggested that he inherited a tradition that the disciple Matthew compiled certain materials that were later incorporated into the Gospel. An older view suggested that τὰ λόγια referred to the words of the Old Testament, in which case Papias' testimony is that Matthew collected the scriptural quotations that are found in the Gospel. This view has not found favour in modern scholarship (Hill 1972:23). An alternative hypothesis, and one which enjoys more support today, is that the disciple collected the Aramaic sayings of Jesus in the (hypothetical) Q source, which was later translated into Greek with different recensions appearing in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (Manson 1949:18-20; Hill 1972:24-27; Davies & Allison 1988:17; Hagner 1993:xliv-xlvi; Nolland 2005:3; cf Körtner 1983:203-206). While such a claim is not capable of proof (Brown 1997:210), it is at least entirely consistent with the wording of Papias' statement, which refers to an original Semitic sayings source and to different translations of it.<sup>6</sup> It is, in any event, a much more probable explanation of the Papias tradition than the alternative offered by Gundry.

The second step in Gundry's overall case therefore suffers from serious weaknesses. The source reproduced by Papias was in likelihood not referring to the canonical Gospel of Matthew at all but to another Christian text compiled in Aramaic by the disciple of Jesus. But even if we were to give Gundry the benefit of the doubt and accept his claim that Papias did advert to the Greek Gospel of Matthew and its Jewish portrait of Jesus, his thesis still runs into difficulties at the third step. We may now turn to his arguments with regard to the reliability of the Papias tradition.

#### 4. THE IDENTITY AND RELIABILITY OF PAPIAS' SOURCE

The tradition in *Church History* 3.39.15-16 states that the information about Mark and Matthew was transmitted by a certain elder named John. This John is discussed a little earlier on when Papias (cited by Eusebius) mentions his oral sources (*Church History* 3.39.3-4). Here Papias refers to what he carefully learnt from the elders, though he points out that he was given this information only second hand. The text in question can be rendered as follows: "And whenever anyone came who had been a follower of the elders, I inquired into the words of the elders, what Andrew or Peter had said, or what Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other one of the Lord's

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<sup>6</sup> For this reason the severe criticism of Kümmel (1975:120) that this is a baseless hypothesis is somewhat of an overstatement. See too Schweizer (1978:15) who also disputes any connection between the disciple Matthew and the Q tradition. For Gundry's critique of this hypothesis, see Gundry (2005:65).

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disciples (had said), and what things Aristion and the elder John, the Lord's disciples, are saying." This is a notoriously difficult passage to interpret, which is open to a number of possible readings. The ambiguity extends to John the elder, whose identity is not immediately clear.

The major issue is whether Papias was referring to two distinct groups, the elders and the disciples of the Lord, or only to a single group which he describes with these two names. If there is only the one group in view and the elders are the disciples, then "the words of the elders" must equate to "what Andrew or Peter (and the other disciples) had said". By inquiring into the words of the elders, Papias was in fact asking about the teachings of the disciples. This view finds some support in the later reference to John the elder and Aristion, who are both seemingly described by Papias as disciples of the Lord. If this understanding of the text is correct, then John the elder must be identified with John the disciple who is mentioned earlier alongside the other disciples. Alternatively, the passage can be read in the sense that there are two distinct groups, the original disciples of Jesus and the elders who followed them. When Papias enquired into the words of the elders, he was asking what they had learnt from the disciples. If this is the correct interpretation of Papias' words, then John the elder and Aristion must be considered, despite the implications of the text, not as disciples themselves but as their followers. On this view, Papias makes reference to two different people named John, one the disciple and the other the elder.

Many scholars argue that Papias had in mind two distinct groups. They come to this conclusion on the grounds that if the elders and the disciples were one and the same, then Papias would simply have used a single term to describe them (Bauckham 2003:31-33). With regard to the status of Aristion and John the elder, the text as given by Eusebius certainly implies that these figures were disciples but there are grounds for doubting that this was the intended meaning of Papias. The use of the present tense (λέγουσιν) suggests that John and Aristion were alive when Papias wrote. Even on Gundry's early date for the composition of Papias' work, is it likely that two of Jesus' disciples would have still been living in the early second century (Körtner 1983:125-126)? And while we know that there was a disciple named John, is it true that Aristion was a disciple of Jesus? There is no mention in any New Testament text of a disciple with that name. Further, why does Papias refer to John as an elder but not describe Aristion in the same way? If the disciples were also elders, we should expect that Aristion would be given the latter title as well. Finally, why is the same John mentioned twice in this short text? Surely it is redundant to mention the things that John had said in the past and the things that John is currently saying. There are good reasons,

therefore, to perceive two distinct groups in this Papiian passage, the disciples of Jesus and the elders who transmitted their words. Therefore, the source of Papias' information about Matthew and Mark, John the elder, is not to be identified with the disciple of Jesus of the same name.

