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

JAMES A. KELHOFFER
Saint Louis University

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

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

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

No-one should defile his soul ¹²with any living being or one which creeps, by eating them, from the larvae of bees to every living ¹³being (מעלי הדבורים עד) (כל נפש הרהיה) which creeps in water. And fish: they should not eat them unless they have been opened up ¹⁴alive, and the[ir blood poured] away. And all the locusts (וכל ההגבים), according to their kind (במיניהם), shall be put into the fire or into water ¹⁵while [they are] still alive, as this is the regulation for their species.²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A second questionable aspect of this scholar's interpretation of Mark 1:6c//Matt. 3:4c concerns the adjective ἄγριον (neuter, singular), which in both Mark 1:6c and Matt. 3:4c must modify μέλι (neuter, singular), not ἀκρίδες (feminine, plural). It is therefore inaccurate to refer to John's diet as "honey and wild locusts."⁵

II. *The Damascus Document and Qumran Cuisine*

In addition to misconstruing Mark 1:6c//Matt. 3:4c, Charlesworth finds a reference to bee honey where it is not present in the Damascus Document. In CD 12:11b–15a, the larvae of bees are mentioned only as a negative example of what *not* to eat (12:12b). The passage does not state that the Essenes ate honey. CD 12:11b–15 mentions only two foods, fish and locusts. Moreover, if John, who baptized in the Jordan River (!), did indeed eat like a former Essene, it is surprising not to find a reference to fish in Mark 1:6c//Matt. 3:4c (or elsewhere).

CD 12:11b–15a makes the rather unremarkable stipulations that blood be drained from the fish and that the locusts be roasted or boiled, presumably to facilitate the removal of the insects' legs and wings. As compared with the Damascus Document, conspicuously absent in Mark 1 and Matthew 3 is an attempt to show that John the Baptist ate locusts/grasshoppers in accordance with some interpretation of kashrut. Therefore, rather than the similarities, the *differences* between CD 12:11b–15 and Mark 1:6c//Matt. 3:4c are more noteworthy.

III. *From Leviticus to Maimonides: Locust-Eating in Jewish Literature*

I have thus far observed that the main similarity between John's diet and the Damascus Document concerns locust-eating. These two witnesses to the eating of a particular food merit attention not primarily in relation to one another (although the complementary synchronic testimonies are interesting), but in view of the common practice of locust-eating in the ANE. This study, to be offered in the remainder of this article, dismisses Charlesworth's implicit assumption that locusts were a distinctive food and could thus support other links

⁵ "Wild locusts" (in contrast to domesticated locusts?) would be redundant.

between a particular locust-eating individual (John) and another group (the Essenes), of which at least certain members ate locusts. This inquiry will also shed light on a small but routine aspect of some (but not necessarily all) Essenes' and the Baptist's life.

Overview of HB and Jewish Writings of the Second Temple and Roman Periods

Most passages in Hebrew scripture and second temple Jewish literature that mention locusts are concerned with what these insects devour. For example, the Lord who sent a plague of locusts against the Egyptians⁶ could also send them against the covenant people.⁷ The prophet Malachi offers a corollary to this affliction by way of the Lord's promise to remove the locust from the covenant people: "I will rebuke the locust for you (וַיְנַעֲרֵהוּ לָכֶם בְּאַכְלֵהוּ), so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the LORD of hosts."⁸

Numerous other ancient Jewish authors refer to locusts metaphorically, to highlight the size of a crowd,⁹ frighteningly rapid movement,¹⁰ or the shortness of life.¹¹ Likewise, the prophet Nahum finds a threefold metaphor in the ability of locusts to devour, multiply and shed their "skin."¹² Perhaps the only positive reference to locusts in

⁶ E.g., Exod. 10:3–20; Wis. 16:8–9; Jub. 48:5; Ezek. Trag. 144–6 (*apud* Cornelius Alexander Polyhistor [flour. ca. 49 B.C.E.], *apud* Euseb., *Praep. evang.* 9.28–29); Artapanus (*apud* Alexander Polyhistor *apud* Euseb., *Praep. evang.* 9.27.32); Philo, *De vita Mos.* 1.121, 122, 126; cf. 1.145; Jos., *Ant.* 2.306.1 (on Exodus 10); R. Hendel, "The Exodus in Biblical Memory," *JBL* 120 (2001) 601–22, esp. 610 on the 8th c. B.C.E. curse involving hail and locusts in Sefire I.25–28.

⁷ Deut. 28:38; 1 Kgs. 8:37 = 2 Chr. 6:28; 2 Chr. 7:13; Pss. 78:46; 105:34; Joel 1:4; 2:25; Amos 4:9; 7:1; Philo, *Praem.* 128.3 (alluding to Deut. 28:38).

⁸ Mal. 3:11; cf. Homer, *Od.* 4.287–8; Cyranides 3.33.9–12; Diod. Sic., *Hist.* 1.87.6; Aristonicus Alex., *De sig. Od.* 4.285–289; Strabo, *Geog.* 13.1.64.

⁹ Judg. 6:5: The enemy came with "their tents, as thick as locusts." Cf. Judg. 7:12; Jer. 46:23; 51:14, 27; Judith 2:20.

¹⁰ A horse leaps like a locust (Job 39:20; the context in vv. 19–25 suggests that the horse should thus be feared); Isa. 33:4: "Spoil was gathered as the caterpillar gathers; as locusts leap, they leaped upon it." So also Sir. 43:17, referring to the snow: "its descent is like locusts alighting." Cf. Rev. 9:1–11; Herm. *Vis.* 4.1.6.

¹¹ In Psalm 109, an individual Psalm of lament, the petitioner complains, "I am gone like a shadow at evening; I am shaken off like a locust" (109:23). Similarly, 2 Esdr. 4:24 observes, "We pass from the world like locusts, and our life is like a mist, and we are not worthy to obtain mercy." Cf. *m. Pesah.* 3:5 ("like the horns of a locust").

¹² Nah. 3:15–17: "There the fire will devour you, the sword will cut you off. It will devour you like the locust. Multiply yourselves like the locust, multiply like the

the HB—notably, in their “gregarious” phase—is the admiration conferred in Proverbs for their ability to organize without a recognizable leader.¹³

With regard to the eating of locusts/grasshoppers, Leviticus 11 allows the consumption of four different kinds of ‘leaping’ insects:

All winged insects that walk upon all fours are detestable to you. ²¹But among the winged insects that walk on all fours you may eat those that have jointed legs above their feet, with which to leap on the ground. ²²Of them you may eat: the locust (אַרְבֵּה) according to its kind, the bald locust ([?] Heb: סַלְעָם) according to its kind, the cricket ([?] Heb: חֲרִנֵּל) according to its kind, and the grasshopper (חָנֹב) according to its kind. ²³But all other winged insects that have four feet are detestable to you. (Lev. 11:20–23, NRSV)

Attention will be given to this passage in the following section.

