Papias was a church leader from Hierapolis in Asia Minor, who lived from approximately 60 to 140 CE. Irenaeus reports that he was “a man from the early period;” and a “hearer” of the disciple John and “companion” of Polycarp (Haer. 5.33.4). Papias authored a popular five-volume work entitled Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord, which continued to circulate into the medieval period but has since disappeared. It survives now only in excerpts quoted by later authors.

Papias discusses the death of Judas in the fourth book of his Exposition. We owe our knowledge of Papias’s account to Apollinaris of Laodicea, whose quotation of the passage survives in Greek catenae—i.e., collections of extracts from biblical commentators. We must agree with Kirsopp Lake, who suggested that further research into the manuscript tradition of the catenae would “enable these texts to be greatly improved.” In the absence of a critical text of Papias that takes into consideration all of the later testimonia, we will focus on the Greek text of Papias as printed in Cramer’s catenae, where we find two versions of Papias’s account: a shorter version in a catena on Matthew and a longer version in a catena on Acts. Both versions begin by discussing Judas’s enormous size but then diverge. In the shorter version a wagon strikes Judas and empties out his bowels, whereas in the longer version Judas apparently dies of disease. While the two accounts may be reconciled if we assume that the wagon incident in the shorter version was not fatal, they may also reflect separate traditions about Judas’s death. Since it is difficult to decide which goes back to Papias, I have included translations of both versions below.

1. Eusebius reports that Papias was “the bishop” of Hierapolis (Hist. eccl. 2.15.2), yet it seems unlikely that there was a single office of “the bishop” in Hierapolis as early as the first decades of the second century. For more information on Papias, see Schoedel, “Papias.”

2. Eusebius preserves the Greek of this passage in his quotation from Irenaeus (Hist. eccl. 3.39.1).


4. Theodor Zahn has argued that the Apollinaris who preserves the passage is not the Laodicenian (ca. 310–after 390 CE), but Claudius Apollinaris of Hierapolis, the church leader and author who was active in the second half of the second century. For a summary of Zahn’s argument and a critical response, see Lake, "Death of Judas,” 23 n. 1.


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These two versions are among a small number of early Christian reports concerning Judas's demise. Ancient authors did not agree upon the circumstances of the death of Judas Iscariot, the disciple who famously handed Jesus over to be crucified. While all four Gospels narrate Judas's betrayal of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:43-46; Par. John 18:1-9), only Matthew and Luke-Acts discuss his death. According to Matthew, Judas was so overcome with remorse following the arrest of Jesus that he tossed his payment of thirty pieces of silver into the temple and rushed off to hang himself (Matt 27:3-10); the priests then used his payment to purchase a field in which to bury foreigners, called the Field of Blood. The author of Luke-Acts reports that while standing in a field (again, called the Field of Blood) that he had purchased with the money from the betrayal, Judas “fell headlong and burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out” (Acts 1:18-20). While many ancient and modern interpreters have attempted to harmonize these two accounts, we should appreciate their differences: the Judas of Matthew returns the money he received for the betrayal and then hangs himself, whereas the Judas of Luke-Acts falls down and bursts open in a field that he himself has purchased with the betrayal money. The mention of a field known as the Field of Blood in both accounts may reflect a historical reality underlying the two traditions.

The recently discovered Gospel of Judas might preserve yet another tradition concerning the death of Judas. In the text Judas tells Jesus about a vision that he received: “I saw myself in the vision as the twelve disciples threw stones at me and persecuted me zealously” (44:24-45:4; trans. AG, 389-411). This passage may indicate that some early Christians believed that Judas was stoned to death by the remaining disciples. Yet, since the author of the Gospel of Judas never confirms this belief, Judas’s vision may simply represent in a general sense the hostility a recipient of secret teaching is likely to face. The text ends with Judas receiving payment and delivering Jesus over to the authorities (58:24-26). Like the Gospels of Mark and John, the Gospel of Judas ultimately allows the fate of the betrayer to remain a mystery.

