The Baptist's diet in Syriac Sources

by

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Behind such plant names as 'St John's Bread', for the carob, lies a long and curious line of exegesis, whose aim was to explain away, by one means or another, the $\dot{\alpha}\kappa\rho i\delta\epsilon_s$, locusts, of the Gospel narratives of Matthew and Mark, and so make John the Baptist into a vegetarian. Although this particular identification of the $\dot{\alpha}\kappa\rho i\delta\epsilon_s$ with the carob (St John's Bread; Greek $\kappa\epsilon\rho \acute{\alpha}\tau\iota o\nu$)¹ does not appear to go back beyond the middle ages, it is typical of many others which can be traced back very much earlier.

The Greek and Latin patristic sources on the subject were collected long ago by Samuel Bochart in his fascinating, and extremely learned, compilation entitled *Hierozoicon*, sive de animalibus sanctae scripturae². Bochart poured scorn on the various fanciful attempts at explaining away the locusts, and he sanely concluded that the $d\kappa\rho i\delta\epsilon s$ of Matthew and Mark were real locusts. But the urge to get rid of the offending locusts dies hard, and even this century there have still been sporadic serious attempts at making a vegetarian of the Baptist³.

In Greek sources the oldest reinterpretation of the $\tilde{a}\kappa\rho i\delta\epsilon s$ is to be found in the Ebionite Gospel, as quoted by Epiphanius⁴. According to it John lived off, not $\tilde{a}\kappa\rho i\delta\epsilon s$, but $\tilde{\epsilon}\gamma\kappa\rho i\delta\epsilon s$, little cakes made with oil and honey—an interpretation that was self-confessedly based on the Septuagint description of Manna in Exodus xvi 31: $\tau\dot{\delta}$ $\delta\dot{\epsilon}$ $\gamma\epsilon\hat{\nu}\mu a$ $a\dot{\nu}\tau\hat{\nu}\hat{\nu}$ $\dot{\omega}s$ $\dot{\epsilon}\gamma\kappa\rho\dot{\nu}s$ $\dot{\epsilon}\nu$ $\mu\dot{\epsilon}\lambda\iota\tau\iota^5$.

^{*} Paper read at the Fourth International Congress on New Testament Studies (Oxford, September 1969). Some of the material has already been presented, in more popular form, in Ararat (New York) 7 (1966) 42-4, »Locusts and Camels«.

¹ Cp. Fr. Cramer, Der Hl. Johannes im Spiegel der französischen Pflanzen- und Tierbezeichnungen, Giessen 1932, p. 44. For its use by (Jewish) ascetics, see I. Löw, Die Flora der Juden, II, p. 405.

² I use Rosenmüller's edition of 1796 (Vol. III, pp. 326-33). The entry s.v. ἀκρίς in Suicerus' Thesaurus is almost entirely based on Bochart.

³ Most notably by R. Eisler in his section »Die Speise und die Kleidung des Täufers«, in Ἰησοῦς Βασιλεύς οὐ Βασιλεύσας, Heidelberg 1929/30, I, p. 25 ff.

⁴ Epiphanius, Panarion XXX.13 καὶ τὸ βρῶμα αὐτοῦ φησὶ μέλι ἄγριον οὖ ἡ γεῦσις ἡ τοῦ μάννα, ὡς ἐγκρὶς ἐν ἐλαίῳ, on which Epiphanius comments ἵνα δῆθεν μεταστρέψωσι τὸν τῆς ἀληθείας λόγον εἰς ψεῦδος καὶ ἀντὶ ἀκρίδων ποιήσωσι ἐγκρίδα ἐν μέλιτι.

