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176
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The Diet of John the Baptist

“Locusts and Wild Honey”
in Synoptic and Patristic Interpretation

Mohr Siebeck
almis parentibus:

Janet Elsie Kelhoffer

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Acknowledgments

On one stiflingly hot August evening in St. Louis, I was walking the dogs when a large insect buzzed past. The dogs wanted to chase it—whether for amusement or an evening snack (or both), I do not know. The next morning I noticed the same (or at least a very similar) insect lying dead on the ground. I looked closer and saw that it was a locust. My stomach turned as I thought of John the Baptist. "Who would ever want to eat that?" I mused.

The question remained with me throughout the day. With syllabi prepared for the coming term but classes not yet in session, I spent a few hours in the library to put an end to the query. Over the next couple of days, I searched several dozen commentaries on Mark and Matthew and monographs on the Baptist. In the secondary literature I read then (and in much I have encountered since), I was dismayed not to find a satisfying answer. I was, in fact, astonished to see the same half-dozen or so references to locusts in Greco-Roman antiquity recycled in one discussion after another without reflection on what such passages reveal about the Baptist’s diet. I thus decided then that an article on John as a locust eater would be part of my research in Fall 2002.

Soon thereafter, my attention was drawn to patristic interpretations of John’s diet, which take on a life of their own in construing John as a non-locust eating ‘vegetarian’ and model of ascetic simplicity. Since a systematic treatment of these assorted interpretations had also not been done, I made a mental note to return to these materials when my work on the historical John was done. Two articles.

As fall slowly gave way to winter, it became apparent to me that two separate examinations of the historical Baptist and the patristic literature would leave certain gaps in the analysis. What to do with the Synoptic tradition, in particular Matthew’s expanding upon Mark’s claim about the Baptist’s diet and, moreover, Luke’s omission of it? Is it conceivable, as Matt 3:4c asserts, that John could have survived on only “locusts and wild honey”? During the 2002 SBL Meeting in Toronto, I was encouraged in conversations with potential publishers that a monograph on the subject would be a welcome contribution. It is hoped that the present study accomplishes its purposes of adding to our understanding of the historical Baptist, his presentation in the Synoptic gospels, and early Christian biblical interpretation.

Without the help and encouragement of many people, the timely completion of this study would not have been possible. I would first like to thank Professor Dr. Jörg Frey for encouraging me to publish this work in WUNT, for suggesting that I include a chapter on the Baptist’s “wild honey,” and for
Acknowledgments

offering constructive feedback on each chapter. Paul A. Patterson was my research assistant in 2002-04 and offered invaluable help on this project from inception to completion. I am also grateful to Clare Komoroske Rothschild and Matthew A. Gilbertson for reading the entire manuscript and offering numerous helpful suggestions. Additionally, Charlotte M. Ridley, a nutritionist on faculty at Saint Louis University, was of great help in suggesting resources pertinent to the analysis of the nutritional aspects of “locusts and wild honey” in chapter 4. A number of other friends and colleagues, including Wendy Love Anderson, Bernhard (Ben) A. Asen, François Bovon, Sebastian Brock, Robert Matthew Calboun, Philichon Richard Choi, Ronald W. Crowe, Robert I. Curtis, Frederick W. Danker, Rish Garela, Cornelia B. Horn, Brett A. Huebner, F. Stanley Jones, Laura Ann Lewellyn, Clarence H. Miller, Michael G. Morony, William L. Petersen, Jill Rasmussen-Baker, Mark Reasoner, George J. (Jack) Renard and James V. Smith, have also offered suggestions, feedback or assistance with various parts of this work. My thanks are also due to Mary L. Boles and Linda R. Ritter, who have shared their laser printer with me more times than any of us can count.

Portions of this study were presented at meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature, the North American Patristics Society, the Chicago Society of Biblical Research, and the Early Christian Studies Workshop at the University of Chicago; my thanks to those in attendance, whose responses helped sharpen the arguments offered here. Part of chapter 1 appeared in Currents in Biblical Literature, and parts of chapters 2 and 3 have been accepted to appear, respectively, in Dead Sea Discoveries and Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies; these preliminary studies have been reworked, corrected and augmented for this monograph. I am grateful for the feedback that I received from the editors and blind reviewers of these journals. Once more I am indebted to Ilice König for overseeing the production of my book, and to others at Mohr Siebeck, with whom I am honored to be publishing again. Any remaining errors or infelicities in this work are, of course, my own.

This book is dedicated to my parents, Janet and Daniel Kelhofer. Their devotion to family and commitment both to each other and to their children’s happiness and dreams are an inspiration to me, and to my sisters and their husbands.

St. Louis, December 2004

James A. Kelhofer

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<td>AB</td>
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<td>AbrN</td>
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<td>ACNT</td>
<td>Augsburg Commentaries on the New Testament</td>
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<td>ACW</td>
<td>Ancient Christian Writers</td>
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<td>Ael., NA</td>
<td>Aelian, <em>De natura animalium</em> (On the Characteristic of Animals)</td>
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<td>Ael., VH</td>
<td>Aelian, <em>Varia historia</em> (Miscellany)</td>
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<td>Agatharch., De mar. Eryth.</td>
<td>Agatharchides of Cnidus, <em>De maris Erythraei</em> (On the Erythraean Sea)</td>
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<td>Aristotle, <em>De auditibus</em> (On Things Heard)</td>
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<td>Ath., Deip.</td>
<td>Athenaeus, <em>Deipnosophistae</em> (The Learned Banquet)</td>
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<td>Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges</td>
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Abbreviations and References

Philo, Spec.
Philos., PA
PL
Ph., Phdr.
Pl., Ti.
Plin. (E), HN
Plut. Amat.
Plut. De soll. an.
Plut. Quaest. conv.
Plut. Sull.
PO
Porph., De antr. nymph.
Prot. Jas.
Ps. Arist., Mir. eucr.
PW
RAC
RB
Rast.
SANT
SBB
SBT
SC
ScotJT
Seri. (Y)
Slb. Or.
SIDIC
SLA
SL
SNTSMS
SNTSU
SOP
SP
SPCK
St.
STDJ
StPat.
StudBT
Tatian, Or.
TB
TBI

TDNT
Thess., I.
Theol., Sent.
TLZ
TNTC
TPI
TPNTC
TSTK
TU
TynBul
TZ
UF
USDA
VC
VCSup
VD
Verg., Ecl.
Verg., Georg.
VT
VTSup
WBC
WC
WMANT
WUNT
Xen., An.
ZAW
ZDPY
ZKG
ZNW
ZTK

Tertullian, Apology Marcinon (Against Marcinon)
Theologianus, Iudaei
Theodoseus, De sensibus (On the Senses)
Theologische Literaturzeitung
Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
Trinity Press International
Theologische Studien und Kritiken
Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der christlichen Literatur
Tyndale Bulletin
Theologische Zeitschrift
Ugarit-Forschungen
United States Department of Agriculture

Vigiliae Christianae
Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae
Verbum Domini
Vigilae Ecclesiasticae
Vigilae Georgicae
Vetus Testamentum
Vetus Testamentum Supplements

Word Biblical Commentary
Westminster Commenataries
Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

Xenophon, Anabasis
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Chapter 1

Introduction and the *status quaestionis*
concerning the Diet of John the Baptist

"Insects are an important element in human diet in many parts of the world, but they have long been taboo in European civilizations."1

A. Introduction:
The Baptist’s Diet in Synoptic Tradition

1. The Problem

Why do two NT authors present John the Baptist as eating “locusts and wild honey” (ἐχριδίας κοι μέλα ἄγριον, Mark 1:6c[Matt 3:4c])? Satisfactory explanations for this attribution with regard to the historical Baptist, the author of Mark and the author of Matthew have yet to be given. The present study seeks an answer not only for the historical John and the Synoptic tradition, but also for the patristic literature, much of which reflects a fascination with John’s diet, as well as the desire to emulate John as an example of simplicity.

Much scholarly attention has been devoted in the modern period to four actions attributed to John the Baptist in the NT gospels—most famously, his baptizing in the Jordan River, but also his preaching a message of repentance, having disciples and wearing clothing made of camel’s hair. Considerably less consideration has been devoted to the peculiarities of another deed credited to John, namely his eating “locusts and wild honey” (Mark 1:6c[Matt 3:4c]). John’s diet has been largely or completely overlooked in many fine monographs2 and articles3 on the Baptist, as well as in commentaries on Mark.

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2 Any number of studies of John or exegetical analyses of the Markan or Matthew passages, including the following monographs, have little or nothing to say on this issue: Kaut Backhaus, *Die "Jüngerkreise" des Täufers Johannes: Eine Studie zu den religiösgeschichtlichen Ursprüngen des Christentums* (Paderborn: Theologische Studien 19; Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1991); Jean Ducellier, *The Work of John the Baptist* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1960); Carl R. Kazmierski, *John the Baptist: Prophet and Evangelist* (Metaphor and Social Context in Matthew’s Gospel) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986); Marcus L. Leone, *John the Baptist as Witness and Martyr* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969); Heinrich


The following commentary on Mark 1:6 have little or nothing to say about John’s diet of “locusts and wild honey”: Paul A. Achtemeier, Invitation to Mark: A Commentary (Doubleday NT Commentary Series; Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1978), 34–5; idem, the Baptist. The same omission is evident in a significant study of the Baptist in (mostly Western) art through the centuries. The disininterest of so many


Alexandre Masseron’s study, Saint Jean Baptiste dans l’art (Paris: Arthaud, 1957), Figures 4, 12, 15, 16, 56, 60, etc., contains any number of paintings and statues of John’s hairy clothing, but none of his locusts or ‘wild honey’. This does not detract from the importance of Masseron’s work, however. As is discussed in chapters 2 and 5, the common omission among artists is perhaps not surprising, because this diet was unremarkable in an ancient Near Eastern context and perceived as either extravagant or unpalatable by so many Christian interpreters through the centuries. Additionally, more recent studies highlight the scarcity of artistic depictions of Mark 1:6c:Matt 3:4a: Friedrich-August von Metzsch, Johannes der Täufer: Geschichte und seine Darstellung in der Kunst (Munich: Callwey, 1989), 102, fig. 93; of 189; B. Weiss, “Johannes der Täufer (Baptista), der Verfasser...
fine scholars in John’s food does not, of course, dismiss the value of their studies. It does, however, show that Mark 1:6c|Matt 3:4c is a commonly overlooked biblical passage. Various passages in the NT gospels offer additional anecdotes about the diet of John the Baptist. This monograph focuses in particular on Mark 1:6c|Matt 3:4c, according to which John’s food regularly included (ἡ ὄντινης ... ἄγωνον, Mark 1:6) or was comprised of (ἡ ὄντινη ἄγωνον, Matt 3:4) “locusts and wild honey.” The remainder of this chapter surveys these assorted Synoptic passages on John’s food before reviewing the secondary literature on Mark 1:6c|Matt 3:4c.

2. “Locusts and Wild Honey” in Mark 1:6 and Matt 3:4

As already mentioned, Mark 1:6 and Matt 3:4 present John in peculiar clothing and eating a particular diet of “locusts and wild honey.”

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mark 1:6</th>
<th>Matt 3:4</th>
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<td>καὶ Ἰωάννης ἐνεδρικὸς τρίχας καυμᾶτος καὶ ζέναν δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφύν αὐτοῦ</td>
<td>αὐτὸς δὲ ἦν Ἰωάννης ἐν πτερύγιοι τῶν χορτῶν καὶ ζέναν δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφύν αὐτοῦ</td>
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<td>ὄσπερ καὶ μέλι ἄγωνον</td>
<td>ἢ δὲ τροφὴ ἡ ἄγωνον ὄσπερ καὶ μέλι ἄγωνον.</td>
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John’s clothing is readily understood as an allusion to Mark (or his source) to the OT prophet Elijah. Despite the attempts of certain scholars, a connec-


8 Compare Mark 1:6b with 2 Kgs 1:8 (LXX): ζέναν δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφύν αὐτοῦ. Additionally, Zech 13:4 assumes clothing like that described in Mark 1:6a|Matt 3:4a as prophetic garb: “That day the prophets will be ashamed, every one of their visions when they prophesy; they will not put on a hairy mantle” (Zech 13:4).

9 Against Catherine M. Murphy, John the Baptist: Prophet of Purity for a New Age (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 129; R. Also Cole, The Gospel according to Mark: An Introduction and Commentary (IVTC 2; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989 [1961]), 107–8; Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, Hearing Mark: A Listener’s Guide (Harrisburg, PA: TIP, 2002), 14–15 (emphasis added): “[A]though this [Mark 1:6–8] is a very short section, we hear a bit about what John wears—camel’s hair and a leather belt—and what he eats—locusts and wild honey . . . [John] dresses like Elijah . . . he eats like Elijah, and we know that Elijah is coming before the end time (Malachi 4:5).” Additionally, Jost Ernst, Johannes der Taufener: Interpretation, Geschichte, Wirkungsgeschichte (BZNW 53; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), 6, initially seems to favor a symbolic interpretation of John’s diet and a connection to Elijah: “Die Wüste (V. 4) und die absonderliche Kleidung und die Speise (V. 6) erhalten einen symbolischen Sinn. Markus illustriert am Beispiel des Johannes erzährend das Dogma des Elias redivivus.” Elsewhere, however, Ernst seems less sure of a symbolic connection of all of Mark 1:6–8 with Elijah: “Die Angaben über Kleidung und Speise des Johannes erzählen also von den außergewöhnlichen Lebensformen eines Manes, der seine hohe Sendung wuße. Ob und in welchem Maße der Elias redivivus-Komplex mitwuchs, ist schwer zu sagen” (9; cf. 8).


Mark 1:6.12 Yet much as Augustine did,13 scholarship has overlooked the different claim made in Matt 3:4c, as compared with that of Mark 1:6c. In this reorganization of Mark’s syntax, the author of Matthew is to be seen as playing a rather active, not a passive, role.14

As a result, Mark 1:6c and Matt 3:4c offer not one but two different claims about John’s diet. These claims merit analysis in connection with depictions of locust eaters in Jewish and Greco-Roman antiquity (chap. 2), ancient conceptions of “wild honey” (chap. 3) and the significance imputed to John’s diet in the Synoptic gospels (chap. 4). Additionally, the history of interpretation of Mark 1:6c|Matt 3:4c is arguably as interesting as these two Synoptic passages. A peculiarity stemming from Mark 1:6c|Matt 3:4c concerns early Christian reflections on John’s (alleged) asceticism and, sometimes, ‘vegetarianism.’ Chapter 5 assesses the assorted patristic (and later) interpretations of John’s “locusts and wild honey,” including the following persons and works: the Gospel of the Ebionites (Gos. Eb.), several witnesses to Tatian’s Diatessaron, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa, Chromatius of Aquileia, Hilary of Poitiers, Peter Chrysologus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodore of Pelusium, the Karshuni Life of John, the Slavonic additions to Josephus, and Theophylactus of Ochrida. A brief epilogue on the Baptist’s deed of eating “locusts and wild honey” as a witness to the historical John and on early Christian biblical interpretation and conceptions of asceticism completes this volume. The remainder of this chapter surveys other Synoptic traditions about John’s diet and assesses the history of scholarship on this subject.

3. Other Synoptic Traditions Pertaining to John’s Diet

a) The Question about Fasting (Mark 2:18 par.)

Since Mark 1:6c|Matt 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. Elsewhere in the gospel of Mark, which is followed by both Matthew and Luke, one learns that John’s disciples practiced fasting:

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<td>καὶ ἦσαν οἱ μαθηταὶ ιωάννου καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι</td>
<td>Καὶ ἦσαν οἱ μαθηταὶ ιωάννου καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι</td>
<td>Οἱ δὲ ἦσαν πρὸς αὐτόν οἱ μαθηταὶ ιωάννου, οἱ Φαρισαῖοι καὶ διάφοροι ποιηταὶ θρησκευόμενοι καὶ διάφοροι ποιηταὶ θρησκευόμενοι, οἱ δὲ σοὶ δοθένται καὶ πύλην οἰ.</td>
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<td>τοὺς προσδόχουντας αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταὶ ιωάννου καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι</td>
<td>καὶ ἠγέτεσαν τὸν Ιησοῦν καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι</td>
<td>οἱ δὲ σοὶ δοθένται οἱ μαθηταὶ τοῦ Ιησοῦ καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι</td>
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| τὸν Ιησοῦν λέγοντες διὰ τις λέγεις Εἰ ὃς ηὐστι γὰρ καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένονται, οὐ γένο

The question in Mark and Matthew is predicated upon John’s disciples’ and the Pharisees’ discipline of fasting, as compared with the lack of such a practice on the part of Jesus’ disciples. Mark again uses a periphrastic construction of an imperfect form of εἰλικρίνεια with a present participle to describe dietary practice (τὸν Ιησοῦν . . . οὐ γένονται, Mark 2:18; cf. 1:6). Yet in Mark’s account it is not clear whether those who “come” (ἐρχόντα) to Jesus are from John’s disciples, the Pharisees, both groups, or some other group.15

12 E.g., Karl L. Schmidt, Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu: Literaturkritische Untersuchungen zur ältesten Jus tifizierung (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969 [1919]), 22: “Der Parallelschnitt aus dem Mt Ev (3. 1-6) ist in der Sachen und in der Form im ganzen mit der Mk-Fassung identisch....” W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, Jr., A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 1.296: “For Mark’s καὶ ἦσαν οἱ μαθηταὶ Matthew has substituted ‘the food of him was’. This makes for better parallelism between [Matt 3:4a and 3:4b]. The final four words are from Mark, with the necessary adjustment in case ending.”; Robert H. Gundry, Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 45: In Matt 3:4: "He had his clothing from hair replaces Mark’s 'was clothed with hair.' The replacement prepares for parallelism (a characteristic of Matthew's style) between 'clothing' and 'food.'" So also Alan R. McNelle, The Gospel according to St. Matthew (London: Macmillan, 1913 [= Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980]), 25-6; Gerd Hüfner, Der verkleinerte Vorläufer: Redaktionstextliche Untersuchung zur Dorstellung Johannes des Täufers im Matthäus-Evangelium (SRB 27; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1994), 22: "Die mk Conjunctio periphrasis . . . wird in einer substantivischen Konstruktion umgewandelt, die zwei parallele Hauptsätze ergibt (ἐρχόντα τὸν Ιησοῦν αὐτῷ . . . ἢ δὲ τραύματα τὸν Ιησοῦν); so wird der Notiz ein größeres Gewicht verliehen als in der Fassung des Mk." Hüfner is on the right track in noting that in Matt 3:4 the statement has "a larger weight" than in Mark 1:6, but he does not make the case that the parallel construction is the reason for the heightened statement in Matthew. Indeed, Hänser's analysis of Matt 3:4 (22-3) and excursus on John's "hairy mantel" (23-31) otherwise ignore John's diet.

13 August, De cons. evang. 2.12 (2.25), on Matt 3:4c: "Mark also gives us this same statement almost in so many words. But the other two evangelists omit it."


