‘LOCUSTS AND WILD HONEY’ (Mk 1.6c AND Mt. 3.4c): THE STATUS QUAESTIONIS CONCERNING THE DIET OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

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ABSTRACT
An astonishing variety of answers has been proffered by scholars who have considered the literary or sociohistorical interpretation of Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c. This article surveys Synoptic passages pertaining to John’s diet and reviews biblical scholarship on the subject from Erasmus to the present. The most prevalent interpretations maintain that the locusts and wild honey, however construed, highlight John as Prophet, wilderness-dweller, ascetic or vegetarian. A recurrent weakness in many interpretations of Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c is that they ignore the possibility that this characterization could have meant different things for the historical Baptist, the author of Mark and the author of Matthew. An additional shortcoming concerns the lack of argument or historical analogy given to support a particular interpretation of John’s diet.

Introduction: The Baptist’s Diet in Synoptic Tradition

The Problem
Why do two New Testament authors present John the Baptist as ‘eating locusts and wild honey’ (εσθίων ακρίδων καὶ μελι ἁγρίων, Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c)? John’s diet has been completely overlooked in many fine monographs (Peter 1911; Schlatter 1956; Steinmann 1958; Daniélou 1966; Schütz 1967; Loane 1969; Backhaus 1991; Webb 1991; Kazmierski 1996) and articles on the Baptist, as well as in numerous commentaries on Mk 1.6 and Mt. 3.4. This article will survey Synoptic passages pertaining to John’s diet and assess the assorted answers that scholars have given to this query.
Locusts and Wild Honey in Mark and Matthew

Mark 1.6 and Mt. 3.4 present John in peculiar clothing and eating a particular diet of locusts and wild honey. John’s clothing (Mk 1.6ab/Mt. 3.4ab) is readily understood as an allusion by Mark (or his source) to the Old Testament prophet Elijah (Vielhauer 1965: 48-53; 2 Kgs 1.8, LXX; cf. Zech. 13.4). A connection with Elijah or, more broadly, a ‘biblical’ origin for John’s diet is not as readily discerned, however (against Cole 1989: 107-108; Malbon 2002: 14-15).

A subtle but significant difference between Mk 1.6c and Mt. 3.4c has been overlooked in previous studies of John’s diet, however. Did John’s diet regularly include (en ho Ioannes...esthion, ‘John was in the habit of eating’; Mk 1.6), or was it entirely comprised of (he de trophe en autou, ‘his diet consisted of’; Mt. 3.4c) locusts and wild honey? In his reorganization of Mark’s syntax, the author of Matthew is to be seen as playing a rather active, and not a passive, role (against Windisch 1933: 67; Vielhauer 1965: 47). As a result, Mk 1.6c and Mt. 3.4c offer not one but two different claims about John’s diet.

Other Synoptic Traditions Pertaining to John’s Diet

Since Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c is commonly discussed in relation to other Synoptic passages that touch upon John’s diet, a few comments about these passages will offer some clarification (and, hopefully, justification) for the assessment of scholarship to be given below. Mark 2.18/Mt. 9.14/Lk. 5.33 states that John’s disciples practiced fasting. For the present study, it is noteworthy that Mk 2.18 par. neither sheds any light on nor is to be connected to Mk 1.6c or Mt. 3.4c. The one witness involves the consumption of particular foods (Mk 1.6 par.), and the other mentions that John’s disciples, and presumably therefore John himself, occasionally refrained from all foods (Mk 2.18 par.). Since the two Synoptic testimonies neither support nor refute one another, they should not be harmonized with one another (against Tilly 1994: 48).

Another Synoptic passage concerning John’s diet is Q/Lk. 7.31-35. This Q saying condemns ‘[the people of] this generation’ (Lk. 7.31/Mt. 11.16) for listening to neither John nor Jesus, despite these two individuals’ different modi operandi with regard to food and drink. Jesus’ ‘eating and drinking’ is contrasted with John’s refraining from the same. In both Lk. 7.33 and Mt. 11.18, John’s abstinence is attributed to his possessing power from a demon (daimonion echet, ‘he has a demon’), whether as a result of some affliction or by a shaman or magician’s cunning.
As was noted with Mk 1.6c and Mt. 3.4c, the depictions of John’s diet in this Q material, as preserved in Lk. 7 and Mt. 11, are markedly different. Q/Lk. 7.33 makes the plausible claim that John refrained from food(s) (arton, ‘bread’; cf. Mk 1) eaten by most of his fellow Israelites and that the Baptist did not partake of alcoholic beverages (oinon, ‘wine’). By contrast, Matthew (again) makes a more far-reaching claim about the Baptist: Jesus ate and drank like other people, but John did not (Mt. 11.18-19). That is, according to Matthew John did not eat or drink anything. The discussion will return to this Q material after considering briefly a final Synoptic passage, namely Lk. 1.15b.

Attempts have sometimes been made to interpret the Q material discussed immediately above (Lk. 7.33/Mt. 11.16-19) in light of Lk. 1.15b, according to which John ‘must never drink wine or beer’. Such interpreters thus take the Q material as an example of John’s Nazarite asceticism. This interpretation does not satisfy for several reasons:

1. The quasi-Nazarite vow imputed to John prior to his birth (Lk. 1.15b) stipulates abstinence from alcohol but no other dietary restriction. By contrast, Q/Lk. 7.33 highlights John’s refraining not only from alcoholic beverages but also from the type(s) of food eaten by most Judeans.