It is noteworthy that Eusebius himself accepted that there were two distinct groups and two Johns. In support of his distinction between these two figures, Eusebius recounted a story of there being two Johns in Asia. One was the apostle who wrote the Gospel that bears his name, while the other was the elder who composed the Book of Revelation (*Church History* 3.39.5-10).

Gundry strongly disputes this understanding of the Papiian text. He argues that the most natural reading of Papias' words is that the elders were none other than the disciples of Jesus; the two terms are used interchangeably (Gundry 2005:52-55). In dismissing the witness of Eusebius, Gundry maintains that the Bishop took an earlier vague story from Dionysius of Alexandria about two tombs of John in Ephesus, and attached it to the two Johns he identified in the Papiian tradition. Eusebius did this for his own apologetic purposes. He wished to separate the author of the Gospel that he admired so much from the unapostolic author of Revelation, whose crass millenarianism he so deplored (*Church History* 3.39.11-13) (Gundry 2005:57-58). As to why Papias describes the one group as both elders and disciples, Gundry explains that using "elders" in addition to "the Lord's disciples" "adds the authority of age to that of original discipleship" (Gundry 2005:53 n 9). On the issue of Aristion being described as a disciple but not as an elder, Gundry suggests that Aristion was indeed an original disciple of Jesus but he was not an elder because he was not an apostle; for Gundry the elders were also apostles (Gundry 2005:54-55). Gundry concludes that, since there is only a single group mentioned by Papias, John the elder who transmitted the information about Mark and Matthew must be identified with John the disciple of Jesus (Gundry 2005:55-57).

Gundry's counterarguments are not altogether cogent. Certainly Eusebius had an axe to grind with regard to the Book of Revelation, but this does not necessarily mean that he has read two Johns into the Papiian passage. He may simply have taken what was already there in Papias and used it in the service of his apologetics. But the real problem for Gundry's view is whether Papias would have used "elders" and "disciples" interchangeably. The Acts of the Apostles, written at roughly the same time as Papias' work (on Gundry's chronology), distinguishes between the disciples (or apostles) and the "elders" (cf 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4). In 1 Peter 5:1, another contemporaneous text, the term "elder" is used of the purported author (i.e. Peter), but also of some in the churches to which he writes; there

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is again no simple identification of the disciples (or apostles) with the elders. The same distinction exists in other New Testament texts and in later Christian literature (Körtner 1983:116-121). U H J Körtner concludes from this evidence that Papias simply could not have identified the two groups (Körtner 1983:121). While that conclusion perhaps exceeds the evidence, it does emphasise the point that Gundry's analysis presumes again that Papias used established Christian terminology in a distinctive and even unique fashion. This is an issue that needs to be acknowledged and addressed by Gundry.

We might add a further difficulty. Gundry does not adequately engage the problems with regard to Aristion on his reading of this text. He simply assumes that this figure was a disciple of Jesus, although he is unattested elsewhere, and he is content to accept without question that this disciple, like John, lived to an extraordinary age. Another problem is apparent in Gundry's explanation as to why Aristion is not described as an elder. Gundry makes a distinction between the apostles who were also called elders and the disciples who were not, but no such distinction appears in the Papias tradition itself. Further, Gundry argues that the "disciples of the Lord" were given the title "elders", because the term "adds the authority of age to that of original discipleship". But surely Aristion, who must have been of advanced years by the beginning of the second century, would have deserved this epithet just as much as John and even more than the others!

While acknowledging that the text of Papias here is problematic and ambiguous, the view that it refers to two distinct groups and therefore two Johns, the disciple and the elder, poses fewer problems than the alternative view of Gundry. However, I do not wish to dwell on this point. It is practical to move on to a further important subject. In the text quoted above, Papias is adamant that he heard the words of the elder about Mark and Matthew not from John himself, but from someone else who had heard him speak. This admission puts another link in the chain of transmission; the elder or disciple passed on the information to someone who then conveyed it to Papias in Hierapolis.

While Gundry initially seems to acknowledge this point (Gundry 2005:52, 54), he nonetheless constructs a complex argument that Papias may in fact have spoken directly with John. In support of this possibility, he first cites the tradition of Irenaeus which mentions that Papias was in fact a hearer of John (*Against Heresies* 5.33.4). Gundry then turns to the witness of Eusebius. He notes that Eusebius discredits this claim of Irenaeus by stating that Papias, in the preface to his work, concedes that he never knew the apostles (*Church History* 3.39.1-2). But, as Gundry highlights, Eusebius does admit that Papias listened to the elder John (and Aristion), even though the

Papian tradition he quoted stipulated that a mediator was involved (*Church History* 3.39.10). Gundry here sees an opportunity to harmonise these two sources. Their dual testimony that Papias knew his informant suggests to him “that Eusebius found in parts of Papias’ ‘Exposition of the Lord’s Oracles’ no longer available to us indications that Papias had heard John” (Gundry 2005:57). In this way Gundry completely removes the “middle man” between Papias and John the elder (or the disciple). He concludes that this “should only strengthen the case for taking his quotation of the elder’s statements about Mark and Matthew very seriously” (Gundry 2005:57).

