doivent au ramassage. Ils ont ignoré les cigales et les sauterelles dont se régalaient les Orientaux. 131

Of great interest to this study is André’s negative generalization (followed by Broshi) that the Romans, unlike Palestinian Jews and other peoples of the ancient Mediterranean world, ignored cicadas and grasshoppers as food, or at least would have disdained the eating of these insects if they had known about them.

Of course, it is exceedingly difficult to prove definitively what inhabitants of the Italian peninsula during the imperial period did not eat. 132 Nonetheless, in stating that the Romans were unaware of cicadas and grasshoppers as food, André notes correctly that the Elder Pliny and several other ancient authors mention locust eating, in order to make the practices of such exotic peoples known to a Roman audience. The most likely context for a communication describing peoples somehow ‘different’ from ‘us’ is one in which the author’s (whether Pliny or Mark the evangelist) own culture or presumed audience does eat locusts/grasshoppers.

It does not necessarily follow, however, that a simple East-West distinction best accounts for the divergent views toward locust eating in the ancient sources. Rather than an exclusively geographic (the Latin West) or ethnic (the Italian peninsula) exception to locusts/grasshoppers as food, the development seems to have occurred over time, perhaps a product of the ‘Romanization’—however unintentional or unorganized this may have been—of the ancient Mediterranean diet in late antiquity. Differing somewhat from Broshi and André, then, the present study proposes a diachronic account for the more pronounced aversion to humans’ eating such insects during the Roman period. This development offers a remarkable parallel to numerous patristic authors, to be discussed in chapter 5, who deprive the Baptist of his locusts and apportion to him instead manna (Gospel of the Ebionites), milk (several witnesses to Tatian’s Diatessaron), or vegetation (Athanasius of Alexandria, Isidore of Pelusium, and many others) with his honey. An examination of the Baptist’s other wilderness provision, his “wild honey,” follows in chapter 3.

Chapter 3

The Baptist’s “Wild Honey”

The previous chapter was devoted to the Baptist’s ἔχορδος. 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 δύναμιν ἐν Mark 1:6c||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 הָרָץ 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

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.”
For this reason, Eva Crane warns concerning possible references to bee honey in ancient civilizations: "Unless the context makes clear a connection with hives, bees, or honeycomb, caution is warranted." It is therefore difficult to ascertain which sweet substance is designated as 'honey' in certain ancient writings, including a number of biblical passages. Yet most biblical scholars do not even consider which type of 'honey' the Baptist ate. Numerous others simply assume that John ate bee honey or sweet tree sap (sometimes referred to as honey-water) and do not reflect an awareness of the inherent ambiguity in almost any occurrence of μέλι without an accompanying reference either to bees or vegetation (trees).

In Mark 1:6cMatthew 3:4c, the adjective ἄγρυπνος distinguishes the μέλι that John the Baptist ate from other types of 'honey.' Accordingly, the Baptist is portrayed as eating some kind of 'honey' that humans did not cultivate. As is discussed below, in antiquity, honey from bees is not the only sweet substance that lends itself to the designation "wild." It is therefore conceivable that the original, or at least a pre-Markan, form of this characterization of the Baptist may have been intended to denote honey from bees, which could in turn have been construed as a different sweet substance by Mark, Matthew or a later recipient of this gospel material. Of course, the opposite scenario is equally possible. Due to the ambiguity inherent in eating (ὄφθαλμοι, Mark 1:6c) or designating as a food (προφητής, Matt 3:4c) "wild honey," this chapter will consider ancient materials pertinent to bee honey, as well as other sweet substances designated (μέλι), μέλα or mel.

B. "Honey" Produced by Bees

This section considers primarily ancient references to 'wild honey' produced by bees. A certain amount of overlap with the following section, devoted to 'wild honey' stemming from trees, is unavoidable, however.

1. Introduction: The Late Arrival of Apiculture in Palestine

In the excavated ancient Near East, the cultivation of bee honey can be documented as early as the 2,6th or 2,5th c. B.C.E. A scene from the Sun Temple of Nuwyoser-Re at Abu Simbel depicts beekeeping in Middle Egypt. Evidence for the use of bee honey on the Nile River survives also from Thebes (modern Qena; c. 1,380–1,130 B.C.E.). In Egypt the practice continued through the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, and beyond. The earliest literary references to honey from bees stem from Niphar (100 ml/160 km SE of Babylon; "Honey" Produced by Bees

“History of Honey,” 453.
E.g., Gen 43:11; Exod 16:31; Jer 41:8; Ezek 3:3; 16:13; 19; Psa 19:10; 119:103; Prov 5:23; 24:13; 25:16; 25:27a; 27:7; Song 4:11; Rev 10:9. Exceptionally, Deut 8:8 ("a land of wheat and barley, of the vine and fig tree and pomegranate, a land of the olive tree and honey") distinguishes between the fig tree (Thunet) and honey (Qawm). Cf. unspecified references to "honey" in Job, Eccles. 1130; Philo, Deut. 115, 117, 118; 4Q372 3:5; 4Q373 (4Qpsephos) 11:16; 4Q386 (4Qpes) 2:5; 11:19 (11Q) 60:9; Jos., Ant. 2.65 (118:11); 3.10 (128); 14.7 (124) = BJ 1.9.1 (184).

On this point, see chapter 1, 6.2.2–5. Conversely, Mauriz Schuster, "Mol," art. PW 15, 364–84, 366–6; Gould, Mark, 8; Strack and Billerbeck, Kommentar zum NT 1, 1.1;1–1; Wilhelm Michaelis, "mel," art. TDNT, 4.452–4; A. Loisy, Mor., 57; M.-J. Lagrange, Mor. 3; A. Plummer, Mark, 4; A. E. J. Rawlinson, Mark, 9; V. Taylor, Mark, 156; and C. H. Kraeling, John the Baptist, 1–11, do appreciate this ambiguity.

For example, Alford, Greek NT, 1.18: "there is no need to suppose anything else meant but honey made by wild bees." H. B. Swete, Mark, 6; T. Zahn, Matthew, 133, 1; R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964), 35; G. Dalman, Sacred Sites, 84; F. J. Aardv. "Diet," 63–4; Davies and Allison, Matthew, 1.296; Leon Morris, The Gospel according to Matthew (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 95; C. S. Keener, Matthew, 119; J. E. Taylor, Immerser, 34; U. Müller, Johannes der Täufer, 24 ("Widbornehöngig"); F. H. Charlesworth, "John the Baptist," 561–79; W. Einhorn, John the Baptist and Jesus: A Report of the Jesus Seminar, 11, 29; E. L. Lapid, "The Law and the Prophets Were Until John," 50–1; A. Dalby, Food in the Ancient World, 179–80. Additionally, BDAG discusses different possibilities under the entry for ἄγρυπνος (p. 15), but only bee honey in the entry for μέλι (p. 627). Moreover, although BDAG (p. 627) refers to the aforementioned article by S. Krauss ('Honey in Palæstina'), it does not call attention to the multivalence of the term μέλι (cf. the translation given at BDAG, 15: "honey [from] wild bees").

"This view is notably less common in the secondary literature. For John's honey as sweet tree sap see, e.g., H. A. W. Meyer, Matthew (New York/London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884 ['1876]), 76–7. B. Weiss, Matthew-Mark, 13.

So Michaelis, "mel," 535–4: "ἀγρυπνος rules out both the honey from beekeeping and fruit honey which comes from human labour"; cf. UBS Committee on Translations, Fauna and Flora, 103–4. 4


c. 2100–2000 B.C.E.). In Mesopotamia, moreover, beekeeping had become a practice by the 8th c. B.C.E.

Centuries later, Aristotle would write at some length about the habits of bees, and his references to the practices and testimonies of beekeepers suggest more than a casual acquaintance with those who practiced this trade. Aristotle and numerous other Greco-Roman authors recognized that the quality of honey was dependent upon the amount of rainfall and types of flowers extant in different regions and seasons. It may come as no surprise, however, that Aristotle and other Greco-Roman writers and writings, such as Varro, Columella, the Elder Pliny, Palladius, and the Geoponica, offer copious advice concerning apiculture but have little, if anything, to say about ‘wild’ honey.

2. Cultivated Bee Honey in the Hebrew Bible

In contrast to the aforementioned witnesses to beekeeping, the Jewish scriptures contain no reference to the domestication of bees, and there is no evidence for this practice in Palestine prior to the late Hellenistic period. Scholars have therefore sought to clarify whether the HB’s many references to “a land flowing with milk and ‘honey’” designate a sweet substance derived from trees (dates, figs or sweet tree sap) or honey produced by bees.

is not necessary that the present inquiry adjudicate this debate, which highlights in literature centuries earlier than Mark 1:6c [Matt 3:4c] the potential ambiguity of any unspecified reference to ‘honey’ in antiquity.

Although the Jewish scriptures do not mention beekeeping, they do offer several references to undomesticated bee honey. Two concern the Lord’s sustenance of the covenant people, or at least the desire to sustain them:

He set him atop the heights of the land, and fed him with produce of the field; he nursed him with honey from the grasses (אברדר), with oil from flinty rock. (Deut 32:13)

I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock (אברד). I would satisfy you. (Ps 81:16)

Two other passages mention the happenstance discovery of uncultivated bee honey:

[8] After a while he [Samson] returned to marry her, and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and there was a swarm of bees (אברדר) in the body of the lion, and honey (אברד). [9] He scraped it out into his hands, and went on, eating as he went. When he came to his father and mother, he gave some to them, and they ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the carcass of the lion. (Judg 14:8-9)

All the troops came upon a honeycomb (אברד); and there was honey on the ground which he cut down (אברד). (1 Sam 14:25)

It is unlikely that the earliest followers of John (or Jesus) would have employed Judg 14:8-9 or 1 Sam 14:25 to interpret the Baptist’s “wild honey.” Nonetheless, it is conceivable that Deut 32:13 or Ps 81:16 could perhaps have suggested to some that the Lord provided for John’s needs in the wilderness and that such care validates the Baptist’s calling as the Lord’s messenger or prophet. This is not to stipulate that such was the ‘original meaning’ of John’s מַטֵּר יִשְׂרָאֵל but rather to acknowledge the possibility that such references could have been made by recipients of this gospel material.

3. The Proscription against Bee Eating at Qumran

The last chapter called attention to the Damascus Document (Zadokite Fragment) in connection with the practice of eating roasted or boiled locusts/grasshoppers at Qumran.20 Charlesworth’s argument that the similari-

27:17 we have a whole list of fruit syrups—one of them is honey . . . What the land was really flowing with was milk and date jam” (emphases original); Robert Blum, “Imkeri im alien Israel,” Bienenwasser (Vienna) 76/10 (1955): 334–6; Cran, “History of Honey,” 437.

20 CD 12:11b–12a: “[11b] No-one should defile his soul [12] with any living being or one which creeps, by eating them, from the larvae of bees to every living [13] being (אברד), which creeps in water. And fish: they should not eat them unless they have been opened up [14] alive, and the[ir blood poured] away. And all
ties to the Baptist’s diet illustrate that John ate like a former Essene has been shown to be dubious, for neither locusts/grasshoppers nor ‘honey’ are distinctive foods. Furthermore, CD 12:12 actually forbids eating the bees’ larvae, not the honey that bees produce. These objections to Charlesworth’s ‘parallelomania’ notwithstanding, the proscription against consuming the larvae of bees in CD 12:12 presupposes that some members of this community had contact with bees and opportunities to eat them.21 Those same Jews who according to CD 12:12 should refrain from eating bees would presumably have chances to partake of bee honey, which the Damascus Document does not prescribe.

Moreover, Hypothetica 11.8, which Eusebius of Caesarea (d. c. 340 C.E.) attributes to Philo of Alexandria (1st c. C.E.), makes explicit such a characterization of the Essenes: “Some of them labor on the land skilled in sowing and planting, some as herdsmen taking charge of every kind of cattle and some superintend the swarms of bees (ένιοι δὲ συμή μελετῶν ἐπιτροπέων).”22 This would represent a difference between the Baptist and the Essenes, since John is said to eat wild honey (μέλα ἔγρυνον), not cultivated honey.