2. The Nazarite vow, taken by adults(!), was temporary and not a lifelong commitment (Schweizer 1970: 22; Meier 1991: 48). Whatever may have been thought of the unborn John would not necessarily have remained in practice during John’s adult life.

3. Like virtually all of Lk. 1–2, Lk. 1.15b is peculiar to this Gospel and was thus either composed by this Evangelist or drawn from special Lukan tradition (‘L’). It is thus tenuous at best to interpret Q/Lk. 7.33 in light of a different tradition that was either composed by Luke or drawn from L (not Q, since Matthew [and presumably also Q^Lk] has no interest in John’s birth).

Given that Lk. 7.31-35/Mt. 11.16-19 differs also from the Markan passages examined above (Mk 1.6c par.; Mk 2.18 par.), it follows that the two versions of this Q saying must also be interpreted independently of other Synoptic traditions pertaining to John’s diet.

**Synoptic Traditions Pertaining to John’s Diet: The Case against Harmonization**

The flawed tendency in scholarship toward the harmonization of two or more of these Synoptic passages (Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c; Mk 2.18/Mt. 9.14/Lk.
5.33; Lk. 7.31-35/Mt. 11.16-19; Lk. 1.15b) can hardly be overemphasized (e.g. Wink 1968: 2-3; Böcher 1971–72: 90-92; Hill 1972: 91; Nolland 1989–93: I, 345; Evans 1990: 357; Bovon 2002: I, 191). It has been argued, on the contrary, that no two of these distinctive traditions lend themselves to such harmonization.

To summarize, the discussion has noted that the Synoptic Gospels offer six different characterizations of John’s diet:

1. The Gospel of Mark states that John’s diet regularly included locusts and wild honey (Mk 1.6c).
2. Mark also makes the rather unremarkable claim that John’s disciples sometimes fasted (Mk 2.18 par.).
3. The version of the Q saying preserved in Lk. 7.33 states that John’s diet was different from that of most Palestinian Jews. One might expect at least a somewhat different diet from a prophet who spend so much time ‘in the wilderness’ (Mk 1.3a par.) and removed from the rest of society.
4. Only Lk. 1.15b makes the (unverifiable) declaration that John was not supposed to imbibe alcoholic beverages.
5. Through a subtle rewriting of Mk 1.6c, Mt. 3.4c claims that John’s food consisted exclusively of locusts and wild honey.
6. The version of the Q saying in Mt. 11.18 makes the super-human claim that John survived without eating or drinking anything at all. Rather, the Baptist was thought to be sustained by his mastery over, or the affliction of, an other-worldly being. By analogy to Mt. 3.4c, it is plausible, but by no means certain, that Matthew deleted arton (‘bread’) and oinon (‘wine’) from the Q material he inherited (cf. Lk. 7.33).

From these disparate anecdotes preserved within the Synoptic Gospels, it can readily be inferred that the early Christians were fascinated by the diet of John the Baptist. One is left with the general impression that John’s status as a holy man and figure of significance for proto-Christian origins was thought to be bolstered because of his choice of food (Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c) or his refraining from the same (Lk. 7.31-35/Mt. 11.16-19; Lk. 1.15b; cf. Mk 2.18/Mt. 9.14/Lk. 5.33). The author of Matthew was so intrigued that his incorporation (and editing) of two different traditions from Mark and Q culminated in a contradiction: Mt. 11.18 (from Q) states that John did not eat or drink anything at all, which is impossible if John ate locusts and wild honey (Mt. 3.4c, following Mk 1.6c).
An astonishing variety of answers, sometimes based on little evidence, has been proffered by scholars who have considered the literary or socio-historical interpretation of Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c. What follows is a mostly diachronic summary and critique of what scholars have written about either or both of these Synoptic passages. Occasionally, adherents to certain representative interpretations of John’s diet—for example, John as Prophet, wilderness-dweller, ascetic or vegetarian—are grouped together. As has already been mentioned, many fine biblical commentaries and studies of the Baptist completely overlook this deed attributed to (Mk 1.6c) or characterization of (Mt. 3.4c) John. Those who attempted to address the issue merit praise for at least recognizing the potential significance of two Synoptic passages explained by neither the New Testament evangelists nor (as far as we can tell) their sources.

Preliminary Observations Concerning Locusts as Human Food: Erasmus, Wettstein, Bochart, Alford, Zahn, and Strack-Billerbeck

As early as the sixteenth century, Erasmus notes that the Mosaic law (Lev. 11.20-23) permits eating locusts and that certain Greco-Roman authors confirm that the consumption of such insects was indeed a culinary practice in antiquity (1986 [1516]: 242, 296; 1961–62 [1703–1706]: VI, 18-20). Writing in the eighteenth century, Johann Jakob Wettstein (1962 [1751–52]: I, 258-59) and Samuel Bochart (1793: III, 326-33) likewise reflect an awareness of locusts as human food. If nothing else, Henry Alford’s influential New Testament commentary made the passages mentioned by Erasmus, Wettstein and Bochart accessible to the English-speaking world (1859: I, 18). Alford knows also two patristic comments concerning John’s diet, namely those of Jerome on ancient locust-eaters (Adv. Jov. 2.6) and Epiphanius (Haer. 30) on the Gospel of the Ebionites. Like many scholars before and after them, Erasmus, Wettstein, Bochart and Alford seem interested primarily in the veracity of the Gospel’s characterization of John as a locust-eater. Even if this was ‘true’ for the historical Baptist, one may further ask what this detail reveals about John, or at least of Matthew or Mark’s portrayal(s) of John.