⁵ The only reflection of this in Syriac tradition is to be found in the first of three explanations

It was not, however, until the fourth and fifth centuries, with the rise of monasticism, that the vogue for this kind of interpretation really set in. Of the many possibilities put forward, two in particular came to be widespreadly held. In an exegetical fragment attributed to Athanasius it is claimed that the $\mathring{a}\kappa\rho \acute{i}s$ is here a plant⁶, and not an insect; but at the same time it is affirmed that the $\mathring{\mu}\acute{\epsilon}\lambda \iota \ \mathring{a}\gamma\rho\iota\sigma\nu$ is genuine honey, and not a plant (i.e. $\mathring{\mu}\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\acute{a}\gamma\rho\iota\sigma\nu^{7}$), but honey that was wild and bitter, and so more suitable as food for an ascetic. This line of thought was further developed in the early fifth century by Isidore of Pelusium: in two separate letters⁸ Isidore explains that the $\mathring{a}\kappa\rho\imath\delta\epsilon$ are tips of plants or trees, $\mathring{a}\kappa\rho\epsilon\mathring{\mu}\acute{\nu}\epsilon s$ $\mathring{\beta}\sigma\tau a\nu\hat{a}\nu$ $\mathring{\eta}$ $\mathring{\phi}\nu\tau\hat{a}\nu$. This particular explanation clearly enjoyed great popularity, as can be seen from the fact that a ninth century anchorite copied down the passage on the wall of his cave near Miletus⁹.

The second, rather similar, explanation that gained wide currency was that the $d\kappa\rho i\delta\epsilon s$ were in fact $d\kappa\rho i\delta\rho v\alpha^{10}$, wild fruits, and it is this interpretation that probably underlies the passage in the old Russian Josephus on the Baptist's diet¹¹. This interpretation significantly conforms the Baptist's diet both to that commonly attributed to primeval man¹², and to that fashionable among contemporary ascetics, whether pagan¹³ or Christian¹⁴.

given in Solomon of Bosra's Book of the Bee (ed. Budge), pp. 101-2 (ET p. 91)
واعد معدم القبر عفاد معدم معدم معدم معدم معدم مناصحه معدم معدم معدم معدم المعدم المعدم المعدم المعدم معدم حداده معدم المعدم المعدم المعدم معدم حداده معدم حداده معدم حداده معدم المعدم المعدم معدم حداده معدم حداده معدم حداده معدم حداده المعدم حداده المعدم المعدم حداده المعدم المعدم حداده المعدم الم

Some have said that it (sc. John's diet) was manna, and this was the food for the children of Israel, and Enoch and Elijah eat of it in Paradise; because its taste resembles honey; Moses, however, likens it to coriander seed. Hermits too live off it in the mountains.

- 6 PG XXVII.1565. A deduction based on the parallellism of $\mathring{a}\kappa\rho\acute{i}s$ to $\mathring{a}\mu\acute{\nu}\gamma\delta a\lambda o\nu$ in the exceedingly obscure verse Eccles. xii 5.
- 7 These were a stock food for ascetics; see the references collected by H. Usener, Die Legenden der hl. Theodosios, p. 133. The passage he comments on (p. 19²⁵⁻⁶), however, mentions two other sources of food for ascetics, both of which later came to be attributed to the Baptist, φοίνικες (for which see the Martyrdom of the Baptist in Vasiliev, Anecdota Graeco-Byzantina, I, p. 2 ἤσθιεν δὲ ἀκρίδας τοῦτ' ἐστιν φοίνικας, and A. Berendts, Studien über Zacharias-Apokryphen und Z.-legenden, Leipzig 1895, p. 79) and ξυλοκέρατα (carobs).
 - ⁸ Book I, Epp. 5 and 132 (PG LXXVIII.181/4 and 269).
- 9 On this see H. Gregoire, »Les sauterelles de St Jean Baptiste«, Byzantion 5 (1929/30) pp. 109-28.
 - 10 First in Theophylact, PG CXXIX.173f, but the explanation is probably much older.
 - 11 Cf. F.I. Anderson, "The Diet of John the Baptist", Abr-Nahrain 3 (1961/2) pp. 66-8.
 - 12 See J. Haussleiter, Der Vegetarismus in der Antike, Berlin 1935, p. 67.
- 13 E.g. Lucian, Menippos (Teubner edn. I, 195) καὶ σιτία μὲν ἡμῖν τὰ ἀκρόδρυα, ποτὸν δὲ γάλα καὶ μελίκρατον καὶ τὸ τοῦ χοάσπον ὕδωρ; Porphyry, De Abstinentia § 48 (on Epicureans); cp also Haussleiter, op. cit., p. 323.
 - ¹⁴ According to Clement of Alexandria St Matthew lived off them (Paedag. II.1).