In addition to Leviticus 11, the other part of the HB reflecting different terms for locusts is the prophet Joel, who mentions four: the cutting locust (הַנּוֹם), swarming locust (הַאֲרֵבָה), hopping locust (הַדִּילֵק) and destroying locust (הַהַסִּיל, Joel 1:4). When this prophet later uses the same four designations, נֹם occurs last rather than first in the list of assailants (הַנּוֹם וְהַדִּילֵק וְהַהַסִּיל וְהַאֲרֵבָה, Joel 2:25). In Joel, these terms could designate distinct species of locusts, or different phases of the Desert Locust (*schistocerca gregaria*). Joel either uses the swarming locusts as a metaphor for attacking (human) combatants¹⁴ or, more

grasshopper! You increased your merchants more than the stars of the heavens. The locust sheds its skin and flies away. Your guards are like grasshoppers, your scribes like swarms of locusts settling on the fences on a cold day—when the sun rises, they fly away; no one knows where they have gone.”

¹³ Prov. 30:24, 27: “Four things on earth are small, yet they are exceedingly wise: . . . the locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank.” Cf. D. Daube, “A Quartet of Beasties in the Book of Proverbs,” *JTS* n.s. 36 (1985) 380–6, esp. 383–5.

¹⁴ This interpretation is sometimes based on the mistaken assumption that locusts would never enter Palestine *from the north*, i.e., from Assyria. See, e.g., P.R. Andriach, “The Locusts in the Message of Joel,” *VT* 42 (1992) 433–41, who argues that the locusts in Joel are not actual locusts, because Joel 2:20 refers to a “northerner,” and in Palestine “locusts always come from the desert areas of the south” (433). Additionally, H. Brodsky, “‘An Enormous Horde Arrayed for Battle’: Locusts in the Book of Joel,” *Bible Review* 6 (1990) 32–39, states erroneously, “The desert locust migrates back and forth, around North Africa and the Near East, from about 5° to about 35° north of the equator. (Israel is the northernmost extension of the locusts’ range.)” (34), although he maintains that Joel refers to actual locusts (33–4). See Lucy W. Clausen, *Insect: Fact and Folklore* (New York: Macmillan, 1954) 57–58, on migrations of ‘gregarious’ locusts from Africa as far north as England and even to North America. It thus follows that locusts could enter Assyria first and then subsequently into Palestine.

probably, describes an actual plague of locusts in terms of an invading army.¹⁵

The Prescription in Leviticus 11

As the only part of Hebrew scripture to mention locust/grasshopper-eating, the aforementioned passage in Leviticus 11 merits additional consideration. The section devoted to food laws in Lev. 11:9–42 offers instructions concerning creatures that inhabit the water (11:9–12), the air (11:13–23) and the land (11:24–42). The second part, Lev. 11:13–23, is concerned with birds (vv. 13–19) and four (types of?) insects.¹⁶

Scholars are well aware of the difficulty of ascertaining which four insects are prescribed in Lev. 11:22.¹⁷ In v. 22a, אַרְבֵּי is a generic

¹⁵ V.A. Hurowitz, “Joel’s Locust Plague in Light of Sargon II’s Hymn to Nanaya,” *JBL* 112 (1993) 597–603, cites an 8th c. B.C.E. Sumerian (Assyrian) prayer to the goddess Nanaya asking that “the evil locust which destroys the crop/grain . . . be turned into nothing” (597–8; cf. Joel 2:18–27). Hurowitz notes, “nearly every detail in this passage has either general or quite specific parallels in Joel’s description of the locusts afflicting Judah” (599). For additional references to locust infestations, see, e.g., Philo, *Praem.* 128.3 (alluding to Deut. 28:38); Jos., *Ant.* 2.306.1; *B.J.* 4.536; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 11.35.104–6; S. Krauss, “Zur Kenntnis der Heuschrecken in Palästina,” *ZDPV* 50 (1927) 244–49, esp. 248–49; J.D. Whiting, “Jerusalem’s Locust Plague: Being a Description of the Recent Locust Influx into Palestine, and Comparing Same with Ancient Locust Invasions as Narrated in the Old World’s History Book, the Bible,” *The National Geographic Magazine* 28/6 (1915) 511–50; F.S. Bodenheimer, “Note on Invasions of Palestine by Rare Locusts,” *IEJ* 1 (1950–51) 146–48.

¹⁶ J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991) 664, notes the following distinction within Lev. 11:13–23: “two-legged winged creatures mostly fly, hence they are called birds (vv 13–19), but four-legged creatures mostly walk and for this reason constitute a discrete group.”

¹⁷ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 665–66; idem, “The Biblical Diet Laws as an Ethical System,” in: idem, *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology* (SJLA 36; Leiden: Brill, 1983) 104–18; M. Noth, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 94; J.E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC 4; Dallas, TX: Word, 1992) 161; P.J. Budd, *Leviticus: Based on the New Revised Standard Version* (NCB Commentary; London: Pickering; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 172; R.K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1980) 129; J.A. Thompson, “Translation of the Words for Locust,” *Bible Translator* 25 (1974) 405–11; B.D. Lerner, “Timid Grasshoppers and Fierce Locusts: An Ironic Pair of Biblical Metaphors,” *VT* 49 (1999) 545–48 (on Num. 13:31–33); S.R. Driver, “Excursus on Locusts,” 84–89; H. Brodsky, “‘An Enormous Horde Arrayed for Battle’: Locusts in the Book of Joel,” *Bible Review* 6 (1990) 32–39; here, 36; [UBS Committee on Translations], *Fauna and Flora of the Bible* (Helps for Translators 11; London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1980²) 53; A. Kaplan, *The Living Torah: The Five Books of Moses, A New Translation Based on Traditional Jewish Sources* (New York; Jerusalem: Maznaim, 1981²) 319–20; M.B. Isman and M.S. Cohen, “Kosher Insects,” *American*

term for “locust,” indeed “the most common term in the HB for this species.”¹⁸ In v. 22b–c, סלעם and הרנל are *hapax legomena* in the HB and difficult if not impossible to identify precisely. Finally, הנב (v. 22d) in Num. 13:33 and Isa. 40:22 signifies a “grasshopper.”

Whatever their precise identity, one may fairly ask why only these four insects are allowed to be eaten. Lev. 11:21 states simply that these insects’ possession of “hind legs above their feet” and corresponding ability to hop rather than crawl distinguishes them from other ‘swarmers,’ which cannot be eaten.¹⁹ Frank Gorman finds a basis for this distinction in the order of creation in Genesis 1: “[W]inged insects that walk on all fours” are prohibited because “[t]he means of locomotion is not appropriate for their bodily appearance. They represent a disruption of the normative order . . . [and] are ‘detestable’ (vv. 20, 23).”²⁰ In the case of the four insects specified in Lev. 11:22, however, “[w]ings are consistent with leaping as a means of locomotion. Thus, they appropriately reflect their location within the created order.”²¹ From the standpoint of the final editor of Leviticus, this explanation may well have been employed to sanction toleration for consuming this quartet of winged insects but not other types of bugs.

