



John the Baptist and Fasting

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Abstract: The Gospels passages describe John the Baptist's ascetic behaviour in the Judean desert, eating locusts and wild honey, wearing garments made of camel hair. The food choices of St. John are analysed in comparison with the practice of nazirite, and also on the light of Eastern tradition, mostly spread in Syriac Christianity, which interpretation differs, underlining a particular form of ascetism completely characterised by vegetables. Commentaries, mostly dating back to the 4th and 5th centuries, explain the word 'akrides' as a particular vegetable. Furthermore, the celebration of St. John's Eve, as a result of medieval western development, is nowadays characterized by abundance of food, in contrast, with the Gospel description of the life of the Baptist, are compared with the tradition of charivari, known since the Middle Ages.

Keywords: Apocrypha; Baptist; locust; fasting; solstice; charivari

The most commonly accepted tradition for reconstructing the biography of John the Baptist and the historical panorama of his preaching are the Gospels and the references in the works of Josephus Flavius; apocryphal texts and legends complete our knowledge, providing a picture of how the figure of the saint developed in the cultural landscape through the ages. John acts as a link between the Old and New Testaments, in this interpretation of the Christian faith he is the last of the Old Testament prophets². John is the most venerated saint in the Christian tradition and, after Jesus and Mary, the most important sacred figure in Christianity. For the Catholic Church, John represents the last prophet before Jesus, as he witnessed

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² Cf. Benedict XVI, *Angelus* of 24 June 2012, "Giovanni Battista figura centrale del Vangelo", transcribed in *Avvenire* June 25th 2012, in: <https://www.avvenire.it/chiesa/pagine/angelus-del-24-giugno-2012> (accessed: 04.05.2023).

the arrival of the Christ and was an active preacher, furthermore, for the Orthodox tradition he represents the perfect form of asceticism, because of his experience with hermitage and fasting. John the Baptist therefore is one of the most present figures among the main religious canon and in popular tradition for which he represents a symbol of passage.

1. Apocrypha and other tradition

No reference is found in the Gospels to John's place of birth. The only information handed down is that it was a town in the mountainous region of Judea (Lk 1:39-45; 1:56-67). The tradition referring to the account of the *Pilgrimage to the Holy Land* by the Russian abbot Daniel (written between 1106 and 1108) identifies the mountain town of Ain Karim³, about 8 km from the old city of Jerusalem, where today stands a church dedicated to the Baptist, which shows a chapel built between the 5th and 6th centuries on the site of the residence of the family of Zechariah and Elisabeth. This place is also identified as the hiding place in the mountains of Elizabeth with John on her lap, an episode recorded in the *Protoevangelium of James*, to escape the 'Slaughter of the Innocents', while Zechariah was killed for not revealing the hiding place to Herod's guards (James 23:3)⁴. In a Byzantine legend, for five months, following the period spent in hiding, his mother Elizabeth made him accustomed to eating locusts and wild honey⁵. Like Jesus, therefore, John also escaped the slaughter of the innocents wanted by Herod: they would have met after fleeing to Egypt⁶. With Jacobus de Voragine, in the legend on the nativity⁷, the information from the gospels is retraced, adding some details. The episode in which Mary goes to Elizabeth (Lk 1:36) to pay her homage and help her in her pregnancy, in the narration

³ D. Palomnik, *Itinerario in Terra Santa*, ed. M. Garzaniti, Rome 1991, p. 129.

⁴ *Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento*, v. 1, ed. L. Moraldi, Turin 1975, p. 85-86; the scene is also described in Arundel Codex 404. See *Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento*, v. 1, p. 149-150. Cf. *New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels and Related Writings*, v. 1, ed. W. Schneemelcher – R. McLachlan Wilson, Louisville – London 1991, p. 436-437.

⁵ S.S. Averincev, *Sofija-Logos. Slovar*, Kiev 2006, p. 215.

