

# John the Baptist’s “Wild Honey” and “Honey” in Antiquity

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The question to which type of honey an ancient author refers can be significant but oftentimes receives no attention in secondary literature. This article studies ancient perspectives on apiculture (beekeeping) and various kinds of “honey,” in order to ascertain the referent and significance attached to the “wild honey” that John the Baptist is said to eat in the New Testament gospels of Mark and Matthew. Mark 1:6c states that while in the wilderness “John was in the habit of eating locusts and wild honey” (ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης ... ἐσθίων ἀκρίδας καὶ μέλι ἄγριον), and Matt 3:4c makes a somewhat heightened claim that his provisions “consisted of” these foods (ἡ δὲ ἦν τροφή αὐτοῦ). The implications of this ascription for understanding the historical Baptist, as well as his presentation in Mark and Matthew, will be discussed.

## I. Defining “honey”

Unlike locusts/grasshoppers, which Mark 1:6c || Matt 3:4c also attribute to John’s diet, most Western and non-Western people today readily identify honey as a pleasing garnish. A word of caution concerning the possible meaning(s) of the Baptist’s “wild honey” is in order, however. By itself, μέλι, like the Hebrew מֶל or *mel* in Latin, can refer equally to honey produced by bees or to any number of other sweet substances, including dates, figs, pods, or sap/gum from carob or other trees.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, Eva Crane warns concerning possible

<sup>1</sup> E. Crane, “History of Honey,” in *Honey: A Comprehensive Survey* (London 1975) 439–488, at 453; S. Krauss, “Honig in Palästina,” *ZDPV* 32 (1909) 151–164; D. Simonsen, “Milch und Honig: (Eine Erwiderung),” *ZDPV* 33 (1910) 44–46; H. Hänsler, “Noch einmal ‘Honig im hl. Lande,’” *ZDPV* 35

references to bee honey in ancient civilizations: "Unless the context makes clear a connection with hives, bees, or honeycomb, caution is warranted" ("History" 453). It is therefore difficult to ascertain which sweet substance is designated as "honey" in certain ancient writings.<sup>2</sup> Yet most scholars do not even consider which type of honey the Baptist ate. Many others simply assume that he ate bee honey<sup>3</sup> or sweet tree sap (sometimes referred to as honey-water),<sup>4</sup> apparently unaware of the inherent ambiguity in almost any occurrence of μέλι without an accompanying reference to either bees or vegetation (trees).

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(1912) 186–199; L. H. Silberman, "Honig," in B. Reicke and L. Rost (eds.), *Biblisch-historisches Handwörterbuch: Landeskunde, Geschichte, Religion, Kultur, Literatur* II (Göttingen 1964) 747; M. Schuster, "Mel," *RE* 15 (1931) 364–384, esp. 364–366; LSJ s.v. μέλι.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Gen 43:11; Exod 16:31; Jer 41:8; Ezek 3:3; 16:13, 19; Pss 19:10; 119:103; Prov 5:3; 24:13; 25:16; 25:27; 27:7; Song 4:11; Ar. *Ach.* 1130; *Ep. Aristeia* 112; Philo *Det.* 115, 117, 118; 4Q372 f3:5; 4Q378 (4Qapocr Joshuaa) f11:6; 4Q386 (4QpsEzekb) 2:5; 11Q19 (11QTa) 60:9; Jos. *AJ* 2.118, 3.28, 14.124 = *Bj* 1.184; Rev 10:9.

<sup>3</sup> For example, H. Alford, *The Greek New Testament I*<sup>4</sup> (London 1859) 18: "there is no need to suppose any thing else meant but honey made by wild bees"; H. B. Swete, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*<sup>3</sup> (London 1913) 6; T. Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus*<sup>4</sup> (Leipzig 1922) 133; F. I. Andersen, "The Diet of John the Baptist," *AbrN* 3 (1961–62) 60–74, at 62–64; W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew I* (Edinburgh 1988) 296; C. S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids 1999) 119; Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids/London 1997) 34; J. H. Charlesworth, "John the Baptizer and Qumran Barriers in Light of the Rule of the Community," in D. W. Parry and E. Ulrich (eds.), *The Provo International Conference on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Leiden 1999) 353–375, at 367–368. Additionally, *BDAG* discusses both possibilities under the entry for ἄγριος, but not in the entry for μέλι.