Without evidence, moreover, Alford states that such food ‘was used… by the lower orders in Judæa’, thus positing for John a particular (albeit undefined) place in ancient Palestinian society. Such a generalization of locusts as food of Bedouins or nomads is common in the secondary litera-
ture (e.g. Schweizer 1970: 33). Writing before the dawn of form criticism, Alford and his predecessors reflect little interest in the origin of this Gospel tradition. Despite the limitations of these early analyses, it is remarkable how many subsequent interpreters have mentioned the same handful of passages from the likes of Strabo and Pliny, Jerome and Epiphanius without making an attempt to elucidate what these and other ancient parallels mean for the historical Baptist or his legacy in early Christianity. It is only a slight overstatement for the present study to note that scholarship on John’s diet has not progressed significantly in the last century and a half since Alford’s rather modest observations. Hence, the need to begin with them in our survey of scholarship.

In his classic but still important commentary on Matthew, Theodor Zahn notes that locust-eating was not simply an ancient practice but continues ‘still today’ among certain Middle Eastern and African peoples (1910: 41-2; 1984: 132-33). Zahn is absolutely correct to note that locusts regularly do serve as food, not simply in a time of need but as a regular food staple of contemporary peoples who dry or roast locusts and preserve them with salt or mix the dried and ground locusts into bread.

Zahn is also aware that the second-century Christian Tatian was a vegetarian and that, differently from Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c, Tatian’s Diatessaron describes John’s food as milk and mountain honey (1922: 133 n. 33). Numerous other commentators, including Lagrange (1929: 7-8) and Swete (1977: 5-6), may well pick up on, but do not add much to, Zahn’s two central points of contemporary locust-eaters and early church traditions of a vegetarian John. Other interpreters who have called attention to the function of locusts as food in antiquity and in the present include Loisy (1912: 57), Johnson (1960: 37), Mann (1986: I, 196), Marcus (2000: 151) and Edwards (2002: 32).

Complementing Zahn’s calling attention to contemporary locust-eaters are Strack and Billerbeck, who highlight a plethora of rabbinic commentaries on locusts as food (1922: I, 98-101). Although contemporary New Testament scholarship appropriately calls for caution in using these later rabbinic materials for interpreting (especially pre-70 CE) New Testament passages, it is significant that the discussion of locusts in Jewish dietary practice was a living issue for Judaism in late antiquity. Later in the twentieth century, scholarship would be blessed with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which, like the later rabbinic materials, offer instructions for how to eat locusts (Damascus Document [CD-A] 12.12-15).
Form Criticism and John as Prophet: Martin Dibelius

Arguably the greatest legacy that Martin Dibelius left for subsequent New Testament scholarship concerns the application of form criticism to the study of the Synoptic Gospels. Yet even before the appearance of his classic study (1933 [1919]), one can see glimpses of Dibelius’s form-critical program in his work on the Baptist: ‘All of this Mark mentions, in order to say: John is a Prophet’ (1911: 46). Dibelius is to be credited with attempting to distinguish between the historical John and how the author of Mark intends to present John to a different audience. For Dibelius, although the historicity of Mk 1.6c is denied (1911: 46; so also Ernst 1989: 6), the characterization in Mark serves instead to highlight ‘that John is more than just a preacher of repentance’. Rather, Mark wishes to present John as ‘a prophet’. Others who follow this line of interpretation—that John’s diet bolsters his identity as a prophet—include Klostermann (1971: 7), Lührmann (1987: 35), Tilly (1994: 48) and Plummer (1914: 55).

The interpretation of John as a prophet by virtue of his food is equally intriguing and vexing. For one thing, Dibelius’s judgment against historicity is stated rather than argued. More problematic is the suggestion that locust-eating would somehow support John’s credentials as a prophet to Mark’s audience, since neither Dibelius nor others who support this interpretation offers any ancient evidence to support this connection. Of course, the earliest interpretations of John as a prophet are preserved within the Synoptics themselves (Mk 11.32/Mt. 21.26/Lk. 20.6; Q/Lk. 7.26/Mt. 11.9 [pace Jn 1.25]; Mt. 14.5), but only a hermeneutic of harmonization can justify the use of any of these Synoptic passages to interpret Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c. Nevertheless, even if Dibelius’s solutions are not compelling, this pioneering scholar receives praise for raising for the first time traditio-historical questions.

John as Ascetic: McNeile, Gnilka, Pesch (and Others)

Looking to the context of Mt. 3.1-6 for understanding John’s diet, McNeile argues that Matthew intends to connect John with the Old Testament citation of ‘a voice of one crying in the desert’ (Mt. 3.3; cf. Mk 1.2-3):

Mt. transposes Mk.’s order, in describing the person of the Baptist before his success. The description (absent from Luke) of his person, ascetic and prophetic, is thus made to carry on the thought of the prophecy ‘a voice of one crying in the desert’ (1915: 26).

McNeile’s observation has merit, especially in so far as Matthew bends conventional rules for grammar to make this connection (1915: 25). One
may fairly ask, however, whether before Matthew the author of Mark also intended to connect John’s diet in some way with ‘Isaiah’ and Matthew highlights to a greater extent an element already present within Mark. Accordingly, McNeile makes a contribution in the interpretation of Mt. 3.3-4 but does not make a compelling case for Matthew’s novelty in this regard.

