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Early Christian Studies among the Academic Disciplines: Reflections on John the Baptist’s “Locusts and Wild Honey”

James A. Kelhofer

Abstract

This article reflects on the methodologies employed in the author’s recent monograph on John the Baptist’s “locusts and wild honey” with an eye to six larger issues of interest to New Testament and early Christian studies in interdisciplinary perspective. These issues concern the ongoing need for philological refinement; moving beyond ‘paralleleomania’ to cogent argumentation and elucidation; the use of sociological data from recent and contemporary, pre-industrialized peoples; John the Baptist (and other biblical personalities) in patristic interpretation; in the early church, biblical literature construed as a source of paideia; and food, culture and theology: conceptions of food in antiquity.

I. Introduction

This article makes no pretension of prescribing what early Christian studies is, let alone what it should be. Instead, it offers a narrative of my attempts to examine John the Baptist’s “locusts and wild honey” (Mark 1:6c//Matt 3:4c) in its ancient Mediterranean context and as refracted in early Christian biblical interpretation through dialogue with several different methods of study.1 To be sure, the topic is rather specialized. This article will highlight the methods that scholars have applied to interpret John’s food; several points at

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1 This article is a revised version of a paper presented at a conference on Early Christian Studies and the Academic Disciplines at The Catholic University of America in June, 2005. Parts of the paper are taken, reworked and expanded, from my study, The Diet of John the Baptist: “Locusts and Wild Honey” in Synoptic and Patristic Interpretation (WUNT 176; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) and appear here with the permission of the publisher. My thanks to Jörg Frey, those at the conference who offered feedback on the paper, and those in attendance at the Spring 2004 CSBR Meeting, where I presented a portion of this study.
which I ventured in a different direction; the implications of my study; and several avenues for future research.

My investigation of John’s “locusts and wild honey” began with the simple query, Why do the gospels of Mark and Matthew, but not Luke, mention the Baptist’s food. My initial research happened upon the equally fascinating question, How did John’s food come to constitute an ethical model in numerous Christian writings of the patristic, Byzantine, medieval and even later periods. I did not begin this inquiry intending to write a book on the subject; I just wanted to resolve these questions. My experience with this research may resonate with many of you: I did not wish to try out new methodologies as part of an arcane intellectual exercise; rather, I endeavored to employ an assortment of methods in the service of addressing an unresolved set of questions.

A few remarks on Mark 1:6c/Matt 3:4c will offer a context for this article’s methodological reflections. I have come to the conclusion that Mark 1:6c and Matt 3:4c, among other Synoptic passages pertaining to John’s food, should each be examined individually. Mark 1:6c makes the unremarkable claim that John was in the habit of eating rather common desert foods (καὶ ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης ἐπὶ ἴσθιν ἀκρίδας καὶ μελη ἄγριοι), in order to connect the Baptist with “the voice of one shouting in the wilderness” (Isa 40:3, cited in Mark 1:3) and, by implication, the wilderness prophet Elijah. The author of Luke omits Mark 1:6 precisely because of how it characterizes the Baptist. Throughout this gospel, Luke consistently retains (and augments) materials from Mark and Q that associate Jesus with Elijah, and deletes those presenting the Baptist as Elijah (for example, Mark 1:6b). Matthew’s changing Mark’s iterative periphrastic (ἡν...ἐσθίων) to ἦν (ἡ δὲ ὑπερήφανη ἦν ἀντον ἀκρίδας καὶ μελη ἄγριοι, Matt 3:4c) results in the heightened claim that John’s wilderness provisions consisted of (ἡν) only these two foods. Matthew’s claim finds analogies in accounts of Judeans who had survived entirely on wilderness foods (2 Macc 5:27; Mart. Ascen. Isa. 2:11; Jos., Vita 2 §11).