4. Philo of Alexandria: Explaining the Uncleanliness of Bees

The disparity between the development of apiculture outside of Palestine, on the one hand, and the absence of bee domestication within Palestine before the late Hellenistic period, on the other hand, has been noted above. The absence of beekeeping in Palestine could stem in part from Lev 2:11, which forbids all kinds of honey (σαρκίδας) from being mixed with grain offerings.23 Referring to Lev 2:11, Philo offers the following commentary on the uncleanliness of bees:

[God] adds in a further enactment by which he orders every sacrifice to be offered without honey or leaven. Both of these substances [God] considers unfit to be brought to the altar; honey perhaps (καθάπερ πεπραγμένον) because the bee which collects it is an unclean animal,

the locusts, according to their kind, shall be put into the fire or into water (15a) while [they are] still alive, as this is the regulation for their species.” See chapter 2, 53–54.


22 Eusebius, Praep. evang. 8.11.8. Greek text and ET: F. H. Colson et al., Philo (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University/London: Heinemann, 1962 [1929]), 9.440–1. The whole of this fragment (Hypothetica 11, one of two that survive; both are in Eusebius’s Praeparatio) describes the habits of the Essenes.

23 Lev 2:11: “No grain offering that you bring to the LORD shall be made with leaven, for you must not turn any leaven or any honey (σαρκίδας) into smoke as an offering by fire to the LORD.”

bread from the putrescence and corruption of dead oxen, we are told, just as wasps are from the carcasses of horses; or else (9) [God] forbids it as a symbol of the utter unholiness of excessive pleasure which tastes sweet as it passes through the throat but afterwards produces bitter and persistent pains, which of necessity shake and agitate the soul and make it unable to stand firmly in its place.24

Philo suggests that Lev 11:20–23, which prohibits dining on ‘creeping’ insects but allows the eating of certain species of locusts/grasshoppers,25 offers a possible rationale for Lev 2:11. The logic imputed to these two commands in Leviticus seems to be that because bees are not to be eaten, bee honey is unfit for the Lord’s altar. However, tentative, Philo’s linking of Lev 2:11 with Lev 11:20–23 may suggest a stigma against coming into close contact with bees. That Philo’s reasoning equivocates between eating bee larvae and offering to the Lord the honey these insects produce is beside the point. What is significant to this inquiry is that the dual prohibitions of bees as harmful food (Lev 11:20–23) and their honey for grain offerings (Lev 2:11) could have given rise to an aversion to entering into the close contact with bees necessitated by apiculture. This inference based upon Philo’s reasoning in Spec. 1.291–292 could contribute to an explanation for the relative lack of apiculture in Palestine.26

At any rate, at the time of John the Baptist almost all bee honey in Palestine would have been uncultivated. For a Palestinian audience, then, calling the Baptist’s honey “wild” (ἔγρυνον) could constitute a tautology. Given the suspicion that Philo associates with honey, moreover, it is unlikely that he would have associated Mark 1:6c[Mark 3:4c with the diet of an ascetic. For Philo, such earthly honey stands in contrast to the ‘bread’ tasting like honey with which the Lord wishes to fill the human soul (Figs. 138; cf. Exod. 16:15). It is thus possible that μέλα ἕγρυνον in Mark 1:6c[Mark 3:4c either does not refer to bee honey, or was composed for a non-Palestinian audience or by a non-Palestinian author who would not have known about the paucity of apiculture in Palestine.

24 Philo, Spec. 1.291–292. Of the two reasons suggested in On the Special Laws 1.291–292 for why honey is prohibited in Lev 2:11, Philo mentions only the latter in Congr. 169: “And further it is forbidden by law to bring any leaven or any honey (σαρκίδας) to the altar. For it is a hard matter to consecrate the holy as the sweet flavors of bodily pleasures or the risings of the soul in their leaven-like thinness and sponginess, so profane and unholy are they by their very nature.”

25 See the discussion of Lev 11:20–23 in chapter 2.

26 This is not to suggest an aversion to contact with bees by all Palestinian Jews, however. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, Philo (Hypothetica 11.8) characterizes some Essenes as beekeepers.
5. Honeys in Josephus and the Mishnah

Compared with the HB, the Mishnah offers greater specificity concerning kinds of ‘honey,’ although the same ambiguity remains in several passages.27 The Mishnah contains references to honeys from both bees28 and dates.29 In *Nedarim* 6, date honey seems to be less precious than both dates and another type of ‘honey’:

[8] He who takes a vow not to eat dates (םַרְבָּדִים בַּרְבָּדִים) is permitted to have date honey (ַרְבָּדִים בַּרְבָּדִים). [He who takes a vow not to eat] winter grapes is permitted to have the vinegar made from winter grapes. … [9] He who takes a vow not to have wine is permitted to have apple wine. [He who takes a vow not to have] oil is permitted to have sesame oil. He who takes a vow not to have honey (ַרְבָּדִים בַּרְבָּדִים) is permitted to have date honey (םַרְבָּדִים בַּרְבָּדִים) … (m. *Ned.* 6:8–9)

In *Ned.* 6:9, the other honey mentioned apparently stems from bees. If correct, a vow to abstain from bee honey would not be broken by partaking of date honey.

The greater esteem given to bee honey suggested in the Mishnah corresponds to an earlier testimony of Josephus (37/8–after 94 C.E.):

Of the date-palms watered by it [a nearby spring] there are numerous varieties differing in flavor and in medicinal properties; the richer species of this fruit when pressed out foot emit copious honey, not much inferior to that of bees. And so the region is abundant in honey (μελις δεντυλη εντνησιν ω τοι ανα το λοιπον χειρον κατα μελιτορφυρα δε ημερας).30

Josephus describes dates and bees (cf. μελισσον [μελιτορφυρα]), and thus the honey associated with each, as plentiful near Jericho.31 These two witnesses thus attest a hierarchy among honeys: Bee honey is more highly esteemed than date honey (Jos., B.J. 4.8.3 [§468]; *Ned.* 6:9).

6. The Potential Dangers of Consuming ‘Wild Honey’

An advantage to consuming cultivated honey is that the eater can anticipate the relative quality (or lack thereof) of what he/she is about to enjoy. Conversely, partaking of wild honey could be dangerous, if the bees were to

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27 Mishnaic references to ‘honey’ without specification: m. *Ma‘as.* 5:15; m. *Hal.* 1:5; m. *Bik.* 1:10; m. *Sabb.* 8:1, 12:5, 22:1; m. *Qadd.* 2:2; m. *B. Qam.* 10:4; m. *Beah.* 3:3; m. Terum. 3:2; m. Makk. 5:9; cf. m. *Kelim.* 5:12 (honey of *upas*).


30 Jos., B.J. 4.8.3 (§468); Greek text and ET (modified); Thackeray, LCL. Cf. Varro, Rust. 3.16.24.


make honey with pollen from poisonous flowers.32 Xenophon, Ps. Aristotle, Strabo and Pliny demonstrate that the dangers of eating such ‘maddenning honey’ were well known in antiquity.

a) Xenophon and Ps. Aristotle: Hapless Honey

Xenophon (c. 430 B.C.E.) describes the infamous ‘Retreat of the Ten Thousand’ that followed the death of Cyrus the Younger in 401 B.C.E. In the vicinity of Trebizond in Asia Minor, the soldiers who ate the local bee honey subsequently displayed symptoms like inebriation and madness, as well as vomiting and diarrhea.33 The soldiers helped themselves to this honey, and Xenophon does not suggest that the local people, who presumably would have known to avoid it, ate from it. Mercifully, no one died from eating the honey, and the ailments dissipated within three or four days (An. 4.8.21).

Moreover, the collection of tidbits attributed to Aristotle in the work, *On Marvelous Things Heard*, likewise mentions such dangerous honey in Asia Minor: “At Trapezus in Pontus honey from boxwood has a strong scent (το άπα της τυσιας μελι βαρυομενον); and they say that healthy people go mad (δειμονονται), but that epileptics are cured by it immediately.”34

b) Strabo: “Maddenning Honey”

Writing later than Xenophon and, presumably, Ps. Aristotle, Strabo (c. 64–after 21 B.C.E.) relates the intentional drugging of foreign troops with ‘wild honey.’ Strabo’s account follows how the Heptaccomaei (Mosynoei) once inflicted heavy losses on Pompey’s army (67 B.C.E.):

For they mixed bowls of the eating honey that the branches [boughs?] of trees yield (κρατεριας … τω χειρινων μελιτορφυρα δε φροσυον οι χειρινων των δευτερων), and placed them in the roads. Then when the soldiers drank the mixture and lost their senses, they attacked them and easily disposed of them. (Geog. 12.3.18; ET [modified]; LCL)
In Greek, ἄκρημιόνες could refer to the trees’ “branches” or “boughs.” An additional, and for this study more significant, point of uncertainty concerns whether this ‘honey’ is the production of wild bees or is to be identified with the trees’ own sap.36

**b) Pliny and Columella: “Maddening Honey” and Third-Rate ‘Wild Honey’**

In addition to Xenophon, Ps. Aristodic and Strabo, the Elder Pliny (23/24 C.E.–79 C.E.) discusses such maddening honey in Asia Minor, as well as the drawbacks of eating ‘wild honey.’ He describes the former kind of honey as follows: “At Heraclea in Pontus the honey turns out in certain years very deadly (περνικοισις), and this from the same bees” that are known to produce harmless honey in other years.36 A different type of bee honey, also from Pontus, is consistently deleterious:

There is another kind of honey . . . among the people [called] Sanni, which, from the madness it produces is called maenomenon (μελίσσα ποτ άσπιξ quam gignit maenomenon vocant). This poison is supposed to be extracted from the flowers of the oolanders (fors rhododendri), which abound in the woods. Although this people supply the Romans with wax by way of tribute, they do not sell the honey, because it is deadly (vitalis).37

According to Pliny, poisoned honeycombs exist also in Persia (in Persia; modern Fars or Farsistan) and in Gaetulia (of Mauretania Caesariensis, in North Africa). Perhaps from observing the effects of this honey on cattle (HN 21.44.77), or on humans, the Greeks themselves apparently called this honey ‘maddening’ (melos insanendum = μέλι μανισάμον). Elsewhere in his *Natural History*, Pliny extols bees for bringing honey to humankind and describes at some length the habits and characteristics of different types of bees (HN 11.4.11–11.23.70). He mentions only in passing two individuals who wrote about bees:

Nobody must be surprised that love for bees inspired Aristomachus of Seli to devote himself to nothing else ( nihil aliud egisse) for fifty-eight years, and Philiscus of Thasos in desert places, winning the name of ‘Wilderness-Man’ (in deserta apes colens in agrum cognominatum); both of these have written about them [bees].38

Mention of a wilderness dweller devoted to bees with the corresponding cognomen Agrium (cf. ἄγριον) is of potential interest to the Baptist’s dict.
point highlights the importance of considering what other types of μέλι an ancient audience could have construed as the Baptist’s sweet wilderness provision.

C. “Honey” Derived from Trees

The previous section considered ‘wild honey’ produced by bees. Given the ambiguity of ‘honey’ in Mark 1:6c and Matthew 3:4c—since these passages do not also mention bees, tree gum/sap, dates or figs—it is incumbent upon the present study to consider other substances that were also referred to as ‘honey’ in antiquity.

1. Plentiful “Wild Honey” in a Pleasing Beverage: Diodorus and Pliny

Diodorus of Sicily (fl. c. 60–30 B.C.E.) appears first in this section because his account of wild ‘honey’ collected from trees is the most detailed and offers a striking parallel to Mark 1:6c/Matt 3:4c. In describing the customs of the Arabs (τὰ νόμιμα τῶν Ἀραβῶν), Diodorus notes the proximity to the wilderness (ἐπίμηκος) of certain Arab peoples (Hist. 19.94.1–4), especially the Nabataeans:

While there are many Arabian tribes who use the desert as pasture (οὐκ οἶκτράνες ἡ ἀραβικὴ ἐνδοξάσθη μέλι τῆς τῆς ἐπίμηκου ἐπίμηκον), the Nabataeans far surpass the others in wealth. . . . [The Nabataeans] are exceptionally fond of freedom; and, whenever a strong force of enemies comes near, they take refuge in the desert (ἐκφυγούντως εἰς τήν ἐπίμηκον), using this as a fortress. (19.94.4, 6)

Diodorus next mentions how the Nabataeans and their flocks survive in the desert with little water (19.94.6–9). He also relates the following detail about their wilderness food (τρωφηνία):

They themselves use as food (πρὸς τρωφήνα τροφήνα) flesh and milk and those of the plants that grow from the ground which are suitable for this purpose; for among them there grow the pepper and plenty of the so-called wild honey from trees, which they use as a drink mixed with water (μετὰ. . . ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνάγρων μέλι πολὺ τὸ κελούμενον ἐπίμηκον ἀνάγρων ἀνάγρων ἐπίμηκον). 44

The Elder Pliny complements Diodorus’s testimony, stating that such a beverage was plentiful in Syria:

There is an oil that grows of its own accord (sponte nascitur) in the coastal parts of Syria called elasonem [Ελασσον + μέλι]. It is a rich oil that trickles from trees (οι αρβορίστας), of a substance thicker than honey but thinner than resin, and having a sweet flavor; this is also used by the doctors. (HN 15.7.32)


44 Dalby, Siren Feasts, 47, does not refer to Mark 1:6c/Matt 3:4c.
Without a doubt, Diodorus offers a close literary parallel to the Baptist's μέλι, ἀγρινον in the wilderness (Ἐρημοῦ). This does not ipso facto prove that the referent in Mark 1:6 (Matt 3:4c) is honey-water. To aid in assessing this possibility, other depictions of honey-water receive attention immediately below.

