

EARLY CHRISTIAN ASCETIC PRACTICES AND
BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: THE WITNESSES
OF GALEN AND TATIAN

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Elsewhere I have argued that ascetic interpretations of John the Baptist’s “locusts and wild honey” (Mark 1:6c | Matt 3:4c) abounded in the early church.¹ I did not, however, endeavor to assess whether construing John’s food (and clothing) as a model of simplicity preceded or followed analogous developments in early Christian asceticism. That is the purpose of the present inquiry. The testimonies of the physician Galen (c. 129/30–199/216 C.E.) and the Syrian Christian Tatian (fl. 165–72 C.E.) to Christian asceticism are slightly earlier than the earliest ascetic exposition of John’s food by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–211/16 C.E.). This study will not argue for a simple *post hoc ergo propter hoc* relationship between ascetic practices and ascetic biblical interpretation. Nonetheless, the temporal proximity of Galen and Tatian to Clement suggests such a correlation, and a direct causal relationship can by no means be excluded.

A brief discussion of the two Synoptic passages will offer a context for this inquiry.²

Mark 1:6a, c
καὶ ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης . . . ἐσθίων ἀκρίδας
καὶ μέλι ἄγριον.
And John was in the habit of eating locusts
and wild honey.

Matt 3:4c
ἡ δὲ τροφή ἦν αὐτοῦ ἀκρίδες
καὶ μέλι ἄγριον.
And his food consisted of locusts
and wild honey

In the Gospel of Mark, John’s having eaten such common desert foods from time to time serves to connect John with the “voice” of

¹ Kelhoffer, *The Diet of John the Baptist: “Locusts and Wild Honey” in Synoptic and Patristic Interpretation* (WUNT 176; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 134–93. In this study I follow Teresa M. Shaw’s definition of asceticism as “a way of life that requires daily discipline and intentionality in bodily behaviors” (*The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998] 6).

² On John’s diet in Synoptic interpretation, see further my *Diet of John the Baptist*, 121–32.

Isa 40:3 (cited in Mark 1:3a) and the famous wilderness prophet Elijah (cf. 2 Kgs 1:8, LXX; Mark 1:6b). Matthew's heightened claim that John ate *only* "locusts and wild honey" is likely informed by one or more of the exclusive claims made for the natural provisions of other Jewish wilderness dwellers in *Mart. Ascen. Isa.* 2.11 and 2 Macc 5:27 (cf. Jos., *Vita* 2 § 11). That is, since Isaiah and Judas Maccabaeus (also Josephus's Bannus) had survived entirely on natural wilderness foods, Matthew wishes to affirm that John ate thus as well (so Matt 4:3c).

The important thing to note for the present study is that neither Mark nor Matthew presents John as an ascetic.³ That innovation is attested first by Clement of Alexandria and by nearly every subsequent commentator until the Protestant Reformation.⁴ Whether or not Patristic commentators thought of John's 'locusts' as actual insects or a type of vegetation, they consistently maintain that his diet offers a model worthy of emulation. A few examples will illustrate this point. In his *Paedagogus* (c. 190/92 C.E.), Clement states that John "maintained extreme self-restraint (ἐγκράτεια)" in eating "locusts and wild honey."⁵ Origen of Alexandria offers John's wish to free his soul from the passions of a body fueled by "savory dishes" as John's rationale for selecting these foods.⁶ After discussing John's food and

³ Against, e.g., Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990–2001 [1985]) 1.168, who argues this point in the case of Matt 3:4c. Other scholars who support this interpretation include Joachim Gnllka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (EKKNT II/1–2; Zurich: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, ³1989) 1.47; Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium I. Teil: Einleitung und Kommentar zu Kap. 1,1–8,26* (HTKNT 2.1; Freiburg: Herder, ⁴1984) 82; and Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, ²1994) 45.

⁴ Concerning John Calvin's (1509–64 C.E.) objection to interpreting the Baptist as an ascetic model, see Luz, *Matthew*, 1.168; Kelhoffer, *Diet of John the Baptist*, 187.

⁵ Clem., *Paed.* 2.1 (2.15.4–2.16.1). Greek text: Miroslav Marcovich, ed., *Clementis Alexandrini, Paedagogus* (VCSup 61; Leiden: Brill, 2002); English translation (modified): Simon P. Wood, *Christ the Educator* (FC 23; New York: Fathers of the Church, 1954).

