EARLY CHRISTIAN ASCETIC PRACTICES AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: THE WITNESSES OF GALEN AND TATIAN

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Elsewhere I have argued that ascetic interpretations of John the Baptist’s “locusts and wild honey” (Mark 1:6c | Matt 3:4c) abounded in the early church. I did not, however, endeavor to assess whether construing John’s food (and clothing) as a model of simplicity preceded or followed analogous developments in early Christian asceticism. That is the purpose of the present inquiry. The testimonies of the physician Galen (c. 129/30–199/216 C.E.) and the Syrian Christian Tatian (fl. 165–72 C.E.) to Christian asceticism are slightly earlier than the earliest ascetic exposition of John’s food by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–211/16 C.E.). This study will not argue for a simple post hoc ergo propter hoc relationship between ascetic practices and ascetic biblical interpretation. Nonetheless, the temporal proximity of Galen and Tatian to Clement suggests such a correlation, and a direct causal relationship can by no means be excluded.

A brief discussion of the two Synoptic passages will offer a context for this inquiry.

Mark 1:6a, c
καὶ ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης... ἔσθην ἀκρίδας καὶ μέλι ἄρτιον.
And John was in the habit of eating locusts and wild honey.

Matt 3:4c
ἡ δὲ τροφὴ ἦν αὐτοῦ ἀκρίδας καὶ μέλι ἄρτιον.
And his food consisted of locusts and wild honey.

In the Gospel of Mark, John’s having eaten such common desert foods from time to time serves to connect John with the “voice” of

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2 On John’s diet in Synoptic interpretation, see further my Diet of John the Baptist, 121–32.
Isa 40:3 (cited in Mark 1:3a) and the famous wilderness prophet Elijah (cf. 2 Kgs 1:8; LXX; Mark 1:6b). Matthew’s heightened claim that John ate only “locusts and wild honey” is likely informed by one or more of the exclusive claims made for the natural provisions of other Jewish wilderness dwellers in Mart. Asc., Isa 2:31 and 2 Macc 5:27 (cf. Jos., Vita 2 § 11). That is, since Isaiah and Judas Maccabaeus (also Josephus’s Bannus) had survived entirely on natural wilderness foods, Matthew wishes to affirm that John ate thus as well (so Matt 4:3c).

The important thing to note for the present study is that neither Mark nor Matthew presents John as an ascetic.⁵ That innovation is attested first by Clement of Alexandria and by nearly every subsequent commentator until the Protestant Reformation.⁶ Whether or not Patristic commentators thought of John’s ‘locusts’ as actual insects or a type of vegetation, they consistently maintain that his diet offers a model worthy of emulation. A few examples will illustrate this point. In his Paedagogus (c. 196/92 C.E.), Clement states that John “maintained extreme self-restraint (ἐγκρατεία)” in eating “locusts and wild honey.”⁷ Origen of Alexandria offers John’s wish to free his soul from the passions of a body fueled by “savory dishes” as John’s rationale for selecting these foods.⁸ After discussing John’s food and clothing, John Chrysostom remarks: “Let us emulate John the Baptist and drunkenness be unknown to us.”⁹ Jerome, moreover, quotes a story of a widow from communion to which she must return [To Marcella]. He is impressed, not an accident, but a way of life that was consistent with the habitation including the food and the century anchoritic life. John’s food on the other hand is central to the ascetic Patriarchal age.

Having analyzed the scriptural appropriations of John the Baptist, we can markable Synoptic parallels for John’s foods (Mark 1:6c; 6:1; 7:1). He and so much of his asceticism was a model of simplicity and modesty, exemplary of figures such as Aratus, Didymus, and Dionysius, who support the inference that John was a figure of the same type of pudeites who lived a life of virtue in philosophic literature. John’s asceticism is given Gregory of Nyssa.

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⁶ Concerning John Calvin’s (1509–64 C.E.) objection to interpreting the Baptist as an ascetic model, see Luz, Matthew, 1:168; Kelhoffer, Diet of John the Baptist, 187.