Given the fashion for this sort of exegesis, it is hardly surprising that Syriac writers should have tried their hand at it; one late commentator indeed, Dionysios bar Ṣalibi (†1171), gives as many as eleven different explanations of the four words of the Gospels, $\mathring{a}\kappa\rho i\partial\epsilon_{S} \kappa\alpha \mathring{i} \mu \acute{\epsilon}\lambda \iota \ \mathring{a}\gamma\rho\iota o\nu$. But rather than give a mere catalogue of these curiosities I shall classify them, and on the basis of this classification try to discover what sort of motives and interests lie behind the explanations.

The various explanations of the diet to be found in Syriac sources fall into four fairly clearly defined categories:

- (i) what can best be termed as 'mythical',
- (ii) vegetarian,
- (iii) literal,
- (iv) allegorical.

To take these in turn:

(i) The single 'mythological' interpretation happens to be the earliest. According to the unanimous testimony of the later¹⁵ Syriac commentators, Isho'dad of Merv, Dionysios bar Ṣalibi, and Barhebraeus, the Diatessaron read here either 'milk and wild honey', or 'honey and milk of the mountain' (with the inner Syriac variant 'gazelles' for 'mountain')¹⁶. It is an interesting reflection on the way in which the Diatessaron was transmitted that none of the daughter versions, Eastern or Western, retain the slightest hint of the milk, although the Persian Diatessaron¹⁷ and the Georgian Opiza Gospels¹⁸ (at Mk i 6) retain the reversed order, with the honey first.

¹⁵ The Armenian version (all that is extant here) of Ephrem's Commentary on the Diatessaron disappointingly passes over any mention of the diet.

¹⁷ G. Messina, *Diatessaron Persiano* (Biblica et orientalia 14, Rome 1951), pp. 32/33 : e il suo nutrimentio miele del deserto e locusta (?, QMṢYṢ, see below note 34), e un alimento che chiamano ğarād (= locusts, Arabie).

¹⁸ See J. Molitor, »Das Adysh-Tetraevangelium«, OC 41 (1957) 2 (mel et locustam campestren).

It is significant that the two earliest reinterpretations of the ἀκρίδες in Greek and Syriac should both be Encratite in origin, and probably roughly contemporary in date: both make the diet a vegetarian one, but at the same time they make an important further step and give it mythical overtones, the Ebionite Gospel linking John's food with Manna, while Tatian makes it into another form of heavenly sustenance, milk and honey¹⁹. It is ironic—although not surprising—that the Ebionite Gospel, written in Greek, as the interpretation shows, should use a Semitic concept, while Tatian's harmony, compiled in Syriac, should employ terms which were more current in the Graeco-Roman, than in the Semitic, world. In connection with Tatian's interpretation it is worth recalling the use made of milk and honey in the early church: the newly baptized, who through baptism had become children of heaven, were appropriately given the heavenly sustenance consisting of milk and honey²⁰.

Later Syriac tradition, puzzled by the milk²¹, embellished the picture. One simple solution was the substitution, easy enough in the Syriac script, of 'gazelles' for 'mountains'. Others, however, linked the diet with the early period of John's life, spent in hiding with his mother in the desert after his father Zacharias — identified with Zacharias son of Barachias of Mt xxiii 35 — had been murdered in the temple. Thus the anonymous chronicle ad annum 1234 states that John was brought up on his mother's milk up to the age of 15(!), when his preaching began²².

(ii) The second type of explanation, which sought to make John's diet both vegetarian and one that conformed with contemporary ascetic ideals, was by far the most common, and it gave rise to a large number of ingenious

¹⁹ Cp Isaiah vii 15, and especially the Graeco-Roman sources collected by H. Usener, in his »Milch und Honig«, Rheinisches Museum NF 57 (1902), p. 177 ff; compare also the quotation from Lucian in note 13, above.

²⁰ The main texts are conveniently collected by Usener, art. cit., p. 183 f.