2. Early Witnesses to Designating Tree Sap as 'Honey'

Roland K. Harrison calls attention to the following 9th c. B.C.E. relief "from the palace of Ashurnasirpal II Nurnûd" depicting Griffin-demons collecting sap from a palm tree.46

The relief attests to an ancient practice (9th c. B.C.E.), although it is not entirely clear that the tree sap it depicts was indeed called "honey."47

The earliest unambiguous designation of such a substance as "honey" may be Plato's Timaeus. Plato (429–347 B.C.E.) describes assorted kinds of water (διόξην) "strained through earth-grown plants and called 'sap.'"48 He uses the term μέλι for one kind of sap, which is inclusive of all sweet saps: "And all

that kind which tends to expand the contracted parts of the mouth, so far as their nature allows, and by this property produces sweetness (γλυκύττυτος περεχόμενον), has received as a general designation the name of 'honey' (μέλη)" (Ti. 608). Theophrastus (c. 371–287 B.C.E.) follows Plato in naming honey (μέλι) among the saps or juices (ἐν χυμοῖς given off by plants).49

3. Additional References to 'Honey' from Trees: Euripides, Aristaeus, Virgil, Sibylline Oracles 3 and 5, Second Enoch, Aelian and Galen

Descriptions of this type of 'wild honey' by Euripides, the Letter of Aristaeus, Virgil, Sibylline Oracles 3 and 5, Second Enoch, Aelian and Galen complement the testimonies of Diodorus, Pliny, Plato and Theophrastus. For example, Euripides characterizes the gathering of the Maenads devoted to Dionysus in terms of the abundance of water, wine, milk and honey (Bacch. 704–711). Concerning the wands, or staffs (θυρσι), that the Maenads carry, Euripides writes: "From their ivy-covered thyrsi dripped streams of honey (γλυκετοῖ μέλιτοι... ροζ)."50

Moreover, the Letter of Aristaeus (2nd c. B.C.E.) describes this type of honey in the vicinity of Alexandria:

The zeal of the farmers is indeed remarkable. In fact their land is thickly covered with large numbers of olive trees and corn crops and pulse, and moreover with vines and abundant honey (μέλιτι πολλῷ). As for the other fruit trees and date palms among them (γάμον τῶν διαλέγονται κατὰ φοινίκων παρ' ἄντος), no number can be given.51

The translation by R. J. H. Shutt in the OTP is incomplete in that it does not translate the adjective διόξην ("other," italicized above). Shutt's assumption—or at least the translation's implication—is that μέλιτι πολλῷ refers to bee honey. Since the passage describes assorted agrarian products and διόξην refers to trees other than those that produce 'honey,' Let. Arist. 112 in fact highlights the abundance of fig honey, date honey, or sweet tree sap, not bee honey.52

Furthermore, Virgil (70–19 B.C.E.), two of the Jewish Sibylline Oracles, and 2 Enoch associate honey-water with the dawnings of a new age. In his famous Fourth Eclogue, Virgil shows esteem for such honey when illustrating

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46 Harrison, "Palm Tree," art. ISBE 3.649. Image provided by and used with the permission of The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY.

47 Harrison, "Palm Tree," 609, notes: "The Babylonians made intoxicating liquor by extracting the syrup content of the spathes [i.e., bract] surrounding the [palm tree] flowers. This liquor... was also known euphemistically as 'honey.'"

48 Gk.: Διόξην ἐκ γάμοι ἂν θυρσίων καθαρισμένος, χυμοὶ λεγόμενοι, Ti. 595. Greek text and ET: R. G. Bury, LCL.


50 Bar., Bacch. 710–711; Greek text and ET: David Kovacs, LCL (2002).

51 Let. Arist. 112; cf. 109, referring to Alexandria. The above ET is modified from that of R. J. H. Shutt, in OTP, 2.20. Shutt translates the last sentence as follows: "As for the fruit trees and date palms which they have, no number can be given."

52 Understood in this light, Let. Arist. 112 may have a precedent in Ezek 27:7? ("Judah and the land of Israel traded with you; they exchanged for your merchandise wheat from Minoth, miller, honey, oil, and balm."). Cf. R. J. Israel, "Milk and Date Jam," 27.
the era ushered in by Octavius, who was by then (c. 37 B.C.E.) the undisputed ruler of Italy. "On wild brambles shall hang the purple grape, and the stubbor
born oak shall distill dewey honey (rosca de mello)." In addition to Virgil's
tatamum ex artu prophecy concerning the eventual emperor Augustus's accom plishments, Sibylline Oracles 3 and 5 associate the appearance of honey-water with the arrival of the day of judgment. The third Sibylline
Oracle predicts, "When indeed this day reaches its consummation...the all-bearing earth will give...a delightful drink of sweet honey from heaven (αυτας αυτος του θεου της του στρεφεται της ημερας της του nad)." The fifth Sibylline Oracle (c. 80–132 C.E.; after Virgil's Fourth Eclogue) likewise foretells that the "holy land" will flow with this pleasing beverage: "But the holy land of the pious alone will bear all these things: a honey-sweet stream (νήματα μελισσεχθαντα) from rock and spring, and heavenly milk will flow for all the righteous" (Sib. Or. 5:281–283). The author of 2 Enoch (late 1st c. C.E.), moreover, presents Enoch as ascending to Paradise and seeing a river flowing with honey-water. Later in 2 Enoch, the archangel Michael anoints Enoch with special oil, whose "ointment is like sweet dew."55

Of course, it does not necessarily follow that the historical Baptist drank honey-water, let alone as a paraletic act complementing a message of repentance and imminent eschatological fulfillment. Like others in Syro-Palestine, the Baptist may simply have drunk what was plentiful in the wilderness (cf. Diod. Sic., Hist. 19.94.10). Nonetheless, given the symbolic

54 In 2 Enoch, Enoch ascends to the third heaven and beholds the wonders of Paradise (8:1–4). One such wonder is a river that flows periodically with honey-water: "[5] and two streams come forth, one of honey and milk, and a source which produces oil and wine. And it is divided into four parts, and they go around with a quiet movement. [6] And they come out into the Paradise of Eden [Eden], between the corruptible and the incorruptible. And from them they pass along and divide into 40 parts. And it proceeds in descent along the earth, and they have a revolution in their cycle, just like the other atmospheric elements" (2 Es. 8:5–6 [3]). ET of the Old Slavonic: F. I. Andersen, OTP, 1.116. At least one other MS of 2 Enoch (A) does not contain this passage, however (ET: OTP, 1.117). Accordingly, 2 Es. 8:5–6 (3) may offer a witness to honey-water later than the 1st c. C.E. (On the yet unresolved text-critical problems associated with 2 Enoch, see F. I. Andersen, in: OTP, 1.91–4).
55 2 Es. 22:8–9 (3): [8] And the Lord spoke to Michael, 'Go, and extract honey from his earthly clothing. And anoint him with my delightful oil, and put him into the clothes of my glory.' [9] And so Michael did, just as the Lord had said to him. He anointed me and clothed me. And the appearance of that oil is greater than the greatest light, and its ointment is like sweet dew, and its fragrance myrrh: and it is like the rays of the dazzling sun." At 2 Es. 22:8–9, MS J and A are quite similar, both mention "ointment...like sweet dew."
4.8.3 \(\text{[6468]}\); m. 

Xenophon, Ps. Aristotle, Strabo and the Elder Pliny even report that not knowing the source of the honey one eats could be dangerous, if not fatal, if the bees interact (that is, pollinate) with poisonous plants. Thus at least in Mark 1:6c, the reference to John's honey has more to do with where John was rather than what he ate: The Baptist ate such honey because it was abundant in the desert, even if he perhaps could have enjoyed better 'honey' elsewhere. This conclusion complements the analysis of chapter 2, which found that locusts, especially in their 'gregarious' phase, accentuate John's place in the wilderness. John's food is simply a reflection of what was plentiful in his midst: insects and uncultivated 'honey.' In the next chapter it will be argued that the author of Mark mentions the Baptist's food precisely for this reason, namely to emphasize John as the prophetic herald "crying out in the wilderness" (Mark 1:3, citing Isa 40:3).

Concerning what kind of honey is presented as being eaten, the possibility of the Baptist's "wild honey" as honey-water derived from the gum or sap of trees is inviting—but by no means certain—for two reasons. First, apiculture had only come to Palestine in the late Hellenistic period, centuries later than to Egypt, Mesopotamia and classical Greece. Second, a plethora of witnesses to honey-water demonstrate that this beverage was both common and well-known. Even if modern (Western) interpreters may not regard the produce of trees as 'honey,' the ancients certainly did. Indeed, Diodorus's description (Hist. 19.94) of a particular Arabian tribe, the Nabataeans, who survive with their flocks in the desert (Ἐρήμων) on 'honey' (μέλι) from trees mixed with water provides the closest extant literary analogy to μέλι ἔγραφον in Mark 1:6c (Matt 3:4c).

With regard to Matt 3:4c, it will be recalled that Matthew presents locusts/grasshoppers and "wild honey" as John's only wilderness food (γεννηθεὶς ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς). Andrew Dalby's observation that bee honey "is never common enough to be a dietary staple" favors the interpretation of Matt

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60 Xen., An. 4.8.21; Ps. Arist., Mitr. ausc. 18; Strabo, Geog. 12.3.18; Plin. (E), HN 21.44.74–75, 21.45.77.

61 However tentatively, with H. A. W. Meyer, Matthew, 76–7; B. Weiss, Matthew-Mark, 13; O. Böcher, "Ass Johannes der Täufer," 91–2; Guelich, Mark, 21; Tilly, Johannes der Täufer, 38.

62 Pl. Ti. 59a–60a; Theophr., Xen. 84; Plin. (E), HN 15.7.32; Verg., Ecl. 4.29–30; Stob. Or. 3:741–746, 5.281–283; 2 En. 8.1–4; Act., NA 15.7; Attius, Iatricorum 3.166.1–3; 8.20.179; 8.7.6.101.

63 Gr.: ἀκόλουθον δὲν ἔχουσιν μέλι πολλόν τὸ καλόμενον ἔγραφον ὑπὸ χράντει ποτῶ μεθ' ἐδενεῖς, Diod. Sic., Hist. 19.94.10.

64 Dalby, Swan Feasts, 47.

As noted in chapter 1, the imperfect perishastic in Mark 1:6c (ἡ Ἐρήμων) states that John was in the habit of eating locusts/grasshoppers and "wild honey" presumably among other foods in the wilderness.
Chapter 4

“Locusts and Wild Honey” in Synoptic Interpretation:
The Historical Baptist, Mark, Matthew (and Luke)

“Do not forget about wild foods which are available at no cost.”

“Why should we imitate these uncivilized races?”

πᾶν τὸ παρατιθέμενον ὑμῖν ἐστὶ δεῖ (1 Cor 10:27b)

The previous two chapters discussed John the Baptist’s ἡχρίδες καὶ μέλι ὑμῖν in their ancient contexts. These materials shed much light on John’s diet, as it is reflected in the Synoptic gospels and various patristic interpretations. The purpose of this chapter is to clarify what has been learned through these assorted inquiries and how the present study aids in the interpretation of the Baptist’s “locusts and wild honey.” The most likely meaning(s) of this diet will be considered, in turn, for the historical Baptist, the author of Mark and the author of Matthew. The final section of chapter 4 explores the reason for Luke’s omission of Mark 1:6c in light of this evangelist’s distinctive uses of Elijah traditions. Chapter 5 will consider the interpretations of John’s diet in the early and medieval periods, and beyond.