⁸ Origen, Luc. Hom. 25.2 (on Luke 3:15): “But John always ate locusts, and he always ate wild honey. He was content with simple life and light food, lest his body grow fat, or richer, savory dishes, and be overpowered by exquisitely banquets. This is the nature of our bodies; they are weighed down by excess food and, when the body is weighed down, the soul too is burdened. For the soul is spread throughout the whole body and subject to its passions…. So John’s life was remarkable (vitae mirabilis), and quite different than other men’s way of living (et multis aeternitatem conscribens diversum).” The editions cited for Jerome’s translation of Origen’s Homilies on Luke are: Hermann-Josef Sieben, ed., In Lucam homiliae = Homiliae zum Lukasevangelium (Fontes Christiani 4; Freiburg: Herder, 1991 92); English trans-

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⁹ Chrysostom, Hom. 1.
John Chrysostom urges following the Baptist’s example: “Let us emulate him (Τούτον . . . ἐξεργάζεσθαι): Getting rid of luxuries and drunkenness, let us pursue the simplified life.” According to Jerome, moreover, John’s food and clothing preclude a Christian widow from complaining about the “somber dress” and coarse food to which she must adhere after her husband’s departure (Ep. 38.3 [To Marcella]). In this last case, imitating John is apparently compulsory, not an act of ascetic volition. Ascetics who did in fact choose a way of life that included emulating John’s foods and wilderness habitation include Gregory Nazianzen, Basil of Caesarea, a sixth-century anchorite monk known to us only by an inscription about John’s food on the wall of his cave, and Silvestros, the sixteenth-century Patriarch of Alexandria.

Having analyzed these and numerous other such ascetic appropriations of John’s diet, I wished to ascertain why such an unremarkable Synoptic passage containing two rather common wilderness foods [Mark 1:6c; Matt 3:4c] would receive this type of notoriety—and so much of it—for over twelve centuries. The acclamations of simplicity and moderation in regard to food by Greco-Roman authors such as Aratus, Dio Chrysostom, Plutarch and Apollonius of Tyana support the inference that Patristic interpreters wished to derive the same type of padeia from scripture that had been lauded elsewhere in philosophic literature. Such a connection between philosophers’ virtues and John’s purported example should not come as a surprise, given Gregory Nazianzen’s characterization of Elijah and John as

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Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew 10.5, Greek: PG 57.190; English translation: mine.


E.g., Aratus, Phain. 96–136; Dio Chrys., Or. 6.12; Plut., Quaest. conv. 8.7.3 (727E); Apollonius, IV 1.8.
“perfect philosophers.” It is at this point that my earlier investigation concludes, noting that more work is needed in the areas of paideia and early Christian biblical interpretation and of construals of food in early Christian theology and self-definition.

I did not consider, however, the complementary explanation that early Christian ascetic practices could have offered a precedent for connecting John’s “locusts and wild honey” with paideia. The following testimony of the physician Galen offers support for this possibility:

Most people are unable to follow any demonstrative argument consecutively; hence they need parables, . . . just as now we see the people called Christians drawing their faith from parables [and miracles], and yet sometimes acting in the same way [as those who philosophize]. For their contempt of death [and of its sequel] is patent to us every day, and likewise their restraint in cohabitation. For they include not only men, but also women who refrain from cohabiting all through their lives; and they also number individuals who, in self-discipline and self-control in matters of food and drink, and in their keen pursuit of justice, have attained a level not inferior to that of genuine philosophers.

Galen’s concomitant praise and censure, respectively, of Christian self-discipline and naivety support the inference that his remarks about Christian asceticism in the late-second century are quite credible. Even if Christians do not yet recognize them as “true philosophers,” their “contempt of death,” sexual continence and moderation “in matters of food and drink” strike Galen as entirely commendable.

In addition, Galen’s testimonies accord with what is known about the vegetarianism adopted and promoted by the Syrian Christian

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12. Cf. Galen, De pulsuum differentiis 2.3-4: “One might more easily teach novelties to the followers of Moses and Christ than to the physicians and philosophers who cling fast to their schools.” Likewise, De pulsuum differentiis 2.4: “. . . in order that one should not at the very beginning, as if one had come into the school of Moses and Christ, hear talk of undemonstrated laws, and that where it is least appropriate.” English translation: Walzer, Galen, 14.

my earlier investiga-
tion proceeded in the areas of
construction and of construals
of definition.

A necessary explanation would
have offered a precedent for
the phenomenon of paideia. The following
leaves no doubt for this possibility:

... the expository argument con-
siders that we now see the people... miracles [and miracles], and
philosophy [those who philosophize].

... as to the extension, it is patent to us every
one. For they include not only those who live in
cohabiting all through in common, who also, in self-discipline and
in their keen pursuit of knowledge, they are genuine philosophers.

... they are doubtless, as far as we are concerned, the
most genuine, for his remarks in the second century are quite credible.
The term “true philosophers,”13
was esteemed and moderation “in all things” was entirely commendable.