This criticism applies also to McNeile’s characterizations, without argument, of John’s alleged asceticism and prophetic identity because of eating locusts and wild honey. Ascetic interpretations of Mk 1.6c or Mt. 3.4c—that John is somehow presented as an ascetic by virtue of his clothing or food (or both)—are advocated by many other scholars as well (Rawlinson 1960: 8-9; Anderson 1976: 72; Davies and Allison 1988: I, 296-97; Gnilka 1989: I, 47; Pesch 1989: 82; Blomberg 1992: 75; Gundry 1994: 45; Keener 1999: 118-19; Moloney 2002: 33; Tatum 1994: 11). Most characterizations of the Baptist as an ascetic, like McNeile’s, are of limited value because they are offered without evidence or even a definition of asceticism.

**A Vegetarian Baptist? (Pallis, Kieferndorf and Eisler)**

The depictions of John as a (non-locust-eating) vegetarian as early as the second century in *Gospel of the Ebionites* and Tatian’s *Diatessaron* have already been mentioned in passing. Certain studies of the Baptist have actually argued that John himself was a vegetarian. For example, Pallis supports the notion that ‘common sense’ tells us that John did not eat locusts as follows:

This observation derives considerable support from the fact that, in other instances where Jewish tradition represents men as having been driven into the desert either by stress of circumstances or by a passion for asceticism, their food is said to have been what the soil produced (1903: 3).

Pallis concludes that ‘the archetype [of Mk 1.6] read [εσθόν...ρίζας και καρπον αγριον], that is, eating roots and wild fruit’ (1903: 6). Likewise, Kieferndorf maintains that John was a vegetarian (Jesus too) on the grounds that *άκρις* in Mt. 3.4c should actually be rendered *akra* (apparently referring to the ‘tips’ or ‘extremities’ of vegetable ‘shoots’; 1921: 188-89). Eisler also argues that the original Synoptic tradition as preserved in Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c has become corrupt:

I am myself much more inclined to believe that the word *άκροδρυα* = ‘tree fruits’ was maliciously distorted into *άκριδας* [= locusts] by the hand of an enemy of the Baptist’s sect, desirous of making the Baptist appear as one feeding on vermin, naturally loathsome to Gentile Christians of the educated classes (1931: 236).
A common bias running through these studies is the European prejudice against eating insects (noted correctly by France 2002: 69). Given that such food is strange to most of ‘us’ of European descent and that John’s locust-eating was repudiated by certain early patristic testimonies about John, the logical inference made by these scholars is that John himself did not eat locusts. Ergo, a corresponding non-arthropod proto-Gospel tradition must (!) have been lost. Nevertheless, even if Eisler does not offer a compelling argument concerning the diet of the historical Baptist, he can certainly offer one impetus for the transition from Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c to later Christian traditions about the vegetarian John.

‘John within Judaism’ as a Wilderness-Dweller (Lohmeyer) or an Authoritative Hellenistic Herald (Windisch)

The aforementioned endeavors to understand John’s diet were followed by two different but more substantive attempts in the 1930s, by Lohmeyer and Windisch. In his classic monograph on the Baptist, Lohmeyer devotes attention to the distinctiveness of John’s diet, its function within Mk 1.1-8, the source of this Synoptic tradition, and the place of John’s diet within Palestinian Judaism (1932: I, 50-52). He notes, for example, that in Mark, ‘We hear…that he was peculiar (seltsam) in clothing and food’ (1932: I, 13).

Like Dibelius, Lohmeyer is interested in the function of this characterization in Mark. Different from Dibelius, however, Lohmeyer emphasizes not the Baptist’s prophetic identity but John’s connection with the desert: ‘The narrator seems to have found [significance] in the fact that he legitimized the Baptist as “the voice of one calling out in the desert”’ (1932: I, 50). The lacuna in this analysis is the same as that noted above for Dibelius, namely it is not clear how the author of Mark communicates to his audience a direct connection between John’s food and clothing and the Baptist’s legitimization as a figure in the wilderness mentioned in ‘Isaiah’. Additionally, the wilderness interpretation must account for the fact that people in various locations outside of the wilderness ate locusts. One cannot simply assume that eating locusts would point an ancient audience to a particular geographic location such as the wilderness. Other scholars who connect John’s diet with the wilderness include Gould (1896: 8), Kraeling (1951: 10-13), Lane (1974: 51), Williamson (1983: 32), Meier (1991: 49), Gundry (1993: 37), Hare (1996: 15), van Iersel (1998: 97), Trocmé (2000: 28), Geddert (2001: 32), Edwards (2002: 32) and Müller (2002: 24-25).
With regard to the origin of this tradition, Lohmeyer notes correctly that the description of John’s clothing and diet does not stem from ‘Isaiah’ and that analogies to Elijah do not account for his diet (1932: I, 50). Lohmeyer regards Mk 1.4-8 as a commentary on 1.2-3 and all of 1.1-8 as a traditional, pre-Markan unit (1932: I, 50; so also Gundry 1993: 37). Of course, all of these points need to be sustained by arguments (which Lohmeyer does not provide), although perhaps when form criticism was relatively new in New Testament studies such was not thought to be as necessary as it is today.