Writing with an expertise in entomology that the present author cannot claim, Murray Isman and Martin Cohen argue that the permission to eat locusts but not other insects is based upon the locusts’ vegetarian (that is, non-flesh-eating) diet:

Entomologist 41 (Summer 1995) 100–2; here, 101; M. Bates, “Insects in the Diet,” *American Scholar* 29 (1959–60) 43–52; here, 45; E. Firmage, “Zoology,” art. *ABD* 6.1109–67, esp. 1150 (s.v. ‘locusts’); W.W. Frerichs, “Grasshoppers,” *IDB* 2.470; F.S. Bodenheimer, “Fauna,” art. *IDB* 2.246–56; here, 254; Y. Palmoni, “Locust,” *IDB* 3.144–48; here, 145.

¹⁸ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 161.

¹⁹ J. Soler, “The Semiotics of Food in the Bible,” in: *Food and Drink in History: Selections from the Annales, Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations, Volume 5* (eds. R. Forster, O. Ranum; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979) 126–38; here, 135; L.R. Arrington, “Foods of the Bible,” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 35 (1959) 816–20; here, 818; M. Douglas, “The Abominations of Leviticus,” in: idem, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966) 41–57; here, 56. Cf. Arist., *PA* 4.6 (683A).

²⁰ F.H. Gorman, Jr., *Divine Presence and Community: A Commentary on the Book of Leviticus* (International Theological Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 73. Concerning למיניו and למינהו “according to its kind” (Lev. 11:22), Gorman (73) also points plausibly to “the language of creation found in Gen. 1 (see, e.g., vv. 11, 12, 24, 25).” Cf. J. Trublet, “Alimentation et sainteté: Lévitique 11 Deutéronome 14,” *Christus* 29 (1982) 209–17, esp. 214–15.

²¹ Gorman, *Divine Presence*, 73.

As both the blood and carrion are strictly taboo according to the dietary laws, so are the animals that thrive on them. All flying insects, other than the orthopterans, may have been viewed as predators (blood-feeding dipterans, stinging hymenopterans), or carrion feeders (dipterans). In contrast, orthopterans, particularly locusts and other acridids, are primarily graminivorous.²²

However attractive from a contemporary point of view, the explanation suffers from an inability to postulate credibly that the author of Lev. 11:20–23 possessed such a ‘scientific’ understanding or rationale. Since the eating of blood is a concern elsewhere in Leviticus (Lev. 3:17; 7:26–27; 17:10–14; 19:26a), it could easily have been offered as a rationale in Lev. 11:20–23 as well. As is discussed below, however, such a motivation is clearly evident in the later author of *Aristeas*.

More persuasively, Erhard Gerstenberger considers the normative eating habits of the common people and asks whether the exception offered in Lev. 11:21–22 may have been an “[a]daptation to some prevalent eating custom in Israel’s proximity? Experience of the distresses of famine forcing them no longer to disdain ‘even’ grasshoppers?”²³ Gerstenberger’s first question merits additional attention in light of other witnesses to locust-eating in the Ancient Near East.

Locust-Eating in the Ancient Near East

Lev. 11:20–23 does not at all point to a distinctively Israelite culinary practice of locust/grasshopper-eating. On the contrary, the widespread and well-attested delight in eating such insects in the Ancient Near East may well lie behind the partial prescription afforded in this passage.

R.K. Harrison notes that, “[a]s a food, locusts have been eaten in the Near East for millennia. A royal banquet scene from the palace of Ashurbanipal (c. 669–627 BC), the last great Assyrian king, depicted servants bringing locusts on sticks for the guests to eat.”²⁴ The Assyrian bas-relief of servants carrying skewered locusts and pomegranates, to which Harrison refers, is reproduced immediately below:²⁵

²² Isman and Cohen, “Kosher Insects,” 102.

²³ E.S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 140.

²⁴ Harrison, *Leviticus*, 129.

²⁵ The relief appears in: Y. Palmoni, “Locust,” 146; cf. D. Brothwell and P. Brothwell, *Food in Antiquity: A Survey of the Diet of Early Peoples* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998²) 70, fig. 24; J. Bottéro, “The Cuisine of Ancient Mesopotamia,” *BA* 48 (1985) 36–47; here, 37.



Oded Borowski refers first to another Assyrian relief and then to the aforementioned relief:

The locust was considered a delicacy; and, on one Assyrian bas-relief, servants can be seen carrying, among other foodstuffs, long pins of skewered locusts to a royal feast (Aynard 1972:60). Another relief from the palace of Ashurbanipal shows two servants, one of whom is carrying . . . rows of locusts (Brothwell and Brothwell 1969:fig. 24).²⁶

Complementing this pictographic evidence, the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* cites numerous literary testimonies to locust-eating, including the following:

On the steppe its (the enemy's land) animal life is famished, he roasts (it) like crows
 (var. locusts) (with his fiery, divine brilliance). (Lugale 3.5)
 Send me a hundred locusts and (some) food. (YOS 2.15.27 [OB let.])

²⁶ Borowski, *Every Living Thing: Daily Use of Animals in Ancient Israel* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 1998) 159.

... and the locusts for which I asked you, do not forget the ... and the locusts! (CT 29.11a.7, 9)
 I have forwarded to my lord as many locusts as they were able to catch for me.
 (ARM 3.62.15)
 Send me as many locusts as you have been able to collect and kill. (ABL 910.5)²⁷

The first passage points to the eating of locusts during a time of hardship, in this case following military defeat (Lugale 3.5). The other four testimonies, however, support the depictions of the two bas-reliefs in that they point to orders from individuals of some wealth who *desired this particular food*.

This same inference applies to locust-eating in Mesopotamia: "In a letter found at Mari the writer addresses the King thus: 'Locusts often come to Terqa and the day they arrived the heat was torrid so they did not alight. But all the locusts that were taken I have sent to my Lord.'" ²⁸ It thus follows that locusts were not just the food of necessity for those who possessed no other means with which to feed themselves. On the contrary, locusts routinely comprised the *chosen* cuisine of the *wealthy*.²⁹ Understood within this light, John the Baptist's eating locusts/grasshoppers does not self-evidently constitute a critique of the rich or point to a wilderness dweller.³⁰ Both rich and poor people ate locusts in a variety of rural and (comparatively more) urban locations in the Ancient Near East.

Furthermore, Elizabeth Douglas Van Buren summarizes the follow-

²⁷ These passages are cited in the entry for *erbu* (cf. Heb. אֶרְבֵּה) in *CAD* ([Vol. 4, 1958] ed. I.J. Gelb et al.; Chicago: University of Chicago Oriental Institute, 1956–) 4.256–8; here, 257.