<sup>4</sup> This view is notably less common in the secondary literature. For John's honey as sweet tree sap see e.g. H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew*<sup>6</sup> (New York/London 1884) 76–77; B. Weiss, *A Commentary on the New Testament*<sup>8</sup> I (New York 1906) 13; Otto Böcher, "Ass Johannes der Täufer kein Brot (Luk. vii. 33)?" *NTS* 18 (1971–72) 90–92; R. A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26* (Dallas 1989) 21; M. Tilly, *Johannes der Täufer und die Biographie der Propheten: Die synoptische Täuferüberlieferung und das jüdische Prophetenbild zur Zeit des Täufers* (Stuttgart 1994) 38.

In Mark 1:6c || Matt 3:4c, the adjective ἄγριον distinguishes the μέλι that John the Baptist ate from other types of μέλι.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the Baptist is portrayed as eating some kind of honey that humans did not cultivate. As we shall see, in antiquity honey from bees was not the only sweet substance that lent itself to the designation “wild.” It is conceivable, for example, that the original, or at least an earlier, form of this characterization of the Baptist may have been intended to denote honey from bees, which could in turn have been construed as a different sweet substance by Mark, Matthew, or a later recipient of this gospel material. Of course, the opposite scenario is equally plausible. Given the ambiguity inherent in eating (ἐσθίω, Mark 1:6c) or designating as a food (τροφή, Matt 3:4c) “wild honey,” this paper will consider ancient materials pertinent to bee honey, as well as other sweet substances designated ψᾶν, μέλι, or *mel*.

## II. “Honey” produced by bees

The cultivation of bee honey can be documented as early as the 26th or 25th century B.C. A scene from the Sun Temple of Ny-woser-Re at Abusir depicts beekeeping in Middle Egypt.<sup>6</sup> In Egypt the practice continued through the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, and beyond.<sup>7</sup> The earliest written references to honey from bees stem from Nippur southeast of Babylon, ca. 2100–2000 B.C. In Mesopotamia beekeeping had become a practice by the eighth century.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> So W. Michaelis, “μέλι,” in Kittel, *Theol.Dict.N.T.* IV 553–554: “ἄγριον rules out both the honey from beekeeping and fruit honey which comes from human labour.”

<sup>6</sup> H. Chouliara-Raïos, *L’Abeille et le miel en Égypte d’après les papyrus grecs* (Ioannina 1989) 19–31; E. Neufeld, “Apiculture in Ancient Palestine (Early and Middle Iron Age) within the Framework of the Ancient Near East,” *UF* 10 (1978) 219–247, at 232–233; G. Kuény, “Scènes apicoles dans l’ancienne Égypte,” *JNES* 9 (1950) 84–93; H. Malcolm Fraser, *Beekeeping in Antiquity*<sup>2</sup> (London 1951) 2–5.

<sup>7</sup> Chouliara-Raïos, *L’Abeille* 65–95.

<sup>8</sup> Crane, “History” 454; cf. 439–453 on the uses of bee honey in pre-historic times; Crane, *Archaeology of Beekeeping* (Ithaca 1983) 19–39; A. Mayor,

Centuries later, Aristotle would write at some length about the habits of bees, and his references to the practices and testimonies of bee keepers suggest more than a casual acquaintance with those who practiced this trade.<sup>9</sup> Aristotle and many other Greco-Roman authors recognize that the quality of honey was dependent upon the amount of rainfall and the species of flowers extant in different regions and seasons.<sup>10</sup> It may come as no surprise, however, that Aristotle and other Greco-Roman writers and writings, such as Varro, Columella, the Elder Pliny, Palladius, and the *Geoponica*, offer copious advice concerning apiculture but have little, if anything, to say about "wild" honeys.<sup>11</sup>

*Bee honey in the Hebrew Bible and Palestine*

In contrast to the aforementioned witnesses to beekeeping, the Jewish scriptures contain no reference to the domestication of bees, and there is no evidence for this practice in Palestine prior to the late Hellenistic period.<sup>12</sup> Scholars have therefore sought to clarify whether the Hebrew Bible's many references to "a land flowing with milk and 'honey'" designate a sweet

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"Mad Honey! Bees and the Baneful Rhododendron," *Archaeology* 48.6 (1995) 32–40, esp. 33, 38. Beekeeping: Neufeld, *UF* 10 (1978) 238–239.