Lohmeyer also differs from Dibelius in positing a basic continuity between Mk 1.6c and the life of John (1932: I, 50-51). Offering a then-rare attempt to understand the Baptist in his Palestinian Jewish context, Lohmeyer posits that locusts and wild honey were ‘als heilige Speise auszusuchen’ (‘selected as a holy meal’ [1932: I, 52]). The paradigm that seems to be employed here is one of ‘John against Judaism’: The Baptist avoids meat stemming from ritual slaughtering in the Temple and eats instead a different type of ‘holy meal’. At least to the author of this article, it is not clear if Lohmeyer embraces an ascetic interpretation of John’s diet, but such could well be a logical implication of the notion that John rejected the food of the priests in Jerusalem.

Unlike Lohmeyer, who discusses John’s diet as distinctive within Palestinian Judaism, Windisch explores certain Greco-Roman parallels. Windisch recognizes the emphasis within Mk 1.3a, 4 and 7 on oral proclamation (Windisch 1933: 66). He is not, however, interested in source-critical questions and even downplays the differences between Mk 1.6c and Mt. 3.4c (Windisch 1933: 67).

After noting that the biblical writings offer no analogy to Mk 1.6c, Windisch turns instead to: Pythagoras’s clothing and not drinking wine during the day; the Cynic Menedemos (third century CE); Josephus’s description of Banus, who ‘took food that grew in the wild’ (Life 11); and the later Christian tradition attributed to Hegesippus concerning James (the Lord’s brother), who is said to be noteworthy because of his clothing and diet (Windisch 1933: 67-75). For Windisch, these depictions of Pythagoras, Menedemos, Banus and James clarify that John’s diet in Mark highlights the authority of the Baptist’s proclamation.

The parallels Windisch cites are indeed intriguing, but his use of them to account for John’s diet in Mark does not satisfy for at least three reasons. First, Mk 7.1-23 (cf. Mt. 15.1-20) calls into question Windisch’s interpretation. Jesus’ pronouncement that foods do not make a person clean or unclean (Mk 7.18-19; cf. Mt. 15.17-18) would seem to exclude Windisch’s
construal of food as something that elevates John’s stature, at least in Mark (Svartvik 2000: 375-402). Second, Windisch has not made a compelling case that Mark or Matthew wishes to present John as an authoritative teacher/philosopher. Finally, and like Dibelius and Lohmeyer, Windisch does not account for the particular mention of locusts and wild honey, that is, why these foods and not others receive attention in Mark and Matthew.

Despite these criticisms, Windisch’s study has value for showing how Mk 1.6c and Mt. 3.4c could well have been understood in later Christian literature. Whatever Mark’s motivation may have been for mentioning the Baptist’s clothing and diet, subsequent Christian authors could indeed have interpreted Mk 1.6c as Windisch does and may for this reason have sought to minimize (possibly Luke through omission?) or augment (Mt. 3.4c) this Markan material.

The ‘No Significance’ Interpretation: Kraeling, Yamasaki and Juel

In contrast with the aforementioned studies, Kraeling may have been the first person to argue that no particular significance is to be attached to John’s food and clothing:

The importance of these details has been greatly developed and exaggerated, particularly in later Byzantine legend… Except for the fact that it is specific, there is nothing in Mark’s statement about John’s food that could be construed as involving a special dietary program (1951: 10).

What is said about his food is to be taken merely as an attempt to characterize his life in the wilderness (1951: 13).

This negative argument seems to be fuelled equally by a discussion of the Markan passage in light of Q/Lk. 7.33 and L/Lk. 1.15b and by this scholar’s reaction to the significance attributed to John’s diet and garb in later Christian literature. Despite his harmonizing approach to Mk 1.6c and lack of affinity for the patristic materials, Kraeling’s analysis is nevertheless valuable for calling attention to the ‘vegetarian’ depictions of John’s diet in the Slavonic edition of Josephus and the Syriac Life of John.

Yamasaki offers a more recent example of the ‘no significance’ interpretation of John’s diet:

[T]he narrator does not hold the information [in Mt. 3.4]…to be especially important; this information is presented in summary narrative, as opposed to scene narrative, thus indicating that it is to be considered mere background material (1998: 83).

Yamasaki’s conclusion is informed by his literary approach to the Matthewan Baptist and is not interested in redactional observations concerning
Matthew’s use of this Markan material, among other matters. On the following page of his work, moreover, the conclusion cited immediately above seems not to be followed in that Yamasaki acknowledges that the description does have significance for Matthew: ‘[T]he narrator gives this description to provide the narratee with information that will help him or her to interpret a passage later in the narrative’ (1998: 84).

Indeed, Yamasaki seems to abandon his initial conclusion in his later discussion of Q/Mt. 11.18: In Matthew, Mt. 3.4 serves as background for 11.18-19, so that ‘the narratee realizes that it [11.18-19] is nothing more than a hyperbolic representation of John’s ascetic lifestyle’ (1998: 123). Yamasaki’s interpretation of Mt. 3.4 in light of Q/Mt. 11.18 is likewise problematic in that it still does not account for the locusts and wild honey, or how the attribution could have been meaningful in Mark’s narrative, which lacks material like Q/Mt. 11.18. Accordingly, if, as Yamasaki asserts, ‘the story-line of [Mt.] ch. 3 would remain intact without’ numerous details, including ‘the description of John’s clothing and food (v. 4)’ (1998: 148), why does Matthew (or Mark!) bother to include them? If nothing else, Yamasaki’s work illustrates the inadequacy of employing a solely literary methodology to the Baptist’s food.

A final attempt in scholarship to dismiss the importance of John’s diet is given by Juel:

[H]is diet and clothing are unusual. None of these things is explained further. His diet and clothing apparently mark him as peculiar. Some knowledge of the geographic setting…and the peculiar clothing adds depth to the story but is not necessary to appreciate what is happening (1999: 55).