²⁸ J.M. Aynard, "Animals in Mesopotamia," in: *Animals in Archaeology* (ed. A.H. Brodrick; New York: Praeger, 1972) 42–68; here, 60. Aynard (60) continues, "These insects were in fact much esteemed as a foodstuff, and on one Assyrian bas-relief servants are carrying a hare, birds and long pins of skewered locusts to a royal feast" (cf. 59–60, 64). Moreover, Bottéro, "Cuisine," 39, notes that the Mesopotamians "prepared a fermented sauce (*siqqu*), for both kitchen and table use, out of fish, shellfish, or grasshoppers."

²⁹ Note the overgeneralization of J. Milgrom, "Ethics and Ritual: The Foundations of the Biblical Dietary Laws," in: *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives* (ed. E.B. Firmage et al.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 159–91: "Here it would seem an exception was made because allowing locusts as food was a hallowed practice stemming back to the wilderness period when, as pastoralists, they lived off their herds and feasted on locusts ..." (189).

³⁰ Against M.E. Boring, "Matthew," *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. VIII; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 168; E. LaVerdiere, *The Beginning of the Gospel: Introducing the Gospel according to Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999) 31–32; W. Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (The Bible and Liberation; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) 95.

ing archeological evidence for the prevalence of locusts in Ancient Near Eastern cultures:

A stamp-seal found at Lagaš was adorned with a design of a grasshopper executed with a drill. A golden dagger found in the grave of Meskalamdug at Ur had an image of a locust incised upon it. A locust appears on a few cylinder seals of the time of the First Dynasty of Balylon as one of the symbols scattered in the field . . . , but on seals of the Kassite period it seems to be a grasshopper which is placed near the deity. Lead figurines of a locust, natural size and rendered with great accuracy of observation, came to light in Room 4 of the Temple of Ašur in Kâr-Tukulti-Ninurta, and on a plaque of glazed fayence a locust is represented in the background of a scene showing an Assyrian, probably the king himself, making his petition to a seated divinity. . . . A wall relief from the palace of Sanherib at Nineveh depicts attendants bringing locusts strung on sticks and other provisions for a banquet, and another relief representing Sanherib and his queen feasting in a garden shows a locust on one of the topmost branches of a palm-tree to the left of the group.³¹

Although the interpretation of some of the items to which Van Buren refers may be disputed or less clear than she suggests, her work is valuable for highlighting the place of locusts not only as food but also in Ancient Near Eastern folklore.

The preceding observations are valuable to the present inquiry because they demonstrate that Lev. 11:20–23 is not a distinctive literary testimony. That locust-eating was a common practice is documented by copious materials from the Ancient Near East. What is unusual about Lev. 11:20–23 is the tolerance granted to the eating of *only certain kinds* of “clean” grasshoppers/locusts. The reason for this limited indulgence has been touched upon briefly above and may be explored somewhat further in light of the materials discussed in this section. It is the view of the present author that Lev. 11:20–23 offers an argument from the order of creation to support a dispensation for eating locusts, which were not merely for the poor or famine-stricken but a prized delicacy in the Ancient Near East.³² In short, locusts were just

³¹ E.D. Van Buren, *The Fauna of Ancient Mesopotamia as Represented in Art* (AnOr 18; Rome: Pontificium institutum biblicum, 1939) 109–10; cf. J. Malek, “The Locusts on the Daggers of Ahmose,” in: *Chief of Seers: Egyptian Studies in Memory of Cyril Aldred* (ed. E. Goring et al.; Studies in Egyptology; London: Kegan Paul International, 1997) 207–19; J.A. Thompson, “Joel’s Locusts,” 54–55.

³² With F.S. Bodenheimer, *Insects as Human Food: A Chapter of the Ecology of Man* (The Hague: Junk, 1951) 40–41: “This permission to eat locusts [Lev. 11:21–22] is nothing more than a codification of a habit existing since oldest times among the nomads of the Middle East, which, as we will see, has lasted down to our day.” Cf. D. Nevo, “The Desert Locust, *Schistocerca gregaria*, and Its Control in the Land of Israel and the Near East in Antiquity, with Some Reflections on Its Appearance in

too popular and delightful to proscribe completely, and a reason grounded in Genesis 1 was thus found for allowing the eating of at least some of these insects.

Are Locusts Permitted? Lev. 11:20–23 and Deut. 14:19

A notable contradiction to the exception given for “jointed legs” in Lev. 11:21 is Deut. 14:19, which proscribes the eating of any and all insects that have wings: “And all winged insects are unclean for you; they shall not be eaten.” Deut. 14:19 begins much as Lev. 11:20 but does not offer an exception like that in Lev. 11:21–22 for certain types of (winged) locusts:

Lev. 11:20

כל שרף העוף
ההלך על־ארבע שקץ
הוא לכם

Deut. 14:19

וכל שרץ העוף
טמא הוא לכם
לא יאכלו

The similarity in wording between this and other parts of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 has suggested to a majority of scholars a literary connection between the two, and thus that one passage reflects a revision of the other:

The fact of a literary connection between Lv 11,2b–23 and Dt 14,4–20 is evident and challenged by no one; the common topical arrangement of the two texts and their verbatim correspondence in so many places, both in the general norms for the distinction of clean and unclean animals and in the long list of unclean birds, admits of no other explanation.³³

The question then becomes which tradition is earlier and which passage offers a modification of the other. W.L. Moran is persuaded that Deuteronomy 14 is the later tradition, in part because of the mention of an additional “ten quadrupeds in [Deut. 14:]4b–5.”³⁴ If correct, this

Israel in Modern Times,” *Phytoparasitica: Israel Journal of Plant Protection Sciences* 24 (1996) 7–32, esp. 19–22; Gorman, *Divine Presence*, 73.

³³ W.L. Moran, “The Literary Connection between Lv 11,13–19 and Dt 14,12–18,” *CBQ* 28 (1966) 271–77; here, 271.

³⁴ Moran, “Literary Connection,” 272; so also B.J. Bamberger, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (Vol. 3: *Leviticus*; New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1979) 3.90: “The Torah contains a number of repetitions, but none as

would mean that Deuteronomy came to issue a blanket statement against insect-eating as an objection to Lev. 11:21–22.

Alternately, if Leviticus 11 reflects a revision of Deuteronomy 14,³⁵ Lev. 11:21–22 could be viewed as an attempt to forge some common ground between a common practice among the people and the absolute prohibition of Deut. 14:19. A resolution to this problem is not necessary for the present inquiry. What is important to note is that even within the Pentateuch there is disagreement concerning the propriety of eating locusts.