It is clear, however, that Gundry has made a very large leap that is simply not warranted by the evidence. First, the statements from Irenaeus and Eusebius cannot be harmonised in the manner suggested by Gundry because they are referring to completely different things. The former attests that Papias knew John the disciple, while the latter specifies that he heard John the elder who is not to be identified with the disciple. Secondly, Gundry can only harmonise these traditions by ignoring the statement of Eusebius that Papias said in his preface that he was not a hearer of the apostles. If Papias did in fact write this, then it completely contradicts the testimony of Irenaeus and cannot be used to support it. Thirdly, Gundry accepts without question the claim by Eusebius that Papias had listened to John the elder (not the disciple!), even though it conflicts with the explicit testimony of Papias himself that a mediator was involved. A closer look at the context of Eusebius’ words does not indicate that he learnt this information from other sections of Papias’ writings; on the contrary it appears to be nothing more than a guess on his part. Immediately after making the claim that Papias knew John and Aristion, Eusebius goes on to say, “Certainly he often mentions them by name, and reproduces their teachings in his writings.” This comment suggests that Eusebius made an assumption that Papias knew the elder because of his familiarity with his teachings; it does not in any way imply that Eusebius learnt this from the writings of Papias. Finally, the Irenaeian statement that Papias had listened to the disciple John, upon which Gundry bases so much, may be nothing more than a careless reading of Papias’ words or even a wishful interpretation of them.

Gundry’s attempt to make a direct connection between John the elder and Papias cannot be given any credibility. To build his case, he has to place more credence in the rather dubious testimonies of Irenaeus and Eusebius, both of which state that Papias knew his source directly, than in the explicit witness of Papias himself who concedes that he learnt of the elder’s words through an intermediary. As Gundry well knows, the presence of this mediator has significant repercussions for the reliability of the tradition Papias received.

### ***The Gospel of Matthew, John the elder and the Papias tradition***

An extra link in the chain of transmission creates a greater possibility of error. Who was Papias' informant? How well did this person know the elders, particularly the elder John? How can we be sure that what this informant said was an entirely accurate representation of John's words?

But let us for sake of argument accept Gundry's contentious points here. Let us proceed on the assumption that Papias received his information directly from the source and not through a mediator, and that this source was John the disciple rather than another John. What conclusions can be reasonably drawn from this? In the final sentence of his study, Gundry draws the following conclusion; "All in all, then, the pre-Papian tradition looks very early and apostolically Johannine. You cannot get very much older and better than that" (Gundry 2005:73). Essentially what Gundry is saying is that the reliability of the Papian tradition is guaranteed by the identity of the source. In other words, we can trust absolutely the tradition concerning the authors of Mark and Matthew because the source of this information was the disciple John. Here there is no argument and no further discussion; the apostolic witness of John reigns supreme and cannot be questioned.

To be fair to Gundry, he does prepare the reader to some degree for this conclusion. He states at one point that the Semitisms in the Papian tradition favour "that the tradition of the Elder John had a very early *and therefore likely reliable* origin" (Gundry 2005:51; emphasis added). A little later he contends that the early date of Papias' writing and the identity of his source as the disciple John suggest that "the tradition that Mark wrote the Gospel that bears his name looks as early and as authoritative as one could wish" (Gundry 2005:60). With regard to the confusion that surrounds Papias' reference to Matthew, Gundry replies, "Possibilities of confusion decrease the closer we approach the time of writing. It is especially hard to think that one of the twelve apostles, John himself, fell into such an error" (Gundry 2005:66). These statements provide a good deal of insight into Gundry's manner of reasoning. An early tradition is likely to be authoritative and reliable. But more than this, if the early tradition is apostolic then we cannot get older and better than that. We can trust it with absolute confidence because it is especially hard to believe that one of the apostles made an error. Yet it is precisely here that Gundry's argument needs to be questioned.