To this one may respond that the deliberate allusion to the clothing of Elijah in Mk 1.6ab is indeed significant for understanding ‘what is happening’ (cf. 2 Kgs 1.8, LXX). One cannot on such grounds so easily dismiss the importance of John’s food.

Willi Marxsen’s Alternative Reconstruction of Tradition History

Marxsen is best known for applying redaction criticism to the study of Mark. It thus comes as no surprise that a programmatic essay on John the Baptist in Mark is largely concerned with distinguishing between pre-Markan and Markan elements in Mk 1.2-8, among other passages in this Gospel (1969: 30-53). Marxsen disagrees with Lohmeyer that Mk 1.4-8 constitutes an expansion of the citation of ‘Isaiah’ in Mk 1.2-3. Instead, the earlier ‘formula quotation’ of 1.2-3 should be regarded as the commentary on 1.4-8 (1969: 31-32). Following Schmidt, and perhaps Bultmann,
Marxsen further maintains that the wilderness motif in 1.2-8 was Mark’s creation rather than that of a pre-Markan source (Schmidt 1969: 21-22; Bultmann 1968: 145-47; Marxsen 1969: 35). The same is true, Marxsen maintains, for Mark’s detail about the Baptist’s diet (1969: 35-36). Marxsen’s argument for the latter point is tenuous at best, however, in that it is based on the silence about John in the wilderness in the Fourth Gospel [sic: Jn 1.23] and in the (only partially preserved) Gospel of the Ebionites.

Concerning the Gospel of Mark as a whole, Marxsen states plausibly that ‘Mark composes backward’ in that ‘what follows interprets what precedes… What precedes (the Baptist) takes its shape from what follows (Jesus)’ (1969: 32, 33). In the case of Mk 1.4-8 and 1.2-3, Marxsen takes this principle ‘one step further back’, to the effect that the Baptist (1.4-8) interprets the preceding Old Testament citation (1.2-3) (1969: 33-34). A deficiency in Marxsen’s analysis of 1.2-8 is his inability to relate Mark’s detail about John’s diet to either Jesus or the Old Testament citation. Indeed, Marxsen is aware that Mk 1.6 does not fit his hypothesis concerning 1.2-8 but nonetheless states without argument: ‘It is best to proceed from vs. 6, which of course cannot be clearly interpreted. Yet this much appears to emerge with relative certainty: the diet points to a vegetarian ascetic…’ (1969: 36). These shortcomings in Marxsen’s analysis suggest that with regard to traditio-critical issues in Mk 1.2-8 Lohmeyer has the better part of the argument.

John and Qumran Cuisine: Filson, Davies and Charlesworth

Filson was among the first scholars to connect John’s diet with both the wilderness and the Qumran community: ‘All four Gospels agree that John preached in the wilderness, a phrase from Isa. xl. 3; only Matt. adds of Judea, which indicates strictly the barren region west of the Dead Sea (including the region of the Qumran sect)…’ (Filson 1960: 64, emphases original; already Allegro 1958: 163-65). He further notes that the Baptist ‘ate food available in the wilderness’ (Filson 1960: 65). Filson’s comparison emphasizes only how John’s location in the wilderness impacted the Baptist’s cuisine, as he does not seem to be aware that the Damascus Document from Qumran actually mentions locusts as food.

Others who have emphasized John’s diet in light of the Qumran literature include Davies (1983: 569-71) and Charlesworth (1999: esp. 353-56, 366-68). Frey notes an inconsistency in this thesis, for these scholars do not explain how the Essenes were concerned about purity in connection with the consumption of (wild?) honey (Damascus Document 12.13; Frey 2001: esp. 168-70). Against a direct (or even an indirect) influence of the
Qumran community, it may simply be noted that the eating of locusts would not have been a distinctive activity for either John or the Essenes. The comparison is not a compelling one, for locusts were a common food in much of the ancient Near East and could hardly be construed as distinctive among the children of Israel, much less the Essenes.

**John’s Diet as a Recognized Problem**

The studies of five scholars, Andersen, Scobie, Vielhauer, Boismard and Böcher, reflect that John’s diet was recognized as meriting more focused attention between 1961 and 1971 than it had received previously. The first of these to appear is the important article by Andersen, who begins with a discussion of different terms for ‘locust’ in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East, as well as certain ancient testimonies to locust-eaters in Herodotus, Pliny, Strabo and Jerome (1961–62: 60-61). A significant insight concerns the popularity of locusts among the Babylonians (Assyrians?), who ‘evidently prized [them] as a delicacy’ (1961–62: 60). Since locusts could constitute both a treat at royal banquets and a common food for the poor masses, Mk 1.6c cannot *ipso facto* be assumed to portray John as a poor wilderness-dweller or an ascetic (Andersen 1961–62: 60-61; Hooker 1991: 37).

Also helpful for interpreting John’s diet is Josephus’s mentioning the abundance of honey produced from bees in the vicinity of Jericho (Andersen 1961–62: 60, referring to Josephus, *War* 4.8.3). Andersen does not, however, address the question of historicity of Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c. Instead, he notes simply that ‘[t]he testimony of ancient geographers and of modern travellers supplies all the confirmation needed’ for ‘the text of the Gospel’ (1961–62: 65).