The Letter of Aristeas and Philo of Alexandria: Locusts as a Recognized Food in the Jewish Diaspora

Regardless of the tension resulting from the inclusion of both Lev. 11:20–23 and Deut. 14:19–20 in the final form of the Pentateuch, ancient Jewish writings that mention locust-eating consistently embrace Lev. 11:20–23 and seem to ignore Deut. 14:19. The witnesses to locust-eating discussed in this and the following sections are: the *Letter of Aristeas*, Philo of Alexandria, the Temple Scroll and Damascus Document from Qumran, the Mishnah and midrashim, and, finally, Moses Maimonides.

The *Letter of Aristeas* (2nd c. B.C.E.)—probably from Alexandria—offers the earliest literary testimony subsequent to Lev. 11:20–23 to locust-eating by certain Jews.³⁶ *Aristeas* presents a list of “vegetarian” birds, including locusts, which the Jews known to this author eat in accordance with *kashrut*:

These laws have all been solemnly drawn up for the sake of justice, to promote holy contemplation and the perfecting of character. ¹⁴⁵For of the winged creatures of which we make use (οἷς χρῶμεθα) all are gentle and distinguished by cleanliness and they feed on (χρῶμεθα πρὸς τὴν τροφήν) grain and pulse, such as pigeons, doves, ‘locusts’ (ἀττακοί), partridges, and also geese and all similar fowl. ¹⁴⁶But of the winged creatures which are forbidden you will find that they are wild and carnivorous (σαρκοφάγα). . . .³⁷

extended as this one. Since the passage seems typical of P in content and in style, it is probable that a priestly editor inserted the passage into Deuteronomy” (cf. 3.xviii).

³⁵ So L. Khalifé, “Étude sur l’histoire rédactionnelle des deux textes parallèles: Lv. 11 et Dt. 14,1–21,” *Melto* 2 (1966) 57–72. J. Trublet, “Alimentation et sainteté,” 214–15, does not take a stand on this issue.

³⁶ On the date of *Aristeas*, see the discussion of R.J.H. Shutt in *OTP*, 2.8–9.

³⁷ *Let. Aris.* 144b–146a; Greek text and ET: Moses Hadas, *Aristeas to Philocrates* (*Letter of Aristeas*) (Jewish Apocryphal Literature; New York: Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning/Harper, 1951), 158–59. On the “vegetarian” eating habits of locusts, see further Nepualius 31, in: W. Gemoll, *Nepualii, fragmentum*, 2.

The inclusion of locusts (ἀττακοί; cf. Lev. 11:22b, LXX) in a list of birds assumes the context of Lev. 11:13–23, which mentions clean creatures who inhabit the air—first birds (11:13–19) and then locusts/grasshoppers (11:20–23). In an apology for the propriety of the Jewish Law, including its dietary requirements (cf. *Let. Aris.* 128–72), the author builds on Leviticus in offering locusts as an example of clean, ‘vegetarian’ birds that at least some Jews continue to eat. There is clearly no aversion to locust-eating, as the author of *Aristeas* assumes that his/her audience will recognize both the validity of the Law and the corresponding dietary practices among diasporic (Alexandrian?) Jews at the time of this letter.

Philo of Alexandria offers another witness to locust-eating in the Jewish Diaspora. In his *Legum Allegoriae*, Philo refers indirectly to locusts as human food, which serve as a referent for his allegorical interpretation of Lev. 11:21–22:

Now in Leviticus the sacred word advises (παραινεί . . . ὁ ἱερός λόγος) them to feed ‘on creeping things that go upon all four, which have legs above their feet, so as to leap with them’ [11:21]. Such are the locust (ὁ βροῦχος), the wild locust (ὁ ἀττακός), the grasshopper (ἀκρίς), and in the fourth place the snake-fighter.³⁸ And this is how it should be. For if serpent-like pleasure is an un-nourishing (ἄτροφον) and injurious thing, self-mastery, the nature that is not in conflict with pleasure, must be wholesome and full of nourishment (τροφιμώτατον . . . καὶ σωτήριον). (*Leg.* 2.105; ET: LCL, modified)

Philo’s comparison of locusts/grasshoppers with snakes (cf. the citation of Gen. 3:1 in *Leg.* 2.106) is predicated upon the assumption that locusts/grasshoppers are indeed a wholesome kind of human food. Notably, Philo interprets Leviticus 11, an indulgence allowing the eating of certain locusts/grasshoppers, as God’s exhortation (παραινέω) illustrating humanity’s moral development.³⁹ Such advice from heaven only makes sense if Philo’s Hellenistic Jewish audience already recognizes locusts as “most nutritious” (τροφιμώτατος, superlative of τροφιμότης) and “granting of safety” (σωτήριος), whether to the body (so Lev. 11:21–22), or, in Philo’s allegorical dichotomy, to the soul.

³⁸ Gk.: ὁ ὀφιομάχης, following the LXX of Lev. 11:22d: καὶ τὸν ὀφιομάχην καὶ τὰ ὅμοια αὐτῷ. Cf. Arist., *HA* 8.6 (612A). In *Leg.* 2.105, Philo’s terms for locusts/grasshoppers correspond to Lev. 11:22 (LXX), except that Philo has ὁ ἀττακός (cf. ἀττακοί in *Let. Aris.* 145) instead of ὁ ἀττάκης (11:22b, LXX). In his work *On the Creation*, Philo again mentions the ‘snake-fighter,’ which “springs from the ground and lifts itself into the air like the grasshopper” (*Opif.* 58 [163]). Similarly to *Leg.* 2.105, Philo himself offers a symbolic interpretation of this allusion to Lev. 11:22 in *Opif.* 58 (163), that the snake-fighter “is nothing but a symbolic representation of self-control.”

³⁹ Cf. in the LXX: ταῦτα φάγεσθε (Lev. 11:21, 22), for לַבְּרֵית.

Conditional Affirmation of Locust-Eating at Qumran

The assumption of Philo, *Leg.* 2.105 and the statement of *Let. Aris.* 145 that Jews recognized locusts as food are echoed by the Essenes at Qumran. In particular, the Temple Scroll more or less repeats the instructions of Lev. 11:21–22:

[Of the]⁴⁰ winged [insects] you can eat: the locust and its species, the bald locust and its species, the cricket ²and its species, the grasshopper and its species. These you can eat from among winged insects: those which crawl on four paws, which ³have the hind legs wider than the forelegs in order to leap over the ground with them and to fly with their wings. (11Q19 [11QTemple^a] 48:3–5)

The only detail added to the prescription given in Leviticus 11 concerns the physiology of locusts: Their hind legs are “wider” than their forelegs. This differs only slightly from Lev. 11:21b, which mentions the insects’ ability to jump from having “jointed legs above their feet.” The distinctive detail in the Temple Scroll could well have come from a scribe who had observed locust legs, perhaps in connection with the preparation of a meal. Such repetition of Leviticus 11 without comment suggests that allowing locusts/grasshoppers to be eaten could be affirmed without reference to Deut. 14:19. Moreover, fragmentary copies of parts of Lev. 11:20–23 survive in MasLev^b, 4Q365, and 2QPaleoLev (2Q5).⁴¹

As already mentioned, moreover, CD offers specific instructions for preparing fish and locusts (CD-A 12:11b–15a). The interpretation is notably closer to Lev. 11:20–23 than to Deut. 14:19 in that locusts are kosher, provided that they be roasted or boiled prior to consumption. The process of roasting or boiling the locusts would presumably allow for the easy removal of the insects’ wings and legs, which in fact are not easily digestible.