The remainder of this article will first offer several methodological observations and then reflect on the implications of my study for early Christian studies as a whole. The ultimate validation of any method of study is the fruit that it bears in the elucidation of a particular question, part of scripture, or aspect of early Christianity. Methodologies do not exist in a vacuum; all those employed for studying early Christianity are ancillary to both disciplines. David E. Aune offers an excellent essay on this point. Aune wrote the essay while writing the now published Westminster Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric. Before deciding which articles to include and other matters, Aune wished to explore what other Bible dictionaries and related reference works had—and had not—accomplished, as well as to discern what rationale, if any, informed other editors’ decisions. Aune’s insightful essay unfortunately did not enjoy a wide circulation in the little-known Proceedings: Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies. Originally presented as his 2002 Presidential address to the Midwest chapter of the Society of Biblical Literature, Aune’s remarks made an impression on many of us—and, I dare say, offered a source of embarrassment to some—in attendance at that meeting.

To be sure, we in New Testament and early Christian studies owe it to ourselves to critique what we do, and why. To this end, we should bear in mind that methods of study are constantly in a state of flux and refinement, based on developments within a particular discipline, in the academy as a whole, and, we might say, in our current Zeitgeist. I hope that a few reflections on the methods employed in my study of John’s diet will be of help to others. In what follows I shall address six larger issues of interest to New Testament and early Christian studies in interdisciplinary perspective. These are:

1. the ongoing need for philological refinement;
2. moving beyond ‘parallelelomania’ to cogent argumentation and elucidation;
3. the use of sociological data from recent and contemporary, pre-industrialized peoples;
4. John the Baptist (and other biblical personalities) in patristic interpretation;
5. in the early church, biblical literature construed as a source of paideia;
6. food, culture and theology: conceptions of food in antiquity.

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2 On the drawbacks of uncritically harmonizing the Synoptic materials on the Baptist’s food, see my Diet of John the Baptist, 4-12 and below in this article at note 21. Detailed arguments concerning Mark 1:6c, Matt 3:4c, and Luke’s omission of Mark 1:6 appear in Diet of John the Baptist, 121-32.

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II. The Ongoing Need for Philological Refinement

To complete my study I found that a significant amount of philological work, especially among the Greco-Roman materials, was a necessary prerequisite. Those inquiries concerning “locusts/grasshoppers” and various sweet substances known as “honey” in antiquity affirmed my earlier impression that the simple reliance upon handbooks, Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias can all too easily contribute to a distortion of the presentation of “NT backgrounds.” Moreover, the definitions given in standard lexicons (for example, LSJ, BDAG, Lampe) cannot always be taken as definitive. However indispensable, such resources offer the beginning (not the end) of an exegetical inquiry.

Electronic resources, including the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae, can indeed facilitate such inquiries, at times offering the opportunity to surpass previous investigations. Scholars of early Christianity need not only be the beneficiaries of philologists’, classicists’ and ancient historians’ hard work. We too can advance these and other areas. Indeed, we should make such contributions, lest our scholarship be considered derivative rather than equal in stature to the highest standards of these and other Humanities disciplines. Furthermore, at times we can (and should) bring our work into conversation with the social, and even the natural, sciences.⁵

III. Moving beyond ‘Parallelomania’ to Cogent Argumentation and Elucidation

By itself, of course, philology cannot answer all our questions. One reason for this is that (almost) every writing leaves certain “gaps” for the audience to fill in, in order to make a coherent whole out of a text’s implied or stated narrative. Without such “gaps,” I dare say that exegetes and expositors would be unnecessary, and thus in search of a different vocation. The hypothetical absence of “gaps” in literature would entail that writers (whether ancient or modern) had adhered to the arcane standards of logical positivism and written exclusively in simple propositional statements. Narrative would disappear, interpretation would be unnecessary, and life would be boring.