⁶ Serapion, *Vita Iohannis Baptistae*: cf. *New Testament Apocrypha*, v. 1, p. 467-469; the author of the Life of John probably was not Serapion of Thmuis, cf. K. Fitschen, *Serapion von Thmuis. Echte und unechte Schriften sowie die Zeugnisse des Athanasius und anderer*, Berlin – New York 1992, p. 105.

⁷ Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, ed. G.P. Maggioni, Florence 2007, p. 604-615.

the author cites the *Historia scholastica*⁸ as a source, according to Jacobus, Mary stays with her relative for three months and after the birth of John in her own hands, she takes care of him as a nanny⁹.

The Gospels testify that Jesus came to John to be baptised in the River Jordan, and much to his surprise the Baptist is shown to be unworthy of the task required of him. In the *Gospel of the Ebionites* made known by Epiphanius, we find further news of the encounter between John and Jesus, referring to the moment of the baptism in the river (Epiphanius Salaminis, *Panarion* 30, 13, 6-8)¹⁰. In the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, reported by Jerome, Jesus' mother and brothers want to participate together in the rite of the Baptist, for the absolution of sins, and Jesus himself asks what sin he has committed so that he should be baptised (Hieronymus, *Dialogus Adversus Pelagianos* 3, 2)¹¹.

In the *Gospel of Nicodemus* II, Greek (B.2) and Latin (A.3) recension, John appears in Hades, in the place where all the prophets and patriarchs are found. He is presented to them as the last of the prophets, forerunner of Christ as he was to the living. Therefore, he foretells the arrival of Jesus so that the prophets and patriarchs will do penance and believe in the Christ, in order to enter Paradise¹².

John the Baptist is also celebrated in the Islamic religion, under the name Yahya, as one of the prophets mentioned in the *Qu'ran*. We find references to the story of John and his family in Surah 3:37-41, and in particular Surah 19 dedicated to Mary, the *Qu'ran* shares insight with the Gospels, most specifically with the *Gospel of Luke*, the only one that reports the account of the supernatural birth of John the Baptist and of the kinship ties between the Baptist and Jesus. The detail that Mary was placed in the care of Zechariah (Surah 3:37) is not present in the canonical gospels, but only in the *Protoevangelium of James* 8:1-3, where it is reported that Mary was in the Temple raised like a dove and that she received food from the hand

⁸ Cf. Petrus Comestor, *De ortu Praecursoris, Historia Libri Evangelorum*, v. 3: *Historia scholastica*, PL 198, 1537-1539.

⁹ Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, p. 606-607.

¹⁰ Moraldi, *Apocriphi del Nuovo Testamento*, p. 372; cf. Epiphanius Salaminis, *Panarion*, ed. K. Holl, *Ancoratus und Panarion haer. 1-33*, Berlin – Boston 2013, tr. A.F.J. Klijn, in: A.F.J. Klijn, *Jewish-Christian Gospel tradition*, Leiden 1992, p. 142.

¹¹ Moraldi, *Apocriphi del Nuovo Testamento*, p. 378; cf. *New Testament Apocrypha*, v. 1, p. 158-165.

¹² Moraldi, *Apocriphi del Nuovo Testamento*, p. 618, 626; cf. *New Testament Apocrypha*, v. 1, p. 522, 529.

of an angel. When she became twelve, Mary couldn't stay there any longer, therefore Zechariah was given charge over her, at least for a short moment when he was serving in the Temple as high priest. Zechariah, following the order received from the angel of the Lord, was instructed to find Mary a husband¹³. In a short reference Surah 6:85 presents Yahya (the Baptist) together with Zakariya (Zechariah), 'Iesa (Jesus) and Iliyas (Elias), among the righteous. Surah 21:89-90 remembers once again when Zechariah, prays to God to bless him and his wife with a son.

2. John the wild man

And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey (Mt 3:4; Mk 1:6): there could be no better description of this figure's association with wild life. According to Philippe Walter, the passage to Christianity of the customs related to the two solstice periods was effected by means of biblical figures presenting certain emblematic characteristics of the same nature of creatures and deities that manifest themselves in the tales related to the solstice cycle. John the Baptist corresponds, in fact, to the medieval image of the wild man that Christianity would exploit to hide that this custom was inherited from the archaic pagan rites: a powerful deity of the Hereafter who governs life and death and drives the cycles of time¹⁴.