15 Cf. A. Schlatter Johannes des Täufers, 88: "Markus [2:18] hat ein ganz unbestimmtes Subjekt." The NRSV attempts (in my view, implausibly) to clarify Mark 2:18 by inferring yet a third group in addition to John’s disciples and the Pharisees: “and people came and said to him.” So also C. H. Turner, Mark, 19 (emphasis original): "they came; not John's
Matthew and Luke clarify the Markan ambiguity in different ways. In Matt 9:14, the dropping of Mark’s periphrastic (cf. Matt 3:4) is not nearly as remarkable as Matthew’s clarification that it was John’s disciples who asked Jesus the question about fasting. In Luke 5:33, however, the subject of εἴρηκε is not John’s disciples but rather “the Pharisees and their scribes” (Luke 5:30; cf. mention of only Pharisees in Mark 2:16[Matt 9:11]). Despite these differences, the depictions of the diet of John’s disciples in Mark 2:18 par. may be seen as complementary [pace the different claims made in Mark 1:6c and Matt 3:4c [no Lukan parallel]].

Taken as a whole, this pericope (Mark 2:18–20 par.) trumpets the superiority of the bridegroom Jesus to those who practice fasting. This presumed preeminence explains why John’s disciples fast and Jesus’ do not (or at least did not during Jesus’ lifetime). Such an underlying motivation does not, however, cast doubt upon the pericope’s central claim that John’s disciples, like the Pharisees (and many other pious Jews), fasted. Additionally, that embarrassment could have arisen from Jesus’ disciples’ abstention—whenever and for whatever reason—from fasting [pace Did. 8.1] adds to the credibility of this testimony concerning John’s disciples’ habit of fasting. Since this practice is assumed for the Baptist’s disciples, it may plausibly be inferred for John as well.

For the present study, it is noteworthy that the testimony of Mark 2:18[Matt 9:14] and Luke 5:33 neither sheds any light on nor is to be connected to Mark 1:6c or Matt 3:4c. The one witness involves the consumption of particular foods (Mark 1:6 par.), and the other mentions occasional refraining from all foods (Mark 2:18 par.). Because the two Synoptic testimonia neither support nor refute another, they should not be harmonized.16

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16 With Michael Tilly, Johannes der Täufer und die Biographie der Propheten: Die synoptische Täuferorientierung und das jüdische Prophetenbild zur Zeit des Täufers (BWANT 7/17; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1994), 49; E. P. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 92: “[John] and his disciples fasted, while Jesus and his disciples did not (Mark 2:18f. and par.).” Jesus was known as “a wine-bibber and a glutton” (Matt. 11.19 and par.) and his mission was to include sinners (ibid.). While it is possible that these contrasts have become schematized, there is no particular argument to be brought against any of them, and they probably point to remembered differences between the two men. 17

Against Tilly, Johannes der Täufer, 48–51; here, 48, who offers “Die Fastenfrage (Mk 2,18) als Beleg für die Authentizität von Mk 1,6.” Nor should one infer, e.g., that John or his disciples fasted (Matt 9:14) because they needed a break from constantly eating “locusts and wild honey” (as Matt 3:4 might suggest!)

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b) Q/Luke 7:31–35 and Q/Matt 11:16–19: John and Jesus

A third Synoptic passage concerning John’s diet stems from Q/Luke 7:31–35. This Q saying condemns “the people of this generation” (Luke 7:31[Matt 11:16]) for listening to neither John nor Jesus, despite these two individuals’ different modi operandi with regard to food and drink:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q/Luke 7:32b–34</th>
<th>Q/Matt 11:17–19a</th>
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<tr>
<td>ἐλήλυθαν οἱ νεαροὶ τὸν ἀνθρώπον καὶ κατέχαναν</td>
<td>ἐλήλυθεν ὁ νικός τὸν ἄνθρωπον καὶ κατέχανεν</td>
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discussion will return to this Q material after considering briefly a final Syoptic passage, Luke 1:15b.

c) John the Nazarene (L/Luke 1:15b) in Relation to Q/Luke 7:31–35 and Q/Matt 11:16–19

Attempts have sometimes been made to interpret the Q material discussed immediately above (Luke 7:33; Matt 11:16–19) in light of Luke 1:15b, according to which John “must never drink wine or beer.”99 Such interpreters take the Q material as an example of John’s Nazarene asceticism. This interpretation does not satisfy for several reasons:

1. The quasi-Nazarene vow imputed to John prior to his birth (Luke 1:15b) stipulates abstinence from alcohol but no other dietary restriction. By contrast, Q/Luke 7:33 highlights John’s refraining not only from alcoholic beverages but also from the type(s) of food commonly eaten by other Judeans.

2. The Nazarene vow, taken by adults (τὰς), was temporary and not a life-long commitment.98 Whatever may have been expected of the unborn John would not necessarily have remained in practice during John’s adult life.

3. Luke virtually all of Luke 1–2, Luke 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 tenous at best to interpret Q/Luke 7:33 in light of a different tradition that was either composed by Luke or drawn from Luke (not “Q,” since Matthew reflects no interest in John’s birth).

Given that Luke 7:31–35; Matt 11:16–19 differs also from the Markan passages examined above (Mark 1:6c par.; Mark 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.

d) 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 (Mark 1:6c; Matt 3:4c; Mark 2:18; Matt 9:14; Luke 5:33; Luke 7:31–35; Matt 11:16–19; Luke 1:15b) cannot be over-emphasized.100 It has been argued, rather, that no two of these distinctive traditions lend themselves to such harmonization.101

To summarize, the exercise has noted the plausibility of three different claims, namely that John’s disciples, and presumably also John himself, fasted from time to time, perhaps with some regularity (Mark 2:18; Matt 9:14; Luke 5:33), and that John’s food was somehow distinctive (Mark 1:6c; Q/Luke 7:33):

1. The gospel of Mark states that John’s diet regularly included “locusts and wild honey” (Mark 1:6c).102

2. Mark also makes the rather unremarkable claim that John’s disciples sometimes fasted (Mark 2:18 par.).

3. The version of the Q saying preserved in Luke 7:33 states that John’s diet was unlike that of most Palestinian Jews. One might expect at least a somewhat different diet from a prophet who spent much time “in the wilderness” (Mark 1:3a par.), removed from the rest of society.

Because these three Synoptic traditions (Mark 1:6; Mark 2:18 par.; Luke 7:33) make substantially different claims and are quite plausible, they need not rely on each other for “proof.”

By contrast, three other Synoptic depictions of John’s diet offer much more extraordinary, if not legendary, assertions:

4. Only Luke 1:15b makes the (unverifiable) declaration that John was forbidden to imbibe alcoholic beverages.

5. Through a subtle rewriting of Mark 1:6c, Matt 3:4c (διὸ προερήματα καταφέρθηκαν) claims that John’s wilderness food consisted exclusively of “locusts and wild honey.”

6. The version of the Q saying in Matt 11:18 makes the super-human claim that John survived without eating or drinking anything at all. Moreover, some

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99 Gk.: αὐτὸν καὶ σίκερον οὐ μὴ πίητ. Concerning the translation of σίκερον, Danker, BDAG, 923, calls attention to a cognate Akkadian term “barley beer” and notes, “It is not possible to determine whether σίκερον was considered any stronger than wine; the rendering ‘strong drink’ (in so many versions) may be misleading.” Cf. Lev 10:9; Num 6:2–5; Exod 13:4–7; 1 Sam 1:11 (LXX); 4QSam 1:13.

98 With E. Schweizer, Luke, 22; J. P. Meier, Marginal Jew, 2.48, against a Nazarene interpretation of John’s diet: John is never depicted “abstaining from cutting [his] hair, perhaps the single most striking sign of a Nazarene.”


101 Yet this tendency is attested already, e.g., in Eusebius, Dem. Evang. 9.5 (430–98).

102 See chapters 2 and 4 for arguments affirming the historical plausibility of Mark 1:6c.
people inferred that the Baptist was sustained by his mastery over, or the affliction of, an other-worldly being (σεβαστόν ἄγνω). By analogy to Matt 3:4c, it is plausible, but by no means certain, that Matthew deleted ἀγριόν and ὄντων from the Q material he inherited (cf. Luke 7:33).

The impossibility of verifying the quasi-Nazarene vow attributed to John prior to his birth (Luke 1:15b) and its (un)likely relevance for the adult John have also been noted. Moreover, the spectacular claim of Matt 11:18, that John could perpetually refrain from food and drink, is also not open to historical verification.

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. Matthew was so intrigued that his incorporation (and editing) of two different traditions from Mark and Q culminated in a contradiction: Matt 11:18 (from Q), which states that John did not eat or drink anything at all, is impossible if John are only “locusts and wild honey,” at least while in the wilderness (Matt 3:4c, following Mark 1:6c). One is left with the general impression that John’s status as a holy man and figure of significance for the origins of the Jesus movement was thought to be bolstered because of his choice of (Mark 1:6c][Matt 3:4c), or his refraining from (Luke 7:31–35)[Matt 11:16–19; Luke 1:15b; cf. Mark 2:15][Matt 9:14][Luke 5:33], certain foods.

After surveying the history of scholarship concerning John’s diet in the rest of this chapter, this study will evaluate in greater detail the characteristics of John the Baptist in Mark 1:6c and Matt 3:4c (chap. 4) and in subsequent interpretations of these two Synoptic passages (chap. 5).

B. The status questionis (si autem est quaestio) concerning John the Baptist’s Diet

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 Mark 1:6c[Matt 3:4c. What follows is a mostly diachronic summary and critique of what scholars have argued concerning 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, however.

As has already been mentioned, many fine biblical commentaries and studies of the Baptist completely overlook this deed attributed to John (Mark 1:6c), or this characterization of his food (Matt 3:4c). Those who attempt to address the issue merit praise for at least recognizing the potential significance of two

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39 Alford, The Greek New Testament (Vol. 1: The Four Gospels, 1859 [1849]; London: Rivingtons, Waterloo Place/Cambridge: Deighton, Bell and Co., [1859–60], 1.18, on Matt 3:4: “There is no difficulty about the ἀχριστός, permitted to be eaten, Levit. xi. 22, was used as food by the lower orders in Judaea, and mentioned by Strabo and Pliny as eaten by the Ethiopians, and by many other authors as articles of food.” The witnesses of Strabo and Pliny to locust eating in antiquity will be examined in chapter 2. Concerning Mark 1:6, Alford (1.294) refers the reader to his notes on Matt 3:4.


41 Alford, Greek NT, 1.18, on Epiphanius, Panarion 30.13.4–5. The attention that Epiphanius calls to the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians, 1884 [1876; 1883]), 76–7; and Constantine von Tischendorf, Novum Testamentum Graece: Ad Antiquissimos Testes Donum Rodiensis (Leipzig: Giesecke & Devrient, 1869), 9. These patristic interpretations, among others, will be discussed in chapter 5.

42 Synoptic passages explained by neither the NT evangelists nor (as far as we can tell) their sources.

I. Preliminary Observations concerning Locusts as Human Food:

Erasmus, Wettstein, Bochart, Alford, Zahn, and Strack and Billerbeck

Writing in the sixteenth century, Erasmus (1466–1536) notes that the Mosaic law permits eating locusts and that certain Greco-Roman authors confirm that the consumption of such insects was indeed a culinary practice in antiquity. Writing in the eighteenth century, Johann Jakob Wettstein and Samuel Bochart likewise reflect an awareness of locusts as human food. If nothing else, Henry Alford’s influential NT commentary made the passages mentioned by Erasmus, Wettstein and Bochart more accessible to the English-speaking world. Alford knows also two patristic comments concerning John’s diet, namely those of Jerome concerning locust eaters in late antiquity and Epiphanius on Gos. Eb. Like many scholars before and after
them, Erasmus, Wettstein, Bochart and Alford seem interested primarily in the veracity of these evangelists’ characterization(s) of John as a locust eater. Yet even if this ascription was ‘true’ for the historical Baptist, one may further ask what this detail reveals about John, or at least about Matthew’s and Mark’s portrayals of John.

Without evidence, moreover, Alford states that such food “was used... by the lower orders in Judea,” thus placing for John a particular (albeit undefined) place in ancient Palestinian society. Such a generalization of locusts as a food of Bedouins or nomads is common in the secondary literature and will be criticized in chapter 2. 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 attempting 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 inquiry 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.

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:

Die Heuschrecken, welche noch heute in Palästina, besonders im Ostrajordanland, auch in Arabien und Äthiopien nicht selten gesehen werden und armen Leuten, zumal in Zeiten der Hungersnot, auch als eigentümliches Nahrungsmittel dienen, pflegen im Frühjahr oder bei Gelegenheit von Heuschreckenschwärmen ohne Mühe in Massen gefangen, gedörrt oder geröstet, dann eingesalzen und teils in diesem Zustand aufbewahrt, teils gemahlen und zu einer Art von Brot verarbeitet zu werden. 32

Zahn is absolutely correct to note that locusts regularly do serve as food, and not simply in a time of need. As is discussed in chapter 4 on the historical Baptist, locusts constitute a regular food staple of contemporary peoples, who

oftentimes 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 Mark 1:6 and Matt 3:4, certain witnesses to Tatian’s gospel harmony (the Diatessaron) describe John’s food as milk and mountain honey. Numerous other commentators, including M.-J. Lagrange and H. B. Swete, may well pick up on, but do not add much to, Zahn’s two central points concerning contemporary locust eaters and certain early church traditions of a ‘vegetarian’ John. Other interpreters who have called attention to the function of locusts as human food in antiquity and in the present include Alfred Loisy, C. S. Mann, Sherman E. Johnson, James R. Edwards and Joel Marcus. In chapter 4, ethnographic studies by archaeologists and anthropologists of contemporary peoples will be brought into the discussion of the historical Baptist’s food.

Complementing Zahn’s calling attention to contemporary locust eaters are H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, who highlight a plethora of Mishnaic commentaries on locusts as food. Although contemporary NT scholarship

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32 Zahn, Matthias, 133 n.33, referring to Tatian, Oratio ad Græcos 23 and the Diatessaron. The possible connection between Tatian’s vegetarianism and this distinctive tradition concerning John’s diet is examined in chapter 5. Cf. William L. Peterson, Tatian’s Diatessaron: Its Creation, Dissemination, Significance, and Use in History and Scholarship (VTSup 25; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 121-2.


34 Loisy, L’Evangile selon Marc (Paris: Émile Noury, 1912). Noteworthy is Loisy’s suggestion that John’s “wild honey” may have been left by bees in tree trunks and rocks: “certe le miel déposé par les Abeilles dans les troncs d’arbres et les fissures des rochers” (57).

35 Mann, Mark (AB 27; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986), 1:196, notes that locusts were “[a] common item of diet then and now in the Near East, high in vitamin content.” So also W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, Matthew: Introduction, Translation, and Notes (AB 26; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 25. As is discussed in chapter 4, locusts/grasshoppers are a good source for certain vitamins (e.g., B1 and B2) and are also extremely high in protein.


37 Edwards, The Gospel according to Mark (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 32: “Although offensive to some modern Western tastes, the eating of locusts fell within Jewish dietary regulations... and provided a high source of protein and minerals.”


appropriately calls for caution in using these later Jewish materials for interpreting (especially pre-70 C.E.) NT passages, it is significant for the present study 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 Mithraic materials, offer instructions for how to eat locusts. In chapter 2, it will be argued that witnesses to locust eating not simply in the Pentateuch (Lev 11:20–23), but in material roughly contemporary with the Baptist (Damasus and the midrashim, support the plausibility of the claim in Mark 1:6c that locusts/grasshoppers comprised part of John’s diet.

2. Form Criticism and John as Prophet: Dibelius (and Others)

Arguably the greatest legacy Martin Dibelius left for subsequent NT scholarship concerns the application of form criticism to the study of the Synoptic gospels. Yet even before the appearance of his classic study, one can see glimpses of Dibelius’s form-critical program in his work on the Baptist:

[w]e cannot be satisfied with the widely held view that John is a Pilgrim of the cross. We must regard John as a true prophet, a figure who, in his day, brought the Word of God to the people. (Dibelius, A Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, 1924, p. 144)

Dibelius is to be credited with attempting to distinguish between the historical John and how the author of Mark wishes to depict John. For Dibelius, although the historicity of Mark 1:6c is to be denied, the characterization in Mark serves instead to highlight “that John is more than just a preacher of repentance (Bußtaufe).” 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 Alfred Plummer, Erich Klostermann, Dieter Lührmann, and Michael Tilly.

Dibelius’s interpretation of John as a prophet in Mark 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 contention that locust eating would somehow validate John’s credentials as a prophet to Mark’s audience, since neither Dibelius nor others who advocate this interpretation offers any ancient evidence to support this conclusion. Of course, the earliest interpretations of John as a prophet are preserved within the Synoptic traditions themselves (Mark 11:32; Matt 21:26; Luke 20:6; Q/Luke 7:26; Mark 11:9; pase John 1:25; Matt 14:5), but only a hermeneutic of harmonization can justify the use of any of these Synoptic passages to interpret Mark 1:6c (Matt 3:4c). Nevertheless, even if Dibelius’s solutions are not compelling, this pioneering scholar merits praise for raising for the first time traditional-historical questions to be addressed also in the present study.

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

Looking to the context of Matt 3:1–6 for understanding John’s diet, Alan H. McNeile argues that Matthew intends to connect John with the OT citation of “a voice of one crying in the desert” (Matt 3:1; cf. Mark 1:2–3). His observation has merit, especially in so far as Matthew bends conventional rules of grammar to make this connection. One may fairly ask, however, whether before Matthew the author of Mark also intended to connect John’s diet in

43 Plummer, The Gospel according to St. Mark (CGTSC 2; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1915), 35: “It is neither said nor implied that it was his asceticism which attested the crowds; the belief that he was a Prophet did that.”

44 So also E. Klostermann, Das Markusvangelium (HNT 3; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1971 [1919]), 7: “In bezug auf Taeht und Nahrung erscheint das zugleich als eine Aneignung an das alte Prophetentum.”

45 Lührmann, Das Markusvangelium (HNT 3; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1987), 35: “es geht nicht allein um die Wüstentypologie, sondern um die Darstellung des Täufers als Prophet . . . .”


47 McNeile, Matthew, 26: “It transposes Mk’s. order, in describing the person of the Baptist before his success. The description (absent from Lk.) of his person, ascetic and prophetic, is thus made to carry on the thought of the prophecy’s ‘voice of one crying in the desert.’” McNeile also refers to H. B. Swete’s commentary on Mark—McNeile’s commentary is dedicated to Swete—for additional notes on John’s food.

48 Ibid, 25, on Matt 3:3: “The masc. ὁ ἄγνωστος is unique in the N.T., but the formula is analogous to that in [Matt 1] 22.”
some way with Isaiah 40 and, additionally, whether Matthew highlights to a greater extent an element already present within Mark. Accordingly, McNeile makes a contribution to the interpretation of Mark 3:3–4 but does not make a compelling case for Matthew's novelty in this regard.