That people can, and do, interpret texts differently is empirically verifiable. Historically-oriented exegesis maintains that, when bringing to a text an inference not specified in that passage or work, it is desirable, if possible, to supply some ancient analogy to support one’s elucidation. In my study I noted numerous scholarly works that do not supply arguments for their assorted interpretations of John’s diet. To counter such a predicament, scholars today generally recognize—but sometimes do not reflect adequately in their research—that the more one knows about life, religion and literary expressions in antiquity, the more likely one is to understand an early Christian writing as an ancient audience (yet not necessarily all ancient audiences) would have construed it. It is always important to bear in mind this often acknowledged yet under appreciated buffer against pre-critical eisegeisis. When diverse interpretations abound, who, if anyone, has the better part of the argument?

IV. Method and Eclecticism

This brings up a related point concerning the benefits of not being restricted to a single methodological approach. The last three decades or so have brought to our guild an assortment of new methodologies and hermeneutical approaches which, when fully brought into conversation with historical-critical methods, can shed new light on early Christian literature. Yet in my study’s Forschungsbericht, I criticize certain literary and ideological interpretations of John’s diet.⁷ This is not because there is anything wrong with such inquiries per se, but because they have so far consistently misconstrued Mark 1:6c/Matt 3:4c. Literary approaches to this passage, especially when divorced from historically-oriented methods of study, are particularly myopic, because such inquiries claim to unearth an explanation for John’s diet within Mark’s or Matthew’s narrative, where none is specified.

Socio-historical questions are of particular importance to my investigation of the historical Baptist. Complementing the philological inquiries on “locusts” and “honey,” I wanted to know about the daily experience of an ancient Mediterranean locust gatherer—whether the Baptist or certain Jews at Qumran (CD 12:11b-15a)—and found especially helpful analogies in anthropological studies of Native Americans. I also wished to examine the claim of Matt 3:4c (echoed in Justin, Dial. 88.6-7; Origen, Luc. Hom. 25.2; Philocalia 26.4;).

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⁵ This is not to ignore, however, the innumerable contributions of resources such as the Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament and the Pauly-Wissowa Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft (along with Der Neue Pauly).

⁶ In terms of the title of the conference at which this paper was originally presented ("Early Christian Studies and the Academic Disciplines"), I wish to suggest that we consider not only what we can accomplish within our field of study, but also among—or, in furtherance of the work of—other academic disciplines. Thus the Haupttitel of this article, "Early Christian Studies among the Academic Disciplines."

⁷ See my Diet of John the Baptist, 19-21, 24-26, 33-34.
Ambrose, *De helia et ieunio* 11.40) that John’s food consisted entirely of "locusts and wild honey." Could this diet actually sustain an adult indefinitely?

The main conclusions of these inquiries are (1) that the yield from collecting locusts compares favorably with the benefits of both hunting and gathering; (2) that a locust gatherer could live comfortably off the protein and calories from these insects; and (3) that a deficiency in Vitamin C from a diet of consisting solely of "locusts and wild honey" would result in the manifestation of scurvy. Concerning the first two points, consider the observation of archaeologist David B. Madsen, who examined Native Americans of the Great Basin at "Lakeside Cave, at the western edge of the Great Salt Lake" in Utah:

Great Basin hunter-gatherers visited the cave intermittently during the past 5,000 years. . . . Bits of the insects pervaded every stratum we uncovered, and . . . we estimated that the cave contained remains from as many as five million [grass]hoppers. [That most human feces found in the cave consisted of grasshopper parts in a heavy matrix of sand . . . told us that people ate the hoppers and suggested that the sand was somehow involved in processing them for consumption.8

I should emphasize that the three aforementioned conclusions could not be sustained with recourse only to ancient literary witnesses.

Unfortunately, certain scholars of early Christianity tout that newer methodologies have somehow superceded traditio-historical analyses or "the historical-critical method," however construed.9 The future of early Christian studies, I believe, lies not in antipathy between older and newer approaches but in dynamic interaction between them. Historians in other areas of religious studies have acknowledged as much for decades. It is time that the over-balkanized discipline of biblical studies move beyond such a short-sighted and unnecessary dichotomy.