John preached in the desert of Judea (Mt 3:1; Mr 1:4; Lk 3:3), John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey (Mt 3:4; Mr 1:6). Furthermore, at the time of the annunciation to Zechariah, the archangel Gabriel added that John, the son who would be born, would not drink wine or fermented drinks (Lk 1:15).

3. The celebration

The customs of St John's Eve do not reveal specific references to the figure of the saint, during the course of the feast, they concern excesses –

¹³ Moraldi, *Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento*, p. 75-76; cf. *New Testament Apocrypha*, v. 1, p. 429.

¹⁴ P. Walter, *Mythologie chrétienne. Fêtes, rites et mythes du Moyen Âge*, Paris 2003, p. 146-149.

not only related to food – which is a medieval western development. Nevertheless, there has been no lack of attempts to explain it from a Christian perspective, from St Augustine to the present day. The calendar period of the summer solstice contains archaic cultural elements: its name comes from the Latin term *solstitium*, which indicates the suspension of the sun, is characterised in the festive development by *iustitium*. The latter, in Roman law, symbolises the general suspension of activity relating to the administration of justice occurring on the occasion of festivals, calamities and national mourning. The festivity, therefore, regardless of references to archaic agrarian rites, implies the suspension of the norm. It develops into a parodic form of legalised anarchy, that is, towards an area in which the utmost subjection of life to law is reversed into freedom and licence and the most unrestrained anomie shows its connection to *nomos*¹⁵:

Charivari is one of the many names (which vary from country to country and region to region) for an ancient and widely diffused act of popular justice, which occurred everywhere in similar, if not identical forms. Such forms are also used as ritual punishments in the cyclical masked feasts and their extreme offshoots, the traditional children's begging rituals; one may therefore immediately draw upon these for an interpretation of charivari-like phenomena. A closer analysis shows that what at first sight seemed simply to be rough and wild acts of harassment are in truth well-defined traditional customs and legal forms, by means of which, from time immemorial, the ban and proscription were carried out¹⁶.

4. Locusts and wild honey: between apocryphal Gospels and official tradition

With regard to John's particular diet, not all critics and exegetes agree on attributing an ascetic lifestyle to the Baptist, nor on the ingredients that made up his diet. Already in ancient times, a different interpretation of the term *'ἀκρίς'* found in the two passages of Matthew 3:4 and Mark 1:6 was widespread, aimed at identifying a plant and thus testifying to a completely vegetarian diet. In Jerome's Latin version, on the other hand, the meaning of

¹⁵ G. Agamben, *Stato di eccezione*, Turin 2003, p. 92-93.

¹⁶ K. Meuli, *Gesammelte Schriften*, v. 2 Basel – Stuttgart 1975, p. 473.

‘locust’ is clearly expressed¹⁷. This interpretation persisted in different contexts in medieval times and beyond. Nonetheless, a passage in the *Historia Orientalis*, written between 1216 et 1224 by James of Vitry, the then bishop of Acre, gave rise to several misinterpretations: “Quedam herba [...] quam languste id est locustam nominabant”, in the absence of a comma, the translation of ‘*id est*’ with ‘or’ fostered a misunderstanding absent in the Latin original¹⁸. Du Cange’s successors had allowed themselves to be misunderstood: from the edition of the *Glossarium mediae et infimae Latinitatis*, edited by Louis Henschel (1840-1850), where reference is made to this statement to identify ‘langusta’ with a type of plant widespread in Syria and consumed by John the Baptist¹⁹. Pseudo-Athanasius in 4th century reports: “*Cibus autem ejus erant acrides et mel silvestre. Quod herbae genus quoddam sit acris dictum, id nos Salomon edocet his verbis: Florebit amygdalum, et coagulabitur acris. Sed mel illud silvestre, non herba, sed mel revera silvestre, acerbissimum ac gustui ingrattissimum est*”²⁰ and that is: “That there is a plant called *acris*, Solomon teaches us by saying: The almond tree will blossom, the *acris* will fatten; but neither is wild honey just any herb, but it is indeed wild honey, which is bitter and unpleasant to any taste”.