²¹ Possibly a hint of the same difficulty being felt is to be found in Adamnanus' De locis sanctis (ed. Meehan, p. 92-3) II.23 (Arculf saw in Palestine locusts being cooked in oil): in eodem deserto quasdam videram (= Arculf) arbores quarum folia lata et rotunda sunt lactei coloris et saporis mellei; quorum utique foliorum natura fragilis valde est, et qui in escam sumere cupiunt primum manibus confricant deinde comedunt et hoc est silvestre mel in silvis sic repertum. (The same material is reproduced in Bede's de locis sanctis (ed. Tobler and Molinier) § XIV).

²² Chron. anon. ad annum 1234 (ed. Chabot) I, p. 118:

عملاه لدن مومه لحددته مدهم سنه همد حر دبند دحدت المد همه مر معتب محدادم همه مر سلده عدمه لم عتب مدادم عند عند دردها معتب مدادم عند دردها مدادم عند درداده مدادم م

She took her son and went out into the desert, and there begged from the tents of the Ma'daye who were there, and (thus) she lived; and John was brought up on her milk up till his 15th year; and afterwards he began preaching.

interpretations. Behind these it seems possible to discern three rather different starting points: the diet can be imposed by circumstances, or it can be voluntary, and if the latter, it may either simply conform with ascetic ideals of the day, or it may attempt to reproduce the diet of primitive man in his 'natural state'. Often enough, of course, various combinations of these three aspects will be found all at once in a writer's mind.

Those who saw the diet as imposed by outward circumstances naturally took these circumstances to be the flight of John and his mother from Herod²³, while the vegetarian character of the diet is very probably inspired by the description in II Maccabees v 27 of the fugitive life of Judas Maccabaeus and his companions in the mountains: $\mathring{a}\nu a\chi\omega\rho\mathring{\eta}\sigma as$ $\mathring{\epsilon ls}$ $\mathring{\tau}\mathring{\eta}\nu$ $\mathring{\epsilon}\rho\eta\mu\nu\nu$ $\theta\eta\rho l\omega\nu$ $\tau\rho\acute{\sigma}\pi\nu$ $\mathring{\epsilon}\nu$ $\tau \mathring{\epsilon}\nu$ $\mathring{\epsilon}\nu$ $\mathring{\epsilon}\nu$

'And he lived off herbs and plants and flowers in the desert of Judah, just like the wild animals'.

That such a life could be understood as voluntarily undertaken and not imposed by circumstances is readily made clear when one finds almost identical phraseology used to describe the life of famous ascetics, such as the Armenian Gind in Faustus of Byzantium²⁵, or James of Nisibis as described by Theodoret²⁶. Accordingly the majority of Syriac discussions of the diet are simply concerned with enhancing John's ascetic prowess.

Interest was naturally primarily concentrated on the $\dot{a}\kappa\rho\dot{i}\delta\epsilon_{S}$, objected to on the grounds that an ascetic like John could hardly be expected to have

²³ Possibly the desire to explain the milk of the Diatessaron helped to create this parallel to the Flight into Egypt.

²⁴ Ed. Bedjan, I, p. 157¹. The flight into the wilderness with his mother is also mentioned in connection with the diet in the extract attributed to Epiphanius quoted below, p. 6; compare also the Coptic panegyric on the Baptist attributed to Theodosios of Alexandria (ed. K.H. Kuhn) CSCO Scr. Copt. 33, p. 38 (text) and 34, p. 32 (translation): »and Elizabeth gathered the flowers of the herbs which are in the desert and dipped them in wild honey and put them in her son's mouth«; his later diet as an ascetic is interestingly given differently in the two different recensions, the one leaving the locusts (»eating locusts and wild honey«), but the other making him into a vegetarian (»eating herbs instead of food«), op. cit., p. 55 (text), 47 (translation).