<sup>9</sup> Arist. *HA* 533b, 623b, 626a–b, 627b; *GA* 760a; cf. [Arist.] *Mir. ausc.* 831b–832a; Fraser, *Beekeeping* 13–28.

<sup>10</sup> *HA* 533b, 554b, 626b–627a; *GA* 760b; Cato *Rust.* 76 (on "good honey" [*mellis boni*] as part of a recipe); Varro *Rust.* 3.16.13–14, 26–28; Plin. *HN* 11.32–33; Columella *Rust.* 9.4.7; Apul. *Met.* 1.5; Ael. *NA* 5.42; Palladius *De vet. med.* 2.18, 3.27, 7.11, 11.14; *Geoponica* 15.7 (10th cent.?): cf. Andrew Dalby, *Siren Feasts: A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece* (London/New York 1996) 65, 136, 208–209, 250.

<sup>11</sup> See Varro *Rust.* 3.16.2–38; Columella *Rust.* 9.2–16; Pliny *HN* 11.11–70; Palladius *De vet. med.* 5.7, 6.8, 7.7, 11.13, 12.8; *Geoponica* 15.2–9. Likewise, Aelian's work on the characteristics of animals understandably has more to say about bees than their honey (*NA* 1.9–11, 1.59–60, 2.53, 2.57, 5.10–13, 5.42, 11.37, 17.35; cf. Cato, *Rust.* 76–84).

<sup>12</sup> As Neufeld, *UF* 10 (1978) 219–225, 240–247, argues, answering attempts to demonstrate this practice in the Hebrew Bible. See further R. J. Israel, "The Promised Land of Milk and Date Jam: The Problems of Bees and Honey in the Bible and the Talmud," *National Jewish Monthly* (Washington) 87.3 (1972) 26–30, at 26; E. Firmage, in *Anchor Bible Dict.* VI 1150.

substance derived from trees (dates, figs, or sweet tree sap) or honey produced by bees.<sup>13</sup>

At any rate, at the time of John the Baptist almost all bee honey in Palestine would have been uncultivated. For a Palestinian audience, then, calling the Baptist's honey "wild" (ἄγριον) could constitute a tautology. It is thus possible that μέλι ἄγριον in Mark 1:6c || Matt 3:4c either does not refer to bee honey, or was composed for a non-Palestinian audience or by a non-Palestinian author who would not have known about the relative lack of apiculture in Palestine.

#### *Bee honey at Qumran*

The Damascus Document<sup>a</sup> (Zadokite Fragment) attests the practice of eating roasted or boiled locusts/grasshoppers at Qumran.<sup>14</sup> James H. Charlesworth's argument that the similarities to the Baptist's diet illustrate that John ate like a former Essene is not credible, however, since neither locusts/grasshoppers nor honey are distinctive foods.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, CD 12:12 in fact forbids eating the bees' larvae, not the honey they produce. These objections to Charlesworth's thesis notwithstanding, the proscription against consuming the larvae of bees in CD 12:12 presupposes that some members of this community have sufficient contact with bees to have opportunity to

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Exod 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Deut 6:3; 11:9; 26:9; 26:15; 31:20; Josh 5:6; Ezek 20:6, 15; Sir 46:8; Jub. 1.7. Cf. Israel, *National Jewish Monthly* 87.3 (1972) 27: "In *Ezek. 27:17* we have a whole list of fruit syrups—one of them is honey ... What the land was really flowing with was milk and date jam"; R. Blum, "Imkeri im alten Israel," *Bienenvater* 76 (1955) 334–336; Crane, "History" 457.