The different interpretations that arose in ancient times have long survived in the tradition of Eastern Christianity, especially in the Syriac tradition²¹. Similar dietary variants, according to which the diet was exclusively

¹⁷ The *Vulgate* makes explicit reference to locusts and wild honey: “*Esca autem ejus erat locustae, et mel silvestre*” (Mt 3:4); “*Et locustas et mel silvestre edebat*” (Mk 1:6).

¹⁸ J. Delmulle, *Sur une acception médiévale du lat. locusta désignant une herbe sauvage comestible*, “*Archivum latinitatis Medii Aevi*” 74 (2016) p. 72.

¹⁹ *Glossarium mediae et infimae Latinitatis*, v. 4, ed. G.A.L. Henschel, Paris 1845, p. 26, in: <http://ducange.enc.sorbonne.fr/LANGUSTA> (accessed: 04.05.2023); on the interpretation of the term ‘locust’ with a plant-like meaning, see also the following dictionaries: *Lexicon latinitatis nederlandicae Medii Aevi – Woordenboek van het middeleeuws latijn van de noordelijke Nederlanden*, v. 5, ed. O. Weijers – M. Gumbert-Hepp, Leiden 1994, col. L 238: “*quaedam herba*”; *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, v. 5, Oxford 1997, cf. p. 1634: ‘edible twigs or sim’.

²⁰ Pseudo-Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Fragmenta in Matthaem*, PG 27, 1365-1366D.

²¹ S. Bochart, *Hierozoicon, sive de animalibus sacrae scripturae*, t. 3, Leipzig 1796, p. 326-33; S. Brock, *The Baptist’s diet in Syriac Sources*, “*Oriens Christianus*” 54 (1970) p. 113-124; J.A. Kelhoffer, *The Diet of John the Baptist: “Locusts and Wild Honey” in Synoptic and Patristic Interpretation*, Tübingen 2005, p. 134-193; Z. Djurović, *Le ἀκρίδες di Mt. 3,4: ‘locuste’ o ‘vegetali’?*, “*Sabornost*” 2 (2008) p. 43-59; H. Šedinová, “*Esca eius erant locustae*”: *The origin and meaning of the imaginary quadruped locusta*, “*Listy filologické*” 138/3-4 (2015) p. 231-268.

based on herbs and cereals, are still found in recent times in the Georgian²² and in the Serbian tradition²³. Among the more recent translations, only in the Bulgarian Bible version of 1992 the term ‘ἄκρίδες’ was not translated, but only transliterated into the Cyrillic alphabet²⁴: John a vegetarian?

The most ancient sources known, which propose a different diet for John the Baptist date back from the 2nd to the 5th century, they are the *Diatessaron*, the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, Isidore of Pelusium and Pseudo-Chrysostom.

The *Diatessaron*, composed by Tatian, a Syrian theologian, around year 172, represents the most widespread Gospel version in Syria until the 5th century: it is a unified version of the four canonical Gospels, Διὰ τεσσάρων in fact meaning ‘through the four’. The text, however, has only come down to us through translations and fragments of later commentaries by Christian authors. It is not possible to establish with certainty whether the language in which it was originally composed was Syriac or Greek, although on the basis of linguistic reasoning, the most likely hypothesis is Greek²⁵. Some medieval commentaries by Eastern bishops active in Syria report that the Baptist’s diet in the *Diatessaron* was pointing to the mythical ideal of ‘milk and honey’ which was mentioned in the Bible to describe the Promised Land. The writers were: Ishodad of Merv, active in the 9th century; Dionysus Bar Salibi, who lived in the 11th century; Gregory Bar Hebraeus, primate of the East in the 13th century; Ibn at-Tayyib, an 11th-century Nestorian Arab writer, who was probably the author of the Arabic translation of the text in his commentary, in which, however, the diet is presented as being based on locusts and honey²⁶. We therefore do not have an unambiguous version of the *Diatessaron*, but we do find that the text contributed to the discussion on the type of diet of the Forerunner.