This criticism applies also to McNeile's characterization, without argument, of John's alleged asceticism and prophetic identity because of eating "locusts and wild honey." Asetic interpretations of Mark 1:6c or Matt 3:4e—that John is somehow presented as an ascetic by virtue of his clothing or food (or both)—are also advocated by numerous other scholars. These scholars include: Bernhard Weiss,51 A. E. J. Rawlinson,52 Hugh Anderson,53 W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr.,54 Joachim GNiška,55 Rudolf Pesch,56 Craig L. Blomberg,57 Robert H. Gundry,58...
did not eat locusts: "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 passion for asceticism, their food is said to have been what the soil produced." Pallis concludes that "the archetype (of Mark 1:6) read ἔρευνον ... ζῷα καὶ καρπὶν ἔρευνον, that is, eating roots and wild fruit." Likewise, Philipp Kieferndorf maintains that John was a 'vegetarian' (Jesus too) on the grounds that ἔρευνον in Mark 3:4c should actually be rendered ἄρευνον. Robert Eisler also argues that the original Synoptic tradition as preserved in Mark 1:6c||Matt 3:4c has become corrupt:

I am myself much more inclined to believe that the word ἄρευνον = 'tree fruits' was maliciously distorted into ἕρευνον 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. 46


48 Neut. Pl. of ἄρευνον, ἄρυνον, apparently referring to the "tips" or "extremities" of vegetable "shoots." Given the title of the journal in which it appears, the argument is not surprising: P. Kieferndorf, "Seine Spieße war Hirscheshof?" Vegetatia Warte 54 (1921): 188–9. Similarly, in the same journal another author identified simply as Dr. Marx, the Duke of Saxony and a university professor (Dr. Marx, Herzog zu Sachsen, Universitätsprofessor, "Die Nahrung Johannes des Täufers: Eine Antwort auf den Artikel von Philipp Kieferndorf," Vegetatia Warte 55 (1922): 1–5) argues that both locusts and wild honey are corrupt traditions (p. 1) and calls attention to (much) later Christian interpretations of John the 'vegetarian' in Mignone's PG (pp. 2–5).

49 Eisler, "The Baptist’s Food and Clothing," in: idem, The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist according to Phileas Josephus. Recently Rediscovered ‘Capture of Jerusalem’ and Other Jewish and Christian Sources (New York: L. MacVeagh [Dial], 1931 [1929–30]), 235–40; here, 236; cf. 614–15. Note also the recent inquiry of Richard A. Young, "Didn’t John the Baptist Snack on Locusts?" in: idem, Is God a Vegetarian? Christianity, Vegetarianism, and Animal Rights (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 90–101. In the Lukas Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), Young calls attention to carob pods (καρπύδια, v. 16), mentioned as the pig food desired by the wayward son who was down on his luck, as a possibility for John’s food. Nonetheless, Young acknowledges that the Baptist probably did eat locusts and that "There is no clear evidence that John the Baptist or the early apostles were vegetarian and if they were what their reasons might have been" (100).

A common bias running through these studies, to which the present author must also confess, is the European prejudice against eating insects.70 Given that such food is regarded as strange by most people 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-anthropoid proto-gospel tradition must (?) have preceded Mark 1:6c. Nonetheless, even if Eisler does not offer a compelling argument concerning the diet of the historical Baptist, he can at least offer a plausible impetus for the transition from Mark 1:6c||Matt 3:4c to later Christian traditions about John as a ‘vegetarian.’

5. ‘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 Ernst Lohmeyer and Hans Windisch. In his classic monograph on the Baptist, Lohmeyer devotes attention to the distinctiveness of John’s diet, its function within Mark 1:1–8, the source of this Synoptic tradition, and the place of John’s diet within Palestinian Judaism.71 He notes, for example, that in Mark, "Wir hören ... dafür er seltsam in Tracht und Nahrung war."72 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: "Der Erzähler scheint ihn darin gefunden zu haben, daß er den Täufer als ‘Stimme eines Rufers in der Wüste’ legitimiert."73 The lacuna in Lohmeyer’s analysis is the same as that noted above for Dibelius, namely it does not establish how Mark’s audience would have made the connection between John’s food and clothing and the Baptist’s legitimization as the figure in the wilderness men.

70 With R. T. France, The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Erdmann/Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2002), 69: "There is no basis in Greek usage for the traditional notion (born no doubt of Western squeamishness) that the word δισθενος refers here not to locusts but to the carob or ‘locust’-bean (hence called ‘St. John’s bread’)." So also C. S. Mann, Mark, 1:196.

71 Ernst Lohmeyer, Das Urchristentum (Vol. 1: Johannes der Täufer; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1932), esp. 1:50–2. Lohmeyer (1:50–1 n.4) mentions certain early Christian interpretations of John’s diet as well.

72 Ibid, 1:53. That John’s food was ‘strange’ or ‘peculiar’ is not developed, however.

tioned in Isaiah 40.24 Additionally, the wilderness interpretation must account for the fact that people in various locations other than the wilderness ate locusts. Without argument, then, Lohmeyer simply assumes that eating locusts would point an ancient audience to a particular geographic location such as the wilderness. Other scholars who posit a connection between John’s diet and the wilderness include John P. Meier,72 Robert H. Gundry,76 Douglas R. A. Hare,77 Evi-Marie Becker78 and Ulrich B. Müller.79

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.80 Lohmeyer regards Mark 1:6–8 as a commentary on 1:2–3 and all of 1:1–8 as a traditional, pre-Markan unit.81 Of course, all of these points need to be sustained by arguments (which Lohmeyer does not provide). Perhaps when form criticism was relatively new in NT studies such brief observations seemed sufficient.

Lohmeyer also differs from Dibelius in positing a basic continuity between Mark 1:6c and the life of John:

Sie mag bis zu einem gewissen Grade mit dem Steppendasein gegeben sein, aber sie scheint auch gegen die Lebensweise in kultivierten Gegenden zu protestieren. Denn

54 The present study will establish the plausibility of a connection between John’s food and location in the wilderness in Mark. On this, see the discussion of Mark 1:2–8 in chapter 4.
72 Meier, Marginal Jew, 2:69: “Clearly, then, both the clothing and the diet of John point first of all simply to his habitation in the desert. Whatever further meaning they may have must be derived from his own stated understanding of his [sc. John’s] ministry.”
76 Gundry, Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 37: “A tradition probably contributes also to the description of John’s diet as consisting of ‘locusts’ and wild honey. For Mark, this piece of information harks back to John’s being ‘in the wilderness’ and thus reinforces correspondence to God’s plan as written in Isaiah the prophet.”
77 Hare, Mark (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 15: “The details concerning John’s clothing and diet are probably intended to reinforce the reference to his wilderness habitat. . . . ‘Wilderness’ is stressed because of its symbolic power concerning God’s past and future expressions of grace and judgment.”
80 Lohmeyer, Johannes, 1.50.
81 Ibid. So also Gundry, Mark, 37.

wilder Honig oder Milch oder Heuschrecken gelten als reine Speisen, etwa im Gegensatz zu der Fleischerschließung, die erst durch die rituelle Schlachtung des Tieres rein wird.82

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.”83 The paradigm that Lohmeyer seems to presume is that of ‘John against Judaism’: The Baptist avoids meat stemming from ritual slaughtering in the Jerusalem Temple and eats instead a different type of “holy meat.”84 From this it is not clear if Lohmeyer is flirting with 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, Hans Windisch explores certain Greco-Roman parallels. Windisch recognizes the emphasis within Mark 1:6a, 7b and 7c on oral proclamation.85 Windisch is not, however, interested in reduction-critical questions and even downplays the differences between Mark 1:6c and Matt 3:4c.86

After noting that the biblical writings offer no analogy to Mark 1:6c, Windisch turns to the following four examples: Pythagoras’s clothing and avoiding wine during the day;87 the Cynic Menades (3rd c. B.C.E.);88 Josephtus’s description of Bannus, who “fed on such things as grew of themselves,”89 and the later Christian tradition attributed to Hegesippus concerning James (the Lord’s brother), which is said to be noteworthy because of his clothing and diet.90 For Windisch, these depictions of Pythagoras, Menades, Bannus and James clarify that John’s diet in Mark highlights the authority of the Baptist’s proclamation.

82 Lohmeyer, Johannes, 1.50–1. That Lohmeyer is open to a ‘vegetarian’ interpretation of John’s diet is not to be overlooked, as he cites the works of Kieferendorf, Marx, and Elsner (discussed above).
83 Ibid., 1.62; cf. 1.48, 1.65.
84 Similarly, and also without argument, J. R. Edwards, Mark, 32: “John’s rustic dress and diet set him apart from the refined temple cult in Jerusalem and further identify him with ‘the desert region’ (1:1).” Cf. T. William Manson, “John the Baptist,” BJRL 36 (1953–54): 395–412; here, 401: “His choice of food and clothing and dwelling-place was a standing visible protest against the moral and spiritual deterioration which he, like many before him in Israel, felt to be the inevitable accomplishment of alienation and civilization.”
86 Ibid., 67; “Jeder der beiden hat die verschiedenartig . . . Die entscheidenden Bezeichnungen sind aber identisch, so daß die Annahme, Matthäus schöpfte die Nachricht aus anderer Überlieferung, nicht nötig ist.”
87 Ibid., 67, on Diogenes Laertius, Lives 8.1.19.
89 Ibid., 72, on Jos., Pītā 2 § 11.
90 Ibid., 75, on Hegesippus apud Euseb., Hist. eccl. 2.23.4–6.
The parallels Windisch cites are indeed fascinating, but his use of them to account for John’s diet in Mark is wanting for at least two reasons. First, Windisch has not made a compelling case that Mark (or Matthew) has a primary motivation of presenting John as an authoritative teacher/philosopher. Second, 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).91

Despite these criticisms, Windisch’s study has value for showing how Mark 1:6c and Matt 3:4c could well have been understood by some in the early church. Whatever Mark’s rationale may have been for mentioning the Baptist’s clothing and diet, subsequent Christian authors could indeed have interpreted Mark 1:6c as Windisch does and may for this reason have sought to minimize or augment (cf. Matt 3:4c) this Markan material.

6. The ‘No Significance’ Interpretation: Kraeling, Yamashiki and Juel

In contrast to the aforementioned studies, Carl H. Kraeling argues 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. . . . What is said about his food is to be taken merely as an attempt to characterize his life in the wilderness.92

This negative argument seems to be fuelled equally by a discussion of the Markan passage in light of Q/Luke 7:33 and L/Luke 1:15b and by this scholar’s reaction to the significance attributed to John’s diet and garb in later Christian literature.93 Despite his harmonizing approach to Mark 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 Karshuni Life of John.

Gary Yamashiki offers a more recent example of the ‘no significance’ interpretation of John’s diet: “[T]he narrator does not hold the information [in Matt 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.”94 Yamashiki’s conclusion is informed by his literary approach to the Matthean Baptist and does not stem, for example, from redactional observations concerning Matthew’s use of this Markan material.95 On the following page of his study, moreover, the conclusion cited immediately above seems not to be followed in that Yamashiki acknowledges that the description does have significance for Matthew: “[T]he narrator gives this description to provide the narrator with information that will help him or her to interpret a passage later in the narrative.”96

Indeed, Yamashiki seems to abandon his initial conclusion in his later discussion of Q/Matt 11:18: In Matthew, Matt 3:4 serves as background for 11:18–19, so that “the narrator realizes that it [11:18–19] is nothing more than a hyperbolic representation of John’s ascetic lifestyle.”97 Yamashiki’s interpretation of Matt 3:4 in light of Q/Matt 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/Matt 11:18. Accordingly, if, as Yamashiki asserts, “the story-line of [Matt] ch. 3 would remain intact without” numerous details, including “the description of John’s clothing and food (v. 4),”98 why does Matthew (or Mark!) bother to include them? If nothing else, Yamashiki’s work illustrates the inadequacy of employing a solely literary methodology to the questions pertinent to the present study.

A final attempt to dismiss the importance of John’s diet is given by Donald H. 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 add depth to the story but is not necessary to appreciate what is happening.”99 To this

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91 Additionally, Mark 7:1–23 (cf. Matt 15:1–20) would also seem to call into question Windisch’s interpretation. Jesus’ pronouncement that foods do not make a person clean or unclean (Mark 7:18–19; cf. Matt 15:17–18) would exclude Windisch’s construal of food as something that elevates John’s stature, at least in Mark. On this passage, see, e.g., Jesper Svartvik, Mark and Mission: Mk 7:1–23 in Its Narrative and Historical Contexts (ConBNT 32; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2000), esp. 375–402. This criticism of Windisch does not rest on the need for the ‘consistency of Mark or Matthew, however. Windisch’s interpretation of John’s diet would not even work for an author like Luke, who has no parallel to Mark 7:1–23, since in Luke there is also not a parallel to Mark 1:6 and Acts 15 (esp. vv. 22–29) makes affirmations similar to Mark 7:18–19.

92 Kraeling, John the Baptist, respectively 10, 13. Cf. the discussion of John Calvin in chapter 5.

93 Ibid., 10–13, although it is interesting that wild honey in Mark could mean “honey collected by wild bees or the gum exuded by certain types of trees” (Ibid, 195 n.11, referring to p. 11).

94 Yamashiki, John the Baptist in Life and Death: Audience-Oriented Criticism of Matthew’s Narrative (JSNTSup 167; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 83, on Matt 3:4; cf. p. 143.

95 Additionally, Yamashiki (26, 29, respectively) can justifiably fault others for uncritically assuming the historicity of Mark 1:6 (P. W. Holfenbach, Social Aspects of John, 833) or of Matt 1:6/Matt 3:4 (J. E. Taylor, Immersen, 54), but his literary approach to Matt 3:4 does not address the problem either.

96 Ibid., 84.

97 Ibid., 122–3; here, 123.

98 Ibid., 148.

one may respond that the deliberate allusion to the clothing of Elijah in Mark 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.

7. Marxsen’s Alternate Reconstruction of Tradition History

Willi Marxsen is best known for applying redaction criticism to the gospel of Mark. It thus comes as no surprise that his programmatic essay on John the Baptist in Mark is largely concerned with distinguishing between pre-Markan and Markan elements in Mark 1:2–8, among other passages in this gospel.

Marxsen disagrees with Lohmeyer that Mark 1:4–8 constitutes an expansion of the citation of ‘Isaiah’ in Mark 1:2–3. Instead, the earlier “formula quotation” of 1:2–3 should be regarded as a commentary on 1:4–8. Marxsen further maintains that the wilderness motif in 1:2–8 was Mark’s creation and not taken over from a pre-Markan source. The same is true, he maintains, for Mark’s detail about the Baptist’s diet.

Marxsen’s argument that the Baptist’s diet stems not from a pre-Markan source is tenuous at best, however, in that it is based on the supposed silence about John in the wilderness in the Fourth Gospel (sic: John 1:23) and in the (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).” In the case of Mark 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 OT citation (1:2–3). 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 OT citation. Indeed, Marxsen is aware that Mark 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 aspect. . . .” These shortcomings in Marxsen’s analysis warrant in the present study a different approach more in line with Lohmeyer’s traditional-critical hypothesis.

8. John and the Cuisine at Qumran: Filson, Davies and Charlesworth

Floyd V. 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 preceded 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). . . .” He further notes that the Baptist “ate food available in the wilderness.” Filson’s comparison emphasizes only how John’s location in the wilderness influenced 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 QL include S. L. Davies and James H. Charlesworth.

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102 Ibid., 36. Marxsen accounts for the lack of an explanation within Mark for the details of 1:6–8 in terms of the purpose for which Mark composed these verses, i.e., to ‘prove’ the fulfillment of 1:2–3 by John’s association with “the wilderness” (3:3f). This part of Marxsen’s analysis is also problematic in that it does not follow. We are to suppose that “Mark composes backward” and read Mark 1:2–3 in light of what is later said about John in Mark 1:4–6. Yet the brevity in 1:4–6 is explained by the desire to ‘prove’ John’s association with the wilderness. Additionally, “Mark, when part of the passage (1:6, on John’s diet) does not fit Marxsen’s redactional hypothesis, he simply ignores it. Given the distinctiveness of Mark 1:6 and the lack of an explanation given within 1:2–8, it makes better sense (following Lohmeyer) to regard this verse as pre-Markan, rather than a Markan composition.

103 Already John M. Allegro, The Dead Sea Scrolls (London: Penguin Books, 1955 [1956]), 163–5; here, 164: “We are told that besides his wearing of only the simplest garments, he ate only honey and locusts, both of which are mentioned in the food laws at the end of the Damascus Document. This again may indicate that the food he was able to eat was strictly limited owing to his purity vows taken in the Community.”

104 Filson, A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew (INTC; New York: Harper, 1960), 64, emphaizes original.

105 Ibid., 65.

106 Charlesworth, “John the Baptist and Qumran Barriers in Light of the Rule of the Community,” in: The Provo International Conference on the Dead Sea Scrolls (STUD 30; ed. D. W. Parry and E. Ulrich; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 353–75, esp. 353–6, 366–8. S. L. Davies, “John the Baptist and Essene Kashruth,” NTS 29 (1983): 560–71, maintains that John’s eating “locusts and wild honey” did not make him an ascetic; rather, it was concerned with ritual purity. Davies and Charlesworth also call attention to the prescription of the Damascus Document 12:13 that one needs to be careful not to eat the larave of bees when eating honey. Additionally, the Damascus Document 12:14–15 states that roasted or boiled locusts may also be eaten. These scholars do not, however, explain how the Essenes were concerned about purity in connection with the consumption of bee honey.
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 regarded as a distinctive activity for either John or certain Essenes. The comparison is not a compelling one, for as is discussed in chapter 2 locusts were a common food in much of the ancient Near East and could hardly be construed as distinctive among Palestinian Jews, much less the Essenes.

9. John’s Diet as a Recognized Problem: Anderson, Scobie, Vielhauer, Boismand and Böcher

The studies of five scholars, F. I. Andersen, Charles H. H. Scobie, Philipp Vielhauer, M. E. Boismand and Otto 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 F. I. Andersen, who begins with a discussion of different terms for “locust” in the HB and the ancient Near East, as well as certain ancient testimonies to locust eaters in Herodutus, Pliny (E), Strabo and Jerome. A significant insight concerns the popularity of locusts among the Babylonians (Assyrians?), who “evidently prized [them] as a delicacy.” Since locusts could constitute both a treat at royal banquets and a common food for the poor masses, Mark 1:6 cannot ipso facto be assumed to portray John as a poor wilderness dweller or an ascetic.

Also helpful for interpreting John’s diet is Josephus’s mentioning the abundance of honey produced from bees in the vicinity of Jericho. Andersen does not, however, address the question of historicity of Mark 1:6c][Matt 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.”

In addition to other patristic testimonies, Andersen may have been the first to mention those of Clement of Alexandria and Theophylactus. 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 unhygiened 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. 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 pretexts of explanations for John’s diet surveyed thus far in this chapter, sooner or later the need to differentiate between and evaluate the merits of them would be sensed by scholarship. Charles H. H. Scobie 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 Nazarene (cf. Num 6:1–21). This option depends on Luke 1:15, which as Scobie correctly notes is “probably legendary to a great extent” and a dubious reference for interpreting Mark 1:6c][Matt 3:4c.
3. Essene influence: Philo, Hypothetica 11.8 (apud Euseb., Prasp. evang. 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 Mark 1:6c][Matt 3:4c does not include in John’s diet.
4. The analogy of Josephus’s Banna: 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 and fish (provided that the blood is drained from the fish beforehand). If John’s diet was indeed influenced by the Essenes, why, then, 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.”

113 Ibid., 60, referring to CAD 4.257a.
114 Likewise, Morna D. Hooker, The Gospel according to Saint Mark (BNTC; London: A & C Black/Peabody, MA: Hendriksen, 1991), 37, notes: “Locusts and honey would not be John’s entire diet but might well be his greatest delicacies.” It does not necessarily follow, however, that since this diet “was permitted in the Torah . . . John stands in the Mosaic tradition” (37).
Although possible, there is no evidence for connecting such a diet with repentance or waiting for God’s promised deliverance. Thus, Scobie offers an apt critique of certain studies but does not himself advance the discussion of the historical Baptist’s diet.