... but what is more certain is that the Syrian Christian

Tatian in late-second century.14 In his Oration to the Greeks, Tatian
likens killing animals for food to the senseless slaughter of gladiators.15
Such an equation between meat eating and homicide may
ultimately be indebted to Aratus of Soloi (c. 315–before 240 B.C.E.),
who stated in his popular Phaenomena that humanity’s devotion into
both murder and meat eating occurred long ago during the Bronze
Age (Phaen. 129–136). Tatian therefore exemplifies Galen’s generaliza-
tion concerning the “self-discipline” of some second-century Christians
“in matters of food and drink.”16 It is possible, moreover, that several
later witnesses to the Diatesseron depicting John the Baptist’s foods
as honey and milk (not locusts!) reflect Tatian’s own vegetarian emen-
dation of Mark 1:6c | Matt 3:4c.17

Galen’s favorable comparison of Christians’ discipline with that of
the “genuine philosophers” betrays his assessment that the paideia
cultivated in Christian and philosophical circles was essentially the
same.18 This claim merits additional investigation. The important
point for the present inquiry is that ascetic interpretations of John
the Baptist’s “locusts and wild honey” have precedents in both Greco-
Roman philosophical literature and ascetic practices of second-century
Christianity.

The origins of such Christian ascetic practices likewise merit addi-
tional study, especially in light of the contrasting non-ascetic por-
trays of Jesus in the Synoptic gospels. For example, according to

... Miroslav Marcovich, Tatiani, Oration ad Graecos (Patristische Texte und Studien
43; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995) 1–3, dates the Oration after the death of Justin Martyr
(165 C.E.) and prior to 172 C.E., when Tatian “left Rome and returned to
the Orient” (3); cf. Molly Whittaker, Oration ad Graecos and Fragments (OEC1; Oxford:

... Tatian, Or. 23.2: “You sacrifice animals in order to eat meat, and you buy
men to produce slaughter for the human soul.” Greek text and English translation:
Whittaker, Oration, 46–47.

... Robert M. Grant, “The Heresy of Tatian,” JTS 5 (1954): 62–8; here, 64, finds
additional evidence for Tatian’s Eciratism in Oration 8.2 (criticizing the goddess
Aphrodite, who delights in marriage) and 34.1 (a woman with thirty children is an
element of much incontinence).

... On this point see my Did of John the Baptist, 141–48; in my view the surviving
evidence does not allow for a definitive answer to the question whether Tatian
himself or some later Syrian Christian first described John’s foods as honey and
milk (not locusts).

... Pace Frances M. Young, Biblical Exegesis and the Formulation of Christian Culture
(Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1997) 76: “Once the biblical literature became
established as an alternative body of classics, it would soon be seen as the basis of
a new paideia.”
Mark 2:18 par. John’s disciples’ and the Pharisees’ practice of fasting contrasts with the lack of such a custom on the part of Jesus’ disciples—and, presumably, of Jesus himself. Likewise, Q/Luke 7:31–35 || Matt 11:16–19 differentiates between John’s eclectic habits with/out food and Jesus’ unsavory reputation as φάγως καὶ οἰνοπότης ("a glutton and a drunkard"). As Edmondo Lupieri notes, this difference between the Baptist and Jesus in the Synoptics may have fostered later ascetics’ choice to emulate John’s purported example:

The choice of John the Baptist was a very logical one: [1]n the New Testament he is the only figure who can be considered a model for ascetic life. As a chaste, fasting, total abstainer who dressed in camel-hair clothing, he—even more than Jesus!—offered a positive example to people who wanted to follow an ascetic way of life. 20

What indeed may have prompted certain followers of Jesus—himself no ascetic according to passages in both Mark and Q—to identify the Christian life with renunciation and simplicity in regard to food, drink and other matters? Can such practices by Christians be dated earlier than Galen and Tatian in the late-second century (cf. Col 2:16–21)? Scholars who, following the distinguished example of David E. Aune, analyze the New Testament and other early Christian literature in its Greco-Roman context are the most likely to make progress on these important questions. 21

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19 Whereas Q/Matt 11:18 (μὴ ἐφθανεῖν μὴν πίνῃ) states that John ate nothing at all, Q/Luke 7:33 (μὴ ἐφθανεῖν ἐστὶν μὴν πίνῃ ὑδάτη) claims more plausibly that the Baptist’s food and drink were somehow distinctive.

20 Lupieri, "John the Baptist: The First Monk: A Contribution to the History of the Figure of John the Baptist in the Early Monastic World," in Monasticism: A Historical Overview (Word and Spirit 6; Stil River, MA: St. Bede’s, 1984) 11–23; here, 16.

21 My thanks to Clare K. Rothschild and James V. Smith, who offered comments on an earlier version of this study.