V. John the Baptist (and Other Biblical Personalities) in Patristic Interpretation

At present this article shifts in focus from reflections on method to avenues for future inquiry. In the course of investigating John’s diet in Synoptic and patristic interpretation, I noted several items meriting additional attention—indeed, more than any individual scholar could pursue during a lifetime of work in these areas:10 I would be most pleased to see other scholars take up any of the three following areas: John the Baptist (among other biblical personalities) in early Christian interpretation; biblical literature as a source of *paideia* in the early church; and attitudes toward food in antiquity.

With regard to the first of these areas, form criticism posits that the sundry materials incorporated into the NT gospels survived because they were somehow *useful* to the primitive church. Much later, with the eventual emergence of a Christian canon of scripture, this sequence of utility leading to preservation would oftentimes run in the opposite direction. *Mutatis mutandis*, the abiding interpretive problem became for many—including many of us today—in what way(s) the NT gospels (among other esteemed writings) could be useful to *us* as scripture. My study commends the benefits of studying the initial reason(s) for (even part of) a passage’s preservation, as well as the various uses derived from that passage in later centuries.11

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8 Madsen, "A Grasshopper in Every Pot," *Natural History* (New York) 98/7 (1989): 22-5; here, 22, emphases added. Likewise, Madsen, "Grasshopper," 23, notes: "We found that one person could collect an average of 200 pounds of sun-dried [grass]hoppers per hour. . . . Laboratory analyses of the hoppers indicated a yield of just over 1,365 calories per pound. (For comparison, a pound of medium-fat beef produces about 1,240 calories and a pound of wheat flour about 1,590 calories.) We thus came up with an average return of 273,000 calories per hour of effort invested. Even when we took a tenth of this figure, to be conservative, we found this to be the highest rate of return of any local resource. It is far higher than the 300 to 1,000 calories per hour rate produced by collecting most seeds . . . and higher even than the estimated 25,000 calories per hour for large game such as deer or antelope. Put another way, an hour spent collecting twenty pounds of sun-dried grasshoppers provides the equivalent of about twenty-two pounds of meat." Madsen’s figures are illustrative, although they pertain only to the collection of locusts and not to the additional time that would be needed to preserve and store them for future consumption.


10 For the record, my own research in the coming years will not be concerned with any of these areas.

11 Thus studying a passage form-critically and in light of its history of interpretation might also offer a fitting epitaph for "canonical criticism," which myopically employs the (Protestant?) canon of scripture as a (the?) context for
One area meriting further investigation is John's clothing in patristic interpretation (Mark 1:6ab/Matt 3:4ab), which my study mentions only occasionally. From having read many such passages on John's mantle and belt, I have the impression that the patristic authors devoted even more attention to John's clothing than they did to his diet. Somebody should write an article on the subject. Perhaps there is enough material to justify a monograph. It would certainly be interesting to know how often monks wore hairy garments like John, as well as how many early Christian interpreters exalted the faithful to dress simply because of John's purported example. To take just one example of this interpretation, Jerome asserts that John's challenging lifestyle offers a model even to widows, who should find comfort in the difficulties the Baptist experienced:

A widow who is “freed from the marital bond” has, for her one duty, to continue as a widow. But, you will reply that a somber dress scandalizes the world. In that case, John the Baptist would scandalize it, too; and yet, among those that are born of women, there has not been [one] greater than he. He was called an angel (angelius); he baptized the Lord Himself, and yet he was clothed in raiment of camel's hair, and girded with a leather girdle. Is [the world] displeased because a widow's food is coarse (viliores)? Nothing can be coarser than locusts (nihil vilius locustis). More broadly, there is certainly enough material to warrant a handful of monographs on the Baptist (or any number of other biblical figures) in patristic interpretation. Giving the copious gospel materials on the Baptist and the need to explain his relationship to Jesus, a study of a single author, such as Clement of Alexandria or Origen, let alone Augustine or John Chrysostom, could easily fill a volume. It would be interesting to know to what extent later Christian authors recognized the tension between the presentations of Jesus and his “forerunner” in the NT gospels. Do patristic authors associate the Baptist with the Old Covenant, the New Covenant, or both epochs of salvation history? In what ways do reinventions of John's persona serve the theological concerns of later centuries? The approach informing these questions is to take a point of New Testament Introduction (a.k.a. “higher criticism”) and search for an awareness of the problem—and possibly reactions to it—already in early Christian biblical interpretation.