Despite the title, nearly all of Philipp Vielhauer’s essay is devoted to John’s clothing rather than his diet. 122 Given the lack of an overt comparison of John with Jesus in Mark 1:6, Vielhauer suggests that it may be accurate historically: “Vor allem in der Notiz v.6 findet sich kein christliches Element; sie dürfte eine historisch zuverlässige Nachricht sein.” 123 Concerning the locusts and wild honey, Vielhauer refers to studies by J. J. Hess 124 and Gustaf Dalman 125 and notes simply, “Die Heuscheuren und der wilde Honig, die in der handschriftlichen Überlieferung zu zivilisierten Speisen umgedeutet wurden, gehören zu der kargen Nahrung der Beduinen.” 126 Vielhauer’s arguments for the historicity and pre-Markan character of Mark 1:6c are followed by Rudolf Pesch. 127

For his part, M. É. Boismard accounts for the difference between Mark 1:6c (“locusts and wild honey”) and Gos. Eb. (“wild honey, of which the taste was that of manna, like cakes [δόχειον τούτα] in olive oil”) in terms of the independence of these ‘gospel’ traditions. The argument offers a useful and perennially necessary caution against assuming that Gos. Eb. reflects a revision of ‘our’ Mark or Matthew. 128 Boismard’s article does not adequately account for the origin of the two different depictions of John’s diet, however. Given Boismard’s source-critical reconstruction, there would be no reason for John to have been transformed into a locust eater in a later stratum of the Synoptic tradition. On the contrary, this chapter 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 Gos. Eb. 129 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.

Otto Böcher’s article on Q/Luke 7:33 gives attention also to Mark 1:6c. Although Böcher notes correctly the difference between Mark 1:6c and this Q material, he nonetheless argues that the former Synoptic passage offers an illustration of the latter:

Wenn also der Täufer Heuscheuren (als feste Nahrung) und Honig (als Getränk) genießt, so bedeutet dies unwechselbar den Verzicht auf Fleisch und Wein. Johannes reicht sich damit ein in die große Schar der antiken Asketen, die sich durch sexuelle Enthaltung, so auch durch Fleisch- und Getränkeverzicht von dämonischer Befleckung freihalten wollen. . . . 130

Somewhat like Windisch’s literary approach, Böcher’s socio-historical 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 argument that John’s diet of locusts and lemon-water exemplifies his abstention from meat 131 and wine is guilty of conflating two Synoptic passages (that is, Mark


123 See further on this point in chapter 5.

124 Böcher, “Ass Johannes der Täufer kein Brot (Luk. vii. 33)?” NZT 18 (1971-72): 90-2; here, 91; cf. 90. Böcher construes µεθάπροσωπον δίπροσωπον in Mark 1:6 as honey-water, which—he further states with reference to Plato, Symp. 203b; Porphy, De oenír. nymph. 16; Luke 24:42; the Essenians, according to Philo (opus Euseb., Proep. evang. 8.11.8); IQS 64-5; and IQSap 2:17-21—is feared by the demons and is the ‘wine’ of the gods.

125 Böcher’s interpretation (“Ass Johannes der Täufer,” 90) of δίπροσωπον as neat in Q/Luke 7:33 posits that δίπροσωπον misconstrues the Hebrew דִּבְשָׁא in that the latter would include meat. On this point J. P. Meier (Marginal Jew, 2:48) is appropriately critical, since δίπροσωπον is attested only in Luke, and a person who ate locusts would not be ‘vegetarian.’ Nonetheless,
own accord.” The comparison made by Lupieri and Taylor is helpful insofar as locusts and wild honey “were neither subject to human control nor the result of human labor,” and “[t]he Hebrew ליָלָל refers to uncultivated land, as does the equivalent Greek word ἑρμήνου.”

11. Ulrich Luz on the History of Interpretation of Matt 3:4

In his important commentary on Matthew, Ulrich Luz suggests the likelihood that Matt 3:4a 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 parascetic undertone. Nevertheless, the passage was interpreted parascetically as an explanation of the church and thereby was drawn into the mainstream of church disputes.”

In distinguishing between the pre-Matthean (possibly also pre-Markan) meaning of John’s diet, Matthew’s (allegedly) ascetic characterization of John and the hortatory interpretations derived from that diet in later centuries, Luz appreciates 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 history of interpretation, it comes as no surprise that Luz calls attention to certain understandings of the Baptist’s diet through the centuries, including those of John Chrysostom (“We want to imitate him”) and even John Calvin.


Yet another interpretation of John’s diet is given by M. Eugene 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 the Leonard of the book of Acts, and to identify him with the wil-

Robert A. Guelich, Mark 1:8–26 (WBC 34A; Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), 21 follows Böcher’s construal of John as a ‘vegetarian’ and μυκόν as non-alcoholic honey-water.


133 R. H. Smith, Matthew (ACNT; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 50.

derness that was to be the scene of eschatological renewal." Warren Carter also understands John's diet as a criticism of the rich. Somewhat analogously, Eugene LaVerdiere draws a connection between John's diet and Jesus' later instructions to the disciples in Mark 6:8–10 "to take no possessions" but rather "to accept whatever local hospitality provided." The implicit assumption in these quasi-liberationist interpretations of Matt 3:4c is that eating "locusts and wild honey" identifies the Baptist with the poor. As noted above and is to be addressed further in chapter 2, however, such a motivation or social location for an ancient Mediterranean locust eater cannot be assumed.

13. Summation

This survey of scholarship on John's diet reveals that there is not—nor has there ever been—a consensus concerning what ἀχρίδες καὶ μέλι ἄγριον means in Mark 1:6c|Matt 3:4c. The most prevalent interpretations maintain that "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 Mark 1:6c|Matt 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 shortcomings concerns the lack of argument or historical analogy in support of any given interpretation of John's diet.

It is for these reasons that the present study considers Mark 1:6c|Matt 3:4c in light of actual locust eaters in antiquity (chap. 2), ancient conceptions of "wild honey" (chap. 3), and the interpretations of John's diet in the Synoptic gospels (chap. 4) and in the early church (chap. 5). The topics to be addressed in chapters 2, 3 and 4 have up to this point yet to receive a full investigation. Furthermore, the interpretation of Mark 1:6c|Matt 3:4c in the early church also merits a comprehensive analysis. It is thus hoped that the reader's appetite is whetted to learn more about John's diet and that this inquiry will further the understanding of John's place within Second Temple Judaism and legacy in early Christianity.


140 Carter, Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading (The Bible and Liberation; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 95: "His food denotes poverty, as well as his commitment to trust in God by not being distracted . . . because of concern with daily food (cf. 6:25–34, 11). He is indebted to no one. . . . John's unusual food. . . . presents a critique of the economic extravagance of the powerful elite, who maintain their own abundance at the expense of the poor. . . ."

141 LaVerdiere, The Beginning of the Gospel: Introducing the Gospel according to Mark (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 31–2. It is not clear, however, if LaVerdiere thinks that the author of Mark presents the Baptist (or Jesus' disciples) as a model of either discipleship or missionary activity.
Chapter 2

Locust/Grasshopper Eating in Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman Antiquity

Neither Mark nor Matthew specifies why John the Baptist ate ἄρριδες καὶ μέλι ἄγγελον, or how this particular diet contributes to their presentations of the Baptist in Mark 1:8 and Matt 3:1-6. As a result, the interpreter must ask what the depiction of an eater of grasshoppers/locusts and unrefined honey could mean to an ancient audience. As indicated in chapter 1, such a study has yet to be done and is the task of this and the following chapter. It is not the assumption of the present study that all people in antiquity would have had the same understanding of what such a diet would mean, or that the historical John, the author of Mark and the author of Matthew would have given the same explanation for its significance. Indeed, in chapter 4 it is argued that different shades of meaning (or lack thereof) are to be noted for the Baptist and these two evangelists.

Although honey remains to this day a common food in many parts of the Western and the Two-Thirds World, the idea of eating locusts, grasshoppers or cicadas has long been regarded as peculiar in many, particularly Western, cultures. Partially for this reason, this chapter on John's lo-

A. Introduction

As Marston Bates, “Insects in the Diet,” 43, among others, observes: “Insects are an important element in human diet in many parts of the world, but they have long been taboo in European civilizations.” Bates further notes, “There is one striking exception to the Western refusal of insects as food—honey. To be sure, honey is not an insect, but it is an insect product, and a very intimate product at that, for the bees have to carry the nectar home in their crops to regurgitate it into the honeycomb” (44). Similarly, in a broad and comprehensive survey of Talmudic and other witnesses to the Palestinian ‘food basket,’ Magen Broshi, “The Diet of Palestine in the Roman Period — Introductory Notes,” Israel Museum Journal 5 (1965): 41–56, notes that “grasshoppers (locusts) are ‘virtually the only food eaten in antiquity that is not consumed today’” (51). Cf. Joseph C. Bogart, “Insects as Food: How They Have Augmented the Food Supply of Mankind in Early and Recent Times,” Natural History 21 (1921): 191–200; here, 191; Ronald L. Taylor, Butterflies in My Stomach. Or: Insects in Human Nutrition (Santa Barbara, CA: Woodbridge, 1975), 15–21.

B. Prolegomena: What is a ‘Locust’?

For philologists and anthropologists alike, the task of distinguishing between references to locusts, grasshoppers and cicadas can be exasperating. Depending on whom a person reads, or asks, a word that usually denotes a ‘locust’ may in a particular context refer to a ‘grasshopper,’ and vice-versa. Adding to the confusion is the immense variety of species of grasshoppers that exists in our world today. A clarification of terms is thus necessary before the ancient evidence is examined.

In modern scientific taxonomy, locusts and grasshoppers are not two different insects: “All grasshoppers (except the so-called long-horned

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1 As Marston Bates, “Insects in the Diet,” 43, among others, observes: “Insects are an important element in human diet in many parts of the world, but they have long been taboo in European civilizations.” Bates further notes, “There is one striking exception to the Western refusal of insects as food—honey. To be sure, honey is not an insect, but it is an insect product, and a very intimate product at that, for the bees have to carry the nectar home in their crops to regurgitate it into the honeycomb” (44). Similarly, in a broad and comprehensive survey of Talmudic and other witnesses to the Palestinian ‘food basket,’ Magen Broshi, “The Diet of Palestine in the Roman Period — Introductory Notes,” Israel Museum Journal 5 (1965): 41–56, notes that “grasshoppers (locusts) are ‘virtually the only food eaten in antiquity that is not consumed today’” (51). Cf. Joseph C. Bogart, “Insects as Food: How They Have Augmented the Food Supply of Mankind in Early and Recent Times,” Natural History 21 (1921): 191–200; here, 191; Ronald L. Taylor, Butterflies in My Stomach. Or: Insects in Human Nutrition (Santa Barbara, CA: Woodbridge, 1975), 15–21.

2 As is noted in chapter 1, Mark 1:6 claims only that John was in the habit of eating “locusts and wild honey” (γὰρ ἐστὶν ἄρριδες καὶ μέλι ἄγγελον), possibly among other items during his time “in the wilderness.” Matt 3:4, however, states that John’s wilderness food was only “locusts and wild honey” (τὸ δὲ τροφή ἦν στεφάνων ἄρριδες καὶ μέλι ἄγγελον).

3 Chapter 4 will also consider the function of Mark 1:6 as a part of 1:2–8 and examine what light these observations shed on this diet for the historical Baptist and the author of Mark. It will be argued that within Mark 1:2–8 Mark 1:6c complements other characterizations of John in the wilderness. The function of Matt 3:4c within Matt 3:1–6 and the possible reasons for Luke’s omission of this Markan material will also be addressed in chapter 4.

4 Ian C. Beavis, Insects and Other Invertebrates in Classical Antiquity (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1988), 62: “Because of their song, the harmless species of aekis are often closely associated with cicadas, and it is probable that there was some degree of confusion between the two groups of insects” (cf. 91–2). Mark Q. Sutton, Insects as Food: Aboriginal Entomophagy in the Great Basin (Bailiara Press Anthropological Papers 33; Menlo Park, CA: Bailiena, 1983), 11, likewise calls attention to this problem for the contemporary anthropologist. "Grasshoppers are locally called 'Cicadas' (Orthoptera,Locustidae) are here considered under the same heading due to their general similarity and to the difficulty in separating the different genera in the ethnographic literature (e.g., one native group denied eating grasshoppers, but said they did eat locusts, which may have actually been cicadas).” Cf. Taylor, Butterflies, 146.
grashoppers) belong to the super family Acridoidae.\(^{15}\) Locusts comprise a specific kind, or genus, of grasshoppers. The ‘family’ name given to most locusts is acrididae, who belong to the ‘order’ orthoptera (= “straight-winged”).\(^{6}\) It may be counterintuitive to the non-scientist that successive generations of the same type of locust can exhibit remarkable differences in physiology, including body structure and color, as well as social behavior. According to the “phase theory” pioneered by entomologist Boris P. Uvarov in the early-twentieth century, locusts are polymorphic insects that exist, alternatively, in ‘solitary,’ ‘transitional’ and ‘gregarious’ phases.\(^{7}\) ‘Solitary’ locusts (solitaria) act much like other kinds of grasshoppers and are not a threat to crops or other vegetation. Young ‘solitary’ locusts can, however, enter a ‘transitional’ phase (transiens) before swarms of ‘gregarious’ locusts (gregaria) appear. What distinguishes the gregarious phase of locusts from the solitary phase is the gregarious locusts’ comparatively longer rear legs for jumping, proclivity for migration over long distances, procreation en masse, and, of course, ravenous appetite. To the unsuspecting farmer, there is naturally a huge difference between a harmless handful of grasshoppers or ‘solitary’ locusts and a smothering swarm of devouring, ‘gregarious’ locusts.\(^{8}\) It thus comes as no surprise that a plurality of terms in languages ancient and modern came to designate grasshoppers and (different phases of) locusts.

In both the Jewish and the Christian tradition, the most well-known locust in scripture is the Desert Locust (schistocerca gregaria). It is this particular kind of locust that the Lord is said to have sent against the Egyptians (Exod 10:3–20) and, later, threatened against the disobedient covenant people (for example, Deut 28:38). For those who read the Christian Bible from a “canonical” perspective (whether intentionally or subconsciously), it might be all too easy to infer that schistocerca gregaria is the type of ἄξπις named in Mark 1:6c–Matt 3:4c. The translation of ἄξπις as “locust” can reinforce this interpretation. It must be remembered, however, that the Desert Locust is not the only species of locust/grasshopper indigenous to Palestine. Others include the Moroccan Locust (Dociostaurus maroccanus), the Tree Locust (Anacridium melanorhodon arabafraun), and the Sudan Plague Locust (Aiolopus simulacris).\(^{9}\)

It is also noteworthy that neither Mark 1:6 nor Matt 3:4 suggests that the Baptist was grazing upon the remains of a locust/grasshopper infestation. Nor is there evidence that such an infestation occurred during the Baptist’s lifetime. For the following reasons, then, “grasshoppers” is the preferred English translation of ἄξπις in Mark 1:6c\(^{10}\) and Matt 3:4c:

1. In Greek, ἄξπις does not designate a particular kind of grasshopper or locust, whether ‘solitary,’ ‘transient’ or ‘gregarious.’

2. Rendering τινός as “locusts” in Mark 1:6c–Matt 3:4c runs the risk of leading many Western readers to make one, possibly two, unwarranted assumptions. The first is that John dined on a ‘plague of’ gregarious locusts that had invaded Palestine from Eastern Africa (or elsewhere). The other is that Mark 1:6c–Matt 3:4c intends some ‘intersexuality’ with the locusts predicted by the Hebrew prophet Joel.

3. Biologically, the broader English term “grasshopper” includes locusts and corresponds to the more general term given to this family of insects (acrididae).

In light of these considerations, the analysis to follow will give full weight to the ambiguity inherent in the term ἄξπις in Mark 1:6c–Matt 3:4c and will consider a variety of ancient testimonies to locusts/grasshoppers, regardless of an author’s intended or actual referent.

\(^{1}\) Alison Steedman, ed., Locust Handbook (Kent, UK: Natural Resources Institute, Overseas Development Administration, 1990), 2.

\(^{2}\) Although the bodies of grasshoppers and cicadas are quite similar, cicadas are differentiated from locusts by their wider (butterfly-like) wings and for this reason belong to a different order, homoptera.


\(^{4}\) Concerning the Desert Locust (schistocerca gregaria), Allan S. Gilbert, “The Flora and Fauna of the Ancient Near East,” in: Civilisations of the Ancient Near East (ed. Jack M. Sasson; New York: Scribner’s, 1995), 1.153–74; notes that “Normally existing in a harmless, dispersed ‘solitary’ phase, they grow larger and darker in color under conditions of increased population density and ultimately coalesce into the ravaging migrating hordes of their ‘gregarious’ phase, which may last up to several years bringing with it the inevitable ruin evoked by the Eighth Plague of Exodus 10°” (1.172). Cf. Ael., Na 10.13.

\(^{5}\) Additionally, Frederick S. Bodenheimer, “Note on Invasions of Palestine by Rare Locusts,” IEJ 1 (1950): 146–8; here, 146, notes that, in addition to schistocerca gregaria, “The European locust (Locusta migratoria L.), is common in all the more humid habitats of Palestine, but generally only in its solitary phase,” rather than its notorious ‘gregarious’ phase. Bodenheimer (147–8) calls attention also to “the Moroccan Locust (Dociostaurus maroccanus Thogb.),” which “lives permanently in Palestine without ever causing damage or increasing” in numbers. In its ‘gregarious’ phase, however, it did infest Palestine 1897–1900 and again in the mid-twentieth century, at the time Bodenheimer wrote this article. See further Steedman, ed., Locust Handbook, 104, 110, 113, 117 (with maps).

\(^{6}\) With Joel Marcus, Mark 1:6–8, p. 149.
the ability of locusts to devour, multiply and shed their ‘skin’. Perhaps the only positive reference to locusts in the HB—notably, in their ‘gregarious’ phase—is the admiration conferred in Proverbs 30 for their ability to organize without a recognizable leader.

With regard to the eating of locusts/grasshoppers, Leviticus 11 allows the Israelites to consume four different kinds of ‘leaping’ insects:

[20] All winged insects that walk upon all fours are detestable to you. [21] But among the winged insects that walk on all fours you may eat those that have jointed legs above their feet, with which to leap on the ground. [22] Of them you may eat: the locust (בְּרֵה), according to its kind, the bals locust (בַּלַּס), according to its kind, the cricket (כָּרָן) according to its kind, and the grasshopper (קָרָן) according to its kind. [23] But all other winged insects that have four feet are detestable to you. (Lev 11:20-23)

For reference in later discussions in this chapter, the terms used for “locust” in the HB and LXX at Lev 11:22 are as follows:

| Lev 11:22a | קָרָן | κρατία | Βροοχός |
| Lev 11:22b | בַּלַּס | οἰκτικός |
| Lev 11:22c | לָשֶׁנ | έκρατος |
| Lev 11:22d | בְּרֵה | οἰκτρίας |

Attention will be given to Lev 11:20–23 in the following section.