⁶ Origen, *Luc. Hom.* 25.2 (on Luke 3:15): "But John always ate locusts, and he always ate wild honey. He was content with simple life and light food, lest his body grow fat on richer, savory dishes and be overpowered by exquisite banquets. This is the nature of our bodies; they are weighted down by excess food and, when the body is weighed down, the soul too is burdened. For the soul is spread throughout the whole body and subject to its passions. . . . So John's life was remarkable (*vita mirabilis*), and quite different than other men's way of living (*et multum ab aliorum hominum conversatione diversa*)." The editions cited for Jerome's translation of Origen's *Homilies on Luke* are: Hermann-Josef Sieben, ed., *In Lucan homiliae = Homilien zum Lukasevangelium* (Fontes Christiani 4; Freiburg: Herder, 1991–92); English trans-

clothing, John Chrysostom urges following the Baptist's example: "Let us emulate him (Τοῦτον . . . ζηλώσωμεν): Getting rid of luxuries and drunkenness, let us pursue the simplified life."⁷ According to Jerome, moreover, John's food and clothing preclude a Christian widow from complaining about the "somber dress" and coarse food to which she must adhere after her husband's departure (*Ep.* 38.3 [To Marcella]). In this last case, imitating John is apparently compulsory, not an act of ascetic volition. Ascetics who did in fact choose a way of life that included emulating John's foods and wilderness habitation include Gregory Nazianzen, Basil of Caesarea, a ninth-century anchorite monk known to us only by an inscription about John's food on the wall of his cave, and Silvestros, the sixteenth-century Patriarch of Alexandria.⁸

Having analyzed these and numerous other such ascetic appropriations of John's diet, I wished to ascertain why such an unremarkable Synoptic passage concerning two rather common wilderness foods (Mark 1:6c | Matt 3:4c) would receive this type of notoriety—and so much of it—for over twelve centuries. The acclamations of simplicity and moderation in regard to food by Greco-Roman authors such as Aratus, Dio Chrysostom, Plutarch and Apollonius of Tyana⁹ support the inference that Patristic interpreters wished to derive the same type of *paideia* from scripture that had been lauded elsewhere in philosophic literature. Such a connection between philosophers' virtues and John's purported example should not come as a surprise, given Gregory Nazianzen's characterization of Elijah and John as

lation: Joseph T. Lienhard, *Homilies on Luke; Fragments on Luke* (FC 94; Washington: Catholic University of America, 1996).

⁷ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 10.5. Greek: *PG* 57.190; English translation: mine.

⁸ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 33; Basil of Caesarea, *Ep.* 42.5. As Henri Grégoire, "Les Sauterelles de Saint Jean-Baptiste: texte épigraphique d'une épître de S. Isidore de Péluse," *Byzantion* 5 (1929–30) 109–28, discusses, the inscription stems from Isidore of Pelusium (c. 360–c. 435 C.E.). The witness to Silvestros (d. 1590 C.E.) is a letter written in 1581 C.E. from Silvestros's protégé Meletios Pigas to Theodore Beza; Greek text: Fernand Aubert and Henri Meylan, eds., *Correspondance de Théodore de Bèze* (Geneva: Droz, 1960) 24.385–99. See further: Jerome, *Adv. Iovin.* 2.15; the anonymous *Life of John* which survives in Karshuni (English translation: Alphonse Mingana, "A New Life of John the Baptist," in *Woodbrooke Studies: Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic, and Garshuni* [ed. J. Rendel Harris; Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1927] 1.234–87; here, 241).

⁹ E.g., Aratus, *Phaen.* 96–136; Dio Chrys., *Or.* 6.12; Plut., *Quaest. conv.* 8.7.3 (727E); Apollonius, *VA* 1.8.

“perfect philosophers.”¹⁰ It is at this point that my earlier investigation concludes, noting that more work is needed in the areas of *paideia* and early Christian biblical interpretation and of construals of food in early Christian theology and self-definition.

I did not consider, however, the complementary explanation that early Christian ascetic practices could have offered a precedent for connecting John’s “locusts and wild honey” with *paideia*. The following testimony of the physician Galen offers support for this possibility:

Most people are unable to follow any demonstrative argument consecutively; hence they need parables, . . . just as now we see the people called Christians drawing their faith from parables [and miracles], and yet sometimes acting in the same way [as those who philosophize]. For their contempt of death [and of its sequel] is patent to us every day, and likewise their restraint in cohabitation. For they include not only men but also women who refrain from cohabiting all through their lives; and they also number individuals who, in self-discipline and self-control in matters of food and drink, and in their keen pursuit of justice, have attained a level not inferior to that of genuine philosophers.¹¹

Galen’s concomitant praise and derision, respectively, of Christian self-discipline and naïveté¹² support the inference that his remarks about Christian asceticism in the late-second century are quite credible. Even if Christians do not merit recognition as “true philosophers,”¹³ their “contempt of death,” sexual continence and moderation “in matters of food and drink” strike Galen as entirely commendable.

In addition, Galen’s testimonies accord with what is known about the vegetarianism adopted and promoted by the Syrian Christian

¹⁰ Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 43.29 (536B). Greek text: Jean Bernardi, ed., *Grégoire de Nazianze, Discours 42–43* (SC 384; Paris: Cerf, 1992) 190–2; English translation: Leo P. McCauley et al., *Funeral Orations by Saint Gregory Nazianzen and Saint Ambrose* (FC 22; New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953) 52–3.

¹¹ The passage is from Galen’s (lost) summary of Plato’s *Republic*. Richard Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949) 16, dates this work by Galen to c. 180 C.E. English translation of the Arabic: Walzer, *Galen*, 15; cf. Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003) 8–9.