A. The Historical Baptist’s “Locusts and Wild Honey”

The first section of chapter 4 examines the historical Baptist’s experience of collecting “locusts and wild honey.” To this end, the discussion will relate anthropologists’ observations concerning recent and contemporary locust-eating peoples to what the ancients actually understood about eating locusts/grasshoppers. The nutritional value of “locusts and wild honey” with reference to the different claims of Mark 1:6c and Matt 3:4c will also be addressed. It will be argued that, inasmuch as locusts/grasshoppers are rich in protein and certain types of ancient ‘honey’ in carbohydrates, Mark 1:6c plausibly characterizes parts of the historical Baptist’s diet. This study will also evaluate the benefits and potential drawbacks of the exclusive claim of Matt 3:4c—that the Baptist ate only these foods—in light of empirical data on human nutrition.

1. Introduction: Present-Day Locust Eaters

That locust-eaters were known to Greek and Latin authors during the Classical, Hellenistic and Roman periods is supported by numerous witnesses. A number of the materials examined in chapter 2 have clarified certain aspects of John’s diet, or at least its presentation in Mark or Matthew. This section seeks to ascertain in what ways the practices of modern and relatively recent eaters of locusts/grasshoppers shed additional light on the historical Baptist. In spite of the difficulties inherent in drawing conclusions about life in the ancient Mediterranean world in light of present-day pre-industrial societies, certain aspects of locusts as human food, which the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman sources reveal less clearly, can be better understood, or further illustrated, through the habits of recent and contemporary peoples. These aspects include how John may have gathered locusts and that he could easily have met his daily needs for protein and calories, albeit not all of his dietary needs, from these insects.

2. Locust Eating in the Great Basin of North America and Elsewhere in Our World Today

Since antiquity, locusts have been a vital and cherished food for numerous peoples of the world. Acrididae remain so in many parts of the world today. There is copious evidence to support these points from Africa,2

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1 Advice given to South African teachers and health care workers in the “Primary Healthcare Booklet,” cited in: G. R. DeFoliart, “Insects as Food: Western Attitude,” 29. DeFoliart, an entomologist, argues that “Westerners should become more aware of the fact that their bias against insects as food has an adverse impact” on insect-eating peoples, “resulting in a gradual reduction in the use of insects without replacement of lost nutrition and other benefits” (21).

2 Hypothetical question posed by Vincent M. Holt, Why Not Eat Insects? (Hampton-Middlesex: Classley, 1967 [1885]), 33. Holt’s suggestion pertains to locust eating by those of European descent and is discussed in this chapter’s excursus.

3 See the discussion in chapter 2 of Herod., Hist. 4.172; Ar., Ach. 870–871; 1114–1117; Thuc., I. 1.22; Arist., Pol. 5.30 (356b); Alexis, Pr. 167.13 (162.13); Anaxandrides, Fr. 42.59 (41.59); Diot. Sic., Hist. 3.29.1–4; Strabo, Geog. 16.4.12; Life of Aesop 99; Plin. (E), Hist. 6.3.195; 11.32.92; 11.35.106; 30.21.68; Ath., Deip. 4.135; Dioscorides, De mat. med. 2.51–52; Gal., De simp. med. temp. 11.13.12 (11.12.149); Terr., Adv. Marc. 1.17; De anima 15.2, 16a.; Adv. loqu. 27.15.

4 The present author has searched for but not found analogous material on people today who eat “wild honey,” however construed. As a result, the following comparative exercise focuses on locusts, but not uncultivated honeys.

contemporary anthropologists, as well as archaeologists, 11 can be guilty of the same sin of omission. Likewise, this oversight applies to otherwise important and thorough studies of food in ancient Greece and Rome. 12

Moreover, Sutton and other modern observers of locust-eating peoples posit a connection between avoiding indigestion and taking off the locusts' legs (and wings):

The removal of the legs seems to have been a fairly common practice in the preconquesting of grasshoppers. The legs are probably of little food value; they tend to have spurs, be very spiny, and may be uncomfortable to swallow. They might, thus, cause some difficulty in the digestive tract. 13

The following commentary concerning locust eating in Cambodia in the mid-1990s by Rich Garell, a Western journalist and political activist, complements Sutton's description: "May is locust season! Every spring, kids come around with baskets of these tasty fried locusts. The best way to eat them is to snap off their lower legs (otherwise they scratch up your throat something awful), and sau[e] th[e]m again so they're piping hot!" 14 Similarly, John D. Whiting, a witness to the invasion of locusts that struck Palestine in 1915, observed that the Arabs "dismember the insects, pulling off legs and wings, but not the head, and while (the locusts are) still alive roast them in a pan over
a hot fire; and after being thoroughly dried in the sun, they can be stored away in sacks." The observations of Sutton, Garell and Whiting offer a plausible explanation for why the Damascene Document in Qumran requires that the locusts first be roasted or boiled and, conversely, why Strabo describes a short-lived Ethiopian people who eat the locusts whole. Roasting or boiling allows for the easy removal of the legs and wings, and failure to do so can result in physical discomfort, if not more serious complications, for the eater. One cannot be sure that John the Baptist himself thus removed any of the locusts' appendages before eating only the remaining parts, but he probably did, given the emphatically verifiable drawbacks of failing to do so.

Mark Sutton further notes that one Native American tribe, the Ute (in Utah), were known as the "Grasshopper Indians," apparently because of this people's proclivity for gathering and eating grasshoppers. Given that Native American peoples were unlikely to refer to themselves by the incorrect (South-Asian) designation "Indian," the name "Grasshopper Indians" was likely given by European settlers. Presumably non-insect eating outsiders described as Strabo and the Elder Pliny (HN 11.32.92; 11.35.106; 30.21.68) had done centuries earlier—an ethnic group different from themselves in terms of the people's particular eating habits.

3. The Collection and Preservation of Locusts

Also of interest to the diet of the historical Baptist is Sutton's calling attention to the fact that, when grasshoppers land upon water, they cannot swim and soon drown. Notably, that locusts perish in water is assumed in Exodus 10 and by the Elder Pliny:

The LORD changed the wind into a very strong west wind, which lifted the locusts and drove them into the Red Sea; not a single locust was left ("נתן גשם פגע בסוף כל האוכלי") in all the country of Egypt. (Exod 10:19)

They also have another way of dying: they are carried away in swarms by the wind and fall into the sea or stagnant water (in maria au stagna decidunt). This happens purely by accident and not, as was believed by ancient, owing to their wings being drenched by the dampness of night.

Additionally, the Geoponica, an agricultural manual, attributes to the ancient philosopher Democritus (b. 460/57 B.C.E.) the estimation that a locust or a cicada can swim in pure wine but will drown in wine that has been diluted by water. The North African church father Tertullian likewise names locusts among insects that prefer aridity to moisture.

To these points may be added the observation of S. R. Driver that, "[w]hen conditions are favourable, the migratory instinct is strong in [the locusts]; but they have little power of guidance in flight, and are mainly borne along by the wind." That is to say, in the presence of a stiff wind, locusts and grasshoppers are powerless to prevent themselves from being blown down into a lake or river and, subsequently, perishing in the water.

19 Sutton, Insects, 12-13, on the vast numbers of grasshoppers that would periodically wash up on the shore of lakes in the Great Basin and could be caught in great quantities with little effort.
20 Plin. (E), HN 11.35.103, referring to leucotis in 11.35.101.
21 Geoponica 7.8.1-2: "It is necessary for the master often to trust wine or must to the curators or to the servants; it is also necessary that the buyer should prove if the wine is genuine (ἐλεύθερον). Some therefore throw an apple into the vessel, but it is better to throw in wild pears; some throw in a locust (διόπτην), and some a cicada (σκιατίδα). And if these indeed swim the wine is genuine; but if they sink, it is diluted (διώτητος)." Cf. Hom., fl. 21.12; Cato, Rost. 106, 111. The Geoponica (10th c. C.E.) is based, supposedly, on Cassius Bassus's 6th c. C.E. Latin treatise. Greek text: Heinrich Beck, Geoponica zue Cassianae Bassi scholastici, De re rustica eclogae (Teubner: Leipzig; Teubner, 1894 [1885]), 193-4; ET (modified): Thomas Owen (1749-1812), ГЕОПОНИКА: Agricultural Pursuits (London: Spilsby, 1805-06). 1.221; online: http://digital.lib.msu.edu/onlineoils/display.cfm?TitleNo=257&FT=gif (on 8 April 2004). On Democritus in the Geoponica, see Wilhelm Gemoll, Untersuchungen über die Quellen, den Verfasser und die Auflassungstexte der Geoponica (Berlin: Berliner Studien für klassische Philologie und Archäologie 1/1; Berlin: C. Calvary, 1883 [= Wallraf bei Wiesbaden: M. Staudig, 1972]), 103-27; cf. Eugen Fuchs, Zur Geschichte der griechischen Geoponica (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913).
22 Tert., De anima 32.353, 6 (BT: ANF, 3.212): "In like manner, those creatures are opposite to water which are in their nature dry and sapless; indeed, locusts (leucotis), butterflies, and chameleons rejoice in droughts."
specify fully-developed adult locusts with functional wings. The recently
hatched "nymphs," which cannot fly, are vulnerable to attacks even from
other insects, not to mention insect-eating animals27 and, of course,
humans. All this is to say that, whether in the vicinity of water or in the
wilderness, the Baptist would have had easy access to this food.

Excursus: Why Not Eat Locusts Today?

The disparity between the positive attitude toward insect eating in most
cultures of the world throughout history, on the one hand, and the aversion
to eating locusts in European cultures since the Roman Empire, on the
other hand, has led certain Western authors to commend to their Indo-European
comrades the nutritional benefits of eating arthropods. With a tone of
nineteenth-century cultural superiority that is only slowly working itself out
of today's academia, Vincent M. Holt suggests:

"Why should we imitate these uncivilized races?" But upon examination it will be found
that, though uncivilized, most of these peoples are more particular as to the fitness of their
food than we are, and look upon us with far greater horror for using, as food, the unclean
pig or the raw oyster, than we do upon them for relishing a properly cooked dish of clean-
feeding locusts or palm-grubs.28

Happily without the imperialist rhetoric, other more recent authors also seek
to assure the Western aversion to insects as food for humans.29 Simply put,
there is no rational basis for proscribing insect eating (although the present
author cannot yet claim to have overcome this disposition).

Ironically, two recent publications on "Bible foods" overlook locusts, de-
spite the fact that throughout antiquity many Jews, possibly including Jesus,

27 Taylor, Butterflies, 126–7; Edward O. Essig, Insects and Mites of Western North
Whiting, Jerusalem’s Locust Plague," 540.
28 Holt, Why Not Eat Insects? 33; cf. 32–3; J. C. Bequaert, "Insects as Food," 200. Holt's
description of locusts as "clean-feeding" denounces their "vegetarian" diet; that is, these insects
do not feed on meat (cf. the discussion in chapter 2 of Lot. Aris. 1440–146a).
29 Peter Menzel and Faith D'Aluisio, Map Eating Bugs: The Art and Science of Eating
Insects (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1998), with illuminating color photos throughout, as well as
a Mexican recipe for grasshopper tacos (p. 110); R. L. Taylor, Entomologists, esp. 88–90; R. L.
Taylor and Barbara J. Carter, Entertaining with Insects, or The Original Guide to Insect
Cookery (Yorba Linda, CA: Salutek, 1996 [1976]), includes a recipe for "John the Baptist
Bread," with crickets substituted for locusts (p. 30), and advice for cleaning and preparing
insects before cooking (pp. 142–3); David George Gordon, The Eat-A-Bug Cookbook: 52 Ways to Cook Grasshoppers, Ants, Water Bugs, Spiders, Centipedes, and Their Kin
(Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1998), esp. 15–26; Ledger, "Eighteenth Plague," 219; DeFoliart,
"Insects as Human Food," Crop Protection (Guildford, England) 11 (1992): 395–9; see
ate them. However well-intended, such popular books highlight that, for many modern Western interpreters, like the ancient Romans before them, understanding John’s diet of locusts/grasshoppers literally is somewhat counterintuitive. Could ἄρετος not have meant something else besides actual locusts/grasshoppers?

For the historical John, the present study has answered this question with a definitive “No.” In this chapter it remains to offer some observations concerning the nutritional aspects of John’s diet as depicted in Matt 3:4c; to consider John’s likely response to the characterization of Mark 1:6c|Matt 3:4c; and to examine the meanings attached to this diet in the Synoptic tradition.