CD 12:14–15 is a significant literary testimony that locusts were still eaten by at least some Jews around the time of the Baptist. The Damascus Document does not, however, support an Essene influence (whether direct or indirect) on John’s eating habits. Since locusts were such a common food in much of the Ancient Near East and not distinctive in Jewish literature (cf. above on Philo and *Aristeas*), the com-

⁴⁰ 11Q19 48:1–2 are corrupt. It is plausible that the paraphrase began with Lev. 11:20 at 11Q19 48:2 or, perhaps, 48:1.

⁴¹ D.L. Washburn, *A Catalog of Biblical Passages in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Text-Critical Studies 2; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002) 40.

parison is flimsy. In the case of the Baptist and the Essenes, then, there is no basis to infer, as Charlesworth does, that “[t]he description of what John ate [in Mark 1:6c//Matt. 3:4c] has a decidedly Qumran or Essene ring to it” in that John intentionally ate like a (current or) former Essene.⁴²

Locusts in the Mishnah: Like Fish, But Not Quite Fowl

The Mishnah reflects a rather lively discussion on whether, and under what conditions, locusts/grasshoppers—usually referred to as הַנְּבִיִּים (cf. Lev. 11:22d)—are permitted as food. Three passages in particular point unambiguously to locust/grasshopper-eating among certain Jews in late antiquity:

Unclean locusts [הַנְּבִיִּים טְמֵאִים] which were pickled with clean locusts [הַנְּבִיִּים טְהוֹרִים] have not invalidated [imparted uncleanness to] the brine [in which they were pickled]. Testified R. Sadoq⁴³ concerning the brine of unclean locusts, that it is clean. (*m. Ter.* 10:9)

Over something which does not grow from the earth one says, “For all [was created according to his word].” Over vinegar, unripe fruit, and edible locusts [הַנְּבִיִּאֵי] one says “For all [was created at his word].” (*m. Ber.* 6:3)

Testified R. Yose b. Yoezer of Seredah about a qamsa locust [אֵיל קַמְצָא], that it is clean [for eating];. . . And they called him ‘Yose the Easy-going.’ (*m. ‘Ed.* 8:4)

⁴² Charlesworth, “John the Baptizer,” 366–68; here, 367. Moreover, according to Philo (*Hypothetica* 11.8) as preserved by Eusebius (*Praep. evang.* 8.11.8), the Essenes kept bees. If accurate, this would represent a difference, since John is said to eat wild honey (μέλι ἄγριον) rather than cultivated honey. In the view of the present author, the larger thesis that the Baptist had ever been an Essene is also dubious. On this last point, see further J. Frey, “Die Bedeutung der Qumranfunde für das Verständnis des Neuen Testaments,” in: *Qumran: Die Schriftrollen vom Toten Meer* (ed. M. Fieger et al.; NTOA 47; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001) 129–208, esp. 168–70; F.I. Andersen, “The Diet of John the Baptist,” *AbrN* 3 (1961–62) 60–74; here, 62–63; C.H.H. Scobie, *John the Baptist* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 137–39; J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* [Vol. 2: *Mentor, Message and Miracles*; New York: Doubleday, 1991] 2.49.

⁴³ I.e., in *m. ‘Ed.* 7:2: “R. Sadoq gave testimony concerning brine made from unclean locusts that it is clean. For the first Mishnah holds: unclean locusts which were pickled with clean locusts—they have not invalidated their brine.” Here and elsewhere, translations of the Mishnah are from J. Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Hebrew text: C. Albek, *Shishah Sidrei Mishnah* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik: 1952–59). Cf. H.L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck, 1922–61) 1.98–100; E.J. Schochet, *Animal Life in Jewish Tradition: Attitudes and Relationships* (New York: Ktav, 1984) 92, 98; M. Broshi, “Diet of Palestine in the Roman Period,” 51.

According to *m. 'Ed.* 8:4, Jose b. Joezer of Zereda's reception of the nickname 'Easy-going' or 'Permitter' suggests that not everyone was pleased with his interpretation allowing that a particular type of locust be eaten. Additionally, *m. Šabb.* 9:7 refers to a "living unclean locust" (הַנִּבְּחָה הַיּוֹמָה) as something that a child plays with (R. Judah), thus suggesting the common place of the locust in Jewish (and other) homes.

Moreover, two other passages from the Mishnah, like the Damascus Document, append stipulations to Lev. 11:20–23:

Among locusts [וּבְהַנְבִּיחִים] [these are clean]: Any which has (1) four legs, (2) four wings, and (3) jointed legs, and (4) the wings of which cover the greater part of its body. R. Yose says, "And (5) the name of which is locust [יִשְׁמוֹ הַנִּבְּחָה]." (*m. Hul.* 3:7)

These are things which [to begin with] are permitted for [Israelite] consumption: . . . Locusts which come from [the shopkeeper's] basket are forbidden. Those which come from the stock [of his shop] are permitted.⁴⁴

Whether one should consider the physical characteristics or the source of the locusts (*m. Hul.* 3:7; *m. 'Abod. Zar.* 2:7), the practice of eating locusts was seen to need at least some regulation. On this point R. Jose again offers a notable exception (*m. Hul.* 3:7; cf. above on *m. 'Ed.* 8:4).

Elsewhere in the Mishnah, locusts, along with fish, belong to a special classification relative to other kinds of meat:

Every [kind of] flesh [of cattle, wild beast, and fowl] is it prohibited to cook in milk, except for the flesh of fish and locusts [הָרֹחַץ מִבֶּשֶׂר דְּנִיּוֹת וְהַנְּבִיחִים]. And it is prohibited to serve it up onto the table with cheese, except for the flesh of fish and locusts. He who vows [to abstain] from flesh is permitted [to make use of] the flesh of fish and locusts. (*m. Hul.* 8:1)

Additionally, Jews are liable for consuming the blood of cattle, wild animals or birds, but are not liable because of "the blood of fishes or the blood of locusts" (דָּם דְּנִיּוֹת וְדָם הַנְּבִיחִים).⁴⁵ Thus, locusts and fish may be 'mixed' with dairy, and the blood of these two creatures does not result in impurity as that of other meats does.

These statements from *m. Hullin* and *m. Kerithot* would not, however, warrant a 'vegetarian' construal of locusts in the Mishnah or, by

⁴⁴ *m. 'Abod. Zar.* 2:7. H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933) 440 n. 3, suggests that the shopkeeper's locusts are forbidden because "[h]e is suspected of sprinkling them with wine."