¹² Cf. Galen, *De pulsuum differentiis* 2.3–4: “One might more easily teach novelties to the followers of Moses and Christ than to the physicians and philosophers who cling fast to their schools.” Likewise, *De pulsuum differentiis* 2.4: “. . . in order that one should not at the very beginning, as if one had come into the school of Moses and Christ, hear talk of undemonstrated laws, and that where it is least appropriate.” English translation: Walzer, *Galen*, 14.

¹³ Cf. Walzer, *Galen*, 58.

Tatian in late-second century.¹⁴ In his *Oration to the Greeks*, Tatian likens killing animals for food to the senseless slaughter of gladiators.¹⁵ Such an equation between meat eating and homicide may ultimately be indebted to Aratus of Soloi (c. 315–before 240 B.C.E.), who stated in his popular *Phaenomena* that humanity’s devolution into both murder and meat eating occurred long ago during the Bronze Age (*Phaen.* 129–136). Tatian therefore exemplifies Galen’s generalization concerning the “self-discipline” of some second-century Christians “in matters of food and drink.”¹⁶ It is possible, moreover, that several later witnesses to the *Diatesseron* depicting John the Baptist’s foods as honey and *milk* (not locusts!) reflect Tatian’s own vegetarian emendation of Mark 1:6c || Matt 3:4c.¹⁷

Galen’s favorable comparison of Christians’ discipline with that of the “genuine philosophers” betrays his assessment that the *paideia* cultivated in Christian and philosophical circles was essentially the same.¹⁸ This claim merits additional investigation. The important point for the present inquiry is that ascetic interpretations of John the Baptist’s “locusts and wild honey” have precedents in both Greco-Roman philosophical literature and ascetic practices of second-century Christianity.

The origins of such Christian ascetic practices likewise merit additional study, especially in light of the contrasting non-ascetic portrayals of Jesus in the Synoptic gospels. For example, according to

¹⁴ Miroslav Marcovich, *Tatiani, Oratio ad Graecos* (Patristische Texte und Studien 43; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995) 1–3, dates the *Oratio* after the death of Justin Martyr (165 C.E.) and prior to 172 C.E., when Tatian “left Rome and returned to the Orient” (3); cf. Molly Whittaker, *Oratio ad Graecos and Fragments* (OECT; Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) pp. ix–x.

¹⁵ Tatian, *Or.* 23.2: “You sacrifice animals in order to eat meat, and you buy men to produce slaughter for the human soul.” Greek text and English translation: Whittaker, *Oratio*, 46–47.

¹⁶ Robert M. Grant, “The Heresy of Tatian,” *JTS* 5 (1954): 62–8; here, 64, finds additional evidence for Tatian’s Encratism in *Oratio* 8.2 (criticizing the goddess Aphrodite, who delights in marriage) and 34.1 (a woman with thirty children is an example of much incontinence).

¹⁷ On this point see my *Diet of John the Baptist*, 141–48; in my view the surviving evidence does not allow for a definitive answer to the question whether Tatian himself or some later Syrian Christian first described John’s foods as honey and milk (not locusts).

¹⁸ *Pace* Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1997) 76: “Once the biblical literature became established as an alternative body of classics, it would soon be seen as the basis of a new *paideia*.”

Mark 2:18 par. John's disciples' and the Pharisees' practice of fasting contrasts with the lack of such a custom on the part of Jesus' disciples—and, presumably, of Jesus himself. Likewise, Q/Luke 7:31–35 | Matt 11:16–19 differentiates between John's eclectic habits with(out) food¹⁹ and Jesus' unsavory reputation as φάγος καὶ οἰνοπότης (“a glutton and a drunkard”). As Edmondo Lupieri notes, this difference between the Baptist and Jesus in the Synoptics may have fostered later ascetics' choice to emulate John's purported example:

The choice of John the Baptist was a very logical one: [I]n the New Testament he is the only figure who can be considered a model for ascetic life. As a chaste, fasting, total abstainer who dressed in camel-hair clothing, he—even more than Jesus!—offered a positive example to people who wanted to follow an ascetic way of life.²⁰

What indeed may have prompted certain followers of Jesus—himself no ascetic according to passages in both Mark and Q—to identify the Christian life with renunciation and simplicity in regard to food, drink and other matters? Can such practices by Christians be dated earlier than Galen and Tatian in the late-second century (cf. Col 2:16–21)? Scholars who, following the distinguished example of David E. Aune, analyze the New Testament and other early Christian literature in its Greco-Roman context are the most likely to make progress on these important questions.²¹

¹⁹ Whereas Q/Matt 11:18 (μήτε ἐσθίων μήτε πίνων) states that John ate nothing at all, Q/Luke 7:33 (μὴ ἐσθίων ἄρτον μήτε πίνων οἶνον) claims more plausibly that the Baptist's food and drink were somehow distinctive.

²⁰ Lupieri, “John the Baptist: The First Monk. A Contribution to the History of the Figure of John the Baptist in the Early Monastic World,” in *Monasticism: A Historical Overview* (Word and Spirit 6; Still River, MA: St. Bede's, 1984) 11–23; here, 16.

²¹ My thanks to Clare K. Rothschild and James V. Smith, who offered comments on an earlier version of this study.