<sup>14</sup> CD 12:11b–15a: "[11b] No-one should defile his soul [12] with any living being or one which creeps, by eating them, from the larvae of bees to every living [13] being (מעגלי הדבורים עד כל נפש החיה) which creeps in water. And fish: they should not eat them unless they have been opened up [14] alive, and the [ir blood poured] away. And all the locusts, according to their kind, shall be put into the fire or into water [15] while [they are] still alive, as this is the regulation for their species"; Heb. and transl. (modified) F. García Martínez and E. J. C. Tigchelaar (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls, Study Edition* (Leiden 1998) 570–571.

<sup>15</sup> Charlesworth, in *Provo* 367–368.

eat them. Those same Jews who should refrain from eating bees would presumably have chances to partake of bee honey, which the Damascus Document does not proscribe.

Moreover, *Hypothetica* 11.8, which Eusebius of Caesarea attributes to Philo of Alexandria, makes explicit such a characterization of the Essenes: "Some of them labor on the land skilled in sowing and planting, some as herdsmen taking charge of every kind of cattle and some superintend the swarms of bees (ἔνιοι δὲ σμήνη μελιττῶν ἐπιτροπέουσιν)."<sup>16</sup> This would represent a difference between the Baptist and the Essenes, since John is said to eat wild honey, not cultivated honey.

#### *Honeys in Josephus and the Mishnah*

Compared with the Hebrew Bible, the Mishnah offers greater specificity concerning kinds of honey, although the same ambiguity remains in several passages.<sup>17</sup> The Mishnah contains references to honeys from both bees<sup>18</sup> and dates.<sup>19</sup> In *Nedarim* 6, date honey seems to be less precious than both dates and another form of honey:

[8] He who takes a vow not to eat dates (מןֹ החמרים) is permitted to have date honey (בדבש חמרים). [He who takes a vow not to eat] winter grapes is permitted to have the vinegar made from winter grapes ... [9] He who takes a vow not to have wine is permitted to have apple wine. [He who takes a vow not to have] oil is permitted to have sesame oil. He who takes a vow not

<sup>16</sup> Euseb. *Praep. Evang.* 8.11.8; text and transl. F. H. Colson et al., *Philo* (Loeb) IX 440–441. The whole of this fragment describes the habits of the Essenes.

<sup>17</sup> Mishnaic references to "honey" without specification: *m. Ma'as.* § 2:1, 5:13; *m. Hal.* 1:4; *m. Bik.* 1:10; *m. Šabb.* 8:1, 12:5, 22:1; *m. Qidd.* 2:2; *m. B. Qam.* 10:4; *m. Šebu.* 3:3; *m. Tehar.* 3:2; *m. Makš.* 5:9; cf. *m. Sotah* 9:12 (honey of "supim").

<sup>18</sup> *M. Šb.* 10:7; *m. 'Abod. Zar.* 2:7; *m. Ned.* 6:9; *m. Makš.* 6:4 (honey from bees and honey from hornets); *m. 'Uq.* 3:10.

<sup>19</sup> *M. Ter.* 11:2–3; *m. Bik.* 1:3, 3:9; *m. Ned.* 6:8–9.

to have honey (מן הדבש) is permitted to have date honey (בדבש חמרים).<sup>20</sup>

In *Ned.* 6:9 the other honey mentioned apparently stems from bees. If this is correct, a vow to abstain from bee honey would not be broken by partaking of date honey.

The greater esteem given to bee honey suggested in the Mishnah corresponds to an earlier testimony of Josephus:

Of the date-palms watered by it [a nearby spring] there are numerous varieties differing in flavor and in medicinal properties; the richer species of this fruit when pressed under foot emit copious honey, not much inferior to that of bees. And so the region is abundant in honey (μέλι δαψιλές ἀνιᾶσιν οὐ πολλῶ τοῦ λοιποῦ χεῖρον. καὶ μελιττοτρόφος δ' ἡ χώρα).<sup>21</sup>

Josephus describes dates and bees, and thus the honey associated with each, as plentiful near Jericho. These two witnesses attest a hierarchy among honeys: bee honey is more highly esteemed than date honey.