The etymology of ‘ἄκρίς’, according to Reinhold Strömberg, is connected to the verb ‘κρίζω’ which means to ‘creak’, alluding to the sound emitted

²² M. Barnaveli, *The Meaning of the Words mkali (locusts) and veluri tapli (wild honey) Mentioned in the Gospel*, “The kartvelologist. Journal of Georgian studies” 27/12 (2018) p. 96-121.

²³ Djurović, *Le ἄκρίδες di Mt. 3,4: ‘locuste’ o ‘vegetali’?*, p. 43-59.

²⁴ Djurović, *Le ἄκρίδες di Mt. 3,4: ‘locuste’ o ‘vegetali’?*, p. 45; J.A. Kelhoffer, ‘Locusts and wild honey’ (Mk 1.6c and Mt 3.4c): the status quaestionis concerning the diet of John the Baptist, “Currents in Biblical Research” 2/1 (2003) p. 104-127.

²⁵ I.N. Mills, *Zacchaeus and the Unripe Figs: A New Argument for the Original Language of Tatian’s Diatessaron*, “New Testament Studies” 66 (2020) p. 208-227.

²⁶ Tatianus Assyrius, *Diatessaron*, ed. H.W. Hogg, ANF 9, Peabody 1995, p. 49, n. 318.

by the insect²⁷; the initial ‘α-’, however, causes some difficulty in determining a sure interpretation²⁸. The vowel in initial position would then result either from a prosthesis or from an incorrect association with ‘ἄκρος’²⁹, term which means ‘extremely, uppermost, highest, at the top’. Through the element ‘ἀκ-’, in many cases linked with ‘r-’, which is present *inter alia* in ἄκρος, ἄκρις and in many nouns and verbs, the general idea of ‘extremity’³⁰, gave birth to the pseudo-etymology of ‘ἀκρίδες’, as a ‘tip’ of a plant. From the 4th-5th centuries, with the rise of monasticism of ascetic kind, probably this interpretation of the Baptist’s diet had spread, having its model in 2 Maccabees 5:27 where Judas who was part of a group of ten, withdrew into the wilderness, living in the mountains in the manner of the wild animals together with those who were with him; and they lived by feeding on plants.

The bishop Epiphanius of Salamis (4th-5th century), in the *Panarion* (Latin title from the 16th-century translations: *Adversus Haereses*) comments on the *Gospel of the Ebionites*³¹ in several parts and in his commentary on it (*Panarion* 30, 13, 4-5): “And his food was, it said [the *Gospel according to the Ebionites*], wild honey, of which the taste was that of manna, like cakes in olive oil. They say this to turn the word of truth into a lie and they say honey-cakes (ἐγκρίδα ἐν μέλιτι) instead of locusts”³².

Isidore of Pelusium (4th-5th century) further polemicizes the traditional interpretation of Matthew 3:4 by explaining that the ἀκρίδες are in fact twigs of vegetables or plants (*Letter* I, 132, 269C). Isidore, in this case, clearly states that the ἀκρίδες should not be interpreted as insects: “The locusts which John the Prophet was feeding, were not animals but ends of botans or plants (ἀκρέμονες βοτανῶν ἢ φυτῶν). And the wild honey was not any grass or herb, but mountain honey, made by wild bees, which was most bitter and hostile to every taste”³³. Isidore’s interpretation can mainly be explained in two ways: since Isidore himself followed an ascetic life on

²⁷ R. Strömberg, *Griechische Wortstudien. Untersuchungen zur Benennung von Tieren, Pflanzen, Körperteilen und Krankheiten*, Gothenburg 1944, p. 15-19.