In addition to other patristic testimonies, Andersen may have been the first to mention those of Clement of Alexandria and Theophylactus (1961–62: 63-64). Concerning the patristic interpretations of John’s diet, Andersen notes plausibly:

> Western scholars were explaining away a practice which they did not understand because they were unacquainted [sic] with the eating of locusts, or which they found repulsive because of preconceptions. Just why locusts should not be considered suitable food for a person like John is not clear, but perhaps this prejudice is a genuine survival of the Ebionite outlook (1961–62: 64).

With an appreciation of the difference between the Synoptic and later patristic materials on John’s diet and of the need to explain both, Andersen’s article represents the most thorough twentieth-century study of the Baptist’s diet.
Given the plethora of explanations for John’s diet surveyed thus far in this article, sooner or later the need to differentiate between and evaluate the merits of them would be sensed by scholarship. Scobie (1964: 136-39) offers the first such evaluation of four possible reasons why John may have had such a diet:

1. **Necessity**, because of the difficulties of life in the wilderness. Scobie dismisses this solution as unlikely, because one could easily travel to, e.g., Jericho for supplies. Thus, this diet was John’s deliberate choice.

2. John was a **Nazarite** (cf. Num. 6.1-21). This option depends on Lk. 1.15, which as Scobie correctly notes, is ‘probably legendary to a great extent’ and a dubious reference for interpreting Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c.

3. **Essene influence**: Philo, *Hypothetica* 11.8 (*apud* Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 8.11.8), suggests that honey is part of a frugal diet and that some Essenes attended to the swarms of bees. Additionally, the Damascus Document states that as long as the locusts are roasted or boiled, they may be eaten. For Scobie, the problem with this explanation is that at Qumran the diet included also bread and wine, which Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c does not include in John’s diet.

4. The analogy of Josephus’s **Banus**: John ate what does not require cultivation or breeding but rather what could be found naturally in the wild.

Concerning the third option, one could add to Scobie’s objection that the Damascus Document gives stipulations for eating locusts, honey and fish (provided that the blood is drained from the fish beforehand). If John’s diet was indeed influenced by the Essenes, why would John, who baptized in the Jordan River (!), not have eaten fish as well?!

Scobie himself favors none of the aforementioned interpretations but rather attaches to John’s diet a deuteronomistic explanation: John’s diet ‘expressed humiliation before God and symbolized repentance for sin’ (1964: 139-40). Although this is possible, there is no evidence for connecting such a diet with repentance or waiting for God’s promised deliverance. Thus, Scobie offers a helpful analysis of certain studies but does not himself advance the discussion of the historical Baptist’s diet.

1. John would have fished in the Jordan if he wanted to eat like a (former) Essene (cf. Mk 1.5, 9 par.; Jn 1.28; 10.40).
Despite the title, nearly all of Vielhauer’s essay is devoted to John’s clothing rather than his diet (1965: 48-53). Given the lack of an overt comparison of John with Jesus in Mk 1.6, Vielhauer suggests that it may be accurate historically (1965: 47; so also Müller 2002: 23). Concerning the locusts and wild honey, Vielhauer refers to studies by Hess (1915: 120-36) and Dalman (1924: 92 [= 1935: 84]) and notes simply, ‘The grasshoppers and the wild honey…belong to the meager food of the Bedouins’ (Vielhauer 1965: 53). Vielhauer’s arguments for the historicity and pre-Markan character of Mk 1.6c are followed by Pesch (1989: 316).

For his part, Boismard accounts for the difference between Mk 1.6c (‘locusts [akrides] and wild honey’) and Gospel of the Ebionites (‘wild honey, which tasted of manna, like a small cake [hos engkris] in olive oil’) in terms of the independence of these ‘Gospel’ traditions. The argument offers a useful and perennially necessary caution against assuming that Gospel of the Ebionites reflects a revision of ‘our’ Mark or Matthew (1966: 327-28; cf. Kelhoffer 2000: 123-30). Boismard’s study is not helpful, however, for accounting for the origin of the two different depictions of John’s diet. Given his explanation, there would be no reason for John to have been made into a locust-eater in later strata of the Synoptic tradition. On the contrary, this article has already noted certain ‘vegetarian’ tendencies in antiquity that could well explain a shift in the other direction, that is, from ‘our’ Mark or Matthew (or their prototypes or sources) to the version of John’s diet in Gospel of the Ebionites. At least with regard to John’s diet, then, Boismard’s arguments for a particular—and in the view of this author unnecessarily complex, if not speculative—explanation of the Synoptic Problem are neither helpful nor compelling.

Böcher’s article on Q/Lk. 7.33 gives attention to Mk 1.6c as well. Although Böcher notes correctly the difference between Mk 1.6c and this Q material, he nonetheless argues that the former Synoptic passage offers an illustration of the latter:

If the Baptist thus enjoys grasshoppers (as solid food) and honey (as a beverage), then that means beyond all doubt the renouncement of meat and wine. John thereby belongs to the large crowd of ancient ascetics, who want to keep themselves free from demonic staining by sexual abstention and by renouncement of meat and wine (1971–72: 91).

Somewhat like Windisch’s literary approach, Böcher’s sociohistorical analysis compares John with various religious ascetics of the ancient world, including Neo-Pythagoreans and Neo-Platonists, to the effect that John’s peculiar diet protected him from demonic powers. Böcher’s argu-
ment that John’s diet of locusts and honey-water exemplifies his abstention from meat (Böcher 1971–72: 92; followed by Guelich 1989: 21) and wine is guilty of conflating two different Synoptic passages and, moreover, misconstrues Mk 1.6c as depicting John as a vegetarian. Böcher’s arguments are followed by Marshall (1978: 301) and Tilly (1994: 38). Nonetheless, even if Böcher’s interpretations of these two Synoptic passages (individually and collectively) are problematic, his calling attention to the protection from demons afforded by a particular diet is intriguing.