*The potential dangers of consuming “wild honey”*

An advantage of consuming cultivated honey is that the eater can anticipate the relative quality (or lack thereof) of what he or she is about to enjoy. Conversely, partaking of wild honey could be dangerous, if the bees were to make honey with pollen from poisonous flowers.<sup>22</sup> Xenophon, Ps.-Aristotle, Strabo, and Pliny demonstrate that the dangers of eating such “maddening honey” were well known in antiquity.

<sup>20</sup> *Ned.* 6:8–9. Translations of the *Mishnah* are from J. Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven 1988); Hebrew: C. Albek, *Shishah Sidrei Mishnah* (Jerusalem/Tel Aviv 1952–59).

<sup>21</sup> *Jos.* *Bḥ* 4.468; transl. (modified) Thackeray (Loeb).

<sup>22</sup> For this phenomenon, both in antiquity and among the pre-Columbian Yucatecan Mayans in South America: J. Ott, “The Delphic Bee: Bees and Toxic Honeys as Pointers to Psychoactive and Other Medicinal Plants,” *Economic Botany* 52 (1998) 260–266. For a more popular treatment of the subject see Mayor, *Archaeology* 48.6 (1995).

Xenophon describes the infamous "Retreat of the Ten Thousand" that followed the death of Cyrus the Younger in 401 B.C. In the vicinity of Trapezus in Asia Minor, the soldiers who ate the local bee honey subsequently displayed symptoms like inebriation and madness, as well as vomiting and diarrhea. Mercifully, no one died from eating the honey, and the ailments dissipated within three or four days (4.8.20–21). Moreover, the collection of tidbits attributed to Aristotle, *On Marvelous Things Heard*, likewise attests such dangerous honey in Asia Minor: "At Trapezus in Pontus honey from boxwood has a strong scent (τὸ ἀπὸ τῆς πύξου μέλι βαρύοσμον); and they say that healthy people go mad (ἐξιστάναι), but that epileptics are cured by it immediately."<sup>23</sup>

Strabo describes the *intentional* drugging of foreign troops with "wild honey." The Heptacometae once inflicted heavy losses on Pompey's army (67 B.C.):

For they mixed bowls of the crazing honey that the branches of trees carry (κρατήρας ... τοῦ μαινομένου μέλιτος, ὃ φέρουσιν οἱ ἀκρεμόνες τῶν δένδρων), and placed them in the roads. Then when the soldiers drank the mixture and lost their senses, they attacked them and easily disposed of them (12.3.18, transl. Jones [Loeb], modified).

It is uncertain whether this "honey" is the production of wild bees or amounts to the trees' own sap.<sup>24</sup>

The Elder Pliny also discusses such maddening honey in Asia Minor, as well as the drawbacks of eating "wild honey." Of the former: "At Heracleia in Pontus the honey turns out in certain years very deadly (*perniciosissima*), and this from the same bees" that are known to produce harmless honey in other years.<sup>25</sup> A

<sup>23</sup> [Arist.] *Mir. ausc.* 831b, transl. Hett (Loeb). Cf. Ael. *NA* 5.42, who seems to paraphrase this passage.

<sup>24</sup> There is no such ambiguity, however, when Strabo paraphrases Aristobulus' description of a tree in India whose pods are "full of honey" (πλήρεις μέλιτος, 15.1.21); cf. 15.1.20, 16.1.14.

<sup>25</sup> *HN* 21.74 (transl. Jones [Loeb]). Pliny further notes concerning this honey: "The signs of poison (*venenati signa*) [in the honey] are that it does not



different type of bee honey, also from Pontus, is consistently deleterious:

There is another kind of honey ... among the people called Sanni, which from the madness it produces is called maenomenon (*mellis quod ab insania quam gignit maenomenon vocant*). This poison is supposed to be extracted from the flowers of the oleanthers (*flore rhododendri*) which abound in the woods. Although these people supply the Romans with wax by way of tribute, they do not sell the honey, because it is deadly (*exitialē*).<sup>26</sup>

According to Pliny, poisoned honeycombs exist also in Persis and Gaetulia. Perhaps from observing the effects of this honey on cattle (21.75), or on humans, the Greeks themselves apparently called this honey “maddening.”

