

DID JOHN THE BAPTIST EAT LIKE A FORMER ESSENE?
 LOCUST-EATING IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST
 AND AT QUMRAN

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James H. Charlesworth has argued that John the Baptist's eating locusts and honey characterizes the legendary wilderness prophet as a former Essene:

During the beginning of his [John's] attempt to enter the Community, he would have sworn an oath to obey Torah according to the interpretation of the priests (1QS 1.16–20; 5.1–6.1; 6.13–23). He ate only honey and wild locusts. That would indicate that he did not accept food from others. The description of what John ate has a decidedly Qumran or Essene ring to it. That is, locusts and honey were acceptable foods for the Qumranites and the Essenes.¹

Charlesworth uses a particular interpretation of CD 12:11b–15a to support this characterization of John as a former Essene:

No-one should defile his soul ¹²with any living being or one which creeps, by eating them, from the larvae of bees to every living ¹³being (מֵעֲנַלֵּי הַדְּבוּרִים עַד) (כֹּל נֶפֶשׁ הַחַיָּה הַחֹרֶץ) which creeps in water. And fish: they should not eat them unless they have been opened up ¹⁴alive, and the[ir blood poured] away. And all the locusts (וְכֹל הַחֲנִיבִים), according to their kind (בְּמִינֵיהֶם), shall be put into the fire or into water ¹⁵while [they are] still alive, as this is the regulation for their species.²

Charlesworth is not the first scholar to posit a connection between the diet of the Baptist and the Essenes, however.³

¹ Charlesworth, "John the Baptizer and Qumran Barriers in Light of the *Rule of the Community*," in *The Provo International Conference on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (STDJ 30; ed. D.W. Parry and E. Ulrich; Leiden: Brill, 1999) 353–75; here: 367. Cf. Mark 1:6c/Matt. 3:4c, discussed below.

² CD 12:11b–15a; Heb. and ET: F. García Martínez and E.J.C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* (Leiden: Brill; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000 [1998]) 570–71.

³ Already J.M. Allegro, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (London: Penguin Books, 1958² [1956]) 163–65; here, 164: "We are told that besides his wearing of only the simplest

Charlesworth's argument, that the "description of what John ate" in Mark 1:6c//Matt. 3:4c "has a decidedly Qumran or Essene ring to it," is open to criticism for several reasons:

1. It construes inaccurately Mark 1:6c//Matt. 3:4c, the NT witnesses to John's locusts and honey.
2. It misinterprets CD 12:11b–15a.
3. It wrongly assumes that locusts were a distinctive food in a Palestinian Jewish context.

The first two points may be dispensed with rather briefly. The majority of this article will be concerned with locust-eating in the Ancient Near East and in Jewish writings from Leviticus to Moses Maimonides. A plethora of testimonies demonstrates that locusts were (and, incidentally, remain) a rather common food for people in this region and, moreover, can shed some light on one aspect of the Baptist's and the Essenes' way of life.

I. *What Mark 1:6c//Matt. 3:4c Does (and Does Not) State concerning John's Diet*

Charlesworth's characterization of John as eating "only honey and wild locusts" is dubious in two respects. First, the exclusive attribution ("only") corresponds to the later claim of Matthew, that John's wilderness food consisted of (ἦν) locusts and wild honey: ἡ δὲ τροφή ἦν αὐτοῦ ἀκρίδες καὶ μέλι ἄγριον (Matt. 3:4c). The earlier Gospel attribution of Mark 1:6c states with an iterative imperfect periphrastic (ἦν . . . ἐσθίων) merely that John was in the habit of eating grasshoppers and wild honey: ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης . . . ἐσθίων ἀκρίδας καὶ μέλι ἄγριον. Inferring for the historical Baptist the heightened attribution of the later Gospel, Matthew, requires an argument, which Charlesworth does not provide.⁴

garments, he ate only honey and locusts, both of which are mentioned in the food laws at the end of the Damascus Document. This again may indicate that the food he was able to eat was strictly limited owing to his purity vows taken in the Community." Additionally, S.L. Davies, "John the Baptist and Essene Kashruth," *NTS* 29 (1983) 569–71, maintains that John's eating locusts and wild honey did not make him an ascetic; rather, it was concerned with ritual purity.

⁴ There is no reason, however, to question the plausibility of Mark 1:6c, that John regularly ate these foods while in the wilderness.