²⁵ VI.16 = trans. V. Langlois, Collection des historiens de l'Arménie, Paris 1881, I, p. 310.
26 PG LXXXII col. 1293 τροφὴν δὲ εἶχεν, οὐ τὴν μετὰ πόνου σπειρομένην καὶ φυομένην, ἀλλὰ τὴν αὐτομάτως βλαστάνουσαν. τῶν γὰρ ἀγρίων δένδρων τοὺς αὐτοφυεῖς συλλέγων καρποὺς καὶ τῶν βοτανῶν τὰς ἐδωδίμους καὶ λαχανώδεις...

eaten meat, whatever its form; but the wild honey also sounded suspiciously like a delicacy, and we shall find several reassuring remarks made on its bitter character. Isidore, as it has already been seen, interpreted the $\dot{\alpha}\kappa\rho i\delta\epsilon s$ as 'the tips of plants', and Isidore is actually quoted by name in Dionysios bar Ṣalibi², although in a rather altered form:

מסב אשיניסוא משישא: לם מביצא מסם בינוא אלה האה הבתוא הלה הבינות מר הבתוא הבתו בחבא. אם נחובא הכל התבינות הבתוא העבול ההבינות הבתוא העבולא העבול העבול

'Isidore the presbyter: not the ordinary locusts, but the inside of some plant, or the seeds of the cotton plant, or the tips of the branch(es) of plants'.

Here only the last phrase corresponds to anything in the Greek and the source of the mention of the cotton plant is completely unknown to me. The first element of the explanation, however, which goes against the whole spirit of Isidore's pseudo-etymology of $\grave{a}\kappa\rho \acute{l}s$ as 'tip', turns up again several times in Syriac texts, most notably in an unpublished extract attributed — almost certainly wrongly²⁸ — to Epiphanius. This reads as follows:²⁹

Now from St Epiphanius: what are the locusts and honey which John the Baptist lived on?

The locusts which John the Baptist lived aff are not the flying and fleshy kind of locusts as some have imagined, but the inside part of

²⁷ Ed. Sedlaček, loc. cit. (See note 16).

 $^{^{28}}$ The attribution is most unlikely in view of Epiphanius' disapproval of the Ebionite attempt to make John a vegetarian.

²⁹ The text is to be found in Mingana syr. 3, f. 79^a. I take the opportunity to thank the curator of the Mingana Collection (Selly Oak Colleges Library, Birmingham), the Reverend Professor W.D. McHardy, for permission to publish the extract.

certain roots (or plants), or the tips from the branches of a plant. These his mother also lived on when she fled from Herod to the desert. The wild honey too is that which wild bees make, which is very bitter, and which the palate's taste buds abhor, and its taste is not acceptable. By these the blessed John is shown to (have lived) in complete humility and self abasement, and not in pleasures, but in abstinence from living things, treating his palate to bitterness with plants (consisting) of bitter (and) base roots (or herbs)³⁰.

The 'locusts' again seem to be taken as meaning 'roots' in three other of Dionysios's list³¹ of interpretations, one of which specifically compares them with the carrot:

Others (say) that they are roots (or plants), which he ground and mixed with honey and ate³².

(2) (This is also found in Isho'dad (= Ish.) and Solomon of Bosra³³)

ره العامی (مام العه.) حمیت می جمعی (مام العه.) حمید \overline{m} + العه.) حمید می جمعی (مام العه.) حمید العه.) حمید العه.) من جمعید (tp العه.) من جمعید (tp العه.) من جمعید وزه مید وزه مید

Others: the locusts, they say, are soft and tender roots, like a carrot $(\sigma \tau a \phi \nu \lambda \hat{\iota} \nu o s)$ and not very sweet. Some people call them QMSYS³⁴, while others QMSYN (= locusts)³⁵.

(Dionysios takes over all five of the explanations provided by Isho'dad, adding to them a further six (nos 1-3, 9-11 of his list) from another source).

He lived off a plant (or root) called QMWS, which is (!) wild honey.

QMSYS is otherwise unknown; one manuscript of Ishoʻdad reads QMSYS, the word used in the Persian Diatessaron (see note 17) and translated by Messina as 'locusts' (presumably taking it as equivalent to Ar. *qamas*; the form QMSYS, however, is unknown to both Arabic and Persian). The source of these variant plant names remains obscure, although possibly they were specially

³¹ For reference see note 16.

³² Cp Arculf (note 21).

(3) (This too is to be found in Isho'dad)

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Others (say) that they are roots (or plants) called QWH' which in shape resemble locusts, but in taste are sweet like honey³⁶.