4. The Nutritional Value of “Locusts and Wild Honey”

Whether they are, or were, aware of it, people throughout the centuries have eaten locusts, among other insects, for several good reasons. The obvious incentives are that locusts are plentiful and rather easy to catch. Like the ancient Assyrians who ordered locusts for royal banquets centuries ago, people who eat these (and other) insects also seem to enjoy them. Less apparent reasons are that these insects are high in protein and certain vitamins and minerals.31

a) Approximating What John Needed to Sustain Life in the Wilderness

One goal of the following inquiry is to illustrate the claim of Matt 3:4c, that John’s wilderness “food consisted of grasshoppers and wild honey.”32 This inquiry into the nutritional value of “locusts and wild honey” is valuable in its own right and will also inform the discussion later in this chapter of Matthew’s editing of Mark 1:6c. Additionally, the following investigation will offer an approximation of John’s caloric needs in the wilderness, which will serve as a referent for assessing the amount of “locusts and wild honey” John would have needed to consume to subsist.33 Further, it will be asked if Matt 3:4c depicts a healthy, sustainable diet or, conversely, if the lack of variety would have resulted in a nutritional deficiency for a person seeking to live solely on these foods. Scientific data on human nutrition, to be discussed below, support the conclusions that a person deriving nourishment only from these foods would suffer from a lack of Vitamin C (ascorbic acid) and probably also from an insufficient intake of carbohydrates.

i) Prolegomena

Any attempt to assess John’s nutritional needs is complicated by at least three major factors. First, as noted in chapter 2 ancient terms for locusts/grasshoppers do not correspond to modern classification systems for particular species. We therefore cannot ascertain the species of locusts that John ate, or how many different species he may have eaten. Species of locusts vary somewhat in size and chemical make-up, and therefore in their nutritional benefits as food.35

Second, chapter 3 demonstrated that we do not know whether the Baptist ate uncultivated honey produced by bees or derived from trees (or both). Even if the type of John’s honey could be ascertained, the compositional make-up of bee honeys varies by region. Moreover, bee honey can change in its chemical structure over time.

Third, humans 2,000 years ago tended to be slightly smaller than people today and therefore required somewhat fewer calories. How many calories a Judean wilderness prophet would actually have consumed is obscured also because caloric need, along with definitions of thinness and obesity, are to a certain extent culturally defined. Consequently, peoples living at the same point in time (whether today or in antiquity) may eat different amounts because of how their culture construes portion size, being “full,” and desirable bodily proportions.

Hence, it will not be possible to determine exactly how many insects or how much “honey” per day the Baptist would have had to consume, according to Matt 3:4c. This inquiry will have been successful if it can offer an approximation illustration of the exclusive claim of Matt 3:4c, and concomitantly a basis for weighing its historical plausibility.

b) Estimating John’s Nutritional Needs

Some background data concerning human nutrition will aid the assessment of the difficulties outlined in the preceding subsection. With the exception of John’s gender (male), each of the following variables that this inquiry poses tentatively for the historical Baptist is uncertain:

Body Type: Since John, like most people in antiquity, was poor and, moreover, lived at least part of his life in the wilderness, he was probably not

33 Gk.: ἄρετος ἄρετος ἄρετος, καὶ μᾶλθα ἄρετος. As already mentioned, the iterative imperfect of Mark 1:6c (ἵνα ἀρετοὺς ἄρετος, “he was in the habit of eating”) does not claim that these were John’s only foods in the wilderness.
34 In the field of biblical studies, this investigation may break new ground methodologically. The attempt here is to pursue a holistic approach to the study of one ancient person, John, with the hope that other scholars will build upon and refine the methods employed herein.
35 Boris Uvarov, Grasshoppers and Locusts, 1.90–5.
overweight and may have been somewhat thin. Dieticians today define Body Mass Index (BMI) as an estimate of body fat as a factor of weight; it is calculated by a person's weight in kilograms, divided by height in meters squared (kg/m²). The American National Academy of Sciences (NAS) defines a "normal" BMI as between 18.5 and 24.9. The Dietary Reference Intakes guide of the NAS lists statistics for only three Body Mass Indices within the "normal" range: 18.5 (low/normal); 22.5 (average/normal); and 24.9 (high/normal). Of course, what is construed as average for Americans tends to be higher (that is, heavier) than the norm defined by many other cultures (both post- and pre-industrial) today. Supposing for John a BMI of 18.5 places him at the low (that is, thin) end of "normal" according to the NAS; this BMI quite possibly could have been regarded as average for a poor Palestinian man when John lived. A Body Mass Index for a rather thin person (18.5) is therefore posited for this study.

Ager: The NAS uses thirty years of age as its standard; younger people tend to need more calories, and older people fewer. John's age is unknown. The Baptist probably did not live to see his 50s, and perhaps not his 40s, since he was killed by Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea 4 B.C.E.-39 C.E. (Mark 6:14-29 par.). The typical correction for adults older or younger than thirty years in terms of daily calories needed is rather small, however (around ± 1% per year). This variable, like the others, is not significant for the present study, because it will be shown below that John could have easily met (and surpassed) his daily need for calories from eating locusts.

Height: People in antiquity tended to be somewhat smaller than people today. The height of any individual is the result of both nature (genes) and nurture (environment). On the basis of the human remains from Qumran

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37 Luke 3:23 states that Jesus was "about thirty years old" (σχελε ετῶν προξύντος) when he began his public ministry. This evangelist also places John's birth a few months before Jesus' birth (esp. Luke 1:24-26). If accurate, one could infer from the Lukan chronology that John began his public ministry in his (at least) 20s. Above all, however, the uncertainty of John's age must be emphasized.


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thus far analyzed, a height of 1.65 m (5'5") is posited, albeit cautiously, for the Baptist.

Level of Activity: Naturally, active people require more calories than sedentary individuals. The 1,416 calories per day posited below for John's basal metabolism denotes energy needed to sustain basic bodily functions, without any additional activity. The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) makes four general distinctions for Physical Activity Level (PAL): sedentary (such an individual would require a total of 2,068 calories per day); low active (2,254 calories per day); active (2,490 calories); and very active (2,880 calories). A "very active" person would engage regularly in a cardiovascular activity, such as running. Postulating this wilderness prophet as "active" strikes the present author as plausible.

According to the NAS, then, a rather thin, thirty-year-old man 6'5" tall (195 cm; 1.65 m) requires 1,416 calories per day to sustain life (basal metabolism). Such an individual with an "active" Physical Activity Level would need a total of 2,490 calories per day. At 1.65 meters, moreover, a person with a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 18.5 would weigh approximately 50.4 kg (111 lbs.). The daily diet of an adult at this weight would need to include 40.3 grams of protein: "The Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for both men and women is 0.8 g of good quality protein/kg body weight/day and is based on previous careful analyses of available nitrogen balance studies." The inferences that John needed some 2,490 calories and forty grams
of protein per day are offered only as approximate referents for the nutritional data on “locusts and wild honey” to be offered immediately below.

b) The Caloric and Nutrient Contents of “Locusts and Wild Honey”

i) Locusts and Protein

Although perhaps unknown to the catters, maybe the most significant benefit of eating locusts (and many other insects) is that they are a rich source of protein, and therefore plentiful in calories as well.46 Dried locusts comprise “up to 75 per cent protein and about 20 per cent fat; 100 grams of locust, when analyzed, showed the presence of 1.75 mg. of riboflavin and 7.5 mg. of nicotinic acid (vitamin B3 complex), demonstrating that they are also of value for their vitamins.”47 Such a high protein content, even in uncooked grasshoppers (7.6 grams/ounce), compares favorably with the level of protein in many meats—including blood sausage (4.1 grams/ounce), smoked ham (5.1 grams/ounce), and moose liver (6.9 grams/ounce)—which many poorer peoples cannot afford, or choose not, to consume.48

David Madsen’s approximation of the caloric and nutritional benefits of locust gathering (locust hunting?) by Native Americans in the Great Basin illustrates that the Baptist could indeed have easily met his needs for protein—and calories in general—by eating locusts. Moreover, as compared with the energy exerted in collecting seeds or in hunting, locust gathering requires a rather small amount of effort in return for a valuable yield in calories and nutrition:

(pounds), in other words, for the average 154-pound person (70K), 56 grams of protein are needed.49 For the purposes of the present study, height/size, like age, does not significantly alter this figure. As the slightly shorter height of 1.60 meters (63”), such an “active” person would require 2,397 calories per day, or 3.7% fewer; at 1.70 m (67”), 2,286 calories, or 3.3% more; at 1.75 m (69”), 2,083 calories, or 7.8% more.

Even today in developing societies, protein deficiency is among the most common and chronic dietary challenges. On this subject in general, see Bukkens, “Nutritional Value of Edible Insects,” 287–319. Additionally, Bruno Comby, Déliteaux Insectes: Les protéines du futur… (Geneva: Éditions Jouveno, 1990), esp. 42, 51–77, argues that protein-rich insects offer an important part of the solution to world hunger.


We found that one person could collect an average of 200 pounds of sun-dried grasshoppers per hour. . . . Laboratory analyses of the hoppers indicated a yield of just over 1,356 calories per pound. (For comparison, a pound of medium-fat beef produces about 1,200 calories and a pound of wheat flour about 1,500 calories.) We thus came up with an average return of 275,000 calories per hour of effort invested. Even when we took a tenth of this figure, to be conservative, we found this to be the highest rate of return of any local resource. It is far higher than the 300 to 1,000 calories per hour rate produced by collecting most seeds . . . and higher even than the estimated 25,000 calories per hour for large game such as deer or antelope. Put another way, an hour spent collecting twenty pounds of sun-dried grasshoppers provides the equivalent of about twenty-two pounds of meat.43

Under the ideal conditions of the multitudes of drowned and sun-dried locusts strewn along the beach that Madsen describes, an hour’s work could have sustained the Baptist for a week or more45 and left the wilderness prophet with ample time for other activities. Gathering grasshoppers in areas devoid of lakes and streams results in a substantially lower, but nonetheless rewarding, yield: “The numbers in our tests thus converted to an average of 2,959 calories per hour for handpicking from ground cover and 23,479 calories per hour from along the lake margin.”46 Accordingly, John could have gleaned forty (or many more) grams of protein and 2,490 calories per day from locusts with as little as an hour of work each day (away from water), or even an hour per week (near water).

ii) ‘Wild Honey’ and Carbohydrates

At roughly 1.6 grams of carbohydrates per insect, locusts/grasshoppers are not a significant source of carbohydrates.47 As a result, if the Baptist were to eat only “locusts and wild honey” (so Matt 3:4c), he would need to glean most of his carbohydrates from the latter. The National Academy of Sciences states that every person, regardless of age or size, requires 130 grams (286 lbs.) of carbohydrates per day to provide energy to the brain and other organs of the body.48 The preceding chapter noted the difficulty of ascertaining what

46 Madsen, “Grasshopper,” 23. Madsen’s figures are illustrative, although they pertain only to the collection of locusts and not to the additional time that would be needed to preserve and store them for future consumption.

47 Using Madsen’s calculations (“Grasshopper,” 23): One hour to collect 20 pounds (9.1 kg) of locusts at 1,365 calories per pound would glean for the gatherer 27,300 calories, or enough energy to sustain a person needing 2,490 calories per day for nearly eleven days.


49 [Four Winds Food Specialist], Ethnic Foods Nutrient Composition Guide, 89 (1.6 g in carbohydrates per raw grasshopper with an average weight of 28.4 g); cf. Brotwell and Brotwell, Food in Antiquity, 68–9.