The relationship between Papias's account and those of Matthew and Acts is a matter of debate. J. R. Harris, for example, has suggested that Papias expanded the account in Acts. He argues that the earliest text of Acts 1:18 did not read “falling headlong (prénes genomenos) he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out” as it does now, but “becoming inflamed (préthesis genomenos) he burst open ...” Thus Papias sought to embellish the terse report in his version of Acts by supplying additional details. However, the manuscript evidence for such a variant in Acts 1:18 is late. More recently, D. R. MacDonald has suggested that the literary influence went in the opposite direction. He argues that the accounts in Matthew, Papias, and Acts are all related: Papias “refutes” Matthew's account with his own, and Acts (assigned a late date by MacDonald) draws upon both Matthew and Papias. MacDonald has set forth this intriguing argument as

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7. We find a similar scene in the Gospel of Thomas. After Thomas receives a private teaching from Jesus, Peter and Matthew ask about the teaching, to which Thomas responds: “If I tell you one of the sayings he said to me, you will take up stones and cast them at me, and fire will come out of the stones and burn you” (Gos. Thom. 13; trans. AG, 303-49).


9. As evidence for the existence of an early variant in Acts 1:18 that read préthesis in place of prénes, Harris calls attention to the presence of the variant in the Armenian and Georgian versions of Acts as well as in an Armenian catena of Acts. See Harris, “Did Judas Really Commit Suicide?” 498. However, the evidence marshaled by Harris is much too late to suggest the existence of the variant in the time of Papias.
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part of a broader source-critical study of the Gospels. It should be noted, however, that the most compelling evidence that Papias composed his account in response to Matthew's ("Judas did not die by hanging") comes not from Papias, but from Apollinaris's remarks prior to his quotation of Papias—he states "Judas did not die by hanging but lived on, having been cut down before he choked to death." It is also important to point out that MacDonald's argument assumes the originality of the longer version of Papias's account of Judas's death, yet good arguments could be made in favor of the priority of the shorter version.

The vivid depiction of Judas's diseased and swollen body, especially in the longer version of Papias's account, calls to mind similar depictions of the dying days of other notorious villains. Josephus reports that God punished King Herod by cursing him with afflictions such as an insatiable appetite, ulcerated bowels, and putrefying and worm-emitting genitals (Josephus, Ant. 17.6.5). Eusebius likewise describes the torturous final days of the emperor Galerius, whose ruthless treatment of Christians provoked divine punishment in the form of corpulence, abscessed genitals, and worm infestation (Hist. eccl. 8.16.3–5). The terrible death of Judas also recalls the story of Antiochus IV's death as recounted by the author of 2 Maccabees. The arrogant and antagonistic Seleucid king apparently fell out of his chariot and received an injury that caused his flesh to crawl with worms and eventually rot away, producing a putrid stench (9:5–29). The author of the longer version of the account of Judas's death made use of a similar cluster of motifs in order to illustrate God's physical punishment of Judas for his act of betrayal.

Translation

The two passages below are translated from the Greek text printed in Cramer's catenae on Matthew and Acts. The shorter version appears in Cramer's catena on Matthew 27 and the longer version appears in the catena on Acts 1. In both Matthew and Acts the death of Judas is presented as the typological fulfillment of biblical passages (see Matt 27:9–10 and Acts 1:20), and it appears as though the authors of both versions attributed to Papias, but especially the author of the longer version, shared this interest. Therefore, biblical allusions are noted in the translations below.

Bibliography

EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS


10. For the details of the argument as well as his broader source-critical theory, see MacDonald, Two Shipwrecked Gospels, esp. 28–34, 43, 59–62, and 76–78. See also MacDonald, "Luke's Use of Papias."
13. For additional examples see Zeichmann, "Papias as Rhetorician," 428 n. 3.
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STUDIES


The Death of Judas according to Papias

Short Version (*Catena on Matthew, ed. Cramer 1:231*)
Judas walked about in this world as a weighty example of impiety. He was so inflamed in the flesh that he could not pass where a wagon could easily pass. When the wagon struck him, his bowels emptied out.

Judas walked about in this world as a weighty example of impiety. He was so inflamed in the flesh that he could not pass where a wagon could easily pass, in fact not even the bulk of his head alone could pass. For they say that the lids of his eyes were so swollen that neither could he see any light at all, nor could a doctor aided by instruments see his eyes. Such was their depth from the outer surface of his body. His genitals appeared to be more nauseating and enlarged than any other genitalia, and he passed through them pus and even worms that converged from throughout his body, causing an outrage on account of a simple necessity of life. After many tortures and punishments, they say, he died in his own land. His land remains until now desolate and uninhabited on account of the stench. Even to this day no one can travel through that place without holding their nose. So great was the judgment that spread through his flesh upon the earth.