

St John the Baptist's diet - according to some early Eastern Christian sources (Greek and Syriac)  
(summary)

According to the Gospels of Mark 1:6 and Matthew 3:4 John the Baptist lived off *akrides kai meli agrion*, 'locusts and wild honey'. With the rise and spread of monasticism from the fourth century onwards, John the Baptist tended to be taken as a model for the ascetic life. Since the ideal of the ascetic life was a meatless diet, the *akrides* became a problem: were they really 'locusts'? Isidore of Pelusium in the fifth century suggested that they were actually 'tips' of plants (based on the *akr-* element of the word), and this was a view that became widely popular, as is witnessed by an inscription recording it, written by a monk in the ninth century on the wall of his cave near Miletus. By the twelfth century variations on this explanation had multiplied, and the Syriac author Dionysius bar Salibi was able to collect and record in his Commentary on the Gospels no less than eleven different explanations of this sort, making John into a vegetarian. It will have been similar concerns that led to the identification, first in the medieval west, of John's diet as carob beans, giving rise to the German name for the carob, *Johannisbrot*.

The 'wild honey' was less of a problem from this point of view, though a text attributed to Epiphanius is careful to specify that this was 'not the sweet kind, but being produced by wild bees is very bitter, which the palate's taste buds abhor'.

Ideas about John's vegetarian diet were sometimes linked with an early tradition that identified the murdered Zacharias of Matthew 23:35 as John's father Zacharias, and held that his mother had fled with him as an infant into the desert, just as the Maccabees had fled for safety to the desert where, according to 2 Maccabees 5:27, they lived off greens.

Various other slants might be given to John's supposed vegetarian diet: it represented the food of primitive humanity, it was an indication of his humility, and so on.

Vegetarian concerns, however, were by no means the only ones to be found. Two of the earliest interpretations that arose could both be described as 'mythical' (in the good sense), since they each sought to link John with some aspect of salvation history.

According to what are admittedly rather late sources, the text of the lost second-century harmony of the Gospels known as the Diatessaron, instead of 'locusts and wild honey', had the reading 'honey and milk of the mountain': milk and honey were frequently seen as a source of heavenly sustenance, which was why, in some parts of the early Church, it was given to the newly baptized. This interpretation also sometimes became associated with the tradition of John's flight to the desert with his mother, and in this context the 'milk of the mountain' was sometimes corrupted (by a misreading easy in Syriac) into 'milk of gazelles'.

The other interpretation of a 'mythical' character is to be found in the Ebionite Gospel, one of the non-canonical Gospels known only from a few quotations. By a slight change in the Greek word, the 'locusts' (*akrides*) became *egkrides*, little cakes made with oil and honey.

According to the Septuagint at Exodus 16:31, this is what manna tasted like; thus once again John was accorded a heavenly diet.

Yet another approach that was occasionally found was purely allegorical: the reference to John's food in the Gospels now refers to his teaching, and the 'locusts' and 'wild honey' represent the recipients of his teaching. The locusts, according to this view, turn out (rather surprisingly) to be the Pharisees and Sadducees who were converted by his teaching. Here one needs to recall that locusts are clean according to the Mosaic Law. The honey, by contrast, are the Gentiles, who were once bitter but had been made sweet. It was this sort of allegorical interpretation against which Theodore of Mopsuestia fulminated in a work *Against the Allegorists*, which only survives in quotations. It is thus no surprise that in his extant works Theodore goes out of his way to explain that the *akrides* were 'the winged insects and that the honey was natural honey, things that are readily to be found in deserts'. The various Greek and Latin texts opinions on the question of John's diet were collected together in the seventeenth century by the learned Samuel Bochart, in his *Hieroicoicon, sive historia animalium s. Scripturae*, a work which appeared in two volumes in 1663, but whose third edition had grown to three volumes by the late eighteenth century. Bochart adopted the view of Theodore, and poured scorn on the fanciful explaining away of the *akrides* in so many of the ancient sources. This has generally been the view of most subsequent commentators up to the present day, though some views have been expressed that are no less bizarre than those of the early Church Fathers. The focus of interest is also very different, for discussions of the *akrides* are now often more likely to be concerned with the nutritional value of locusts than with any deeper significance that might lie behind the inclusion of the specific details of John's diet. An excellent account of both ancient and modern opinions on the subject can be found in James Kelhoffer's book, *The Diet of John the Baptist* (Tübingen, 2004), while further details of the views on the topic to be found in Syriac writers are given in my *From Ephrem to Romanos: Interactions between Syriac and Greek in Late Antiquity* (Aldershot, 1999), chapter X.

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