In addition to Leviticus 11, the other part of the HB reflecting different terms for locusts is the prophet Joel, who mentions four: the cutting locust (בְּרֵה), swarming locust (בַּלַּס), hopping locust (כָּרָן) and destroying locust (קָרָן), Joel 1:4. When this prophet later uses the same four designations, בַּלַּס occurs last rather than first in the list of assailants (בַּלַּס בַּרְוַה הַשָּׁרַים שִׂאִים, Joel 2:25). In Joel, these terms could designate distinct species of locusts, or different phases of the Desert Locust (schistocerca gregaria). Joel either offers the swarming locusts as a meta

observes, “We pass from the world like locusts, and our life is like a mist, and we are not worthy to obtain mercy.” Cf. m. Pesah, 3.5 (“like the horns of a locust”).

[17] Nāb 3:15–17: “[15] There the fire will devour you, the sword will cut you off. It will devour you like the locust. Multiply yourselves like the locust, multiply like the grasshopper!”

[16] You increased your merchants more than the stars of the heavens. The locust sheds its skin and flies away. [17] Your guards are like grasshoppers, your scouts like swarms of locusts settling on the fens on a cold day—when the sun rises, they fly away; no one knows where they have gone. [18] Prov 30:24, 27: “Four things on earth are small, yet they are exceedingly wise: ... the locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank.” Cf. David Daube, “A Quartet of Beastes in the Book of Proverbs,” JTS n.s. 36 (1985): 380–6, esp. 383–5.
phoc for attacking (human) combatants or, more probably, describes an actual plague of locusts in terms of an invading army. 30

This interpretation is sometimes based on the mistaken assumption that locusts would never enter Palestine from the north, i.e., from Assyria. See, e.g., Pablo R. Andifidh, "The Locusts in the Message of Joel," VT 42 (1992): 433–41, who argues that the locusts in Joel are not actual locusts, because Joel 2:20 refers to a "northerner," and in Palestine "locusts always come from the desert areas of the south" (433). Andifidh also dismisses the interpretation of the locusts as "the zoological taxonomy of God" (436). Instead, Andifidh regards the locusts as a reference to a foreign army (437–9; cf. Ar., 1:149–52; Nic, 1:78–87, 301–805). Additionally, Harold Brodsky, "An Enormous Horde Arrayed for Battle": Locusts in the Book of Joel," Bible Review 6 (1990): 22–29, states erroneously, "The desert locust migrates back and forth, around North Africa and the Near East, from about 35° to about 35° north of the equator. (Israel is the northernmost extension of the locusts' range.)" (24), although he maintains that Joel refers to actual locusts (32–4). See W. L. Chaves, Insect: Fact and Folklore, 57–8, on migrations or "surviving" locusts from Africa as far north as England and even across the Atlantic Ocean to North America. It thus follows that locusts could well have entered Assyria first and then subsequently into Palestine.

V. A. Hurwitz, "Joel's Locust Plague in Light of Sargon II's Hymn to Nanaya," JBL 112 (1993): 597–603, cites an 8th c. B.C.E. Sumerian (Assyrian) prayer to the goddess Nanaya asking that "the evil locust which destroys the crops...be turned into nothing" (597–8; cf. Joel 2:18–21). Hurwitz notes, "nearly every detail in this passage has its general or quasi-specific parallels in Joel's description of the locusts afflicting Judah" (599).


2. The Prescription in Leviticus 11

As the only part of Hebrew scripture to mention locust/grasshopper eating, the aforementioned passage in Leviticus 11 merits additional consideration. The section devoted to food laws in Lev 11:9–42 offers instructions concerning creatures that inhabit the water (11:9–12), the air (11:13–23) and the land (11:24–42). The second part, Lev 11:13–23, is concerned with birds (vv. 13–19) and four (types of?) insects. 31

Scholars are well aware of the difficulty of ascertaining which four insects Lev 11:22–25 prescribes. In v. 22a, πετεώς is a generic term for "locust."
indeed "the most common term in the HB for this species." In v. 22b-c, הָאָרְסָה and וָרָסָה are hapax legomena in the HB and difficult if not impossible to identify. Finally, וָרָסָה (v. 22d) in Num 13:33 and Isa 40:22 signifies a "grasshopper." 33

Whatever their precise identity in Leviticus 11, one may fairly ask why only these four insects are allowed to be eaten. Lev 11:21 states simply that these insects' possession of "hind legs above their feet" and corresponding ability to hop rather than crawl distinguishes them from other 'swarmers,' which are forbidden. 34 Frank Gorman finds a basis for this distinction in the order of creation in Genesis 1: "[W]inged insects that walk on all fours" are prohibited because "[t]he means of locomotion is not appropriate for their bodily appearance. They represent a disruption of the normative order...[and] are 'detestable' (vv. 20, 23)." 35 In the case of the four insects specified in Lev 11:22, however, "[w]ings are consistent with leaping as a means of locomotion. Thus, they appropriately reflect their location within the created order." 36 From the standpoint of the final editor of Leviticus, such an explanation may well have been employed to sanction toleration for consuming this quartet of winged insects but not other types of insects.

Writing with an expert in entomology that the present author cannot claim, Murray I. Isman and Martin Cohen argue that the permission to eat locusts but not other insects is based upon the locusts' "vegetarian" (that is, non-flesh eating) diet:

As both the blood and carrion are strictly taboo according to the dietary laws, so are the animals that thrive on them. All eating insects, other than the orthopterans, may have been viewed as predators (blood-feeding dipterans, stinging hymenopterans), or carrion feeders (dipterans). In contrast, orthopterans, particularly locusts and other scarids, are primarily granivorous. 37

However attractive from a contemporary point of view, the explanation suffers from an inability to postulate credibly that the author of Lev 11:20–23 possessed such a scientific understanding or justification. Since the eating of blood is a concern elsewhere in Leviticus (Lev 3:17; 7:26–27; 17:10–14; 19:26a), there is no reason to infer that it could not have been specified as a rationale in Lev 11:20–23 as well. As is discussed below, however, such a motivation is clearly evident for the later Jewish author of the Letter of Aristeas.

More persuasively, Erhard Gerstenberger considers the normative eating habits of the common people and asks whether the exception offered in Lev 11:21–22 may have been an "[a]daptation to some prevalent eating customs in Israel's proximity? Experience of the distresses of famine forcing them no longer to disdain 'even' grasshoppers?" 38 Gerstenberger's first question mer-

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33 F. H. Gorman, Divine Presence and Community, 73.


35 F. H. Gorman, Divine Presence and Community, 73.


37 F. H. Gorman, Divine Presence and Community, 73.

its additional attention in light of other witnesses to locust eating in the ancient Near East.

3. Locust Eating in the Ancient Near East

Lev 11:20–23 does not at all point to a distinctively Israelite culinary practice of locust/grasshopper eating. On the contrary, the widespread and well-attested delight in eating such insects in the ancient Near East may well lie behind the partial prescription afforded in this passage.

R. K. Harrison notes that, "[a]s a food, locusts have been eaten in the Near East for millennia. A royal banquet scene from the palace of Ashurbanipal (c. 669–627 BC), the last great Assyrian king, depicted servants bringing locusts on sticks for the guests to eat."30 The Assyrian bas-relief of servants carrying skewered locusts and pomegranates, which Harrison describes, is reproduced immediately below.31

Oded Borowski refers first to another Assyrian relief and then to the aforementioned relief:

The locust was considered a delicacy; and, on one Assyrian bas-relief, servants can be seen carrying, among other foodstuffs, long pins of skewered locusts to a royal feast (Aynard 1972:60). Another relief from the palace of Ashurbanipal shows two servants, one of whom is carrying... rows of locusts (Brothwell and Brothwell 1969:fig. 25).32

Complementing this pictographic evidence, the Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago cites numerous literary testimonies to locust eating, including the following:

On the steps its (the enemy's land) animal life is famished, he roasts (it) like crows (var. locusts) (with his fiery, divine brilliance). (Lugale 3.5)

Send me a hundred locusts and (some) food. (Yos 2.15.27 (69 let.))

... and the locusts for which I asked you, do not forget the... and the locusts! (CT 29.11a.7, 9)

I have forwarded to your lord as many locusts as they were able to catch for me. (Arm 3.62.15)

Send me as many locusts as you have been able to collect and kill. (Arm 91:0.5)33

The first passage points to the eating of locusts during a time of hardship, in this case following military defeat (Lugale 3.5). The other four testimonies, however, corroborate the depictions of the two bas-reliefs in that they point to orders from individuals of some wealth who desired this particular food.

This same inference applies to locust eating in Mesopotamia: "In a letter found at Mari the writer addresses the king thus: 'Locusts often come to Terqa and the day they arrived the heat was torrid so they did not alight. But all the locusts that were taken I have sent to my Lord.'"34 It thus follows that locusts were not just the food of necessity for those who possessed no other means with which to feed themselves. On the contrary, locusts routinely comprised the chosen cuisine of the wealthy.35 Understood within this light,

30 Borowski, Every Living Thing: Daily Use of Animals in Ancient Israel (Walnut Creek, CA: AltMira, 1998), 159.
31 These passages are cited in the entry for erba (cf. Hab. 1:12) in CAD (Vol. 4, 1958; ed. J. J. Gansel et al; Chicago: University of Chicago Oriental Institute, 1956–64), 1:256–8; here, 257.
32 J. M. Aynard, "Animals in Mesopotamia," in: Animals in Archaeology (ed. A. H. Bredikhin; New York: Praeger, 1972), 42–68; here, 60. Aynard continues, "These insects were in fact much esteemed as a foodstuff, and on one Assyrian bas-relief servants are carrying a hare, birds and long pins of skewered locusts to a royal feast" (60; cf. 59–60, 64).
John's diet does not self-evidently constitute a critique of the rich or point to a wilderness dweller. Both rich and poor people ate locusts in a variety of rural and (comparatively more) urban locations in the ancient Near East.

Furthermore, Elizabeth Douglas Van Buren summarizes the following archeological evidence for the prevalence of locusts in ancient Near Eastern cultures:

A stamp-seal found at Lachish was adorned with a design of a grasshopper executed with a drill. A golden dagger found in the grave of Meskalamdug at Ur had an image of a locust incised upon it. A locust appears on a few cylinder seals of the time of the First Dynasty of Babylon as one of the symbols scattered in the field, but on seals of the Kassite period it seems to be a grasshopper which is placed near the deity. Lead figurines of a locust, natural size and rendered with great accuracy of observation, came to light in Room 4 of the Temple of Ashur in Khorsabad. On a plaque of glazed faience a locust is represented in the background of a scene showing an Assyrian, probably the king himself, making his petition to a seated divinity. Even a relief from the palace of Khorsabad depicts attendants bringing locusts on sticks and other provisions for a banquet, and another relief representing Sanherib and his queen feasting in a garden shows a locust on one of the topmost branches of a palm-tree to the left of the group.

Although the interpretation of some of the items to which Van Buren refers may be disputed or less clear than she suggests, her work is valuable for highlighting the place of locusts not only as food but also in ancient Near Eastern folklore.

Given the copious findings of locust artifacts from other civilizations, Oded Borowski notes correctly about a seal that was found within Palestine and depicts a locust:

Since, according to the biblical prescription, the locust was edible, it should not be surprising that the insect is depicted on a Judean seal inscribed "belonging to Azaryahu (of) the locust (family)" with an engraved grasshopper under the inscription (Avigad 1966; Neufeld 1978: fig. 1).

Nahman Avigad is persuaded that the same Israelite craftsman was responsible for the carved locust and the inscription. Moreover, the Testament of Solomon would later account for Solomon's insufficiency in terms of the king's sacrificing locusts to foreign deities.

The preceding observations are valuable to the present inquiry because they demonstrate that Lev 11:20–23 is not a distinctive literary testimony. That locust eating was a common practice is documented by copious materials from the ancient Near East. What is unusual about Lev 11:20–23 is the tolerance granted to the eating of only certain kinds of "clean" grasshoppers/locusts. The reason for this limited indulgence has been touched upon briefly above and may be explored somewhat further in light of the materials discussed in this section. It is the view of the present author that Lev 11:20–23 offers an argument from the order of creation to support a dispensation for eating locusts, which were not merely for the poor or famine-stricken but a prized delicacy in the ancient Near East. In short, locusts were just too popular and delightful to proscribe completely, and a theological rationale was thus found for allowing the eating of at least some of these insects.


A notable contradiction to the exception given for "jointed legs" in Lev 11:21 is Deut 14:19, which proscribes the eating of any and all insects that have wings: "And all winged insects are unclean for you; they shall not be eaten." Deut 14:19 begins much as Lev 11:20 but does not offer an exception like that in Lev 11:21–22 for certain types of (winged) locusts:

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37 T. Sol. 26.3 (§129), concerning the Shummanite woman whom Solomon wished to marry: "So because I loved the girl—she was in full bloom and I was out of my senses—I accepted as nothing the custom (of sacrificing) the blood of the locusts (טב דשניך וות עיניו) as well as my hands and sacrificed in the name of Bashan and Molech to idols, and I took the maiden to the palace of my kingdom." Greek text: C. C. McCoy, ed., The Testament of Solomon (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1922), 74; ET: OTP, 1986.
38 With Frederick S. Bodenheimer, Insects as Human Food: A Chapter of the Ecology of Man (The Hague: W. Junk, 1951), 40–1: "This permission to eat locusts [Lev 11:21–22] is nothing more than a codification of a habit existing since oldest times among the nomads of the Middle East, which, as we will see, has lasted down to our day." Cf. David Nevo, "The Desert Locust, Schistocerca gregaria, and Its Control in the Land of Israel and the Near East in Antiquity, with Some Reflections on Its Appearance in Israel in Modern Times," Phytoparasitica: Israel Journal of Plant Protection Sciences 24 (1996): 7–32, esp. 19–22; Gorman, Divine Presence, 73.
5. The Letter of Aristeas and Philo of Alexandria: Locusts as a Recognized Food in the Egyptian Jewish Diaspora

Regardless of the tension resulting from the inclusion of both Lev 11:20–23 and Deut 14:19 in the final form of the Pentateuch, ancient Jewish writings that mention locust eating embrace Lev 11:20–23 consistently and seem to ignore Deut 14:19. The witnesses to locust eating discussed in this and the following sections are: the Letter of Aristeas, Philo of Alexandria, the Temple Scroll and Damascus Document from Qumran, the Mishnah and midrashim, and, finally, Moses Maimonides.

If a Hellenistic date for the Letter of Aristeas (2nd c. B.C.E.) is correct, then this letter—probably from Alexandria—offers the earliest literary testimony subsequent to Lev 11:20–23 to locust eating by certain Jews. Aristeas presents a list of ‘vegetarian’ ‘birds,’ including locusts, which the Jews known to this author eat in accordance with kashrut:

[144b] These laws have all been solemnly drawn up for the sake of justice, to promote holy contemplation and the perfecting of character. [145] For of the winged creatures of which we make use (οἱ ἄγριοι) all are gentle and distinguished by cleanliness and they feed on (χρυσομέλα πρὸς τὴν τροφὴν) grain and pulses, such as pigeons, doves, 'locusts' (ἄττακοι), partridges, and also geese and all similar fowl. [146] But of the winged creatures which are forbidden you will find that they are wild and carnivorous (σαπροφόροι). . .

The inclusion of locusts (ἄττακοι; cf. Lev 11:22b, LXX) in a list of ‘winged creatures’ assumes the context of Lev 11:13–23, which mentions clean creatures who inhabit the air—first birds (11:13–19) and then locusts/grasshoppers (11:20–23). In an apology for the propriety of the Jewish Law, including its dietary requirements (cf. Let. Aris. 128–172), the author builds on Leviticus in offering locusts as an example of clean, ‘vegetarian’ birds that at least some Jews continue to eat. There is clearly no aversion to locust eating, since the author of Aristeas assumes that his/her audience will recognize both the validity of the Law and the corresponding dietary practices among diasporic (Alexandrian?) Jews at the time of this letter.

Philo of Alexandria (1st c. C.E.) offers another witness to locust eating in the Jewish Diaspora. In his Legum Allegoricae, Philo refers indirectly to locusts as human food, which serve as a referent for his allegorical interpretation of Lev 11:21–22:

On the date of Aristeas, see the discussion of R. J. H. Shutt in OTP, 28–9.

Now in Leviticus the sacred word advises (προαύσιν ... ὅ ἵππος ἔγηγη) them to feed ‘on creeping things that go upon all four, which have legs above their feet, so as to leap with them’ [11:21]. Such are the locust (ὄ βραχυς), the wild locust (ὄ ἄρτικος), the grasshopper (ἀπερόθ), and in the fourth place the snake-fighter. And this is how it should be. For if serpent-like pleasure is an un-nourishing (ἄρανθόν) and injurious thing, self-mastery, the nature that is not in conflict with pleasure, must be wholesome and full of nourishment (προαύσιν ... καὶ ἔγηγη). (Leg. 2.105; ET: LCL, modified)

Philo’s comparison of locusts/grasshoppers with snakes (cf. the citation of Gen 3:1 in Leg. 2.106) is predicated on the assumption that locusts/grasshoppers are indeed a wholesome type of human food. Notably, Philo interprets Leviticus 11, an indulgence allowing the eating of certain locusts/grasshoppers, as God’s exhortation (προαύσιν) illustrating humanity’s moral development.44 Such advice from heaven only makes sense if Philo’s Hellenistic Jewish audience already recognizes locusts as “most nutritious” (προαύσιν ... οὐ προστάτην) and “granting of safety” (προαύσιν), whether to the body (so Lev 11:21–22) or, in Philo’s allegory, to the soul.