Elsewhere in his *Natural History* Pliny expresses preferences concerning the quality of assorted types of honey.<sup>27</sup> He classifies different kinds of honey according to the time of year they are produced, whether spring (11.34–35), summer (36–37), or fall (41–45). He considers spring honey the most desirable and, moreover, disparages “wild honey” produced in the fall:

A third, very little valued, and “wild” kind of honey (*tertium genus mellis minime probatum silvestre*), which is called heath honey, is collected after the first autumn rains, when only the heath is in bloom in the woods (*in silvis*), and consequently it resembles sandy honey (*ob id harenoso simile*).<sup>28</sup>

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thicken at all, its color is mostly red, its smell is strange and at once causes sneezing, and it is heavier than harmless honey” (75).

<sup>26</sup> *HN* 21.77; cf. Mayor, *Archaeology* 48.6 (1995), esp. 33–37.

<sup>27</sup> *HN* 11.32: “It is always of the best quality where it is stored (*ubi ... conditur*) in the calyces of the best flowers. This takes place at Hymettus and Hybla in the region of Attica and of Sicily ... and also on the island of Calydna.”

<sup>28</sup> *HN* 11.15.41. Arist. *HA* 626b describes spring and autumn as the seasons for making honey and likewise states that “the spring honey is sweeter and paler and in general better than the autumn honey.”

In this context, the adjective *silvestris* can designate either honey found “in the woods” or “undomesticated” honey. Pliny should not, however, be accused of bias against all things grown in the wild. At *HN* 20.92, he praises the quality of wild cabbage. Although Jerome would later refer to the Baptist’s honey thus (*silvestris melle: Adv.Iovin.* 2.15 [*PL* 23.323]), Pliny does not provide an exact parallel to the Baptist’s wilderness honey, since he mentions also the blooming of the heath “in the woods,” not the desert.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, Columella, a contemporary of Pliny, also underscores the dubious value of such honey: “The honey which is considered of the poorest quality is the woodland honey (*ex sordidis deterrimae notae mel habetur nemorensis*), which comes from dirty feeding grounds and is produced from broom-trees and strawberry-trees.”<sup>30</sup> Pliny and Columella therefore highlight the undesirability of eating honey whose taste is limited by (pollen from) a single species of plant. Whatever bee honey may have existed in John’s wilderness would probably also have been exposed to a limited variety of vegetation.

With regard to the historical Baptist, one should not infer that his “wild honey” was drugged, as there is no evidence that such honey existed in Palestine. Xenophon and Strabo relate the experiences of soldiers—especially the inability to travel or fight—that almost anyone would not choose to repeat. Nonetheless, these descriptions of Xenophon, Ps.-Aristotle, Strabo, the Elder Pliny, and Columella are valuable for showing how this gospel material could have been construed by those aware of such accounts. For such an audience, eating “wild honey” could be added to the long list of occupational hazards associated with John’s prophetic calling and wilderness habitation.

*Is bee honey a food?*

The preceding examination of wild bee honey in antiquity merits consideration in light of a comment of Andrew Dalby: “Honey is to humans essentially a relish, a flavouring agent and

<sup>29</sup> In *HN* 11.15.42 he also mentions harvesting only one-third of this honey, so the bees can eat the rest during the winter months.