⁴⁵ *m. Ker.* 5:1. Likewise *m. 'Uq.* 3:9; cf. *m. Hul.* 3:7 and *m. Ter.* 10:8–9, which mention fish and locusts together.

implication, of the Baptist's diet.⁴⁶ According to *m. Kelim*, contact with locusts can impute uncleanness, but touching fruit cannot: "There are three [kinds of] leather gloves. . . . That of the locust-catchers (של הנביין) is susceptible to corpse uncleanness. And that of the fruit-pickers is clean of all" (*m. Kelim* 24:15). Thus with regard to matters of purity, the Mishnah discusses locusts and fish as something in-between fruits and vegetables, on the one hand, and most other meats, on the other. Locusts are indeed a kind of meat, but these insects along with fish can be eaten under certain circumstances when eating other types of meat would be forbidden.

Locust-Eating in Later Jewish Literature

It has been noted that the *Letter of Aristeas*, the Temple Scroll, the Damascus Document and various tractates from the Mishnah do not prohibit the eating of locusts (so Deut. 14:19), but rather consistently allow them as human food under certain conditions (with Lev. 11:20–23). Such toleration is also attested in the midrashim. For example, concerning Isaac's statement to Esau in Gen. 27:33, "I ate from all [of it] (ואכל מכל) before you came,"⁴⁷ the Genesis Midrash places into the mouth of Isaac the following answer to Esau concerning what the patriarch had eaten: "'I do not know,' he replied, 'but I tasted in it the taste of bread, the taste of meat, the taste of fish, the taste of locusts and the taste of all the delicacies in the world.'"⁴⁸ The commentary assumes that locust-eating is permitted and calls attention to the quality of the meal that Rebekah had prepared for Jacob to give to his father Isaac (cf. Gen. 27:5–17).

In addition, the Lamentations Midrash states:

R. Ḥanina b. Abbahu said: There are seven hundred species of clean fish, eight hundred of clean grasshoppers, and birds beyond number; and they all went into

⁴⁶ Against J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 151; R. Eisler, "The Baptist's Food and Clothing," in: idem, *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist according to Flavius Josephus' Recently Rediscovered 'Capture of Jerusalem' and Other Jewish and Christian Sources* (New York: L. MacVeagh, 1931) 235–40.

⁴⁷ Gen. 27:30–40 reports what transpired upon Esau's arrival, after Isaac had already blessed Jacob, who was impersonating his brother Esau.

⁴⁸ Genesis Midrash (Toledoth) 67.2; ET: *Midrash Rabbah* (trans. H. Freedman; ed. H. Freedman and M. Simon; London: Soncino, 1961 [1939]) 2.607–8; cf. S. Krauss, "Heuschrecken," 244.

exile with Israel to Babylon; and when the people went back, they returned with them. . . .⁴⁹

Here one learns that myriad kinds of locusts permitted as human food entered into exile with the covenant people and returned with them after the period of captivity in Babylon had ended. A similar statement may also be found in the Babylonian Talmud.⁵⁰ The implication is that Jews have always had, *and continue to have*, copious varieties of fish, grasshoppers and birds to eat.

For whatever reason, the midrashim on Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 have nothing to say about the directions for eating certain kinds of locusts or grasshoppers (Lev. 11:20–23) or about the proscription of all winged insects (Deut. 14:19).⁵¹ One may safely infer that the rabbis had more pressing concerns than to comment on such a commonplace activity as locust-eating.

In addition to these midrashim, the medieval testimony of Moses Maimonides (1135–1204 C.E.) further affirms the consistency of Jewish interpreters' allowing the eating of certain locusts. His famous Code contains a treatise on forbidden foods, including locusts (*Holiness* 5.2):

The Torah permits eight species of locusts: the grasshopper; another species of grasshopper called *razbanit*; the cricket; another species of cricket called *arsubya*; the common locust; another species of locust called 'the vineyard bird'; the bald locust; and another species of bald locust called 'the Jerusalemite *Johana*.' ²²He who is an expert in them and in their names may eat of them, and a hunter is to be believed in their case as in the case of birds. But he who is not an expert in them must examine their tokens. They possess three tokens: Whichever has four legs and four wings which overlie most of the length of its body and most of its circumference, and has in addition two legs with which to leap, is deemed a clean species. Even if it has an elongated head and a tail, so long as it is known by the name of locust, it is clean. ²³If at present the locust has no wings or legs, or if its wings do not cover the greater part of the body, but it is known that it will grow them after some time when it has matured, it is deemed permitted immediately.⁵²

⁴⁹ Lamentations Midrash (Proems) 34, following a citation of Jer. 9:10c: "both the birds of the air and the animals have fled and are gone." ET: *Midrash Rabbah* (trans. A. Cohen; ed. H. Freedman and M. Simon; London: Soncino, 1961 [1939]) 7/2.64.

⁵⁰ See *b. Hul.* 63b (II.10.B); ET: J. Neusner, *The Talmud of Babylonia: An Academic Commentary* (Vol. 30: *Bavli Tractate Hullin*, 1994; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994–99) 30.278.

⁵¹ An ET of the Leviticus Midrash (Shemini) 13 is conveniently available in: *Midrash Rabbah* (trans. J. Israelstam; ed. H. Freedman and M. Simon; London: Soncino, 1961 [1939]) 4.162–76; for the Deuteronomy Midrash (Re'eh) 4: *Midrash Rabbah* (trans. J. Rabbinowitz; ed. H. Freedman and M. Simon; London: Soncino, 1961 [1939]) 7/1.89–101.

⁵² Maimonides, *Holiness* 5.2.1.21–23; ET: *The Code of Maimonides (Mišneh Torah)*

Apparently following the pattern of Leviticus 11, Maimonides's instructions concerning locusts follow on the heels of his interpretations on clean and unclean birds (*Holiness* 5.2.1.14–20). As in the Mishnah, moreover, locusts appear in the same context as fish (*Holiness* 5.2.1.24; cf. *b. Hul.* 66a–67a [V.1–2]).

