

Synopsis

The Identity of Papias' "Elder John"

For 1,700 years scholars have struggled with a paragraph from Eusebius' *Church History (HE)* where he quoted Papias (c.70-140), the bishop of Hieropolis. Eusebius himself immediately followed with an argument that Papias referred to two men named "John" and that this second John was the real author of the Book of Revelation. Do these words refer to two men named John? Do they refer to one John only, contrasting past with present teaching?

"And whenever anyone came who had been a follower of the elders; I asked about their words: 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 what Aristion and the presbyter [Elder] John, disciples of the Lord, **were still saying**. For I did not think that information from books would help me as much as the word of a living, **surviving** voice." (*HE* 3.39.4, Maier translation, p.127).

■ Eusebius believed Papias spoke of two Johns and that the second John was the author of Revelation. He emphatically taught that the Apostle John did write the Gospel of John (*HE* 3.24.11-13). Yet, building on Eusebius' conclusion about two Johns, some modern scholars assert that the Apostle John did not even write the Gospel of John (e.g., Martin Hengel-Tubingen, Germany, Richard Bauckham - St. Andrews, Scotland). Traditional scholars such as Pope Benedict believe this Elder John was still an early and truthful eyewitness, but liberals go in the direction that any second "John Doe" would not be a reliable author on the life of Christ.

■ Apostolic authorship of John's Gospel and Revelation can be affirmed without use of the Papias quote in *HE* 3.39.4 or a decision whether it referred to two leaders named John (see Waterhouse, *Jesus and History*, pp. 45-59). The quote says nothing about authorship.

■ The issue is still worth study as a sub-point. If a second John never existed, he is not a candidate for writing anything.

■ An early date for Papias gathering information (that also overlaps with the life of John the Apostle) favors that Papias would be more interested to learn from him. Papias was early enough to be acquainted with two of the daughters of Philip who were mentioned in Acts 21:9 (*HE* 3.31.3, 39.9.9). Eusebius placed his chapter on Papias between chronological notations of year three and year twelve of Trajan, i.e., AD 101-110 (*HE* 3.34 and 4.1.1). He made reference to Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp in the immediate context just before Papias (3.38.5). Note that Papias was also mentioned at the same time as Ignatius and Polycarp in *HE* 3.36. In this same chapter Eusebius recorded the martyrdom of Ignatius in c. 107-108. Yet, Polycarp's martyrdom awaited a later reference past the material on Papias. In fact Polycarp's final years came only in Eusebius' **next book** (*HE* 4:15). Therefore, Eusebius had already placed Papias

within Polycarp's earlier years. Polycarp died in c. 156 at the age of 86. Since Polycarp had been the Apostle John's student, then Papias was also quite likely early enough either to have known the Apostle John or at least to have obtained information from followers of the still living Apostle John. Despite his own objections, it seems that Eusebius himself had placed Papias at a time he could have known the apostle. It is best to follow Irenaeus who was originally from Asia Minor and studied under Polycarp. Irenaeus said Papias was a "companion of Polycarp" and a "**hearer of John.**" Already by 175 Irenaeus had viewed Papias as an "ancient man" (*Adv. Haer.* 5.33.4). If Papias wrote in c. 110 or even later, and John lived to 98 (the time of Trajan, *HE* 3.23.1-4); then Papias' earlier time of learning was well within the Apostle John's "live" teaching ministry.

- A theory about any second Elder John who as an actual disciple of Jesus moves in the direction of being a self-defeating proposition. If Papias was early enough to learn from this hypothetical disciple, Papias must have also been early enough to learn from the Apostle John. John was himself probably among the youngest of those who literally followed Jesus around in ministry. The Apostle John was known to have survived to a time that is about as late as any historical disciple of Jesus could have possibly lived.

- Aristion and the Elder John were listed together in *HE* 3.39.4, but Papias did not give Aristion the description "elder." Therefore, to Papias "elder" meant more than advanced age or church leader, evidently apostle as in 1 Peter 5:1.

- Papias said his oral learning was equal to books. Assuming Papias included the written Gospels among his books (see Hill, *The Johannine Corpus*, p. 385 ff. and Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 417), then his oral sources likely included an equivalent and, therefore, the highest authority, favoring the Apostle John.

- A following reference in *HE* 3.39.15 to simply "the Elder" without any name could favor Papias expected his readers would identify this Elder with the Apostle John as in 2nd and 3rd John as apparently other early church fathers did (see below).

- When Eusebius quoted Dionysius about a non-apostle "John" writing Revelation, there was no reference to Dionysius himself calling this John "the Elder John" or linking this other author back to any Papian quote (*HE* 7.25). In addition, Eusebius himself failed to argue for this view by any supporting reference to his earlier Papian quote or reference to another John called "John the Elder." Why is this if Eusebius strongly believed his own conclusions about Papias identifying two Johns with the second one as the author of Revelation? It is especially amazing that in *HE* 3.39.6 Eusebius stated that two memorials to John in Ephesus indicate two Johns had lived there and the second was Papias' Elder John who wrote Revelation. He also wrote this "Elder John" had been frequently mentioned in Papias' books (*HE* 3.39.7). Yet, in *HE* 7.25 Eusebius made no connection between Dionysius' statement about two John monuments in Ephesus (section 16) and his own earlier reference that Papias' second Elder

John was probably remembered (or even buried) in one of these monuments. Obviously, Eusebius totally agreed with Dionysius' conclusion that a second man named John must have written Revelation. This was a major issue to Eusebius. Why did Eusebius drop his earlier conclusions when they would have provided great proof of Dionysius' doubts about the apostolic authorship of Revelation?