<sup>30</sup> Columella *Rust.* 9.4.7 (transl. Forster and Heffner, Loeb).

a preserving agent; it is never common enough to be a dietary staple.” Of course, consuming too much of any sweet substance, including honey, can make a person sick. If correct, Dalby’s characterization could mean the following for Mark 1:6c || Matt 3:4c:

1. Mark 1:6c (ἦν ... ἐσθίων) is not primarily about what John ate but where he ate his locusts/grasshoppers and “wild honey.” Mark’s claim is plausible historically and connects John with the desert, where things grow “in the wild” rather than by human cultivation.
2. Matt 3:4c (ἡ δὲ τροφή ἦν αὐτοῦ) is not realistic in that it exaggerates the amount of bee honey that would have existed in the wilderness.
3. At least in Matt 3:4c, μέλι does not refer to bee honey at all. Moreover, no Greek audience would have associated the Baptist’s μέλι with honey from bees, because uncultivated bee honey was not available in such quantities, whether in Palestine or elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Our examination of “wild honey” in antiquity will remain in dialogue with these possible implications of Dalby’s thesis. If nothing else, his point highlights the importance of considering what other types of μέλι an ancient audience could have construed as the Baptist’s wilderness food.

### III. “Honey” derived from trees

Given the ambiguity of “honey” in Mark 1 and Matthew 3—since these passages do not also mention bees, tree gum/sap, dates, or figs—we must consider other substances that were also referred to as “honey” in antiquity.

#### *“Wild honey” as a plentiful and pleasing beverage*

Diodorus’ account of wild honey collected from trees is our most detailed, and it offers a striking parallel to Mark 1:6c || Matt 3:4c. In describing “the customs of the Arabs” (τὰ νόμιμα τῶν Ἀράβων), Diodorus notes the proximity to the wilderness (ἔρημος) of certain Arab peoples (19.94.1–4), especially the Nabataeans:

While there are many Arabian tribes who use the desert as pasture (οὐκ ὀλίγων δ' ὄντων Ἀραβικῶν ἔθνῶν τῶν τὴν ἔρημον ἐπινεμόντων), the Nabataeans far surpass the others in wealth ... [The Nabataeans] are exceptionally fond of freedom; and, whenever a strong force of enemies comes near, they take refuge in the desert (φεύγουσιν εἰς τὴν ἔρημον), using this as a fortress (19.94.4, 6).

Diodorus next mentions how the Nabataeans and their flocks survive in the desert with little water (19.94.6–9), and then gives the following detail about their wilderness food (10):

They themselves use as food (χρῶνται τροφῇ) flesh and milk and those of the plants that grow from the ground which are suitable for this purpose; for among them there grow the pepper and plenty of the so-called wild honey from trees, which they use as a drink mixed with water (φύεται ... ἀπὸ τῶν δένδρων μέλι πολὺ τὸ καλούμενον ἄγριον ᾧ χρῶνται ποτῶ μεθ' ὕδατος).

The Elder Pliny complements Diodorus' testimony that such a beverage was plentiful in Syria-Palestine (15.32):

There is an oil that grows of its own accord (*sponte nascitur*) in the coastal parts of Syria called *elaomeli* [= ἔλαιον + μέλι]. It is a rich oil that trickles from trees (*ex arboribus*), of a substance thicker than honey but thinner than resin, and having a sweet flavor; this is also used by the doctors.

Without a doubt, Diodorus offers a close literary parallel to the Baptist's μέλι ἄγριον in the wilderness (ἔρημος). This does not ipso facto prove that the referent in Mark 1:6c || Matt 3:4c is honey-water. In order to assess this possibility, other depictions of honey-water merit attention.

*Early witnesses to "honey" as tree sap*

In the *Timaeus* Plato describes assorted kinds of water (ὕδωρ) "strained through earth-grown plants and called 'sap.'"<sup>31</sup> He

<sup>31</sup> *Ti.* 59E, διὰ τῶν ἐκ γῆς φυτῶν ἠθημένα, χυμοὶ λεγόμενοι (transl. Bury [Loeb]).

uses the term μέλι for one kind of sap, which is inclusive of all sweet saps (60B): “And all that kind which tends to expand the contracted parts of the mouth, so far as their nature allows, and by this property produces sweetness (γλυκύτητα παρεχόμενον), has received as a general designation the name of ‘honey’ (μέλι).” Theophrastus follows Plato in naming honey (μέλι) among the types of sap or juice (ἐν χυμοῖς) given off by plants.<sup>32</sup>