On what grounds can we assume that anything passed on by the disciple John must have been completely accurate? To view John as necessarily reliable on this or any other issue, or as one who would not fall into error, is to confer some sort of infallibility on the disciple which is neither logical nor deserved. The difficulty for Gundry is that John was not a participant in the events he transmits, the writing of the Gospels of Mark and Matthew. This

means that he must have received this information from another party. Neither Eusebius nor Papias was interested in John's source, but it stands to reason that the modern scholar should be. Was John informed about these Gospels directly by the primary participants – Peter, Mark or Matthew? If so, how did they convey this information? Did they meet with John in person? Did they send a messenger with an oral communication? Did they send a messenger with a letter? And when did they communicate with him? Was it soon after they wrote their Gospels or at a much later date? Alternatively, did John hear of these Gospels and their authors not from the primary witnesses themselves but from others? If that was the case, how did these people come by this information? Were they in direct communication with the evangelists, or did they hear it through “the Christian grapevine”? When did they inform John about these Gospels? If it was near the time of Papias, then we are dealing with a long process of oral transmission. How accurate was this tradition by the time it reached John? Would John, having heard this tradition, have checked its accuracy?

These questions of course cannot be answered. There is simply no extant evidence that describes the process by which John the elder (or disciple) received his information about the origins of Mark and Matthew. The church tradition that comes closest to providing an account is found in Eusebius' *Church History* 3.24.7. Here Eusebius relates what prompted John to write his Gospel. The disciple had no intention of committing his message to writing until the other three Gospels were widely distributed and came ultimately into his possession. He noticed that they lacked detail about the early part of Jesus' mission, so he wrote his own Gospel to fill this gap. This account is interesting in so far as it suggests that John learnt about the other Gospels only when they came into his hands and not through any message communicated to him by their authors.

Eusebius' source for this story is not known. Despite the claim of some scholars that Eusebius found it in the writings of Papias (e.g. Hill, 1996:588-611), this is by no means certain. Eusebius does not mention Papias as his source. On the contrary, he introduces the narrative with  $\phi\alpha\sigma\acute{\iota}$  (“it is said”), which suggests that it came to him from an anonymous tradition (Sellew 1992:121). The story in fact has the appearance of being late and legendary rather than early and reliable. But even if it is accepted as Papias and even as historical, it provides no support for Gundry's argument. It actually stands against his view in so far as the early church's witness conceded that John's statements about the origins of Mark and Matthew were based on information that was at the very least second hand.

We must conclude in the absence of any relevant evidence that the link or links between John and the events he narrated is completely lost to us. There is simply no way of establishing whether he was informed by the Gospel writers or whether he was told by others after a long process of oral transmission. This does not necessarily mean that the Papias/Johannine tradition is wrong, but it does mean that its reliability cannot be taken for granted. It is a little surprising therefore that Gundry, who goes to great pains to posit a direct link between John and Papias, does not feel the same need to establish a similar link between John and the evangelists about whom he speaks. Like Papias and Eusebius before him, he simply assumes that his apostolic witness was well-informed. For Gundry to prove his point, however, he needs to trace back even further the pre-Papias tradition to its pre-Johannine roots.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The attempt by Gundry to defend the traditional view of the ancient church that the disciple Matthew wrote the canonical Gospel of Matthew must be deemed unsuccessful. Even if we accept his early date for the writings of Papias, there are simply too many difficulties in the later steps of his overall argument.

First of all, Gundry runs into the problem of the meaning of the tradition transmitted by Papias. The Bishop was seemingly referring to an Aramaic tradition compiled by the disciple Matthew and not to the Greek canonical Gospel and its Jewish portrait of Jesus. But even if we concede Gundry's case that τὰ λόγια means the canonical Gospel and that (Ἑβραϊδί διαλέκτω) refers to its Semitic style, then he encounters the further difficulty presented by the source of Papias. Despite Gundry's best efforts to identify that source, John the elder, with the disciple John, the probability is that Papias distinguished between them. The elder therefore learnt his information from the disciples. A more important point, however, is the concession of Papias that this information came to him through a third party. Gundry's claim to the contrary, that Papias heard firsthand from John the elder (disciple), finds no support at all in the relevant evidence. This means that the tradition transmitted by Papias had a substantial pre-history. The disciple John taught it to the elders, who in turn passed it on to an anonymous tradent, who then informed Papias.

Yet, even if we allow Gundry his point, that Papias was informed of this information directly by John the disciple, much more needs to be done to establish the reliability of this pre-Papias tradition. Gundry simply assumes that the apostolic status of the witness guarantees its veracity because an apostle would not make such an error, but such an assumption is not justified. Since John was not involved in the writing of Mark and Matthew, he too must have been informed about these matters by someone else. Nothing precludes the possibility that John was misinformed about this matter. In order to demonstrate

that he was not, Gundry is required to trace back this tradition through its various tradents to its origins. Only when this has been done can we begin to discuss the trustworthiness or not of this information. Gundry may believe that we cannot get very much older and better than his apostolic witness, but the conventions of modern historical scholarship demand that we do so.

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