- Eusebius quoted Dionysius as affirming apostolic authorship of 2nd and 3rd John (*HE* 7.25.11). Yet, then even to Dionysius the title "the Elder" meant the Apostle John not a second man named John.

- Eusebius himself cast doubt on the authorship of 2nd and 3rd John in *HE* 3.25.3. Yet, he still allowed that "the Elder" who wrote these letters might be fairly interpreted as the Apostle John. Note he made no suggestion of an alternative elder from the books of Papias whom he claimed often mentioned the Elder John (*HE* 3.39.7). Was Eusebius really mostly concerned to find an alternative and non-apostolic author for Revelation as opposed to having a firm confidence in his own "Elder John" theory? In Revelation the author does not use the title "elder." Both 2nd and 3rd John begin with the phrase "the elder." If a second Elder John theory fits anywhere, it seems that it would be stronger support for the authorship of these epistles.

- Eusebius was not objective on millennialism or the authorship of Revelation. Eusebius knew the Apostle was elderly (*HE* 3.23.1-4). Even more telling, he knew the Apostle John had been exiled to Patmos but later relocated to Ephesus (*HE* 3.18.1 and 20.11). Also, he knew others affirmed apostolic authorship (Justin Martyr, Melito, Irenaeus, the Muratorian Canon, see Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, p. 700). How many elderly Johns were imprisoned on Patmos, later moved to Ephesus and wrote books of the Bible (Revelation 1:4,9, 2:1)? Given that Eusebius had a blind spot about authorship, how can we trust he was objective on the identity of the Elder John within the full books of Papias?

- Eusebius defined "the Elder" as a non-apostle, but then he equated "the words of the **elders**" with the "words of the **apostles**" (*HE* 3.39.7). Which is it? Furthermore, if Papias equated elders with apostles, then this sentence supports an early date which in turn supports that Papias' early years overlapped with the Apostle John. The "followers" reporting about the "elders" (i.e., apostles) gives two spiritual generations, not three ("followers," then "elders," and then "apostles").

- In *HE* 3.39.13 Eusebius says Papias had "very limited intelligence" and misinterpreted the "apostolic accounts" regarding "a thousand-year period when the Kingdom of Christ will be established on this earth in material form." True, Eusebius tied this view to "word of mouth" and "legendary accounts" (Maier, p. 129). Nevertheless, Eusebius knew Papias' foundational source for his belief was Revelation 20. He also knew most church fathers prior to him believed in the apostolic authorship of this "account." Does this phrase "apostolic accounts" regarding millennialism reveal a "slip-up" on Eusebius part (see Hill, p. 395 fn. 117)?

■ The five books of Papias still existed in Europe in the Middle Ages (Carson and Moo, p.142) and in Armenia until the 13th Century (Hill, p. 365). Church fathers prior to Eusebius made no reference to any second Elder John. While this would be compatible with his obscurity (but probably not authorship), it is more likely they would have read any reference to “the Elder” as apostolic as in 2nd John and 3rd John. If all three of John’s letters were bound together and circulated in one book, then the early assumption was that the Apostle John wrote them all. Second and Third John are small, but they are similar in style to 1 John (e.g., “antichrist” in 2 John 7) and significant early church fathers believed the Elder’s identity to be the Apostle John (Carson and Moo, pp. 670 ff.; Kostenberger, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, pp. 783 ff.; and Hill, 99, 136, 460-463). As far as available information allows, Eusebius was the first to spot a reference to a second “Elder John” and turn him into an author (not even Dionysius made this specific connection, see above). Orchard claims only on this issue (the apostolic authorship of Revelation and whether Papias’ Elder John was the Apostle John) did Eusebius challenge the judgment of previous leaders such as Irenaeus (Orchard, *Why Three Synoptic Gospels?*, p. 171). Eusebius had serious problems with giving Revelation full apostolic authority.

■ No one in the early church ever tied any second “Elder John” to the authorship of John’s Gospel (not even Dionysius or Eusebius, *HE* 3.24.11-13, both of whom questioned the apostolic authorship of Revelation).

Conclusion: Apostolic authorship for the Johannine Corpus can be sufficiency established without referral to any Papias quotation. Yet, if a second John never existed, he can not be a candidate for writing anything. All we can do is follow small clues within the partial secondary quotations of Papias by a hostile critic, Eusebius. Still, small hints add up. Based upon information that is available, Eusebius’ interpretation of Papias’ quotes is not objective on authorship of Revelation or the existence of another John. He is “fishing” for an alternative author to Revelation and has to settle for a hypothetical John within one sentence of Papias. It would take much stronger evidence than now exists to follow Eusebius in thinking Papias’ “surviving voice” was any other than the Apostle John who was also famously known as the “Elder.”

© Dr. Steven Waterhouse, Westcliff Bible Church, Amarillo TX
www.webtheology.com
westcliff@amaonline.com