50 NAS, Dietary Reference Intakes, 207: “The primary role of carbohydrates (sugars and starches) is to provide energy to cells in the body, particularly the brain, which is the only carbohydrate-dependent organ in the body. The Recommended Dietary Allowance for carbo-
kind of 'honey' the Baptist ate. For this reason, this study will examine the content and benefits of honey/syrup from bees, dates, figs and tree sap, insofar as they can be determined, and from these data assess whether John could have met his daily needs for carbohydrates from 'honey.' For reasons to be offered below, eating only 'locusts and wild honey' would probably not offer the carbohydrates needed to sustain properly the brain and other organs.

a') Bee Honey

Jonathan W. White, Jr. discusses at some length the variables pertinent to ascertaining the "average composition" of bee honey produced within a particular region.33 He also notes significant differences in the composition of bee honey produced in different parts of the world.34 The task of evaluating a particular type of bee honey is even more challenging, because the chemical content of stored bee honey can change over time.35

Despite these difficulties, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates bee honey's nutritional content as 304 kcal/100 g.36 The USDA Nutrient Database also states that bee honey consists almost entirely of water (17.1%) and of carbohydrates from sugars (82.4%). Bee honey contains no fat (lipids) and almost no protein (0.2%) or fiber (0.2%); it has only trace (that is, insignificant) amounts of vitamins, proteins and amino acids. To be sure, bee honey is a rich source of energy: If John were to consume a handful—that is, an exceptionally large amount equivalent to around one cup (= 339 grams)—he would glean some 1,031 calories, or around forty percent of the energy he needed for one day.

hydrate is set at 130 g/day for adults and children based on the average minimum amount of glucose utilized by the brain.32


White, "Composition of Honey," 35: "Nectar from different plants vary widely in the identity and concentrations of their constituent sugars; in fact, honey types are ascribed to plant sources by flavour or gross composition alone. Weather or climatic conditions and beekeeper practices in removing and extracting honey may affect composition to a minor extent."


b') Date Honey

The same generalization concerning the inadequacy of bee honey as a primary food staple applies also to date honey, since this fruit (Phoenix dactylifera) is also mostly water (20.5%) and carbohydrates from sugars (75.0%).38 Dates (277 kcal/100 g) have slightly fewer calories than bee honey (304 kcal/100 g), although date syrup has slightly more calories (313 kcal/100 g).39 Thus, to meet his daily need for carbohydrates (130 grams per day), the Baptist would need to eat 173.3 grams (381 lbs.) of dates converted into honey/syrup per day. Depending on the type and size of the dates, this would be equivalent to eating between seven and twenty-one dates per day.40 Even if not impossible, it is unlikely that John would have eaten such a large quantity of date syrup each day.

As is well known, however, calories from sugars are beneficial to the body only in the short term.40 Even more challenging for the historical Baptist would have been the extraordinarily large quantity of a sweet substance such as bee honey that he would have to consume each day—157.8 grams (347 lbs.)—in order to meet his daily need for carbohydrates.41 The idea that John would have eaten so much bee honey on a regular basis is therefore implausible.


38 This calculation is derived from the approximate concentration of carbohydrates from sugars in bee honey (82.4%). Eating 157.8 grams of bee honey would yield to the eater around 130 grams in carbohydrates.

39 According to the USDA Nutrient Database for common (i.e., medjool) dates, the figures for medjool dates are similar. Medjool dates also contain almost no fat (0.4%) and small amounts of protein (2.4%) and fiber (8.0%). Even allowing for regional and seasonal varieties among dates, the general point concerning the high sugar content in dates is valid. Cf. Irene Jacob and Walter Jacob, "Flora," act. AB, 2,803–1; here, 807 (i.e. palm dates): Dates were "a basic food consumed both fresh or dried, made into honey (over 60 percent sugar content)."

40 The caloric content for dates is according to the USDA Nutrient Database for common (medjool) dates. For the caloric content of date syrup, see: Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations: Food Policy and Nutrition Division, Food Composition Tables for the Near East (ed. Z. I. Salyer and R. L. Rizek; FAO Food and Nutrition Paper 2, Rome: FAO, 1982), 72–9.

41 The USDA Nutrient Database lists 8.3 grams as an average weight for common (medjool) dates and 24 grams for medjool dates.
c) Fig Honey

In the case of figs (Ficus carica), moreover, the percentages of water (79.1%) and carbohydrates from sugars (19.1%) are nearly the opposite of those in bee honey and dates. Because figs contain much more water than dates and bee honey do, Ficus carica offers around one-fourth as many calories (74 kcal/100 g). Concerning John’s daily need for carbohydrates, the fig honey he would eat on a daily basis would need to contain the equivalent of 680 grams (1.496 lbs) of this fruit, or between ten and seventeen figs. The attempt to eat so many distilled dates or figs could result in a stomach ache, if not greater physical discomfort.

d) Honey-Water

The present author has not been able to find any data on the nutrient value of tree sap, whether from date trees or other trees. It nonetheless stands to reason that if the Baptist made use of honey-water in the wilderness, the benefit in carbohydrates and gross calories would be rather small. The primary benefit would instead be hydration—always a good idea in the wilderness!

e) Conclusion: ‘Wild Honey’ and Carbohydrates

However much “wild honey” John may have consumed, he would not have needed much to supplement the calories he could have easily derived from eating locusts. From the standpoint of John’s daily caloric need, whether the Baptist’s honey was rich in calories (bee honey or date honey) or had fewer calories (fig honey, honey-water) may be a moot point. He would have made himself sick to his stomach if he ate too much bee honey or date honey, because of these honey’s high sugar contents. Furthermore, he would have needed to consume even more fig honey or honey-water, because they would contain a lower concentration of sugars.

Thus, one difficulty with the characterization of Matt 3:4c concerns whether the Baptist could have consumed enough carbohydrates from “locusts and wild honey” to maintain adequate brain function. Equally striking about bee, date and fig honey, moreover, is the relative absence of vitamins, minerals and amino acids. These aspects of the Baptist’s diet are addressed immediately below.

References:

63 According to the USDA Nutrient Database. The relative absence of protein (0.8%) and fat (0.3%) and small amount of fiber (3.3%) in figs is again noteworth. Three (i.e., insignificantly small) amounts of certain vitamins, minerals and amino acids comprise the remaining 0.7% in figs. See further: J. J. Condit, The Fig (New Series of Plant Science Books 19; Waltham, MA: Chronica Botanica, 1947), 148–55.

64 Depending on the type and size of the figs. The USDA Nutrient Database classifies figs only according to size, whether small (40 g), medium (50 g), or large (64 g).

65 Bredwell and Bredwell, Food in Antiquity, 68–9.

66 Bodenheimer, Insects as Human Food, 32–4; here, 34: “B1 and B2 are the vitamins most commonly found in grasshoppers.” See also Sutton, Insects, 14–15; Taylor, Butterflies, 57, 202–3; [Four Winds Food Specialists], Ethnic Foods Nutrient Composition Guide, 80; Buckens, “Nutritional Value of Edible Insects,” 300, 309.

67 According to L. Kathleen Mehans and Sylvia Eseor-Stumpp, eds., Krause’s Food, Nutrition & Diet Therapy (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 2000), 106, adults require 60 mg of Vitamin C daily. The USDA Nutrient Database states that 100 grams of bee honey contain only 5 mg of ascorbic acid. The amounts for dates (0.4 mg/100 g) and figs (2.0 mg/100 g) are also quite low. Had the Baptist tried to glean 60 mg of Vitamin C from bee, date, or fig honey in a single day, he most likely would have made himself sick from the accompanying excess quantity of sugar!

68 As attested, e.g., by Mark 1:5a (ἐξερχομένου τρόπον πάντων η Ουδέποτε χάρα καὶ οἱ Ἀποστόλοι τῶν πάντων) and par.; Mark 11:52 par.; Jos., Ant. 18.5.2 (§§116–119).
likely, however, that he would have been able to consistently eat the large quantities of "wild honey" necessary to satisfy his needs for carbohydrates. Moreover, John could not have met his needs for Vitamin C (ascorbic acid) from eating only these foods.

For these reasons, Matt 3:4c must be dismissed as a historically unreliable characterization of the Baptist’s food in the wilderness. Matthew’s motivation for thus depicting John’s diet will be explored below, after two other inquiries have been satisfied, namely how John himself may have responded to the characterization of Mark 1:6c,[Matt 3:4c, and Mark 1:6c as a part of Mark 1:2–8. There is no reason at all, however, to question the claim of Mark 1:6c, that John would eat ἄχφιδες ταίς μὲν ἁγίστριον from time to time, or even as a staple of a more varied diet.88 Indeed, the locusts would be a rich source of protein and calories for anyone seeking to subsist in the wilderness or, for that matter, anywhere else.

5. The Historical Baptist’s Likely Response to His Commemoration in Mark 1:6c[Matt 3:4c

"What?!!"

John probably would have been surprised to learn that Mark and Matthew would later memorialize him for reasons including his eating grasshoppers and ‘honey’ of poor quality. This inference is justified because, as noted in the preceding two chapters, the characterization of Mark 1:6c[Matt 3:4c is far from extraordinary when considered in light of analogous ancient Jewish, ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman materials. For example, honeys of various qualities are commonly discussed in Greco-Roman antiquity.89

With regard to the Baptist’s ἄχφιδες, it is already stated in Leviticus 11 (pace Deut 14:19) that eating certain locusts/grasshoppers is permitted.90 Copious evidence from the ancient Near East demonstrates that Lev 11:20–23 is not an isolated literary testimony, and furthermore, that this prescription does not point to a distinctively Jewish culinary practice. Additional evidence for

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88 With Becker, "'Kamelhaare... und wilder Honig." 22–3.
89 Arist., HA 5.22 (559a–554b); 8.9.40 (626a–627a); Od 3.10 (760b); Cato, Rost. 76; Varro, Rost. 3.16.2–38; Plin. (E), Nat. 11.4.11–11.23.70; 11.32–33; Columella, Rost. 9.2–16; Apul., Met. 1.5; Ael., NA 4.24; Palladius, De vet. med. 2.18; 3.27; 5.7; 6.8; 7.7; 7.11; 11.13–14; 12.8; Geoponica 15.2–9.
90 Lev 11:20–23: "[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 (7426) (7424) according to its kind, the grasshopper (7426) according to its kind, and the cricket (7426) according to its kind, and all other winged insects that have four feet are detestable to you." See the discussion in chapter 2 on the difficulty of translating certain terms for "locust" in this passage.

locusts as human food in antiquity includes literary references,71 as well as Assyrian bas-reliefs, one of which depicts servants bearing skewered locusts and pomegranates. Second Temple Jewish literature and subsequent Jewish writings indicate that certain Jews ate locusts both before and after John the Baptist. These witnesses include the Letter of Aristeas (2nd c. B.C.E.),92 Philo of Alexandria,93 the Damascus Document,94 numerous tractates of the Mishnah,95 later interpretations of Hebrew Scripture,96 and Moses Maimonides (1135–1204 C.E.).97 There is thus no reason to infer that either

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E.g., “I have forewarned to my lord as many locusts as they were able to catch for me” (Aram 23.15), cited in the entry for erou (cf. Heb. יָפָו) in CD, 257.
92 Aristeas 143b–146a: “[143b] These laws have all been solemnly drawn up for the sake of justice, to promote holy contemplation and the perfecting of character. [145b] For of the winged creatures of which we make use (ὅς χρώματικός) all are gentle and distinguished by cleanliness and they feed on ἄρμανας πρὸς τὴν προφήτην) grain and pulse, such as pigeons, doves, locusts (ἔτρακτοι), grasshoppers, and also geese and all similar fowl. [146b] But of the winged creatures which are forbidden you will find that they are wild and carnivorous (χαβορίζεσθαι).”
93 Philo, Leg. 2.105: “Now in Leviticus the sacred word advises (προελευθεροῖται ὡς ποιμὴν λόγος) them to feed on creeping things that go upon all four, which have legs above their feet, so as to leap with them” (Lev 11:21). Such are the locust (ὕπαπανον), the wild locust (ὕπαπανον), the grasshopper (batis), and in the fourth place the snake-flyer. And this is how it should be. For if serpent-like pleasure is an unwholesome (ἄνευ φρονήματος) and injurious thing, self-necessity, the nature that is not in conflict with pleasure, must be wholesome and full of nourishment (μακρομεροῦσαν καὶ συντρόφους).
94 CD 12:11b–15a: “[11b] No one should defile his 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 the[ir blood poured away. And all the locusts (谰ίκες) ἢλλοι, according to their kind, shall be put into the fire or into water [15a] while [they are] still alive, as this is the regulation for their species.” Cf. 11Q19 (11Q19) 48:5–8.
95 E.g., m. Hull. 8:1: “No flesh may be cooked in milk excepting the flesh of fish and locusts; and no meat may be served up on the table together with cheese excepting the flesh of fish and locusts. If a man vowed to abstain from flesh, he is permitted the flesh of fish and locusts.”
96 For example, the Lamentations Midrash states: “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…”
97 Maimonides, Holiness 5.2.21–23: “[21] The Torah permits eight species of locusts: the grasshopper; another species of grasshopper, called rashabun; the cricket; another species of cricket called emalah; the common locust; another species of locust called the vineyard bird; the bald locust; and another species of bald locust called the Jerusalemite Johano.”
98 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 teeth. They possess three teeth: 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
"Locus of Wild Honey" in Synoptic Interpretation

B. John as Wilderness Herald: Mark 1:6c

The passages discussed in chapter 2 that are related, however loosely, to Lev 11:20-23 do not resolve the problem with which this query began, namely what the attribution of Mark 1:6c[Matt 3:4c] meant to the Synoptic evangelists. It has been argued that this characterization would have had little, if any, significance to John himself. It remains to consider the importance that Mark and Matthew (or their sources) ascribe to this attribution. This section does not endeavor to offer a complete exegesis of Mark 1:2-11 but aims instead to illustrate how the findings of this study contribute to the understanding of this passage.