Collectively, the witnesses of Plato, Theophrastus, Diodorus, and others demonstrate that “wild honey” in Mark 1:6c || Matt 3:4c could have been intended, or interpreted, as honey-water derived from trees. Even if such “honey” is not familiar to many Western interpreters, its prevalence among diverse cultures in the ancient Mediterranean world, and beyond, merits serious consideration. It does not necessarily follow that the historical Baptist drank honey-water, let alone as a parabolic act complementing his message of repentance and imminent eschatological fulfillment. Like others in Syria-Palestine, the Baptist may simply have drunk what was plentiful in the wilderness (cf. Diod. 19.94.10). Nonetheless, given the symbolic character of John’s dress, in apparent imitation of the prophet Elijah (cf. 2 Kgs 1:8, LXX), such an understanding—whether for the historical John, John’s followers, or certain early Christians—cannot be excluded.

#### IV. Conclusion: John the Baptist’s “wild honey”

It is not possible to state with certainty to what type of “honey” Mark 1:6c or Matt 3:4c refers, since neither author specifies either bees or honey as a sweet product of trees (for example, dates, figs, or sap/gum). The findings of this paper have implications for other ancient references to “honey” and can be instructive for recognizing misunderstandings, or even incorrect translations, of ancient texts.

Despite the ambiguity in Mark 1:6c || Matt 3:4c concerning what sweet substance John consumed, the meaning of his “wild honey” is readily ascertained from descriptions of various types

<sup>32</sup> Theophr. *Sens.* 84. See further *Ep. Aristeia* 112; Verg. *Ecl.* 4.29–30, *Georg.* 1.31; *Or. Sib.* 3.741–746, 5.281–283; 2 *En.* 8.5–6 (J); Ael. *NA* 15.7; Gal. *De alim. fac.* 3.39 (VI 739–742 K.).

of uncultivated "honey" in antiquity: the honey that John found in the wilderness was not as pleasing or highly esteemed as other types of honey. The Elder Pliny likens autumn "wild honey" from the forest to "sandy honey."<sup>33</sup> Xenophon, Ps. Aristotle, Strabo, and Pliny even report that not knowing the source of the honey one eats could be dangerous, if not fatal, if the bees interact (that is, pollinate) with poisonous plants. Thus at least in Mark 1:6c, the reference to John's honey has more to do with where John was rather than what he ate: the Baptist ate such honey because it was abundant in the desert, even if he perhaps could have enjoyed better "honey" elsewhere. This conclusion complements the depiction of John as a locust-eater in Mark 1:6c || Matt 3:4c, since locusts, especially in their "gregarious" phase, tend to congregate in the wilderness. John's food is simply a reflection of what was plentiful in his midst: insects and uncultivated honey. The author of the Gospel of Mark mentions the Baptist's food precisely for this reason, to emphasize John as the prophetic herald "crying out in the wilderness" (Mark 1:3, citing Isa 40:3).

Concerning what kind of honey is presented as being eaten, the possibility of the Baptist's "wild honey" as honey-water derived from the gum or sap of trees is inviting<sup>34</sup>—but by no means certain—for two reasons. First, apiculture had come to Palestine only in the late Hellenistic period, centuries later than to Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece. Second, a plethora of witnesses to honey-water demonstrate that this beverage was both common and well known.<sup>35</sup> Even if modern interpreters may not regard the produce of trees as "honey," the ancients certainly did. Indeed, Diodorus' description (19.94) of the Nabataeans, who survive with their flocks in the desert (ἔρημος) on "honey" from trees mixed with water, provides the closest

<sup>33</sup> *HN* 11.41; cf. Jos. *B $\bar{J}$*  4.468; *m. Ned.* 6:8–9.

<sup>34</sup> However tentatively, with Meyer, *Matthew* 76–77; Weiss, *Matthew-Mark* 13; Böcher, *NTS* 18 (1971–72) 91–92; Guelich, *Mark* 21; Tilly, *Johannes* 38.

<sup>35</sup> See n.32.

extant literary analogy to μέλι ἄγριον in Mark 1:6c || Matt 3:4c.<sup>36</sup>

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