The diet of John the Baptist is one of those dramatic details which embeds itself in the mind, usually from the very first hearing. Yet as James Kelhoffer shows in his study *The Diet of John the Baptist: ‘Locusts and Wild Honey’ in Synoptic and Patristic Interpretation* (WUNT 176; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005. €69.00. pp. xxiii + 256. ISBN 3-6-148460-6) the significance of the description of John’s food has been neglected both in studies of the Baptist and commentaries on the Gospels. This lacuna is now filled by Kelhoffer through the analysis of the function of this description in the Markan and Matthean accounts, the discussion of the wider social milieu of locust-eating in the ancient Mediterranean world, and the detailed survey of the reception history of the topic of the diet of John the Baptist.

The opening chapter looks at the New Testament texts that refer to ‘locusts and wild honey’ as John’s staple food, along with asking why Luke omitted this detail from his account. Kelhoffer suggests that a significant distinction between Mark 1:6, ‘[John] was eating locusts and wild honey’ and Matthew 3:4 ‘and his food was locust and wild honey’ is that ‘Matthew’s version of this Markan material makes the far more wide-reaching claim that John are only such things’ (5). While it is important to highlight the differences in perspective between the evangelists, it may perhaps be asked whether the Matthean account should be read in such a strictly logical way as an exclusive statement. Is this not like a child reporting to its parents after a French lesson that ‘the diet of the French consists of snails, frogs legs and horse meat’? There is a certain ‘fascination-factor’ which focuses on the most lurid or unusual details to the exclusion of the mundane or common descriptions, and the description of John’s diet in Matthew’s gospel may be such a case.

Kelhoffer next surveys the phenomenon of locust-food in the ancient world. Here one will learn much about locusts. ‘Locusts comprise a specific kind, or genus, of grasshoppers. The “family” name given to most locusts is *acrididae*, who belong to the “order” *orthoptera* (= “straight-winged”) (38). Armed with such knowledge, Kelhoffer investigates Jewish texts from Leviticus to Maimonides, which refer to locust-eating. This is complemented with an overview of the use of locusts for food in Greco-Roman antiquity. Chapter three looks at the other component of John’s diet: wild honey. The study shows that ‘honey’ was a more ambiguous term in antiquity, not only referring to ‘bee-honey’, but also sap from trees, fig or date honey, and honey water (93–97). Kelhoffer suggests that ‘wild honey’ reflected John’s ascetic practice, since it was a less pleasing type of sweet substance, and moreover, he cautiously suggests that it is possible that the reference is to honey-water and not the product of bees, since apiculture came late to Palestine.

Unlike many surveys of reception history, Kelhoffer does not fall into the trap of simply cataloguing references to John’s diet. Instead he looks at the emergence of various interpretations of the Baptist’s diet, and how these were used to support various theological perspectives. Most interesting is the characterization of John as a vegetarian. This is traced as far as the nineteenth century Seventh Day Adventist leader Ellen White, who in 1872 wrote of John the Baptist ‘His diet, purely vegetable, of locusts and wild honey, was a rebuke to the indulgence of appetite and the gluttony that everywhere prevailed’ (190–91). Kelhoffer cites Calvin’s rebuttal of the vegetarian interpretation, yet here one sees that this was not done primarily for reasons of historical accuracy, but to counter claims that monastic practices found their justification in John’s world-denying behaviour. Thus Calvin railed against those who supposed John ‘to be a man who lived in solitude, and who disdained the ordinary way of living; as the only superiority of hermits and monks is that they differ...’
from other people' (187). Throughout the Patristic and Medieval periods, Kelhoffer demonstrates the resilience of the vegetarian interpretation, although this is also paralleled by a stream of other figurative interpretation in writers such as Origin. The genesis of the vegetarian understanding is traced back to Tatian and is seen as compatible with his encratic tendencies. The stronger evidence comes from three Syriac witnesses to Tatian's Diatessaron provided by: Merv, bishop of Hadatha (ninth century); Bar-Salibi, bishop of Amida (twelfth century); and Bar-Hebraeus (thirteenth century). These three show knowledge of a substitution of the term ‘milk’ for ‘locust’ in the Diatessaronic tradition, thereby making John a strict vegetarian. The difficulty is that these witnesses, which are much later, could attest a corruption of the tradition rather than Tatian's original wording. Kelhoffer marshals further evidence in support of Tatian having vegetarian inclinations. In his Oration to the Greeks Tatian writes, ‘You sacrifice animals in order to eat meat, and you buy men in order to produce slaughter for the human soul’ (Or. 23.2). From this Kelhoffer argues, ‘Only other vegetarians, who agreed with Tatian's premise that killing animals to eat them is evil, would appreciate the comparison of killing animals for food to the human slaughter of gladiatorial combat in Or. 23.2’ (145). However, what Kelhoffer does not consider is the possibility that Tatian is not criticizing the consumption of meat, but in agreement with many early Christian writers is actually critiquing pagan sacrifices to the gods as the means of acquiring meat. Even if the origin of the vegetarian interpretation cannot be traced back as far as Tatian, Kelhoffer has demonstrated its antiquity and persistence in reflections on the significance of the Baptist's food.

In his concluding chapter, Kelhoffer summarizes his findings, as well as presenting a number of methodological reflections. His three comments on methodology are astute and should be read by all engaged in the study of ancient texts. First he highlights the need for students of the New Testament to interact with both social and natural scientist, and questions over-dependence on Wordbooks and encyclopaedias rather than gaining a thorough understanding of the cultural setting of various texts. Second, he suggests that history (especially ancient history) leaves ‘gaps’ which require elucidation or interpretation. Yet, ‘[h]istorically oriented exegesis maintains that, when bringing to a text an inference not specified in the passage or work, it is desirable, if possible, to supply some ancient analogy to support one’s elucidation’ (200). Finally, it is argued that an eclectic approach is required that retains the controls of the historio-critical method, yet is open to the insights of some of the newer methodologies. He notes that ‘certain scholars tout that newer methodologies have somehow superceded traditio-historical analyses or “the historical-critical method”, however construed’ (201).

Kelhoffer's study is rich, insightful and well-written. It combines careful research, close analysis of the text and a wide knowledge of the Patristic sources that deal with John the Baptist's diet. While this may have been a neglected area of enquiry in biblical studies, this gap is now superbly filled. There are of course places where the interpretations offered may be questioned, and as Kelhoffer himself acknowledges, gaps still remain which require further investigation. The ‘fascination-factor’ surrounding John the locust and wild honey eater still remains, but Kelhoffer has admirably provided a marvellous resource whereby such fascination may be better informed by appreciating how that description has been understood and shaped within the various social and historical settings in which it has been read.

PAUL FOSTER
New College, University of Edinburgh

Both read the Bible day and night,
But thou read'st black where I read white.

William Blake, The Everlasting Gospel (c. 1818)