As noted in chapter 1, the description of John’s clothing (Mark 1:6ab) already assumes a Greek context (2 Kgs 1:8, LXX); the same may be inferred also for his diet (1:6c), since there is no reason to assign the details concerning John’s clothing (1:6ab) and diet (1:6c) to two separate strata of ‘gospel’ traditions. Accordingly, the earliest recoverable Synoptic tradition is removed from the context of John’s Aramaic preaching. Mark thus presents the Baptist’s diet and clothing as features that a Greek-speaking audience would have understood.

Certain characteristics of locust eaters, discussed in chapter 2, elucidate that Mark 1:6c offers additional ‘proof’ that John came in fulfillment of “Isaiah.” Chapter 2 demonstrated that eating locusts was well-attested in antiquity. Of particular importance to the present inquiry is Diodorus (Hist. 3.29.1-6), who connects an Ethiopian tribe of ‘Locust Eaters’ and their food with the desert/wilderness (περὶ τῆς ἔρημου). Although Diodorus’s Ethiopian ‘Locust Eaters’ do not live in the desert, the locusts blown by the wind come from the desert. Since the author of Mark does not explain the meaning of “locusts and wild honey,” he must assume that his characterization had some meaning for his audience, a meaning lost to most (Western) interpreters of Mark through the centuries. If one can assume for Mark’s audience a connection between locusts and the desert, then the characterization of Mark 1:6c within 1:2:8 begins to make sense.

Mark 1:2-8 reveals only a handful of details about John the Baptist. This gospel begins with a title for this work (1:1), and then immediately delves into a citation of “Isaiah” (Isa 40:3 and Mal 3:1; Mark 1:2-3), which is tied directly to the coming of the Baptist (κοσμίων γεγραμμένον... ἐγένετο Ἱωάννης 1:2-4). Mark asserts that the “voice shouting in the wilderness”

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(ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, 1:3a) was indeed John’s (βασιλικὸς ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ καὶ κηρύσσων, 1:6a).

Within Mark 1:2–8, verse 6 serves to authenticate John’s identity as the wilderness herald foretold in Isaiah 40. As noted in chapter 1, that John is a prophet is confirmed by his “hairstyle.” The leather belt bolsters the eschatological significance of John’s coming as the new Elijah. Finally, ἄρκτος καὶ μέλι ἁγρίου (Mark 1:6c) describes a particular diet which, for the author of Mark and his/her audience, designates John as a member of a foreign culture whose social location is in the wilderness (ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ). Analogous passages discussed in chapter 2—not only Diodorus Siculus (Hist. 3.29), but also in Strabo (Geog. 16.4.12) and the Elder Pliny (Nat. Hist. 6.35.178–197)—demonstrate that the locust-wilderness connection was well-attested by the time of the first century C.E. Thus, in Mark 1:2–8 the most likely reference for the cultural designation by means of food is John’s place “in the wilderness” (1:3a, 4a). This is where John partook (ἐφ … ἐσθίον) of grasshoppers and unrefined ‘honey,’ since these are among the sparse virtuallides one is likely to find in the wilderness. Thus, it is only in reference to the desert that Mark makes an indirect association between John’s diet and the wilderness herald of Isa 40:3. Accordingly, John’s clothing (v.6ab) and diet of a wilderness dweller (1:6c) demonstrate that the Baptist is indeed the new Elijah (pace John 1:21), who came in fulfillment of Isa 40:3 and Mal 3:1. Mark 1:2–8 may thus be seen as offering an explanation for why John baptizes Jesus (and not vice-versa) in Mark 1:9–11. Jesus can be baptized by John precisely because John is the new Elijah, who came as the Hebrew prophets said he would.

As argued above, however, there is no reason to infer that John or his followers would have associated a particular context “in the wilderness” with this common food. Such a connection between food and the wilderness would hardly be self-evident within a Near Eastern context, where grasshoppers were commonly eaten not just in wilderness regions but at royal banquets as well. Yet in a different culture or location, where locusts were not on the menu, such an association (or misunderstanding) was entirely possible. The creativity of Mark the evangelist (or his source) is thus to be recognized for taking this otherwise unremarkable aspect of the historical Baptist’s life and endowing it with theological significance, as a roundabout confirmation of Isa 40:3. John’s diet of “locusts and wild honey” (v.6c), together with his clothing (v.6ab, with reference to the Baptist as Elijah), confirm the citation of “Isaiah” in Mark 1:2–3. That is to say, Mark 1:5 ties together Mal 3:1 and Isa 40:3, cited at the beginning of the pericope (Mark 1:2–3).

Viewed as a whole, then, Mark’s introductory passage begins with the claim that, just as Second Isaiah described Jesus’ forerunner in the wilderness (Mark 1:2–3), John appeared there (1:4). C. S. Keener notes the symbolic importance of Mark’s emphasizing John’s whereabouts: “The meaning of John’s location would not be lost on Syro-Palestinian Jews. Israel’s prophets had predicted a new exodus in the wilderness (Hos 2:14–15; Is 40:3; later interpreters properly understood such passages as applicable to the time of Israel’s restoration—e.g., Ps. Sol. 11:1).” In light of the importance of linking the Baptist with Isaiah 40, Malachi 3 and the return of Elijah, it is not surprising to find in Mark 1:6 examples of food and clothing demonstrating that John does indeed fit the part. Accordingly, John’s clothing (1:6ab) and diet of a wilderness dweller (1:6c) demonstrate that the Baptist is indeed the new Elijah (pace John 1:21), who came in fulfillment of Isa 40:3 and Mal 3:1. Mark 1:2–8 may thus be seen as offering an explanation for why John baptizes Jesus (and not vice-versa) in Mark 1:9–11. Jesus can be baptized by John precisely because John is the new Elijah, who came as the Hebrew prophets said he would.

Unlike John, who foraged for what provisions were available in the wilderness, Jesus had angels to wait on him during his time of wilderness temptation (Mark 1:13: ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ὑπῆρξεν ἐν τῷ ἔρημῳ τῆς Βηθεναίας, cf. 1 Kgs 19:4–5).

The conclusion this study offers concerning the wilderness association denoted by John’s “locusts and wild honey” is not new. The contribution of the present study involves a demonstration of why this is the correct interpretation of Mark 1:6c and how the Baptist’s diet functions as a part of this evangelist’s larger concerns in Mark 1.

88 87 Matthew, 117.
89 W. L. Lane, Mark, 51, notes correctly that later in Mark 9:9–13 this identification is made explicit.
90 Cf. the discussion in chapter 1 of scholars who have come to this conclusion but not offered adequate support for it, including E. Lohmeyer, Johannes der Täufer, 50–2; J. P. Meier, Marginal Jews, 2:49; R. H. Gundry, Mark, 37; D. A. Hare, Mark, 38; W. L. Lane, Mark, 51; L. Williamson, Mark, 32; C. H. Kraeling, John the Baptist, 10–13; E. P. Gould, Mark, 8; B. M. F. van Iersel, Mark, 97; J. R. Edwards, Mark, 8; É. Trocmé, Mark, 28; T. J. Gedó, Mark, 28.
C. John as a Bonafide Wilderness Survivor: Matt 3:4c

1. From Mark's Wilderness Confirmation to Matthew's (and Luke's)
   Wilderness Assumption(s)

   The previous section concluded that the author of Mark 1:2–6 (or some
   source used by Mark) offers John's clothing and diet as a proof that the
   Baptist was the wilderness dweller and the new Elijah foretold in Isa 40:3
   and Mal 3:1. Despite the many similarities between Mark 1:2–8 and Matt
   3:1–6 and, in particular, between Mark 1:6c and Matt 3:4c, it is not a
   primary concern in Matthew 3 to offer a connection between the wilderness
   and John's grasshoppers and 'honey.' In order to understand how the
   author of Matthew interpreted Mark 1:6c, it is necessary to consider first how
   this evangelist made use of Mark 1:2–6 and other wilderness materials from
   this gospel.

   Unlike Mark, Matthew places John the Baptist ἐν τῇ ἡρίμω τῆς
   Τουρανίας (Matt 3:1b||Mark 1:4a) before citing Isa 40:3 (Matt 3:3||Mark 1:2).
   What this indicates is that Matthew assumes a point for which Mark
   argues by means of OT scripture and John's clothing and food. Since Matthew
does not need the Baptist's cuisine to demonstrate an association with the
   wilderness, the mention of ἄχριδας καὶ μέλι ἁγρίον in Matt 3:4c
   could indeed serve a different function in Matt 3:1–6 than it does in Mark
   1:2–8.

   Also differing from Mark 1:2–8, the early chapters of Luke offer a
   treatment of John and the wilderness analogous to that in Matt 3:1–6. For
   example, Luke describes the young John, prior to the beginning of his (adult)
   public ministry, as having already spent a considerable period of time in the
   wilderness: "The child (τὸ ... παιδίον) grew and became strong in spirit,
   and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel"
   (Luke 1:80). Moreover, and as in Matt 3:1–3, according to Luke 3:2 "the
   word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness," prior to the
   citation of Isaiah 40 (Luke 3:4, from Mark 1:2).

   The distinctiveness of Mark's treatment of the Baptist in the wilderness, in
   contrast to those in Matthew and Luke, may be summarized as follows:

   [Insert Table]

   It thus follows that, unlike Mark, Matthew and Luke assume a connection
   between John as a wilderness figure and Isaiah 40. As a result, Matthew and
   Luke organized their narratives without the need to prove this point. That
   Matt 3:1–3 and Luke 3:2–6 reverse the order of the citation of Isaiah 40 and
   John's appearance in the wilderness from that in Mark 1:2, 4 is hardly
   surprising. Once a detail, like John as a wilderness dweller, becomes part of
   the esteemed tradition, it can be seen to require less confirmation. Additionally,
   both the wilderness and the details used to support John's association with
   the wilderness can over time become associated with new meanings and
   interpretations. This and the following section endeavor to ascertain what
   significance Mark 1:6c had for the authors of Matthew and Luke.

2. Matt 3:4c and Reports of Other Judean Wilderness Survivors

   The closest literary analogues to Matt 3:4c pertain to other Judeans who
   survived exclusively on foods found in the wilderness. The following
discussion of 2 Maccabees 5, Martyrdom of Isaiah 2, and Josephus's description
of Bannus (Vita 2 §11) will support the argument that Matthew is not concerned
primarily with what John ate or where he ate (details taken over from Mark),
but rather that the Baptist subsisted entirely on uncultivated foods.

a) The Survival of Judas Maccabeus and Others in the Wilderness

   2 Maccabees 5 relates the plundering of the Jerusalem Temple by
   Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) in 165 B.C.E. A persecution of the Jewish people
as a whole is said to follow this event (2 Macc 5:21–26). In response to this situation, a small group of Jews, including Judas Maccabeus, retreat to the wilderness:

But Judas Maccabeus, with about nine others, withdrew to the wilderness (ἀποφυλακίας εἰς τὴν ἡμέραν), and kept himself and his companions alive in the mountains as wild animals do (ὤντας τὴν τροφήν), they continued to live on what grew wild, so that they might not share in the defilement (τὴν χορτάσας τροφήν στις ἐν τῷ δωρεάν διατέλεσαν πρὸς τὸ μὴ μετατρέχειν τὸ μολὼν λόγον). (2 Macc 5:27)

Second Maccabees presents these Judeans’ concern for purity as the motivation for their grazing like “wild animals” only on grasses and other ‘vegetarian’ foods that grew naturally in the wild.

b) The Survival of “Isaiah” and Other Prophets in the Wilderness

The Martyrdom of Isaiah (2nd c. B.C.E.) states that during the reign of Manasseh (c. 687/6–642 B.C.E.; cf. 2 Kgs 21:1–18) Isaiah and other Israelite prophets fled Jerusalem and lived “on a mountain in a desert place.” For a period of two years, these prophets are said to subsist on only wild herbs: “And they had nothing to eat except wild herbs (which) they gathered from the mountains, and when they had cooked them, they ate (them) with Isaiah the prophet. And they dwelt on the mountains and on the hills for two years of days.”

