

## The Baptist's diet in Syriac Sources

by

Sebastian Brock

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 ἀκρίδες, locusts, of the Gospel narratives of Matthew and Mark, and so make John the Baptist into a vegetarian. Although this particular identification of the ἀκρίδες with the carob (St John's Bread; Greek κεράτιον)<sup>1</sup> 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 scripturae*<sup>2</sup>. Bochart poured scorn on the various fanciful attempts at explaining away the locusts, and he sanely concluded that the ἀκρίδες 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 Baptist<sup>3</sup>.

In Greek sources the oldest reinterpretation of the ἀκρίδες is to be found in the Ebionite Gospel, as quoted by Epiphanius<sup>4</sup>. According to it John lived off, not ἀκρίδες, but ἐγκρίδες, little cakes made with oil and honey—an interpretation that was self-confessedly based on the Septuagint description of Manna in Exodus xvi 31: τὸ δὲ γεῦμα αὐτοῦ ὡς ἐγκρίς ἐν μέλιτι<sup>5</sup>.

---

\* 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'.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Most notably by R. Eisler in his section 'Die Speise und die Kleidung des Täufers', in *Ἰησοῦς Βασιλεὺς οὐ Βασιλεύσας*, Heidelberg 1929/30, I, p. 25 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* XXX.13 καὶ τὸ βρώμα αὐτοῦ φησὶ μέλι ἄγριον οὐδ' ἡ γεῦσις ἡ τοῦ μάννα, ὡς ἐγκρίς ἐν ἐλαίῳ, on which Epiphanius comments ἵνα δῇθεν μεταστρέψωσι τὸν τῆς ἀληθείας λόγον εἰς ψεῦδος καὶ ἀντὶ ἀκριδῶν ποιήσωσι ἐγκρίδα ἐν μέλιτι.

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







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 Šalibi († 1171), gives as many as eleven different explanations of the four words of the Gospels, ἀκρίδες καὶ μέλι ἄγριον. 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 later<sup>15</sup> Syriac commentators, Isho'dad of Merv, Dionysios bar Šalibi, 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')<sup>16</sup>. 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 Diatessaron<sup>17</sup> and the Georgian Opiza Gospels<sup>18</sup> (at Mk i 6) retain the reversed order, with the honey first.

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

<sup>16</sup> The precise wording is uncertain, and is variously given : Isho'dad of Merv, *Commentary on Matthew* (ed. M.D. Gibson, *Horae Semiticae*, Vol. VI, p. 41 = ET, Vol. V, p. 23) (ms S ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ; Dionysios bar Šalibi, *Commentary on Matthew* (ed. I. Sedláček, CSCO, Scr. Syri II.98, p. 144 (text) = p. 108 (translation)) ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ; Barhebraeus, *Scholia on Matthew* (ed. I. Spanuth, p. 8) ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ. The form in Isho'dad is probably that of the original Diatessaron (on honey listed first see below, notes 17 and 18), while in Dionysios it has been assimilated in part to the Peshitta, and in Barhebraeus abbreviated. The variant ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܐܠܐ is found in the quotation of the verse in an anonymous Nestorian theological compendium, Berlin syr. 85, f. 41<sup>a</sup> (quoted in Sachau, *Verzeichnis der syr. HSS* ..., p. 316), and in an anonymous Nestorian Commentary (in fact here reproducing Isho'dad), Oxford, Bodley Or. 626, f. 16<sup>a</sup>; cf. Kmosko, OC 2 (1902) 37-8.

<sup>17</sup> G. Messina, *Diatessaron Persiano* (Biblica et orientalia 14, Rome 1951), pp. 32/33 : e il suo nutrimento miele del deserto e locusta (?), QMSYS, see below note 34), e un alimento che chiamano ġarād (= locusts, Arabic).

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







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 Herod<sup>23</sup>, 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: ἀναχωρήσας εἰς τὴν ἔρημον θηρίων τρόπον ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσιν διέζη σὺν τοῖς μετ' αὐτοῦ, καὶ τὴν χορτώδη τροφήν σιτούμενοι διετέλουν. In a homily on the Baptist Jacob of Serugh describes John and his mother's fugitive life in the Judean desert in very similar terms:<sup>24</sup>

ܠܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܝܗܘܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܝܗܘܢܐ  
ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܝܗܘܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܝܗܘܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܝܗܘܢܐ

'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 Byzantium<sup>25</sup>, or James of Nisibis as described by Theodoret<sup>26</sup>. 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 ἀκρίδες, objected to on the grounds that an ascetic like John could hardly be expected to have

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

<sup>24</sup> Ed. Bedjan, I, p. 157<sup>1</sup>. 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).

<sup>25</sup> VI.16 = trans. V. Langlois, *Collection des historiens de l'Arménie*, Paris 1881, I, p. 310.

<sup>26</sup> PG LXXXII col. 1293 τροφήν δὲ εἶχεν, οὐ τὴν μετὰ πόνου σπειρομένην καὶ φνομένην, ἀλλὰ τὴν αὐτομάτως βλαστάνουσαν. τῶν γὰρ ἀγρίων δένδρων τοὺς αὐτοφυεῖς συλλέγων καρποὺς καὶ τῶν βοτανῶν τὰς ἐδωδίμους καὶ λαχανώδεις...







с т

خذ

(2) (

一

30

(Dion

31

32

33

34

QMS



