VI. Biblical Literature Construed as a Source of Early Christian PAIDEIA

An additional area for future research concerns biblical literature construed as a source of paideia in the early church. After several months of collecting, translating and studying numerous early Christian interpretations of John's food, I remained at a loss concerning how to explain the widespread phenomenon of construing John as an ethical model. Why so much attention to this rather unremarkable (and, it should be noted, non-ascetic) Synoptics passage? Something clicked when I read Frances M. Young's statement about scripture and early Christian paideia: “Once the biblical literature became established as an alternative body of classics, it would soon be seen as the basis of a new paideia.” After studying explicit acclamations of several ancient philosophers' 'vegetarian' or simple diets in Greco-Roman writings, I became persuaded that such formulations, which for the most part predate the patristic interpretations of Mark 1:6c//Matt 3:4c, offered the necessary lens through which John's diet could be construed as

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16 Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 76.

17 My study offers only representative examples in Greco-Roman literature. Much more material of this sort remains to be digested.
exemplary. 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 "perfect philosophers" (Or. 43.29 [536b]). In order to understand the various presuppositions that early Christian authors brought to scripture, we need to have a firm grasp of the classical education and paideia that so many of them had received and embraced. The question in what ways Christian and classical paideia may have differed lies beyond my study. Much work remains to be done in this area.

VII. Food, Culture and Theology: Conceptions of Food in Antiquity

It is perhaps axiomatic that attitudes toward food are largely defined by culture and environment. Jerome recognizes as much in his work Against Jovinian, maintaining that, however peculiar, the food of various peoples corresponds to what flourishes in their midst: "But who does not know that no universal law of nature regulates the food of all nations, and that each eats those things of which it has abundance?" Jerome offers the following example to illustrate this point:

Again, because throughout the glowing wastes of the desert clouds of locusts are found, it is customary with the peoples of the East and of Libya to feed on locusts (rursum Orientales et Libyae populos... locustis vesce moris est). John the Baptist proves the truth of this. Compel a Phrygian or a native of Pontus to eat a locust, and he will think it scandalous (nefas). (Adv. Iovin. 2.7)

What peoples Jerome designates as Eastern/"Oriental" is not entirely clear, since his mention of the non-locust eating peoples in Phrygia and Pontus would exclude, respectively, the south-western and northern parts of Asia Minor. For Jerome, then, noting that whereas people in certain regions regularly eat locusts, others would revile such insects as food provides ammunition in a polemical debate concerning different peoples' habits concerning food.

Complementing the excellent progress made during the last quarter century in understanding early Christian asceticism, broader examinations of food, ethnicity and culture in early Christianity could indeed be fruitful. Assuming the multicultural character of and therefore differing eating habits in early Christianity, one question meriting attention in this regard is whether the privileging of one culture's preferences (biases?) concerning food necessarily marginalizes Christians of other cultures or ethnicities. According to the apostle Paul, this was an issue for the church in Antioch already in the 40s C.E. (Gal 2:11-14).