First Kings 19:1–8, which relates Elijah’s flight “into the wilderness” (לְדוֹר הָיְתָה, v. 4) from Ahab and Jezebel, offers an obvious literary precedent for Mart. Ascn. Isa. 2:7–11. Unlike the prophets in the Martyrdom of Isaiah, however, Elijah had the luxury of being fed by an angel (1 Kgs 19:4–8). Thus, prior to the gospel of Matthew, 2 Maccabees and the Martyrdom of Isaiah present Judeans who survived entirely on wilderness foods.

c) Bannus’s Natural Wilderness Clothing and Food

The Jewish historian Josephus claims to have been a student of a Judean wilderness dweller named Bannus. According to Josephus, Bannus’s clothing and food came only from the wilderness:

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93 Mart. Ascn. Isa. 2:7–10: “[7] And when Isaiah the son of Amoz saw the great iniquity which was being committed in Jerusalem, and the service of Satan, and his wantonness, he withdrew from Jerusalem and dwelt in Bethel in the wilderness of Juda. [8] And there also there was great iniquity; and he withdrew from Bethel and dwelt on a mountain in a desert place. [9] And heigh the prophet, and the aged Anainas, and Joel, and Hadabbis, and Jeshah his son, and many of the faithful who believed in the ascension into heaven, withdrew and dwelt on the mountain, [10] All of them were clothed in sackcloth, and all of them were prophets; they had nothing with them, but were destitute, and they all lamented bitterly over the going astray of Israel.” ET of the Ethiopic: M. A. Knibb, OTP, 2:158.

94 Mart. Ascn. Isa. 2:11, parenthetical clarifications original to Knibb’s translation.

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wilderness foods out of a concern for purity. Hypothetically, either of these motivations could have influenced the historical Baptist’s choices of where to live (persecution) or what he ate (purity), but such inferences are unnecessary in the case of such common foods eaten on occasion (Mark 1:6c).

Two of these three accounts of wilderness edibles predate the gospel of Matthew (2 Maccabees 5; Martyrdom of Isaiah 2). As already mentioned, two mention purity as the reason for choosing such natural foods (2 Maccabees 5; Vita 2 §11). Only Josephus, whose account is roughly contemporary with Matthew, presents Bannus as an ascetic. One therefore cannot ignore 2 Maccabees and the Martyrdom of Isaiah and argue only with reference to Josephus’ Bannus that Matt 3:4c (let alone Mark 1:6c) presents John as an ascetic.77

Furthermore, the editing of Mark 1:6c in Matt 3:4c is most plausibly explained by inferring that the author of Matthew had some knowledge of the tales related in 2 Maccabees 5, Martyrdom of Isaiah 2, or both. If Matthew possessed such knowledge, then John’s way of life “in the wilderness” as depicted in Mark 1 would appear less rigorous than those attributed to Judas Maccabaeus and Isaiah. The rather minor changes Matthew made to Mark 1:6c in Matt 3:4c dispense with this difficulty and, moreover, bolster the credentials of Jesus’ prophet or forerunner. In short, Matthew does not need to prove John’s connection to Isaiah 40 but does wish to present John’s wilderness provisions as equally demanding as those of earlier esteemed Jewish leaders who had spent time in the wilderness. In thus correcting Mark 1:6c, Matthew may unintentionally open the door to later ascetic interpretations of John’s diet—scope to be discussed in chapter 5. More than anything, Matt 3:4c presents John as a bonafide wilderness survivor like Isaiah or Judas Maccabaeus, not as an ascetic.

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99 Peace Lupieri, “The Law and the Prophets Were until John,” 50–1, 54. Given the paucity of evidence available, a concern with purity could only be substantiated by positing that Josephus’ Bannus had been a disciple of the historical John and had learned from his teacher to keep kashrut by eating wilderness foods. A connection between Bannus and the historical Baptist is only possible, however. It would be speculative to posit a mentor-disciple relationship between the two. Cf. Steve Mason, ed., Life of Josephus: Translation and Commentary (Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary 9; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 18 (on JES, Vita 2 §11). “Although Shutt (1961:2) and many others opine that Bannus lived ‘probably according to Essene ideals,’ this observation appears to enjoy no better warrant—unless ‘Essene ideals’ refer to a general determination to live simply and in purity—than the posthumous induction of Jesus, John the Baptist, and others as Essenes.”

100 Against, e.g., A. H. McInerney, Matthew, 26; W. Weiss, Matthew—Mark, 13; Peter Böhmermann, Jesus und der Täufer: Schiitische und Christliche Verkündigung der Guten Nachrichten (SNTSMS 99; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1997), 202–3. Cf. the criticism in chapter 1 of attempts to interpret Mark 1:6c (Matt 3:4c) as an ascetic depiction or in terms of John’s “natural” food.

With Luz, Matthew, 1.168.
The author of Mark highlights the Baptist as the coming Elijah, a claim the author of the Fourth Gospel explicitly denies. As already mentioned, in Mark 1:6a the Baptist's clothing made from camel's hair builds on 2 Kings 2 and presents John as Elijah. Mark's identification of John as Elijah is further underscored by Jesus' explicit statement in this gospel about the Baptist's death: "But I tell you that Elijah has come (Ἡλίαξ ἐληλυθέν), and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him" (Mark 9:13; cf. 6:14–29). Matthew agrees with Mark on this point. Significant for the present study, however, is Luke's choice to omit Jesus' identification of John as Elijah (Mark 9:13; Matt 17:12).


As compared with the appropriations of Elijah traditions in Mark and Matthew, those in the gospel of Luke are distinctive in at least one respect. Walter Wink exaggerates only slightly Luke's choice to identify Jesus, not John, as Elijah:

Luke has retained nothing of John's role as Elijah. . . . [While Luke deletes five of Mark's nine references to Elijah, he adds three of his own—1:17; 4:25, 26. In each case he rejects the concept of the eschatological return of Elijah already familiar to us from Malachi, Mark and Matthew.]

As already noted, Luke offers no characterization of John's clothing and food (Mark 1:6);[Matt 3:4] and omits Jesus' statement that John was the Elijah who was to come (Mark 9:11–13; Matt 17:10–13).


Luke does, however, repeat from Mark the opinion of the others that Jesus was Elijah (Mark 6:14–15; Luke 9:7–8 [Herod Antipas]; Mark 8:27–28; Matt 16:13–14; Luke 9:19–19 [Jesus' disciples' answer]). In addition, three characterizations of Jesus peculiar to Luke's gospel reflect an understanding of Jesus (not John) as Elijah. The first is Jesus' rejection in Nazareth (Mark 6:1–6a; Matt 13:54–58; Luke 4:16–24), which only Luke complements with a comparison to Elijah. Second, Jesus raising the widow's only son from the dead (L/Luke 7:11–16) shares many similarities with Elijah's healing of the widow's son at Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:18–24). Perhaps most significantly, Jesus' ascension into heaven—a christological attribution distinctive to Luke—Acts and reflected elsewhere in the NT only in a secondary addition to

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107 Luke 7:16: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most Holy; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways." Against Robinson, "Elijah, John and Jesus," 264; Miller, "Elijah, John, and Jesus," 617, on Luke 7:16: "Here the reference to Elijah is not explicit, though it must be present to some extent through this verse's relation to 1.17 and 7.27." Miller's interpretation of Luke 1:17 is criticized in the preceding note. On Q/Luke 7:27; Matt 11:10, see immediately below.

108 Q/Luke 7:27: "This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." Against Ohler, *Ella im NT*, 87; Miller, "Elijah, John, and Jesus," 617, on Luke 7:27: "Because it is Jesus himself who identifies John with Elijah, Luke cannot but have approved of it." On the contrary, the Lobban Jesus identifies John only with the fulfillment of Isa 40:3, not with Elijah.

109 Jesus' rejection in Nazareth is likened to the experiences of both Elijah and Elisea in Luke 4:25–27: [25] But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heavens was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; [26] yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. [27] There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisea, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."
Mark (Mark 16:19) — has obvious similarities to Elijah's ascension into heaven (2 Kgs 2:11–12). Given Luke's desire to liken Jesus rather than John to Elijah, if the interpretation of Mark 1:6c for which this study has argued — that John's grasshoppers and wild honey place him in the desert where Elijah, the renowned wilderness prophet, once dwelled — was recognized by the author of Luke, the absence of a parallel to John's clothing (Mark 1:6a; cf. 2 Kgs 1:8, LXX) and diet (Mark 1:6c) in this gospel may be explained by Luke's particular uses of Elijah materials.

E. Summation:

ἈΚΡΙΔΕΣ ΚΑΙ ΜΕΛΙ ΑΓΓΓΙΟΝ in Synoptic Interpretation

This chapter has argued for the following interpretations of John's diet with respect to the historical Baptist and the authors of Mark, Matthew, and Luke:

The Historical Baptist: No particular significance. There is no evidence to support the inference that John, his followers, or a Palestinian audience would regard John's partaking of these foods as a parabolic act demonstrating, for example, the fulfillment of Isaiah 40 or the return of Elijah. Conversely, there is no reason to doubt that John did eat "locusts and wild honey" from time to time, according to Mark 1:6c. These were probably not John's only foods, however, since they would not supply John with adequate Vitamin C and would yield rather low levels of carbohydrates. This study of locust gathering as a part of John's wilderness experience, built upon the observations of anthropologists Mark Q. Sutton, David B. Madsen and other scholars concerning recent and present-day locust-eating peoples, could be illuminating for understanding any number of locust eaters in antiquity, including at least some Jews at Qumran (CD 12:11b–15a).

Mark: John's eating foods from the desert (1:6c) associates the Baptist with the prediction of a wilderness herald in Isa 40:3 and, by implication, the occasional place of Elijah in the desert. The literary creativity of Mark (or his source) is responsible for taking this otherwise unremarkable aspect of the historical Baptist's life and endowing it with theological significance. In Mark 1:2–8, the characterization of John's diet complements the explicit comparison made between John's wearing a leather belt as Elijah did (Mark 1:6b; 2 Kgs 1:8, LXX). Because John came as the new Elijah and in fulfillment of Hebrew scripture, Jesus can be baptized by John (Mark 1:9–11). Mark accentuates Jesus' superiority to John through an angel's providing for Jesus' needs in the wilderness (Mark 1:13), which contrasts with John's having foraged for sustenance there (Mark 1:6c).

Matthew: Matthew assumes John's place in the wilderness and therefore does not need Mark's creative effort to establish this point. Rather, Matthew exaggerates Mark's characterization, in order to bring John's credentials into line with other Jews who had survived entirely on wilderness provisions (Matt. Ascens. Isa. 2.11; 2 Macc 5:27; cf. Jos., Vita 2 §11). For Matthew, the most important point is not what in particular John ate or even where he ate it but that the Baptist subsisted solely on natural, uncultivated foods.

Luke: Luke recognized correctly that materials in Mark and Q alternate in associating John and Jesus with Elijah. Aiming to alleviate the possible confusion resulting from the Elijah-John and Elijah-Jesus comparisons in earlier gospel materials, throughout his work Luke highlights only the portions pertaining to Jesus and accordingly modifies certain traditional materials while omitting others. Therefore, the most likely explanation for Luke's omission of Mark 1:6 is that the Third NT evangelist recognized and objected to the allusions to Elijah in Mark 1:6.

Given that such a diversity of expression is already present within the Synoptic tradition, it is perhaps not surprising that later Christian interpretations of John's diet would reflect novel variations on these, and other, themes. That Matthew's depiction receives much attention in the patristic literature is not surprising given the popularity of this gospel in the early church and the possibility that Matt 3:4c could be interpreted ascetically by those unaware of analogous non-ascetic attributions in Mark 1:6c, Matt. Ascens. Isa. 2.11 and 2 Macc 5:27. Although Luke's omission of Mark 1:6c cannot be said to stem from the type of aversion to grasshopper eating discussed in chapter 2, such a culinary predilection could underlie certain later Christian interpretations of Mark 1:6c [Matt 3:4c]. Such are the avenues to be explored in chapter 5.