The aforementioned studies by Andersen, Scobie, Vielhauer, Boismard and Böcher that appeared in the 1960s and early 1970s are noteworthy for the additional attention they devote to the study of John’s diet. Andersen’s encyclopedic article calls attention to numerous materials in need of further investigation. Scobie was the first scholar to differentiate between and critique certain explanations for the Baptist’s cuisine. Vielhauer at least placed ‘Speise Johannes’ (‘the diet of John’) in the title of his article, even if he is primarily interested in the Baptist’s Tracht (‘dress’). Boismard brings the more distinctive readings of Gospel of the Ebionites into the larger question of the Synoptic Problem. Finally, Böcher construes John’s diet of locusts and honey-water as an abstention from meat that offered protection from demons. The preceding summary and critique highlighted positive contributions in each of these studies but also noted that the fundamental question, ‘Why John is presented as eating “locusts and wild honey”’, has yet to be resolved satisfactorily.

John’s ‘Natural’ Food
Although reflecting the errors of harmonization and vegetarianism, Smith’s commentary is innovative for highlighting that John’s food occurs naturally in the wild:

John’s diet was locusts and wild honey, food provided by the grace of the Creator, not produced by human labor or effort of cultivation… It may further signify John’s standing as a Nazir (2.23), a holy man who renounced meat and wine… (1989: 50).

Lupieri also emphasizes John’s adherence to ‘the levitical norms of purity for food’ and decision ‘to eat only what is produced by nature, avoiding food prepared by human hands’ (1993: 439). Similarly, Taylor finds an analogy to John’s food in Josephus’s Banus, who, like John, lived in the wilderness and was ‘wearing only clothing that trees provided and eating what grew on its own accord’ (1997: 34). The comparison made by Lupieri and Taylor is helpful in so far as locusts and wild honey ‘were neither subject to human control nor the result of human labor’, and ‘[i]n Hebrew וָּשָׁנַן...
refers to uncultivated land, as does the equivalent Greek word ἔρημος’ (Taylor 1997: 34).

Ulrich Luz on the History of Interpretation of Matthew 3.4
In his important commentary on Matthew, Luz suggests the likelihood that Mt. 3.4c was interpreted as a model for ascetic practices:

Naturally the verse describes John also as ascetic. Even if nothing else was originally thought of but the food and clothing of Bedouins, the description of John must have been seen as ascetic… The description hardly has a para- netic undertone. Nevertheless, the passage was interpreted paranetically as an explanation of the church and thereby was drawn into the maelstrom of church disputes (1990–2001: I, 168, emphasis original).

In distinguishing between the pre-Matthean (possibly also pre-Markan) meaning of John’s diet and the possible ascetic interpretation subsequently attached to that diet, Luz’s remarks appreciate a diversity of meaning within the Synoptic tradition, and not simply after Mark and Matthew in the patristic literature. Given his interest in Matthew’s Wirkungsgeschichte (‘history of effects’), it comes as no surprise that Luz calls attention to the history of interpretation of the Baptist’s diet, anticipating later patristic and reformation exegetes.

John’s ‘Liberationist’ Diet? (Boring, LaVerdiere and Carter)
Yet another interpretation of John’s diet is given by Boring, who combines an identification of John in the wilderness with the Baptist’s testimony against the rich: ‘The description of John’s clothing and food serves to separate him from elegant society and to identify him with the wilderness that was to be the scene of eschatological renewal’ (1995: 156). W. Carter also understands John’s diet as a criticism of the rich (2000: 95). Somewhat analogously, Eugene LaVerdiere draws a connection between John’s diet and Jesus’ later instructions to the disciples in Mk 6.8-10 ‘to take no possessions’ but rather ‘to accept whatever local hospitality provided’ (1999: 31-32). The implicit assumption in these quasi-liberationist interpretations of Mt. 3.4c is that eating locusts and wild honey identifies the Baptist with the poor. As noted above, however, such a motivation or social location for a locust-eater cannot be assumed.

Conclusion
This article’s examination of scholarship on John’s diet reveals that there is not at present—nor has there ever been—a consensus concerning what
akrides kai meli agrion (‘locusts and wild honey’) means in Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c. The most prevalent interpretations maintain that the locusts and wild honey, however construed, highlight John as Prophet, wilderness-dweller, ascetic or vegetarian. Of course, no two of these interpretations are mutually exclusive, and it is not uncommon to find overlapping or complementary explanations given in the secondary literature. A recurrent weakness in interpretations of Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c is that they ignore the possibility that this characterization could have meant different things for the historical John, the author of Mark and the author of Matthew. An additional shortcoming concerns the lack of argument or historical analogy given to support a particular interpretation of John’s diet.

I hope that the reader’s appetite is whetted to learn more about John’s diet and that my monograph (in progress) will further the understanding of John’s place within Second Temple Judaism and legacy in early Christianity. I endeavor to examine Mk 1.6c/Mt. 3.4c in light of actual locust-eaters in antiquity, debates about food in early Christianity and the interpretation of John’s diet in the early church, and would thus welcome feedback concerning the review of scholarship offered in this article or this inquiry as a whole.

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