The introduction of 'roots' into the discussion will be a purely inner Syriac development, due to the ambiguity of \sim in, which can mean either 'plant' or 'root': it is in fact the word used to translate $\chi o \rho \tau \dot{\omega} \delta \eta s$ in II Mac. v 27. How the confusion arose can perhaps be seen in two almost identical interpretations which certainly derive from the Greek. In the life of Peter the Iberian it is related that the famous Abba Isaiah asked John the Baptist in a vision what the $\dot{\alpha}\kappa\rho i\delta\epsilon s$ he lived off were, and the reply was³⁷.

They were the tops of wild plants/roots.

No doubt 'plants' is what stood in the original Greek, but the rendering κίως was easily capable of being taken as 'roots' by Syriac readers, and it appears to have been taken as such by the lexicographer Bar Bahlul, who quotes the passage in a slightly different form, with κλωμ 'hearts' instead of κρίδες as 'tops' 'tops' '38. The second identification of the ἀκρίδες as 'tops of plants' is to be found in the last of five short extracts attributed to Xystus of Rome: 39

مص مصلاد من بعد دردن مسل محمد بعد معن کمد المحمد مصم مصمد محدد محمد معمد معمد معمد معمد معمد المعمد معمد معمد معمد المعمد معمد المعمد معمد معمد المعمد المعمد معمد المعمد المعمد

The locusts which John the Baptist ate were the tops of plants/roots which grew in the land of Judaea.

The interpretation figuring third in Dionysios' long list is particularly intriguing, and reads:

invented so as to provide a plant name resembling qamşe 'locusts', on the analogy of Greek $\mathring{a}\kappa\rho is$ supposedly meaning a plant, alongside $\mathring{a}\kappa\rho is$ 'locust'.

 $^{^{35}}$ Ishoʻdad+» Persian MNG«, i.e. mang, a plant given a very wide range of identifications in the standard dictionaries.

³⁷ Petrus der Iberer (ed. Raabe), p. 1265. By his question Abba Isaiah wished to settle the dispute between the βοσκοί (vegetarians) and ἀκριδοφάγοι. The whole passage is indicative of how seriously the Gospel words were taken.

³⁹ Preserved in Mingana syr. 4, f. 61b.

ישבים אולא הוא אולים או

The whole entry in Dionysios is in fact already found, in rather fuller form, in an unpublished commentary on Mark⁴⁰, perhaps to be attributed to Lazarus of Beth Qandasa (8th century). The passage reads (f. 179^b)

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Some say that John lived off sweet herbs and grass⁴¹ of the countryside — which in the Syriac (sc. Bible) is called QMS (locusts) — and wild honey. For, as a result of the similarity of the words, the person who translated the book into Aramaic thought that the Gospel said that John lived off locusts. But the meaning is (really) as follows: 'he ate herbs and lived in the wilderness'.

The originator of this statement — who incidentally proves a remarkable forerunner of R. Eisler — thought that the 'locusts' of the Syriac New Testament were due to a confusion on the part of the translator between $\mathring{a}\kappa\rho i\delta\epsilon s$ (supposedly) meaning 'plants' of some sort, and the common $\mathring{a}\kappa\rho i\delta\epsilon s$ meaning 'locusts' (cp. the opinion of (Ps.?) Athanasius quoted above, p. 2).

A number of the explanations listed by Dionysios appear to take the 'wild honey', not as a separate item, but as descriptive of the first item. This confusion is certainly old, and is already found in the *Cave of Treasures* (quoted above, note 34). A similar situation can also be found in Greek sources⁴².

⁴⁰ Preserved in a tenth century manuscript, BM Add. 14682.

⁴¹ For the grass compare the Carshuni Life of the Baptist, ed. A. Mingana, Woodbrooke Studies I, p. 270 (text), p. 242 (translation).

⁴² See Gregoire, art. cit. (note 9), p. 122.

the honey was not a delicacy. The fullest text on the subject is to be found in the extract attributed to Epiphanius, quoted above, pp. 6-7. In this extract, which clearly has some connection with Isidore's remarks⁴³, we are fortunate in that the motivation behind the explanation is made explicitly clear.

