James A. Kelhoffer

The Diet of John the Baptist: “Locusts and Wild Honey”
in Synoptic and Patristic Interpretation
Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 176
Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005
Pp. xxiii + 256. $135.00.

Kelhoffer, Associate Professor of Theological Studies, Saint Louis University, provides what is without doubt the first thorough study of the diet of John the Baptist (JB). Kelhoffer’s book comprises five chapters, an epilogue, bibliography, and indices. The first chapter, part of which appeared previously in Currents in Biblical Literature 2 (2003), gives a status quaestionis of the discussion of JB’s diet. Chapter two, which is about one-fourth of the prose of the book and which has appeared in Dead Sea Discoveries 11 (2004), is a remarkably complete survey of locust/grasshopper eating in the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world, including discussion of the Old Testament and Second Temple and rabbinic Jewish literature. The third chapter, which has appeared in Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies 45 (2005), is a relatively short treatment of wild honey. Chapter four treats JB’s diet in the synoptic gospels, with a discussion of eating of locusts in the present and their nutritional value. The last chapter is a discussion of JB as a vegetarian and model of asceticism in patristic interpretation, which is almost one-third of the book’s length (Kelhoffer writes at the end of this chapter: “If for no other reason than the weariness of the author, at this point this chapter must conclude” [193]). The epilogue is a summary and discussion of the implications of the study and avenues for further consideration.


Kelhoffer’s careful and detailed study yields positive results. His extensive and fascinating catalogue—probably unequaled in scholarly literature—of locusts in the ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman culture, and the Jewish traditions provide a deep context for understanding the nature and plausible reality of JB’s diet. This discussion is probably one step in recovering the “historical” JB. Kelhoffer shows clearly that eating locusts/grasshoppers was common in the biblical and Jewish traditions; it was not necessarily any violation of Jewish food laws. Kelhoffer demonstrates that eating locusts/grasshoppers/cicadas was not unusual.
in the classical and Hellenistic periods, but that Romans (the Latin west) did not favor the eating of such insects. Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis historia*, for example, tends to associate eating such insects with “exotic” peoples in the East or in Africa. Some medical authors (e.g., Dioscorides and Galen) found in some cases that eating these insects was medically beneficial.

Kelhoffer’s survey of the relatively complex tradition of patristic authors on JB’s diet provides another detailed window into how church fathers dealt with JB’s asceticism and unusual diet and how they came, in general, to see it as a model (along with JB’s clothing) for Christian simplicity. Kelhoffer gives a fine survey of scholarship on Mark and Matthew’s reference to JB’s diet and Luke’s silence on this matter, but in the end he says relatively little that sheds new light on these gospel passages about JB (see pp. 123, 128, 132; in his *Biblical Research* article the NT texts are discussed in only one brief paragraph). Admittedly, that might be rather difficult to achieve, but the enduring significance of this book is in the areas of cultural context and patristic interpretations. The cost of the book and its rather technical presentation probably limits its audience to professors and doctoral students working in these areas.

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George Heyman

*The Power of Sacrifice: Roman and Christian Discourse in Conflict*

Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007

Pp. xxv + 256.

Heyman’s engaging book raises questions of interest to all who consider Christianity’s relationship with the wider world in its earliest centuries. The introduction sets forth clearly the nature of this topic: the rhetorical force and the ideological emphases sacrificial language and ritual played for Romans and Christians. The thesis is that “the conflict between Rome and the early Church was ultimately a collision of sacrificial discourses” (xvii). The argument is that the language of public sacrifice was a key ingredient for both groups in shaping self-identity, and that the way Christianity shaped its discourse on the martyr tradition in terms of sacrifice not only paralleled the Roman imperial cult, the overarching symbol of Roman religion, but was influenced by it to an extent. The book is divided into four chapters.

Chapter one investigates discourse as an analytical tool and the religious discourse of early imperial Rome. The first task is accomplished through an overview of scholars like Foucault and Barthes. Of particular interest is the work of Bruce Lincoln about the ways in which subgroups are controlled by and react against the dominant discourse. *Religio* is seen as the proper behavior, not the beliefs, of the Roman people that promoted divine favor upon the state. Heymann argues that religion was both conservative and innovative in cementing proper social