As mentioned briefly toward the beginning of this article, moreover, the Synoptic gospels offer various, and sometimes contradictory, anecdotes about the Baptist's food. In terms of food as a living issue for early Christian authors, consider the claim of Q/Matt 11:18 that John did not eat or drink anything at all (μηδεν γαρ Ἰωαννος μητε εσθων μητε ποιην), which obviously differs with


21 John ate "locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1:6c). His food consisted exclusively of "locusts and wild honey" (Matt 3:4c). John's disciples—and presumably John himself—sometimes fasted (Mark 2:18 par.). John was not supposed to imbibe alcoholic beverages (L/Luke 1:15b). John's diet was unlike that of most Palestinian Jews (Q/Luke 7:33); Matthew's version of this Q material claims that John survived without eating or drinking anything at all (Q/Matt 11:18).
Matt 3:4c, according to which John derived all his sustenance from “locusts and wild honey.” Despite the contradiction (or perhaps without realizing one), the author of Matthew retains the two details because they serve his purposes.

Numerous later Christian authors attest to the importance of food as an ingredient of theological reflection. This article will offer examples from Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom. In his Paedagogos, Clement offers the Baptist’s diet—and the food of the apostle Matthew as well—as examples worthy of imitation:

[15.4] I for one would not hesitate to call that devil, the devil of the belly, the most wicked and deadly of them all.... Happiness is the practice of virtue. [16.1] Matthew the apostle used to make his meal on seeds and plants and herbs, without flesh-meat (σπέρματων καὶ ἄκροδρῶν καὶ λαχάνων ἄνευ κρέων); John, maintaining extreme self-restraint (ὑπερτείνας τὴν ἐγράφην), “used to eat (ησθεν) locusts and wild honey,” and Peter abstained from pork. But “he fell into an ecstasy” is written in the Acts of the Apostles.22

By contrast, Peter’s indulging meat is taken to be exceptional, given the apostle’s higher calling to preach the good news to the family of Cornelius in Acts 10. Likewise, John Chrysostom derives theological significance from food, interpreting the Baptist’s diet (and clothing) eschatologically.23

What each of the Synoptic evangelists, their sources, the apostle Paul, and many patristic interpretations of John’s diet assume is that food constitutes a palatable cuisine for theological reflection. My study focuses on one such passage (Mark 1:6c/Matt 3:4c) and its history of interpretation. Many other morsels in the HB, the NT and the patristic and matristic literature await attention. Part of the discussion should focus on Christian ‘vegetarians,’ whether Tatian, Ebianite Christians or others. Indeed, some inquiries can be both timely and ideally suited for scholarly analysis. I hope that both this article and my monograph will have helped to illustrate that, regardless of whether one embraces every part of scripture as somehow “useful” (2 Tim 3:16), each passage merits elucidation both in its historical context and for the various interpretations it inspired. At times the later creative improvisations on scripture can be inspirational to us today, even more so than the original text.


23 Chrysostom, In Matthaeum 10.4: “It was necessary (ἐκεῖνο) that the precursor of the One who was to undo the age-long burdens, such as toil, malediction, pain and sweat, should in his own person be symbolic (σύμβολα) of the coming gift, so as to stand above these tribulations. And so it was that he neither tilled the earth nor plowed the furrow, nor did he eat bread (τῶν ἄρτων ἑδάφει) of his own sweat, but his table was easily prepared (ἀλλ’ ἐν ἐκχειδιασμένη αὐτῷ ἑκάτερα), and his clothing more easily than his table. For he had need (ἐδήνη) neither of roof, nor bed, nor table, nor any such thing. But even while still within this flesh of ours he lived almost an angelic life. His clothing was put together from the hair of camels, so that even from his garments he might teach [us] to free ourselves of human needs (ὑμα...παρέχεται τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀμφισβατεῖ), and not be bound to this earth, but that we may return to the pristine dignity (ἐπὶ τὴν προτέραν ἐπανατρέχει ἐνυψάθησαί) in which Adam first lived, before he had need of garments or clothing. Thus John’s clothing itself was symbolic (σύμβολα) of nothing less than the coming kingdom and of repentance.” Greek: PG 57.188; ET (modified): M. F. Toal, ed., The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers (Chicago: Regenery, 1957-63), 1.86.