²⁸ *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, t. 1, ed. H. Frisk, Heidelberg 1960, p. 59.

²⁹ *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, ed. P. Chantraine, Paris 1968, p. 51.

³⁰ *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, t. 1, p. 59-60.

³¹ Judeo-Christian sect, who based their tradition on an interpretation of the *Gospel of Matthew*, with implementations from Mark and Luke, composed around the beginning of the 2nd century. The Ebionites were vegetarians and regarded Jesus as the son of God from the moment of union with the Holy Spirit through the rite of baptism.

³² Klijn, *Jewish-Christian Gospel tradition*, p. 67.

³³ Isidorus Pelusiota, *Epistolae*, PG 78, 269-270, tr. C. Fouskas, in: C. Fouskas, *St. Isidore of Pelusium and New Testament*, “Θεολογία” 37/2 (1966) p. 289-290.

the edge of the desert, it can be assumed either that a literal interpretation of this passage could have made an emulation of the Forerunner's ascetic path untenable, or that it is deliberately a totally vegetarian explanation.

We find in Pseudo-Chrysostom, which are texts written in the 4th-5th century, once attributed to John Chrysostom, references to 'ἀκρίδας βοτανῶν', thus 'acrids' or 'locusts' of plants, interpreting the term 'ἀκρίδες', which can only refer to the insect, win association with a botanical specification, presented as John's nourishment³⁴, whereas John Chrysostom, used the term 'ἀκρίς' exclusively with its proper meaning of locust.

Two authors in the 12th-century Byzantine empire, Theophylact of Ocrida (11th-12th century) and Euthymius Zigabenus (11th-12th century), propose a different interpretation in the Gospel passages in which the term ἀκρίδες is present in relation to John's diet; Theophylact in the *Enarratio in evangelium Matthaei* 3:4, explains that interpretations vary between those who believe it to be plants (sorrel), or fruits such as nuts (Τινὲς λέγουσι βοτάνας εἶναι τὰς ἀκρίδας)³⁵; Euthymius in *Commentarii in Matthaem* 3:4, reports that according to different opinions ἀκρίδες are either sprouts of plants, or the name of a herb or, finally, an animal (Ἀκρίδας δὲ τινὲς μὲν ἀκρέμονας βοτανῶν εἶναι εἶπον, τινὲς δὲ, βοτάνην ἀκρίδα καλουμένην, ἄλλοι δὲ, τὸ ζῶον αὐτό)³⁶. Whether this is a copyist's error or a mistranslation from a hypothetical Aramaic source, this is absolutely undocumentable, as none of the evidence that has come down to us supersedes the term ἀκρίδες, about whose meaning there is no doubt. There are trees whose popular names in English are 'black locust' (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) and 'honey locust' (*Gleditsia triacanthos*), of the genus *Leguminosae*, but these are plants which are native of the American continent; the locust bean, fruit of the carob tree (*Ceratonia siliqua*) is also called 'St John's bread' in German-speaking and Anglo-Saxon countries; the *Parkia biglobosa*, is a tree known in English as 'African locust bean'. However, these names refer neither to St John nor to locusts in Greek and Hebrew.

So did John the Baptist really feed on locusts? Hartmut Stegemann, a theologian who directed the Centre for Research on the Qumran Manuscripts at the University of Göttingen from 1980 to 1997, claims that "locusts

³⁴ Pseudo-Johannes Chrysostomus, *In oraculum Zachariae redditum et in conceptionem Elisabet*, PG 50, 786-787, for other related passages with the transcriptions of the quotations of Pseudo-John Chrysostom, v. Djurović, *Le ἀκρίδες di Mt. 3,4: 'locuste' o 'vegetali'?*, p. 53-54.

³⁵ Theophylactus, *Enarratio in evangelium Matthaei*, PG 123, 173-174C.