6. Conditional Affirmation of Locust Eating in the Dead Sea Scrolls

The assumption of Philo, Leg. 2.105 and the statement of Let. Aris. 145 that Jews recognized locusts as food are echoed by the Qumran community. In particular, the Temple Scroll move or less repeats the instructions of Lev 11:21–22:

[3] [Of the] winged (insects) you can eat: the locust and its species, the beld locust and its species, the cricket [4] and its species, the grasshopper and its species. These you can eat from among winged insects: those which crawl on four paws, which [5] have the hind legs wider than the forelegs in order to leap over the ground with them and to fly with their wings. (11Q19 [11Q5] 483–5)

The only detail added to the prescription given in Leviticus 11 concerns the physiology of locusts: Their hind legs are “wider” than their forelegs. This differs only slightly from Lev 11:21b, which mentions the insects’ ability to jump from having “jointed legs above their feet.” The distinctive detail in the Temple Scroll could well have come from a scribe who had observed locusts’ legs, perhaps in connection with the preparation of a meal. Such repetition of Leviticus 11 without comment suggests that allowing locusts/grasshoppers to be eaten could be affirmed without reference to Deut 14:19. Moreover, fragmentary copies of parts of Lev 11:20–23 survive in MasLev4, 4Q365 and 2Q5 (paleoLev).51

In addition, the Damascus Document (sometimes called the Zadokite Fragment) offers specific instructions for preparing fish and locusts:

[11] No-one should define her soul [12] with any living being or one which creeps, by eating them, from the larvae of bees to every living [13] being which creeps in water. And fish: they should not eat them unless they have been opened up [14] alive, and their blood poured away. And all the locusts (צַבָּיוֹת), according to their kind (צַבָּיוֹת), shall be put into the fire or into water [15] while they are still alive, as this is the regulation for their species.51

The interpretation is notably closer to Lev 11:20–23 than to Deut 14:19 in that locusts are kosher, provided that they be captured alive and roasted or boiled prior to consumption. The process of roasting or boiling the locusts would presumably allow for the easy removal of the insects’ wings and legs, which in fact are not easily digestible.51

As noted in chapter 1, CD 12:14–15 is a significant literary testimony that locusts were still eaten by at least some Jews around the time of the Baptist. The Damascus Document does not, however, support an Essene influence (whether direct or indirect) on John’s eating habits. Since locusts were such a common food in much of the ancient Near East and not distinctive in Jewish literature (cf. above on Philo and Aristaeus), the comparison is as flimsy as noting that any two Americans like to eat hamburgers or two Germans have a penchant for bratwurst. The eating habits of one such American or German cannot be said to have influenced those of a compatriot without additional corroborating evidence. In the case of the Baptist and the Essenes, then, there is no adequate evidence to support James H. Charlesworth’s contention that “[t]he practice of what John ate [in Mark 1:6c][Matt 3:4c] has a decidedly

44 Gk: ὁ ἄρτικος, following the LXX of Lev 11:22d: καὶ τὸν ὀρειχαλκὸν καὶ τὰ δόμους αὐτοῦ. Cf. Arist., Ha 89(6) 615a). In Leg. 2.105, the terms that Philo uses for locusts/grasshoppers correspond to Lev 11:22 (LXX), except that Philo has ὁ ἄρτικος (cf. ἄρτικος in Let. Aris. 145) instead of ὁ ἄρτικος (Lev 11:22h, LXX). In his work On the Creation, Philo also mentions the ‘snake-fighter,’ which ‘springs from the ground and lifts itself into the air like the grasshopper’ (Opif. 58 [163]). Similarly to Leg. 2.105, Philo offers a figurative interpretation of this allusion to Lev 11:22 in Opif. 58 (163), that the snake-fighter “is nothing but a symbolic representation of self-control.” See also Alexander of Aphrodisias (Phil.: fr. c. 198/209 c.r.), In Aristotelis metaphysicorum commentaria 553.35 for a comparison of the grasshopper (ἀπερόθ) with the snake.

45 Cf. in the LXX: ὡς ἔστη ἐπί τῶν ὄφων (Lev 11:21, 22), for ἔκτρις.

46 11Q19 48:1–2 are corrupt. It is plausible that the paraphrase included Lev 11:20 in 11Q19 48:2 or, perhaps, 48:1.


53 This point is discussed in chapter 4 concerning certain recent and contemporary locust-eating peoples.
with his interpretation allowing that a particular type of locust be eaten. Additionally, m. Sabbath 9:7 refers to a “living unclean locust” (נֵסֵע הַרְשֵׁע) as something that a child plays with (R. Judah), thus suggesting the common place of the locust in Jewish (and other) homes.

Moreover, two other passages from the Mishnah, like the Damascus Document, append stipulations to Lev 11:20–23:

Among locusts (נֵסֵע הַרְשֵׁע) [there are clean]: Any which has (1) four legs, (2) four wings, and (3) jointed legs, and (4) the wings of which cover the greater part of its body. R. Yose says, “And (5) the name of which is ‘locust’ (נֵסֵע הַרְשֵׁע).” (m. Hull. 3:7)

These are things which [to begin with] are permitted for [Israelite] consumption: . . . Locusts which come from [the shopkeeper’s] basket are forbidden. Those which come from the stock [of his shop] are permitted.

Whether one should consider the physical characteristics or the source of the locusts (m. Hull. 3:7; m. Abod. Zarah 2:7), the practice of eating locusts was seen to need at least some regulation. On this point R. Jose (Yose) again offers a more permissive interpretation of kashrut (m. Hull. 3:7; cf. above on m. Ed. 8:4).

Elsewhere in the Mishnah, locusts, along with fish, belong to a special classification of meat:

Every [kind of] flesh [of cattle, wild beast, and fowl] it is prohibited to cook in milk, except for the flesh of fish and locusts (נֵסֵע הַרְשֵׁע). And it is prohibited to serve it up onto the table with cheese, except for the flesh of fish and locusts. He who shares (to obtain) from flesh is permitted [to make use of] the flesh of fish and locusts. (m. Hull. 8:1)

Additionally, Jews are not allowed to consume the blood of cattle, wild animals or birds, but those are not liable because of “the blood of fishes or the blood of locusts” (נֵסֵע הַרְשֵׁע). Thus, locusts and fish may be “mixed” with dairy, and the blood of these two creatures does not result in impurity as that of other meats does.

These statements from m. Hullin and m. Kerithoth would not, however, warrant a ‘vegetarian’ construal of locusts in the Mishnah or, by implication, of the Baptist’s diet. According to m. Kelim, contact with locusts can impugn uncleanness, but touching fruit cannot: “There are three [kinds of] leather gloves. . . . That of the locust-catchers (נֵסֵע הַרְשֵׁע) is susceptible to corpse

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54 Charlesworth, “John the Baptistizer,” 366–8; bero, 367, who argues that John adheres to this diet because he was a former Essene who had been excluded from the community but nonetheless still regarded himself bound to an oath corresponding to the instructions of CD 12:14–15 (cf. Zoe, B.J. 2:8 §143). On the contrary, neither Mark 1:6 nor Matt 3:4c specifies that John ate in accordance with the additional requirements placed upon the Essenes (roasting or boiling the locusts/grasshoppers beforehand). Moreover, according to Philo, Hypothetica 11:8 (apud Euseb., Praep. evang. 8.11.8, discussed in chapter 3), the Essenes kept bees. If accurate, this would represent a difference, since John is said to eat wild honey (גֶּדֶה גֶּדֶה) rather than honey produced by domesticated bees. In view of the present author, the larger thesis that the Baptist had ever been an Essene is also dubious. On this last point, see, e.g., Jörg Frey, “Die Bedeutung der Qumranfunde für das Verständnis des Neuen Testaments,” in: Qumran: Die Schriftenrollen vom Toten Meer (ed. M. Fieger et al.; NTA 47; Freiburg: Freiburg Schweiz/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 129–208, esp. 168–69; F. I. Andersen, “Diet,” 62–3; Seebach, John the Baptist, 137–9; Meter, Marginal Jew, 2:49.

55 i.e., in m. Ed. 7:2: “R. Sadoc gave testimony concerning brine made from oleunclean locusts that it is clean. For the first Mishnah holds: oleunclean locusts which were picked with clean locusts—they have not invalidated their brine.” Here and elsewhere, translations of the Mishnah are from Jacob Neusner, The Mishnah: A New Translation (New Haven: Yale University, 1988); Heb.: Chanoch Albeck, Shishah Shalir Mishnah (Jerusalem/Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialyak, 1952–59). Cf. Streck and Billerbeck, Kommentar zum NT VII, 1:98–100; Elijah Jacob Schochet, Animal Life in Jewish Tradition: Attitudes and Relationships (New York: Ktav, 1984), 92, 98; M. Brosh, “Diet of Palestine in the Roman Period,” 51: “Grasshoppers were a popular food and were regarded as a luxury (Bereshit Rabba 67, 2; Tanhuma, Vaera, 14). . . . After the grasshoppers were dewinged and peeled (Yosef, Ocazin 2, 16), they were eaten in a variety of ways. They were also preserved for use in sauce (Mishnah, Teruma 10, 5).”
uncleanness. And that of the fruit-pickers is clean of all’ (m. Kelim 24:15).
Thus with regard to matters of purity, the Mishnah discusses locusts and fish as something in-between fruits and vegetables, on the one hand, and most
other meats, on the other. Locusts are indeed meat, but these insects and fish
can be eaten under certain circumstances when other types of meat would be
forbidden.

8. Locust Eating in Later Jewish Literature: Midrashim and Maimonides

This study has observed that the Letter of Aristeas, the Temple Scroll, the
Damascus Document and numerous tractates of the Mishnah do not prohibit
the eating of locusts, but rather consistently allow them as human food under
certain conditions (with Lev 11:20–23; pace Deut 14:19). Such toleration is
also attested in the midrashim. For example, concerning Isaac’s statement to
Esau in Gen 27:33, “I ate from all of it (ך) before you came,” this
the Genesis Midrash places into the mouth of Isaac the following answer to
Esau concerning what the patriarch had eaten: “I do not know,” he replied,
“but I tasted in it the taste of bread, the taste of meat, the taste of fish, the
taste of locusts and the taste of the delicacies in the world.” The commentary
assumes that locust eating is permitted and calls attention to the quality of the
meal that Rebekah had prepared for Jacob to give to his father Isaac (cf. Gen
27:5–17).

In addition, the Lamentations Midrash acknowledges numerous types of
permitted locusts:

R. Hanina b. Abbahu said: There are seven hundred species of clean fish, eight hundred
of clean grasshoppers, and birds beyond number; and they all went into exile with Israel
to Babylon; and when the people went back, they returned with them.

Here one learns that myriad kinds of locusts permitted as human food traveled
into exile with the covenant people and returned with them after the period of
captivity in Babylon had ended. A similar statement may also be found in the

59 Gen 27:30–40 reports what transpired upon Esau’s arrival, after Isaac had already
blessed Jacob, who was impersonating his brother Esau. Gen 27:32–33: “His father Isaac
said to [Esau], ‘Who are you?’ He answered, ‘I am your firstborn son, Esau.’” [32] Then Isaac
hastened violently, and said, ‘Who was it that hastened and brought it to me, and I
ate from all of it (ך) before you came, and I have blessed him?—yes, and
blessed he shall be!’”

60 Genesis Midrash (Toledoth) 67:2; ET: Midrash Rabban (trans. H. Freedman; ed. H.
Freedman and M. Simon; London: Soncino, 1961 [1939]), 2.607–8; cf. S. Krauss,
“Heuschrecken,” 264.

61 Lamentations Midrash (Pronem) 34, following a citation of Jer 9:10c: “both the birds of
the air and the animals have fled and are gone.” ET: Midrash Rabban (trans. A. Cohen; ed.

Babylonian Talmud. The implication is that Jews have always had, and
continue to have, copious varieties of clean fish, grasshoppers and birds to
eat.

For whatever reason, the midrashim on Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14
have nothing to say about the directions for eating certain kinds of locusts or
grasshoppers (Lev 11:20–23) or about the proscription of all winged insects
(Deut 14:19). One may safely infer that the rabbis had more pressing con-
cerns than to comment on such a commonplace activity as locust eating.

In addition to these midrashim, the medieval testimony of Moses
Maimonides (1135–1204 C.E.) further affirms the consistency of Jewish inter-
preters’ allowing the eating of certain locusts. His famous Code (Hilumin
5.2) contains a treatise on forbidden foods, including locusts:

5.2.21 The Torah permits eight species of locusts: the grasshopper; another species of
locust called Ḥakavim; another species of crickets called Ḥakavim; the
common locust; another species of locust called the vineyard bird; the bâl locust; and
another species of aed locust called the Jerusalemite Johana.”[22] He who is an expert
in them and in their names may eat of them, and a hunter is to be believed in their case as
in the case of birds. But he who is not an expert in them must examine their tokens. They
possess three tokens: Whichever has four legs and four wings which overlie most of the
length of its body and most of its circumference, and has in addition two legs with which
to leap, is deemed a clean species. Even if it has an elongated head and tail, so long as it
is known by the name of locust, it is clean. [23] If it present the locust has no wings
or legs, or if its wings do not cover the greater part of the body, but it is known that it will
grow then after some time when it has matured, it is deemed permitted immediately.

Apparently following the sequence in Leviticus 11, Maimonides’s instruc-
tions concerning locusts follow on the heels of his interpretations on clean
and unclean birds (Hilumin 5.2.1.14–20). As in the Mishnah, moreover, loc-
custs appear in the same context as fish (Hilumin 5.2.1.24; cf. b. Ḥul.
66a–67a [V.1–2]).

Maimonides seems to draw from the Babylonian Talmud for his discussion
of the “tokens,” or characteristics, of locusts (b. Ḥul. 65a [IV.1.A]). He also
echoes this tradition in allowing that eight kinds of locusts/grasshoppers be
eaten, rather than the four mentioned in Lev 11:22: “What does it come to
teach by repeating ‘according to its kind’ four times [in Lev 11:22]? To include [in the rules] the vine-hopper, the Jerusalem ywmlt, the rzovly, and the rzbnymt” (b. Hul. 65a [IV 2.8]). In allowing that one trusts the intuition of a locust hunter (locust gatherer?), moreover, Maimonides may be seen as comparatively more permissive, when weighed against the rather detailed debates concerning the identification of characteristics of permitted locusts in b. Hul. 65a–66a (IV 3.5–IV 5.5c; cf. above on m. Hul. 3:7). The important thing to note in the Babylonian Talmud and Maimonides is that these disputes concern which—not whether—locusts may be eaten. To these observations may be added the comparatively more recent observation that “Yemenite and North African Jews also ate [eat?] ‘clean’ grasshoppers in various ways.”

Of course, with the eight types of locusts/grasshoppers mentioned by Maimonides and the Babylonian Talmud, the same exegetical problem persists as was noted earlier for Lev 11:22. The modern interpreter does not know which insects are prescribed and, by implication, which others are proscribed. It was perhaps for this reason that certain modern Jewish interpretations of halakha have in effect come to embrace Deut 14:19 over Lev 11:20–23. For example, J. H. Hertz observes:

None of the four kinds of locusts [in Lev 11:22] is certainly known. . . . For this reason also, later Jewish authorities, realizing that it is impossible to avoid errors being made, declare every species of locust to be forbidden.

Hertz does not specify which Jewish authorities ultimately came to this conclusion. Whatever the origin of this development, the present study suggests that it occurred not earlier than Maimonides at the turn of the thirteenth century C.E.

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Excursus: Al-Damārī on Locust Eating and Islam

Some two centuries after Moses Maimonides recognized the eating of certain kosher locusts by Jews, in the Islamic tradition Muhammad ibn Mūsā al-Damārī (1341–1405 C.E.) affirmed the lawfulness of the locust (al-Jarād) as food for Muslims: “All the Muslims are agreed as regards its eating being permitted.” Al-Damārī’s work on animals is a compilation from various authors vis-à-vis the Koran, folklore, medicine and food. His entry on locusts cites five different authorities that the prophet Muhammad ate locusts.

Indeed, Allah is the one who sends locusts to the people, whether as food or as an affliction.” Such prescriptions contrast notably with al-Damārī’s instructions concerning certain red worms (caterpillars: al-As'im), which may not be eaten, “as they are reckoned among the creeping animals.”

The present author does not assume that al-Damārī’s collection of Arabic materials on locusts is representative for all Islamic literature either prior to or at the turn of the fifteenth century. There is no reason, however, to dismiss his remarks as simply anecdotal any more than one would precipitously dispense with Aelian’s De natura animalium. What is significant for this study is that the complementary testimonies of Maimonides and al-Damārī highlight the distinctiveness of the Western-European aversion to the eating of locusts and other insects. The origins of this repugnance—which, it is argued below, are to be found not earlier than the Roman period—are taken up in the second half of this chapter.

9. Summation: Locust Eating in Jewish Literature

John the Baptist’s eating of locusts/grasshoppers in Mark 1:6c | Matt 3:4c belongs to a cultural heritage shared for centuries by many Jews and other peoples of the ancient Near East, and continued in Islamic traditions from Muhammad (purportedly) to al-Damārī and beyond. That certain Jews ate locusts/grasshoppers is attested by not only Lev 11:20–23 but also—and

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54 Such a difficulty could well have supplied the original impetus for Deut 14:19 in response to Lev 11:20–23.


59 Such an inquiry would indeed be interesting but lies beyond the scope of this study and the expertise of the present author. Commenting on Lev 11:20–23, Bernard J. Bamberger states that “Medieval halachists, uncertain about the identity of the kosher species, forbade the eating of any insects” (in: The Torah: A Modern Commentary [ed. W. Gunther Plaut; New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981], 815). Bamberger’s generalization may well be correct for certain Medieval Jewish interpreters (other than Maimonides), but Bamberger, like J. H. Hertz, unfortunately does not specify to which interpreters he (Bamberger) refers.


61 E.g.: “Ibn Majah relates on the authority of Anas, who said that the wives of the Prophet used to have sent to them locusts in trays as presents” (Al-Damārī, Ḥayāṭi al-Haywān; ET: 1.143).

62 I am the Lord of locusts and their sustainer, if I desire I send them as food for a people and if I desire I send them as a trial for a people” (ET: 1.410). Al-Damārī also calls attention to medicinal uses for locusts (ET: 1.417). Cf. 1.409–12 on locust infestations.

63 Al-Damārī, Ḥayāṭi al-Haywān; ET: 1.49–50; here, 1.50. The similarity of this prescription to Lev 11:20 | Deut 14:19 is noteworthy.
closer to the time of the Baptist—the Letter of Aristeas, Philo, the Temple Scroll and the Damascus Document.

Although the pitfalls of interpreting the NT gospels in light of later rabbinic materials are well known, one point of contrast is enlightening. Unlike the Damascus Document, the Mishnah and the midrashim, conspicuously absent in Mark 1:2–8 and Matt 3:1–6 is an attempt to show that John the Baptist ate of prescribed locusts/grasshoppers and in a “proper” way, that is, in accordance with some interpretation of kashrut. This suggests that Mark 1:6c is not intended primarily for an audience that was concerned with the finer details of kashrut.

Especially in light of Mark 7:1–23, which dispenses with such requirements, this observation may come as no surprise. It is nonetheless significant for the argument to be offered in chapter 4 that Mark 1:6c is best interpreted from the perspective of a non-locust eating (Greco-)Roman audience. That John himself ate of grasshoppers/locusts from time to time is entirely plausible (so Mark 1:6c). Many Jews both before and after John—possibly including Jesus himself—ate such insects. What is unusual for Mark 1:6c|Matt 3:4c as compared with the Jewish testimonia is the absence of any qualification of which locusts John ate or how he ate them. In order to gain a fuller understanding of Mark 1:6c, then, a survey of the Greco-Roman materials is necessary.

D. Locustae classicae: Depictions of Locust Eaters and Locust Eating in Greco-Roman Antiquity

The difficulties of identifying the types or phases of locusts/grasshoppers in the HB and other Jewish writings have already been noted. Hans Gossen calls attention to the same problem in Greco-Roman literature, and especially that different terms for locusts do not correspond to particular species of locusts/grasshoppers: “Wenn uns also auch verschiedene Namen überliefert werden (άχρις, βρόθχος, βρόχος, κόρων, μύστος, πάρων, locusta), so dürften wir dahinter nicht ebensoviel verschiedene Spezies vermuten...”23 The following inquiry will consider these and other terms for such insects (for example, ἀκταλάς, γραις, μύστος, ὀνος, τετραπετερυλλὰς, τέττις, τροξαλλίς) in an effort to ascertain what ancient Greek and Latin authors understood about them and especially how they regarded those who ate them.