Maimonides seems to draw from the Babylonian Talmud for his discussion of the “tokens,” or characteristics, of locusts (*b. Hul.* 65a [IV.1.A]). He also echoes this tradition in allowing that eight kinds of locusts/grasshoppers be eaten, rather than the four mentioned in Lev. 11:22: “What does it come to teach by repeating ‘according to its kind’ four times [in Lev. 11:22]? To include [in the rules] the vinehopper, the Jerusalem *ywhn*’, the *‘rzwby*’, and the *‘rzbnyt*” (*b. Hul.* 65a [IV.2.B]). In allowing that one trust the intuition of a locust-hunter (-gatherer?), moreover, Maimonides may be seen as comparatively more permissive, when weighed against the rather detailed debates concerning the identification of characteristics of permitted locusts in *b. Hul.* 65a–66a (IV.3.C–IV.5.C). The important thing to note in the Babylonian Talmud and Maimonides is that the debates concern *which*—not whether—locusts may be eaten. To these observations may be added that “Yemenite and North African Jews also ate [eat?] ‘clean’ grasshoppers in various ways.”⁵³

Of course, with the eight types of locusts/grasshoppers mentioned by Maimonides and the Babylonian Talmud, the same exegetical problem persists as was noted earlier for Lev. 11:22: The modern interpreter does not know which insects are prescribed and, by implication, which others are proscribed. It was perhaps for this reason that certain modern Jewish interpretations of *halakha* have in effect come to embrace Deut. 14:19 over Lev. 11:20–23.⁵⁴ For example, J.H. Hertz observes:

None of the four kinds of locusts [in Lev. 11:22] is certainly known. . . . For this reason also, later Jewish authorities, realizing that it is impossible to avoid errors being made, declare every species of locust to be forbidden.⁵⁵

(Yale Judaica Series 16: *Book Five: The Book of Holiness [Sefer Q’dušah]*, 1965; trans. L.I. Rabinowitz and P. Grossman; New Haven: Yale University, 1949–) 16.157.

⁵³ Broshi, “The Diet of Palestine in the Roman Period,” 51, referring to S. Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie* (Grundriss der Gesamtwissenschaft des Judentums; Leipzig, 1910–12 = Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1966) 1.112–13; cf. 1.347 n. 542; D. Nevo, “Desert Locust,” 20; A. Kaplan, *Living Torah*, 320.

⁵⁴ Such a difficulty could well have supplied the original impetus for offering Deut. 14:19 as a response to Lev. 11:20–23.

⁵⁵ Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1960²) 451.

Hertz does not specify which Jewish authorities ultimately came to this conclusion. Whatever the origin of this development, the present study suggests that it occurred not earlier than Maimonides at the turn of the thirteenth century C.E.⁵⁶

Excursus: Al-Damīrī on Locust-Eating and Islam

Some two centuries after Moses Maimonides recognized the eating of certain kosher locusts by Jews, in the Islamic tradition Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Damīrī (1341–1405 C.E.) affirmed the lawfulness of the locust (*Al-Jarād*) as food for Muslims: “All the Muslims are agreed as regards its eating being permitted.”⁵⁷ Al-Damīrī’s work on animals is a compilation from various authors on animals vis-à-vis the Koran, folklore, medicine and food. His entry on locusts also cites five different authorities that the prophet Muhammad ate locusts.⁵⁸ Indeed, Allah is the one who sends locusts to the people, whether as food or as an affliction.⁵⁹ Such prescriptions contrast notably with al-Damīrī’s instructions concerning certain red worms (caterpillars: *al-Asārīf*), which may not be eaten, “as they are reckoned among the creeping animals.”⁶⁰

The present author does not assume that al-Damīrī’s collection of Arabic materials on locusts is representative for all Islamic literature either prior to or at the turn of the fifteenth century. There is no reason,

⁵⁶ Such an inquiry would indeed be interesting but lies beyond the scope of this article and the expertise of the present author. Commenting on Lev. 11:20–23, B.J. Bamberger states that “Medieval halachists, uncertain about the identity of the kosher species, forbade the eating of any insects” (in: *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* [ed. W.G. Plaut; New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981] 815). Bamberger’s generalization may well be correct for certain medieval Jewish interpreters (other than Maimonides), but Bamberger, like J.H. Hertz, unfortunately does not specify to which interpreters he (Bamberger) refers.

⁵⁷ Al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān*; ET: A.S.G. Jayakar, *Ad-Damīrī’s Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān: (A Zoological Lexicon)* (London: Luzac; Bombay: Taraporevala, 1906–08) 1.413; cf. 1.407; L. Köpf, “al-Damīrī, Muḥammad b. Mūsā b. ‘Īsā Kamāl al-Dīn” art. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (ed. H.A.R. Gibb et al.; Leiden: Brill, 1960²–) 2.107–8; Bodenheimer, *Insects as Human Food*, 43–44.

⁵⁸ E.g.: “Ibn Mājah relates on the authority of Anas, who said that the wives of the Prophet used to have sent to them locusts in trays as presents” (Al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān*; ET: 1.413).

⁵⁹ “I am the Lord of locusts and their sustainer, if I desire I send them as food for a people and if I desire I send them as a trial for a people” (ET: 1.410). Al-Damīrī also calls attention to medicinal uses for locusts (ET: 1.417).

⁶⁰ Al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān*; ET: 1.49–50; here, 1.50. The similarity to Lev. 11:20 is noteworthy.

however, to dismiss al-Damīri's remarks as simply anecdotal. What is significant for this study is that the complementary testimonies of Maimonides and al-Damīri highlight the distinctiveness of the Western/European aversion to the eating of locusts and other insects.

IV. *Summation*

John the Baptist's and the Essenes' eating of locusts/grasshoppers in Mark 1:6c//Matt. 3:4c and CD 12:11b–15a belongs to a cultural heritage shared for centuries by many Jews, other peoples of the Ancient Near East, and Islamic traditions from Muhammed (allegedly) to al-Damīri at the turn of the fifteenth century c.e., and beyond. That certain Jews ate locusts/grasshoppers is attested by not only Lev. 11:20-23 but also—and closer to the time of the Essenes and the Baptist—the *Letter of Aristeas* and Philo.

One point of contrast between certain Jewish witnesses and the depictions of John the Baptist in the NT Gospels is enlightening. Different from the Damascus Document, the Mishnah and the midrashim, conspicuously absent in Mark 1:2–8 and Matt. 3:1–6 is an attempt to show that John the Baptist ate of prescribed locusts/grasshoppers and in a 'proper' way, that is, in accordance with some interpretation of kashrut. This suggests that Mark 1:6c//Matt. 3:4c is not intended primarily for an audience that was concerned with the finer details of kashrut. Especially in light of Mark 7:1–23//Matt. 15:1–20, which dispense with such requirements, this observation may come as no surprise. That John himself ate of grasshoppers/locusts from time to time is entirely plausible (so Mark 1:6c). Many Jews both before and after John and the Essenes ate such insects. What is unusual for Mark 1:6c//Matt. 3:4c is the absence of some qualification of *which* locusts John ate or *how* he ate them.

Moreover, it is not extraordinary that CD 12:11b–15a mandates to Essenes certain prescriptions for the preparation of fish and locusts. If nothing else, CD 12:11b–15a and Mark 1:6c//Matt. 3:4c offer an additional indication that John and certain Essenes belonged to a common milieu and ate a particular food, locusts, that flourished in their midst. To argue for a direct connection between those described in these rather different passages, however, is an unfortunate instance of 'parallelomania.'