³⁶ Euthymius Zigabenus, *Commentarii in Matthaem*, PG 129, 159-160BC.

fried in olive oil tasted like chips” and adds “like wild honey, they are a real delicacy”³⁷. Taking into account that Stegemann also adds remarks on the clothing of the Baptist, whose camel hair cloak was no less fine than the linen or woollen clothes of the cities of Israel, and “the leather belt had nothing to envy the cloth scarves of others”³⁸, should we harbour any doubts about the author’s dietary and aesthetic habits? The FAO, through its website, offers some modern recipes with locusts (especially indicated in case of famine)³⁹: In southern Africa they are prepared in the following way: among the Tswana they are first boiled and then sautéed, to be eaten as a side dish along with maize; among the Swazi they are eaten barbecued, while among the Sotho, after cooking, they are made into a powder to be stored and used during journeys; dried, they are kept aside for the winter months. In Uganda, in east-central Africa, they are fried with onion and curry. In Cambodia they are cooked in a wok, stuffed with a hazelnut. In the Philippines they are cooked in soy sauce, vinegar, minced garlic, bay leaves and black pepper, and often browned in the oven or in a frying pan. In Mexico they are eaten in *tacos*.

In fact, however, we find references to locust-eaters much earlier than the story in which John the Baptist is the protagonist. It is mentioned in Leviticus 11:20-23, which relates to events from 538 B.C. onwards, and is also evidenced by a depiction in a bas-relief found in the royal palace of Nineveh in which locusts are brought by one of the servants to a banquet in the Assyrian kingdom of Ashurbanipal (ca. 669-627 B.C.)⁴⁰. Kelhoffer points out that locusts were a popular dish in different contexts: not only indicated to feed the population in times of famine, but also specifically requested for the tables of the wealthy classes⁴¹.

Testifying to the fact that locusts were still a foodstuff in the period contemporary with the Baptist, we find among the Qumran manuscripts the rules of the Essenes community, a Jewish sect that lived in Palestine between the 2nd century B.C. and the 1st century A.D. The so-called Temple Scroll (11Q19 8:3-5) mentions locusts, indicating which winged insects

³⁷ H. Stegemann, *Die Essener, Qumran, Johannes der Täufer und Jesus. Ein Sachbuch*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1993, p. 320.

³⁸ Stegemann, *Die Essener, Qumran, Johannes der Täufer und Jesus. Ein Sachbuch*, p. 320.

³⁹ <http://www.fao.org/ag/locusts/en/info/info/faq/index.html> (accessed: 04.05.2023).

⁴⁰ This bas-relief appears in: J.A. Kelhoffer, *Did John the Baptist Eat like a Former Essene? Locust-Eating in the Ancient Near East and at Qumran*, “Dead Sea Discoveries” 11/3 (2004) p. 301.

⁴¹ Kelhoffer, *Did John the Baptist Eat like a Former Essene?*, p. 301-302.

were allowed to be eaten, roughly following the text of Leviticus 11:20-23; the Damascus Document, one of the main documents of the ancient Qumran community, indicates as well which animals could be eaten and what the rules for purification were, including locusts, which were to be put into fire or water while still alive (CD 12:14-15)⁴².

For some authors of commentaries, therefore, the Gospel references to locusts and wild honey are not sufficient to indicate an ascetic lifestyle for John the Baptist.

It still remains to be clarified what is meant by wild honey: ‘μέλι’ can either mean honey produced by bees or a sweet substance derived from fruit, yet there is no reason to believe that the Baptist discarded the fruit in order to collect only the juice; in this sense the Gospel passages quoted would rather indicate the harvesting of the fruit, as well as the process of processing it to obtain the juice, all the more so as the term ‘ἄγριον’ confirms this, indicating wild in the sense that it is not cultivated, i.e. not the fruit of human labour.

A comparison with the collection of wild bee honey in modern times, where it is still present, can clear up any doubts; testimony collected in the monsoon territories of southern India shows that from the tribes living in the Nilgiri mountains we can learn that it is a practice that requires very restrictive ritual preparations; the gatherer in search of honey does not eat meat for a week prior, he does not sleep with his wife and does not participate in village life, furthermore, at harvest time he intones a chant with a prayer for the bees so that they do not leave the place of production, in this way, without taking the entire honeycomb away, it will be possible to return, saving the gatherer the trouble of searching for a new nest⁴³.