To this end, the following inquiry will discuss critically the argument of Davies and Kathirirhamby that, in contrast to their Near Eastern counterparts, the Greeks actually did not eat locusts during the Classical and Hellenistic periods:

Several ancient authors mention locusts as eaten by an Ethiopian tribe who were therefore known as abridageloi... The idea that the Greeks (or at least the poor in ancient Greece) ate them is less securely founded.24

A definitive finding on this point is not necessary for the present study. What is most important is to demonstrate how a Greco-Roman audience would have understood άχρις/βρόχος in Mark 1:6c|Matt 3:4c, regardless of whether that audience would have shared in the Baptist’s cuisine. Nonetheless, there is good reason to question the position of Davies and Kathirirhamby.25 It will be argued, on the contrary, that there is ample evidence for the eating of locusts/grasshoppers in various parts of the eastern half of the ancient Mediterranean world, including Macedonia. The contrast to be noted in the present study concerns the absence of testimonies indicating the presence of such a cuisine in the Latin West, and, in particular, the ochium expressed toward locust eating expressed by certain authors, beginning in the Roman period.26

After surveying Greek and Latin witnesses to and attitudes toward locust eating, it will be possible to comprehend how Mark 1:6c and Matt 3:4c would have been understood and, possibly, how Mark and Matthew themselves interpreted John’s άχρις/βρόχος. The analysis to follow is primarily diachronic, beginning with the earliest witnesses and concluding with a handful of authors later than the NT. At certain points the diachronic portrayal gives way to a more thematic or comparative approach. Other scholars will have to evaluate whether the buffet of assorted narratives offered in what follows does justice to the Greco-Roman sources and offers a savory context for the interpretation of Mark 1:6c|Matt 3:4c.

26 See the analysis offered below of M. Broshi, “Diet of Palestine in the Roman Period,” 51 n.4.
1. Early References to Locusts/Grasshoppers

Knowledge of locusts/grasshoppers is attested early in the Classical period. For example, the Iliad compares retreating troops to locusts who flee a river before the onrush of fire: Both are consumed by water (Hom., IL 21.12; cf. Od. 4.287–288). A sixth-century Attic red-figure kylix depicting an insect, “perhaps a grasshopper,” points to the knowledge of such (or at least similar) insects early in the classical period. If the later testimony of Aelian can be believed, the ancient Athenians entwined golden grasshoppers/locusts (χρυσός ἐνέπρεποι...τεττηγες) in their hair.

2. Herodotus: Historian and Ethnographer of Locust Eaters

Perhaps the earliest surviving reference to a locust-eating people in Greek literature is from Herodotus (5th c. B.C.E.) concerning the Nasamontians in Cyrene, who cease tending their flocks during the summer and gather from the land a different form of subsistence: “They hunt grasshoppers (έτελεομπος), which when taken they dry in the sun, and after grinding sprinkle them into milk and drink it.” The task of relating at some length other peoples’ foods would be taken up by later ethnographers, such as Strabo, Diodoros Siculus and the Elder Pliny.

3. Aristophanes: The Humor of Grasshopper Eating

Like Herodotus, the famous comic Aristophanes (c. 460/445–c. 385 B.C.E.) alludes to locust eating by humans twice in his Acharnians. Although the following humorous passages do not necessarily offer a reliable witness to what Greeks commonly ate, it is clear that knowledge of locust eating is presupposed in Acharnians 870–871 and 1114–1117:

On the selling of four-winged fowl (that is, grasshoppers): “Buy some of what I am carrying, some of the fowl or of the four-wingers (τῶν τέτελεομπολόβων).”

“My boy and I have been having an argument for a while now. Do you want to bet...whether locusts or thrushes are tastier (σπείρεις ἢ τρύβλιοι)?...He’s strongly for the locusts (τῶν τέτελεομπολοί).”

The first passage suggests that (dried?) grasshoppers were sold in the marketplace. In Acharnians 1114–1117, moreover, Aristophanes assumes that his audience knows what locust eating is. For Aristophanes, “everyone” (supposedly) knows that a bird makes for a better meal than these insects do. What is funny is that the matter is even raised and, moreover, that the pompous Lamachus is being distracted with the question.

4. Locusts as Bird Food and Fish Bait

Given that people could eat locusts, it is perhaps not surprising that certain Greek authors describe birds that eat locusts as food. The earliest such description that I have found appears in a fragment of the comic Nicophon (ft. late-5th–early-4th c. B.C.E.):

δίης καθένας των τά υπόλειου ἄρνων, σφάρα εἰς αύξει τον οίκον, πάρονας.

Winged ants, as well as grubs, grasshoppers [and] locusts.

Unlike Nicophon’s partially preserved remark, Plutarch’s later testimony offers a reason for such hostility toward the locust-eating swallow: “Is there

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77 In order to avoid unnecessary repetition, a number of Greco-Roman references to locusts/grasshoppers not relevant to the present inquiry have already been mentioned in connection to analogous passages in the HB. Unfortunately, certain other references to locusts/grasshoppers are too poorly preserved to be of use to the present study. Such fragmentary references include Aesch. (525/4–456/5 B.C.E., Fr. 101 D 100 and 36 B 401), in: Hans Joachim Mette, ed., Die Fragmenten der Tragedien des Aischylus (Schriften der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Klasse der Philologischen und Geschichte der Sprache, 31), 150; Soph. (460/5–465 B.C.E., Fr. 715, in: Stefan Radt, ed., Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971–77); 4,489; Phyllarchus (3rd c. B.C.E., Hist.), Fr. 4 b 2 (= Pop. Ox. 15.1801), in: Felix Jacoby, ed., Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker, 2. A. 104.

78 Davies and Kathirithambry, Greek Insects, 33, fig. 5.


80 Herod., Hist. 4.172; Herodotus goes on to describe this people’s polygamous behavior. Cf. 4.165.
swallow perhaps in bad repute among [the Pythagoreans]. . . ? She is a flesh-eater (σαρκοφαγός), and is especially prone to kill and feed on cicadas, sacred and musical (τερπόντος καὶ μουσικοῦν) insects. Additionally, the Geoponica commends locusts as a useful bait for catching fish (Geoponica 20.32, 20.44).

5. Locusts as a Food for Poor People: Alexes and Aesop

The comic Alexes (4th–3rd c. B.C.E.) offers locust eating to exemplify the reason for an old woman’s grief at her family’s poverty. Poor people can expect a diet that includes acorns, roots, pears, as well as an occasional locust/cicada (τῆς ὅπερ). If Alexes points to the existence of a literary topos concerning poor people as locust eaters, such may well be assumed in the anonymous Life of Aesop (1/2 c. C.E.). According to this work, the legendary Aesop pleaded for his life in the court of Croesus. Aesop offers the following fable, arguing that he should not be killed, just as a locust-catcher once spared a locust instead of eating it:

Aesop answered, “There was a time when animals spoke the same language as people, and a poor man who had no food would catch locusts (τέρποντας ἐν αὐτοῖς), he would pickle and sell them at a fair price. Once he caught one (ἐν θάλασσῃ ἐν τὰ τοιαύτα ἀπήδηα), called ‘sweet-humming cicada,’ and was about to kill it. It saw what was about to happen and said, ‘Do not be so quick to kill me. I have not harmed the wheat or eaten the new shoots; nor have I destroyed the branches, but by moving my well-adapted wings and feet in harmony, I make a marvelous sound, and give rest to the traveler.’ The man was moved by these words and released it to fly away. In the same way, I feel at your feet. Have mercy on me. I am not powerful enough to attack your army, or distinguished enough in my bearing to bring false charges against anyone and make them stick. My worthless body is my instrument, by which I utter wise sayings to benefit the lives of mortals.”

Croesus can ‘consume’ Aesop by taking his life, just as the poor man would put together a meal of edible locusts.

6. Aristotle: Philosopher, Aetiological and Locust Eater

Aristotle’s (384–322 B.C.E.) assorted writings reflect a fascination with not only the physical characteristics and habits of locusts, grasshoppers and cicadas but also their value as food. Noteworthy is his attempt to distinguish between such insects. Aristotle also comments on the sound that male grasshoppers make by rubbing their legs together. He further observes that locusts have a coiled—that is, a rather complex—stomach.

Aristotle also opines that such insects have no sciscra or fat, as is the case with the other “bloodless animals” (οὐκ ἄρα τῶν ἀνέμων ὁμοίων, Ν.Α. 4.7 [532a]). Such a classification of locusts as “bloodless” may account for the dispensation later given in the Mishnah for eating locusts (and fish) when other types of meat would be prohibited (m. Ἱω. 5:1; m. Ὁμ. 5:1). The later reference of Galen (c. 129/130–199/216 C.E.) to Aristotle’s classification of locusts and crickets (κόλλησις ἀξίωτος τοῦ κατά πάρνον) as “bloodless” strengthens the possibility that an ‘Aristotelian’ understanding of locusts

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Gregory Nagy, Pindar’s Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1990), 323–4, notes correctly this comparison between Aesop and the locust: “a poor man, who resorts to eating locusts in order to stay alive, happens to catch a cicada, pleads for his life on the grounds that he does not harm men by robbing them of their possessions, as locusts do, but instead benefits them through his song...”


88 Arlat, NA 4.9 (535a), 5.30 (556a), Aus. 80a4; cf. Pl., Phdr. 10 (230c); 259a11–12; “the myth of the Cicadas”; Timaeus (Hist; c. 350–260 B.C.E.), Fr. 43a5–6, 19, 23; 43b5, 14, 32 (in: F. Jacoby, Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker, 38.614); P. Arlat, ed., μηδ. παρ. 66; Ar. Rhet., Epist. 1.139; Theocritus, Id. 5.34; 7.41; Ath. Deip. 4.1338a; Ael., NA 1.20; 3.38, 5.13; 6.19; 11.26; cf. 3.35; 5.9. See further: Harrisman Beek, ed., Anthologia Graeca (Munich: Haseloff, 1965–68), 2.117–123 [§7.189–198]; 2.213 [§7.364].
influenced Jewish kalakha on locusts as food in late antiquity. The same is true for the (later Byzantine) epitome of Aristophanes of Byzantium's work, *On the Animals* (Epit. 1.20, discussed below).

Of Aristotle's various other remarks about locusts/grasshoppers, the most interesting for the present study are his observations concerning these insects' procreation, to which he adds a few remarks about locusts as food. Aristotle lists locusts among insects that procreate by copulation. Furthermore, he notes a general preference for eating the larvae of the cicadas before they 'hatch' and, among the mature adults, for eating the males unless the females have recently oviposited:

The larva (ὄρνιχάς), when it has increased in size in the ground, becomes a 'cicada mother' (τρίτοιμοτρόπος), and that is when they are pleasantest (δήσιοντο) [to eat], before the integument bursts open. . . . The [adult] males are tastier (καὶ τὸ μὲν πρῶτον ἥπτων οἱ ἄφραγκοι) [to eat]. But after (μετὰ 56) copulation, the females are, because they have white eggs. As they fly up after you have started them, they discharge a liquid like water. The farmers (ὁι γεωργοί) will tell you this is untrue—that is, that they have no seeds and feed on dew. If you approach them, moving your finger, bending the


100. E.g., *Arist.*, *HA* 8.9(6) (612a) refers to the testimony of others who have seen the locust fight with the snake and grab its neck.

101. *Arist.*, *HA* 5.19 (555b), 5.28–30 (555b–555b), G 4.16 (721a), on the copulation habits of ὀξυτόλονων, ἀφράγκων and ἄφραγκων. He notes that the females are larger than the males and that the females' additional size is advantageous for procreation by copulation. Cf. *HA* 10.6 (637b), summarizing a report about a woman who observed female grasshoppers procreating on their own, i.e., without intercourse.


104. *Arist.*, *HA* 5.30 (556b). *A Mirabilium naturalization, moreover, Ps.-Aristotle mentions a locust to Argos called the 'scorpion fighter'. "They say it is a good thing to eat (ἔτρεχον) a locust as a protection against the scorpion's sting" (M. 139). Cf. *Mir. ov. 176: "Among the Aeolians they say that moles see (ὁ Μοῖρα τούς ἀρχέτοις) indistinctly, and do not eat earth but locusts." Also Philo, *Opif.* 38 (163), on the "snake-fighter" (Greek: ὄρθογος, which "springs from the ground and lifts itself into the air like the grasshopper." As mentioned above, Philo offers a figurative interpretation of this allusion to Lev 11:22, that the snake-fighter "is nothing but a symbolic representation of self-control.


106. On the eggs of the τύξεως, cf. Plut., *Quaest. conv.* 2.3 (638b). By contrast, Plut., *Quaest. conv.* 2.3 (637b) suggests that this insect reproduces 'spontaneously' without eggs. Platarch thus points to a plurality of understandings on this point.

and cultures (un)touched (?) by Greek rule. These authors also reveal much about attitudes toward people who eat locusts.

In what follows, it will be argued that although Diodorus finds this Ethiopian tribe’s subsisting entirely on locusts to be remarkable, he would presumably not deem occasional locust eating to be extraordinary. In Strabo and Pliny, however, a markedly different presentation of this people emerges, one that reflects surprise that they partake of locusts at all. Such a shift in emphasis in relating the same material is consonant with an aversion to locust eating that surfaces in a number of other writers during the Roman period. That such a shift in attitude toward locust eating occurred in the first centuries of the Common Era is to be argued in this and the following sections. The potential significance of this shift for John the Baptist’s “locusts” will be assessed in chapters 4 and 5.

a) Diodorus Siculus, Agatharchides and Aristophanes of Byzantium

For the present discussion, it is significant that the earliest quasi-ethnographic descriptions of a locust-eating people—after Herodotus’s description of the Nasamontians in Cyrene (Hist. 4.172)—predate both the historical Baptist and the gospel of Mark. What is particularly noteworthy in Diodorus Siculus (fr. c. 60–30 B.C.E.) and others is an explicit connection between locust eating and the wilderness (cf. Mark 1:2–5).

The description by Diodorus Siculus may well stem from Agatharchides of Caicus (c. 215–after 145 B.C.E.), who in turn may have borrowed from Aristophanes of Byzantium (c. 257–180 B.C.E.). Aristophanes of Byzantium’s work, On the Animals (τειρής ἄγονος), unfortunately survives only in a later Byzantine epitome. The matter is further complicated in that part of Agatharchides’s text does not survive. In his translation of Agatharchides’s On the Erythraean Sea (that is, the Red Sea; written shortly after 145 or 132 B.C.E.), Stanley M. Burstein plausibly infers Diodorus’s use of Agatharchides and fills the lacuna in Agatharchides’s work with Diodorus’s text. The source-critical question is relevant to the present inquiry only insofar as it is possible that Diodorus’s material could have been more widely attested in antiquity, and thus to the audience of the gospel of Mark. Precisely how much Diodorus may have borrowed from Agatharchides, and Agatharchides from Aristophanes of Byzantium, is open to speculation. In what follows, Diodorus Siculus’s account of this people will receive primary attention.

Quite possibly following Agatharchides or Aristophanes of Byzantium, Diodorus Siculus describes various Ethiopian peoples in terms of their distinctive habits, including what they eat. He attributes the name, “Locust Eaters” (Ἀκριβοδρόφοι), to one such Ethiopian people. Diodorus’s description of this people is cited at some length because of its many similarities to Mark 1:6c|Matt 3:4c:

A short distance from these people the Locust Eaters inhabit the region that borders on the desert (Ἀκριβοδρόφοι κατακοσκεύα τὸ συνορίαν πρὸς τὴν ἔρημον). They are smaller than the others, lean of body and extremely black. During the spring in their region, powerful west and southwest winds drive out from the desert an innumerable multitude of locusts, that are unusual for their large size and have wings that are ugly and dirty-looking in color. From this source they have abundant food during their whole life. They catch these creatures in a way unique to them, for adjacent to their territory there extends for many stades a ravine of considerable depth and breadth. They fill this with bushwood, which abounds in the region. Then, when the previously mentioned winds blow and swarms of locusts approach (προσέρχεσθαι τὸ δέκτο τῶν κυνομον), they divide up the whole area of the ravine into sectors and set fire to the tinder in it. A great amount of pungent smoke is thus generated, and the locusts flying over the ravine are suffocated by the pungency of the smoke and fall to the ground after flying through it for a short distance. As the destruction of the locusts continues for several days, great heaps of their piles up (μετάξυ διοιωτόντος έφυος). Since the region has much salt-laden soil, all the people bring this to the piles. Having watered them with the salt to a suitable extent, they give the locusts a pleasant taste and make it possible for them to be stored free of decay for a long period (ποτέν δὲ τούτον οὐκ ἔχειν αἰθέροιν ἀποθείνειν ... Τούτο οὖν δὲ τούτον αἰθέροιν οὐκ ἔχειν αἰθέροιν).

Burstein, Agatharchides of Cnidus, On the Erythraean Sea (Halkyry Society 2.172; London: Halkyry Society, 1989), 101–3. Concerning the text-critical problems associated with Agatharchides’s work, see Burstein, Agatharchides, 36–41; on the date of this work: Burstein, Agatharchides, 15–18. Cf. the argument of Kenneth S. Sachs, Diodorus Siculus and the First Century (Princeton: Princeton University, 1990), that Diodorus offers not “an arbitrary collection of thoughts derived from whatever source Diodorus happened to be following at the moment,” but rather “a document substantially reflecting the intellectual and political attitudes of the late Hellenistic period” (5). Sachs further maintains “that Diodorus had far more control over his text than is generally assumed” (7).

For example, Athenaeus, Plutarch, Dioscorides Pedanius and Gales, whose works are discussed below.
Locust/Grasshopper Eating in Antiquity

καὶ κολοχρόνιων). Accordingly, their food, for both the short and the long term, is derived from these creatures (κολοχρόνοι τῶν ἑαυτῶν) as the oldest among them does not exceed forty years of age. In addition to the obvious similarity of Diodorus’s (and Aristophanes of Byzantium's) witness to a locust-eating people, the following observations are also significant:

1. Diodorus connects this tribe with the desert (περίκος τῆς ἱματου), much as Mark 1:2-8 does with John (ὁ βασιλιάς ἐν τῇ ἱματου, Mark 1:3a; ἐγὼ εἰμί ὁ Παλαιότερος ὁ βασιλιάς ἐν τῇ ἱματου, Mark 1:4a). Although the Locust Eaters do not live in the desert (so also Ar. Byz., Epit. 2.58.1-2), the locusts blown by the wind come from the desert.

2. The Locust Eaters’ surviving exclusively on dried locusts offers a striking parallel to the heightened claim of Matt 3:4c, that John’s food in the wilderness consisted solely of "locusts and wild honey." It does not suggest that eating locusts per se is unusual. Rather, the extraordinarily large quantity of locusts being eaten to the exclusion of other foods and the particular means of catching them are what Diodorus deems to be remarkable. A modern analogy might be a group of Americans who survive entirely on fast-food hamburgers and, as a result, do not enjoy the usual life expectancy of others in the States who adhere to a well-balanced diet.