(iii) The third category, consisting of literal interpretations, is represented in the lists of both Isho'dad and Dionysios. In the former the literal interpretation is attributed to 'The Interpreter', i.e. Theodore of Mopsuestia, but in the latter — not unnaturally in a Jacobite writer — to 'Others' The entry reads (Isho'dad)

According to the interpreter: The locusts were the winged (insects), and the honey (was) natural (honey) which were always to be found there owing to the warmth and temperateness of the climate⁴⁴.

What is interesting is that the statement is put in polemical form, and implies knowledge of interpretations that did away with the locusts and honev⁴⁵.

(iv) The final category consists of allegorical interpretations. Two different ones are to be found in the sources known to me. The first occurs in the anonymous commentary on Mark and, in slightly different form, in Dionysios's list, while the second is found only in Dionysios.

43 Cp note 30.

44 The explanation seems to be vaguely related, in part, with the first of Dionysios' list: مجنع دمجنع دمجنع دمجنع دمجنع دمجنع عسب. حمدنع دمجنع دمجنع

Some say that he names 'locusts' the honey that we eat, because the wilderness of Ziph is hot, and there are always locusts and bees there which make honey.

This item has probably been abbreviated since its present form does not make much sense. Note that, according to Job of Edessa (*Book of Treasures*, ed. Mingana, p. 372 (text), p. 126 (translation)) honey, when heated, becomes bitter.

And others have said that the locusts were really some of those which (exist) in the world, and the honey-comb was one of those that are constructed by little bees, and is found (in the form of) small white cakes in desert regions.

Cp also Aphraates Dem. VI.13 (PS I, col. 289):

מש שבת ההושו עלישים לחמים

And John used to eat locusts which flew.

The explanation in the anonymous commentary on Mark appears in the following somewhat obscure form:

By the word 'locusts' we understand the Pharisees and Sadducees who had descended to the wickedness of reptiles full of venom — whom he also called 'snakes' and 'generation of vipers'. He changes them to locust(s) in that a locust too is clean according to the Law, and because he rids (them) of their sins as a locust sloughs off its wings. He calls 'wild honey' that made by wild bees, which he says is bitter and repulsive, and he signifies that those from the nations who are outside (i.e. pagans⁴⁶), and who do not fulfil the Law and the Prophets, he makes into carriers and fountains of sweet honey. And this the teachers of the church have demonstrated by facts.

This very remarkable piece appears in Dionysios as follows:

Others (say) that by 'locusts' he designated the Pharisees and Sadducees who are evil, being 'offspring of vipers' and 'poison-bearing reptiles', (but) whom his preaching changed, causing them to be raised to heaven — just as the locust sloughs off and rids itself (of its skin) — and making them clean, just as locusts are clean in the Law. By 'honey' he included the gentiles, who were (once) springs which flowed with the bitterness of godlessness and wickedness, but whom his preaching altered, making them into springs flowing with truth and sweetness of way of life.

 $^{^{46}=} au\hat{\omega}\nu$ $\xi\hat{\omega}$. The whole piece has the air of being a translation from Greek.

The second allegorical interpretation is found only in Dionysios, where it preceeds the first. It reads as follows:

مستن به دهمده لحنه مهم قنه معتصم عمص به دهونه المعتب لفيه و دهم مهم و دهم المعتب المحتب المح

Others (say) that by 'his food' he means 'his preaching', and he called it 'locusts' because it causes those who confess Christ to fly to heaven. And the honey which was sweet was the object of his preaching, repentance and the kingdom. For scripture is in the habit of calling teaching 'food', as for example in the quotation (Amos viii 11) 'He hungered, but not for food'.

One would like to know in what circles these two interpretations originated: although examples of allegorical interpretations are to be found in both Greek and Latin sources⁴⁷, there is nothing exactly parallel to either of these Syriac pieces.

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Further variations on these four main types of exegesis of Matthew iii 4 = Mark i 6 could probably be found elsewhere in Syriac literature; the examples given above, however, will no doubt prove amply representative.

⁴⁷ E.g. apud J.A. Cramer, Catenae, Oxford 1840, I, p. 269 (on Mk i 6); cp also the Catena aurea ad Mt iii 4 and Mk i 6.