Finally, unlike the Byzantine commentators of the above-mentioned passages, who report an unpleasant taste for wild honey, no unpleasant types of honey are found in nature.

5. Ritual asceticism

Fasting has two aspects, the biological and the social: as a therapy, it has purifying effects on a biological level. Pliny already reported that

⁴² *The Dead Sea Scrolls, Study Edition*, ed. F. García Martínez – E.J. Tigchelaar, Leiden 1998, p. 570-571; cf. J.A. Kelhoffer, *John the Baptist's 'Wild Honey' and 'Honey' in Antiquity*, “Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies” 45/1 (2005) p. 63.

⁴³ S. Gie, *Cacciatori di miele*, “Slowfood” 54 (2012) p. 42-44.

some doctors prescribed diets such as to make one almost die of hunger⁴⁴, but also according to recent medical analyses⁴⁵ this practice of abstinence from food and drink with the exception of water, protracted even for several days or weeks, would allow the various bodily organs to rest and to unleash different potentialities in order to regain greater balance. The second aspect concerns the social level, in which religious rituality is also included for its symbolic value, whereby fasting implied in the past, as much as in the contemporary world, detachment both from the materiality of food and from the social practice of eating meals in a group: a time of sharing, of discussion, one need only think of the business dinner or the invitation to dine or have a drink with friends or as an approach to a romantic relationship. On the religious level, fasting – be it during Lent for Christians, as in the month of *Ramadan* for Muslims – is indeed aimed at inner, ritualised recollection, but its purpose is prayer towards the divinity. The religious, ritual aspects are the continuation of those archaic practices that were originally carried out by communities for a purpose useful for survival and whose significance is then modified while preserving the practice, which is then codified only in more recent times.

Biology and religion converge in a third further aspect of fasting, as a technique of ecstasy: the metabolic alterations that result from it also lead to psychic and emotional alterations, even to hallucinatory states that can still be seen today in many modern non-Western societies and that by analogy help to understand the forms of asceticism described in the Bible; fasting is one of the physiological tools for altering consciousness and, in a ritual context determined in this sense, establishing a dialogue with the deity: in other words, the initiate learns to symbolise the god with whom he communicates in a state of *trance*⁴⁶ brought about by fasting – exclusively through it or in addition to other ecstatic techniques.

⁴⁴ I. Herzfeld Cappelli, *Digiuno, Alcool, droghe e addestramento quali componenti principali delle cure mediante la trance e la possessione in alcune società tradizionali*, in: *Il cibo culturale: dal cibo alla cultura, dalla cultura al cibo*, ed. A. Guerci, Genoa 1999, p. 207.

⁴⁵ F. Matteini, *La non alimentazione: digiuno terapeutico e altre forme di rifiuto del cibo*, in: *Il cibo e il corpo: dal cibo alla cultura, dalla cultura al cibo*, ed. A. Guerci, Genoa 1999, p. 398-400.

⁴⁶ Herzfeld Cappelli, *Digiuno, Alcool, droghe e addestramento quali componenti principali delle cure mediante la trance e la possessione in alcune società tradizionali*, p. 211.

6. Conclusion

The reconstruction of a particular aspect of Saint John's life is determined both by literary factors, for which he continues to intrigue scholars of philology, and by popular knowledge, present in legends and rituals that fascinate anthropologists and researchers of religions and occupy a privileged place in the customs of the population. The Apocrypha and related episodes depicted in commentaries by later authors contribute with further information about moments of the Prophet's life to build the modern image of the Saint. The Baptist's cult represents an example of continuity with ancient customs for well-being, fasting and vegetarianism, and propitiatory rites, such as charivari, demonstrating the particular attention to a further reading – a 're-reading', in Latin '*re-legere*' – of the relations with the divine, characteristic which is strictly connected with the etymology of 'religion'.

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