It thus follows that neither Mark 1:6c nor Matt 3:4c offers a novel type of characterization. In chapter 4 it will be argued that the ethnographic depictions of Diodorus and others are significant for understanding Mark’s association of John with the wilderness and Matthew’s presentation of the Baptist as a bona fide wilderness survivor. The similar descriptions of Strabo

and the Elder Pliny also merit attention in this regard. The apparent use of Diodorus (or an earlier source) by Strabo and the Elder Pliny further supports the argument that a connection between the Baptist’s food and location “in the wilderness” may be safely inferred for Mark’s audience.

b) Strabo: Reworking Traditional Ethnographic Material

Albeit briefer than that (those?) of his predecessor(s), Strabo’s (c. 64/63–after 21 B.C.E.) description of this Ethiopian people shares many features in common with Diodorus:

The ‘Locust Eaters’ (Ὀξύντεροι) are blacker than the rest (in Ethiopia) and shorter in stature and the shortest-lived; for they rarely live beyond forty years, since their flesh is infested with parasites. They live on locusts (ζεστά ἑκάστῳ ὀξύντερῳ), which are driven into this region in the spring by strong blowing southwest and western winds. They cast smoking timber in the ravines, lighting it slightly, and, thus easily catch the locusts, for when they fly above the smoke they are blinded and fall. The people pound them with silt, make them into cakes, and use them for food. Above these people lies a large uninhabited region (ὤμος ... μεγίστη), which has pastures in abundance. It was abandoned by reason of the multitudes of scorpions and tarantulas, the ‘four-jawed,’ as they are called; these once prevailed and caused a complete desertion by the inhabitants.

These observations occur in a series of descriptions of non-Roman peoples whom Strabo characterizes in part by what they eat: the Fish Eaters (Geog. 16.4.4), the Root Eaters (16.4.9), the Seed Eaters (16.4.9), the Flesh Eaters (16.4.9), the Elephant Eaters (16.4.10), the Bird Eaters (16.4.11), and—for mention of the Locust Eaters (16.4.12)—the Turtle Eaters (16.4.14). Although there is nothing unusual about eating fish, roots, seeds or meat, Strabo’s subsequent mentioning of elephants, birds, locusts, and turtles marks foods that would likely have been regarded as more distinctive, at least as a primary source of food, by Strabo and his audience.

Strabo repeats numerous details of his source, whether Aristophanes of Byzantium, Agatharchides or Diodorus. Perhaps most noteworthy for the present study, Strabo echoes his predecessor(s) in describing this people’s proximity to a “large wilderness” (ὤμος ... μεγίστη). Strabo also makes two noteworthy changes to his source, however. First, the rather short life span of forty years is mentioned before the description of locust eating, rather than afterward in Diodorus (and Agatharchides?), where it begins a separate section. From Strabo’s arrangement of the materials, the reader could (should?) easily infer that the parasites (what we could today recognize as harmful bacteria?) stem from the locusts that this people eat. If correct,
Strabo would suggest the inadequacy—indeed, the danger—of locusts as human food. Such editing of his source material represents a change in emphasis on the part of Strabo. As noted above, what is remarkable for Diodorus is not locust eating *per se* but a particular people’s living exclusively on dried locusts.

An additional point concerns Strabo’s elaboration on the desert region adjacent to this people from which the locusts are blown by the wind. Apparently agreeing with his source, Strabo highlights the unsuitability of the desert region for human habitation and, by implication, the desperate circumstances under which this Ethiopian tribe must find food. However subtle, such differences between Strabo and his predecessor(s) suggest that Strabo had to elaborate further upon his source material in order to make it intelligible to a non-locust-eating (Roman?) audience why a certain Ethiopian people actually had to resort to eating locusts for sustenance. Sarah Poitceary’s argument that Strabo (c. 64/63 B.C.E.) wrote his *Geography* from 17/18 C.E. until 23 C.E., 113 if correct, would point to an author writing close in time to, if not contemporary with, the activities of the historical Baptist.

c) Pliny the Elder’s Rendition of This Locust-Eating People

If Strabo attests the prevalence of this type of ethnographic activity roughly contemporary with the historical Baptist, the Elder Pliny (23/24 C.E.—79 C.E.) witnesses to the perseverance of such generalizations concerning food and clothing around the time of the author of the gospel of Mark. Pliny is aware that it was not only poor, exotic peoples that ate such insects. He notes, for example, the preference of the wealthy Parthians for eating cicadas. 114 A little later, he notes that even among this somewhat respected people locusts were on the menu: “but among the Parthians even these [locusts] are acceptable as food” (*Parthis et haes in cibo gratae*, 11.35.106).

Of particular interest to this inquiry is Books 3–6 of Pliny’s *Natural History*, which describe the geography and peoples of the ancient world. In *HN* 6.35.178–197, Pliny characterizes numerous peoples of Ethiopia, the Nile valley and Meroë. Like Mark 1:6 Matt 3:4 does for John, Pliny often refers to these peoples’ physical characteristics, including their clothing, along with their diet (cf. *HN* 7.2). In Pliny’s accounts, the transliterated Greek terms (for example, *Gymnites, Agriophagi, Pamphagi, Anthropophagi*) highlight Pliny’s indebtedness to one or more Greek sources. Representative features of the peoples Pliny describes may be paraphrased and quoted as follows:


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Also, Pliny describes the foods of these assorted peoples as follows:

A nomadic group of the Megabarris eat elephants (*grus elephantis vescitur*, 6.35.189; likewise the Simbarri, the Palungen and the tribes of Asachae [*vivunt elephantorum venas*, 6.35.191]).

The Medimni, another nomadic tribe, gain subsistence from the milk of a dog-faced baboon (*Medimni . . . cyncephalorum lacte viventes*, 6.35.190).

Other ‘Wild-Beast Eaters’ live chiefly from the flesh of panthers and lions (*Agriophagi pantherarum leonumque maxime carnibus viventes*, 6.35.195).

Another group receives the name ‘The Omnivores’ because they devour everything (*Pamphagi omnium mandentia*, 6.35.195).

Still another tribe, the ‘People Eaters,’ is said to eat human beings (*Anthropophagi humana carne vescentes*, 6.35.195).

Elsewhere Pliny notes that “One section of the Ethiopians live only on locusts (*locustis tantum vivit*, dried in smoke and salted to keep for a year’s supply of food; these people do not live beyond the age of forty”) (6.35.195).

Thus, Pliny’s attention to foreign or exotic details about assorted other peoples offers an additional ethnographic parallel to the bits of information about the Baptist given in Mark 1:6, namely John’s clothing (v. 6ab) and diet (v. 6c). It is thus plausible that Mark 1:6 serves a function analogous to Pliny’s descriptions, namely to introduce a non-Palestinian people to John’s clothing and food. A corollary to this observation is that John’s garb and locusts would have been regarded as foreign by the intended audience of Mark 1:6c (or its pre-Markan source).

Moreover, the Elder Pliny echoes a remarkable parallel to Matt 3:4c when stating that “one section of the Ethiopians lives only on locusts (*locusts tantum vivit*)” (HN 6.35.195). The claim to living exclusively on locusts has a striking resemblance to Matt 3:4c, which claims that John ate only “locusts and wild honey.” As noted in Strabo’s version of this material, in Pliny the short life span of these Ethiopians indicates a prejudice against this type of food, which he can assume without argument for his fellow Romans as well. Eustathius of Thessalonica, moreover, attests an interest in this Ethiopian locust-eating people in the twelfth century C.E. 115

115 See Eustathius of Thessalonica (c. 1115–1195/6 C.E.), *Commentarii ad Homeri Odysseam* 1.295.3.
8. Additional Expressions of Aversion to Locust Eating: Plutarch, Athenaeus, Galen, Dioscorides, Pseudo-Dioscorides, Oribasius, and a Later Fable of Aesop

In addition to Strabo and Pliny, a number of other authors during the Roman period express an aversion to locusts as human food. As already mentioned, this development is potentially significant to the present study’s interest in the history of interpretation of John’s diet (chapter 5). The writers to be assessed in this section are Plutarch, Dioscorambrosis, Athenaeus, Galen, Dioscorides, pseudo-Dioscorides, Oribasius, and the Fables of Aesop.

a) Plutarch’s Aversion and Dioscorambrosis’s Apology

In his work On the Cleverness of Animals, Plutarch (before 50 C.E.—after 120 C.E.) implicitly suggests that cicadas are not human food but rather bird food:

For nothing that swims and does not merely stick or cling to rocks is easily taken or captured without trouble by human[s] (σπάσικας), as are asses by wolves, bees by bee steers, cicadas by swallows (χελιδόνιοι οἱ ττοτίτας), and snakes by deer, which easily attract them. (De soll. an. 976D)

A vegetarian, Plutarch even dispenses criticism upon such meat-eating birds.114 In this case the lesser exemplifies the greater: If birds come up for such criticism, how much more would Plutarch have disdained humans’ partaking of such food! Dioscorambrosis (c. 40/50 C.E.—after 110 C.E.), a contemporary of Plutarch, even sensed the need to argue that the parts of Homer that merely mention locusts (μεστός) are not inferior to other portions of Homer that make reference to other creatures (Dio Chrys. Or. 55.10–11). Although Dio Chrysostom does not refer to locusts as human food, he points to a general construal of locusts as a subject requiring justification even in the revered canon of the Homeric poems.

b) Athenaeus’s Aversion

Athenaeus, Deipnosophistae (Δειπνοσοφιστη, “The Learned Banquet,” written shortly after 192 C.E. 4.132e–133f) describes a series of delicacies that “the ancients” (οἱ παλαιοὶ) served at banquets. A native of Naucratis (c. 80 km [50 mi.] SE of Alexandria), Egypt, Athenaeus wrote this work in Rome toward the end of the second century C.E.115 Athenaeus’s explanation following his mention of grasshoppers and cicadas highlights the foreignness of such items to his Roman audience:

They used to eat even grasshoppers and cicadas as an incentive to appetite (ὁρθωτὸν ἐκ καὶ ττοτίτασι καὶ κρασίςιν αὐτοψεύδομεν ζέφοροι). [Thus] Aristophanes in Anagnost: “By the gods, how I yearn to eat a grasshopper and a cicada caught on a thin reed.” Now the cicada is an animal like a grasshopper (ττοτίτας) or a tligion (ττίγιον), as Spesippus describes them in the second book of his Similars. Epictetus mentions them in Coriolanus. Alexis in Theram says, “Never have I seen such a charabanc as you, woman, be it cicada (κρασιςίτικος) or magpie, nightingale or swallow, turtle dove or grasshopper (ττοτίτας).”116

The last statement attributed to Alexis, which alludes to the sounds made by cicadas rather than their role as food, highlights the efforts which Athenaeus exerts in order to make grasshopper and cicada eating intelligible to his audience. In addition, the imperfect tense of ὁρθωτὸν could denote a practice belonging to the past, and therefore that such insects would not be served at such banquets in Rome in the 190s C.E.

c) The Use of Locusts for Medicinal Purposes (Rather Than Regular Human Food): Galen, Dioscorides, Pseudo-Dioscorides and Oribasius

Galen (c. 129/130–199/216 C.E.) is among the ancient physicians who attest to the use of locusts in ancient medicine. He notes, for example that some physicians “use dried cicadas/locusts (ττοτίτας ἔρωτοις) where there is tendency to colic, adding one peppercorn per insect,” and that “others bake [cicadas/locusts] and give them as food to those who have pain in the bladder.”117 From his discussions of colic in another work, On the Affected Parts, however, it is clear that Galen himself did not treat colic with locusts.118

114 See further: Dorothy Thompson, “Athenaeus in His Egyptian Context,” in Athenaeus and His World: Reading Greek Culture in the Roman Empire (ed. D. Braun and I. Wilkins; Exeter: Exeter University, 2000), 77–84, esp. 77–9.
116 Gal., De simp. med. temp. 11.13.312 (11.2.149); Greek text: K. G. Kuhl, Claudii Galeni, Opera omnia, 12.360.3–8; the ET is my own. See further I. C. Beavis, Insects, 77, 103.
Elsewhere in his On the Affected Parts, moreover, Galen refers to locusts/grasshoppers as the food of a particular kind of bird, rather than of humans. Accordingly, in De simp. med. temp. 11.13.312 (11.2.149) Galen simply relates the practice of other “physicians.” Somewhat analogous pharmaceutical uses of grasshoppers/locusts are attested, for example, in Galen’s predecessor Dioscorides Pedanius (Med.; β. 41–68 C.E.). The infirmities for which Dioscorides uses locusts are discomfort in the bladder and during urination (= urinary tract infections?) and scorpion stings:

[51] Roasted cicadas when eaten (έτοιμας ὕποθεσαμενα) relieve pain in the bladder. [52] Smoked locusts (χεριδες ψηφεθμενα) help with difficulties of urination, especially in women. But the locust called Troxallis or Oinos (τροξαλλις και διοσ) is without wings and long-legged; a fresh one, once it is thoroughly dried and drunk with wine, helps those stung by scorpions. And the Libyans in Leptis eat [this locust] indulgently (χαμηλης και ατετροπομενα). [120]

Dioscorides’s remedy suggests that his patients would only eat cicadas or grasshoppers under such dire conditions. The diet of Dioscorides’s presumable audience may thus plausibly be distinguished from that of certain Libyans, who regularly, and abundantly, made use of Troxallis or Oinos locusts/grasshoppers as food.

In addition, the Elder Pliny, whose depiction of the Ethiopian Locust Eaters has already been discussed in this chapter (HN 6.35.195; cf. 11.32.92; 11.35.106), also knows of such a remedy:

To eat thrashes with myrtle berries is good for the urine (edidse... prodest urinas), [as are] cicadas roasted (cieades icorax) in a shallow pan; to take in drink the milippode ovicoris is also [good] for pains in the bladder (bibbare et in vesico dolentibus), [as is] the broth of lambs’ mixture. (HN 30.21.68)

Additional medicinal uses for locusts/grasshoppers are also mentioned by Pseudo-Dioscorides and Oribasius (c. 320–400 C.E.; Med.). Each of these medical writers of the Roman period—Dioscorides, Galen, Pseudo-Dioscorides, and Oribasius—supports the inference that most people in good health in these authors’ implied audiences would ordinarily not eat such insects.

4. The Later Fable from the Fables of Aesop

Complementing the aforementioned witnesses, a later, possibly medieval, fable associated with Aesop implies the inadequacy of locusts as food:

A fowler heard a locust and thought he was going to make a big catch, making the mistake of judging the size of his catch by the song. But when he put his art into practice and caught his prey, he got nothing but song and found fault with expectation for leading people to false conclusions. [122]

This testimony contrasts with earlier Aesopic materials that present locusts as human food (Aesop’s Fables 241 [224]; Life of Aesop 99). Along with the testimonies of Strabo, Pliny, Athenaeus, Plutarch, Galen, Dioscorides, Pseudo-Dioscorides and Oribasius, this fable of Aesop highlights a significant shift that began during the Roman period: Locusts are not an adequate source of food for humans and can therefore exemplify the fable’s moral teaching against presumption.

9. Tertullian on the Delight of Marcionite Christians in Locusts as Food

The North African church father Tertullian (c. 160–240 C.E.) likewise reflects knowledge of locust eating. In his treatise Against Marcion, Tertullian presents his Marcionite Christian opponents as extolling the goodness of the creation of humanity as superior even to the divinity’s gift of locusts as human food: “Culled in by these arguments, they break out and say, ‘Sufficient to our god is this one single work, that he has by his great and particular kindness set man free, a kindness of more value than all the preferred types of locusts (omnibus locustis anteponenda).” [123]

Additionally, a less certain,
but nonetheless plausible, reference to locust eating may be found in Tertullian’s work *On the Soul.*

10. The Witness of Jerome to a Plurality of Sentiments about Locust Eating

Additional comments by Jerome (c. 347–419/20 C.E.) on the Baptist’s diet will be examined in chapter 5 (Epp. 22.36, 38.3, 107.3, 125.7). Of interest to the discussion at present is his witness to the eating of locusts in certain areas, as well as the aversion to this food elsewhere. In his work *Against Jovinian,* Jerome maintains 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 Libya to feed on locusts (*rursum Orientales et Libyae populos . . . locustas vasti mortis 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 (nefar.)

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, the mention of actual locust eaters in the East and Libya provides ammunition in a polemical debate concerning different peoples’ habits concerning food.

In addition to those in Phrygia and Pontus, Jerome suggests that, around the turn of the fifth century C.E., Christian monks also eat locusts:

*Præcursore ejus et prece Joannes locustis aliter, et silvestris meli, non corvibus: habitatione deserti et incanabula monachorum, talibus inchoantur aliments.*

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124 At *De anima* 15.2, Tertullian writes of removing the heads of locusts and certain other creatures: “Asclepiades rides rough-shod over with even this argument, that many animals, after losing those parts of their body in which the soul’s principle of vitality and sensation is thought mainly to exist, still retain life in a considerable degree, as well as sensation: as in the case of flies, and wasps, and locusts (*locustae*), when you have cut off their heads; and of she-goats, and tortoises, and eels, when you have pulled out their hearts. (He concludes), therefore, that there is no special principle or power of the soul.” Unlike Aristotle or Galen, Tertullian was not a ‘scientist’ with interests in anatomical observations. Even if Tertullian’s main concern in *De anima* is to demonstrate the existence of the soul, the most likely reason for his knowing about the removal of locust’s heads would be from knowledge of people who eat them. Lat.: J. H. Wawrinka, ed., *Quinti Septimi Florentii Tertulliani, De anima* (Amsterdam: Maujennheff, 1947), 19; ET: ANF, 3.193.


128 Herod., *Hist.* 4.172; Ar., *Aeth.,* 870–1, 1114–7; Theoc., *Id.* 1.52; Arist., *Hec.* 5.30 (556b); Alex, *Fr.* 167.13 (162.13); Anaxandrides, *Fr.* 42.56 (41.59); Diodor., *Hist.* 3.29; *Life of Aesop* 99; *Plin.* (E.), *HN* 11.32.92; 11.35.106; 30.21.68; *Tert.* *Adv. Marci* 1.17; *De anima* 15.2.

129 Strabo, *Geog.* 16.4.12; *Plin.* (E.), *HN* 6.35.195; Ath., *Delg.* 4.133; Plut., *De soll. an.* 976b, *Quaest.* conv. 8.7.3 (277f); Dioscorides (Med.), *De mort. med.* 2.51–2; Pr. Dioscorides, *De mort. med.* 2.115 (2.109); Orbisius, *Ed.* Med. Fr. 63.5 (64.3); Gal., *De simp. med.* temp. 11.13.312 (11.2.49); *Aesop’s Fables* 397.

Chapter 3

The Baptist's "Wild Honey"

The previous chapter was devoted to the Baptist's διχάζεται. Chapter 3 studies ancient perspectives on apiculture (beekeeping) and various kinds of 'wild honey,' in order to ascertain the referent and significance attached to μέλι δέρας in Mark 1:6|Matt 3:4c. Chapter 4 will consider the nutritional aspects of these foods, as well as what light the habits of recent and contemporary locust-eating peoples shed on the historical Baptist. The implications of these studies of "locusts and wild honey" for our understanding of the historical Baptist and the presentation of his diet in the Synoptics will also be assessed in the following chapter.

A. Prolegomena: Defining "Honey"

Unlike locusts/grasshoppers, most Western (and non-Western) people today readily identify honey as a pleasing garnish. A word of caution concerning the possible meaning(s) of the Baptist's "wild honey" is in order, however. By itself, μέλι—like the Hebrew בְּרֵד or mel in Latin—can refer equally to honey produced by bees or to any number of other sweet substances, including those made from dates, figs, pods, or sap/gum from carob or other trees.

1 Sir 11:3: "The bee is small among flying creatures, but what it produces is the best of sweet things."
2 Prov 25:27a: "It is not good to eat [too] much honey." Cf. Prov 25:16: "If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, or else, having too much, you will vomit it."