

6.30

Matthew 3:4—John’s Clothing and Diet (Church Tradition)

The Gospels of Matthew and Mark describe John the Baptist as having what might be regarded as a peculiar wardrobe and diet:

| Matthew 3:4 | Mark 1:6 |
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| “Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.” | “Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.” |

Modern Scholarship

Modern scholars usually account for John’s clothing and diet in one (or both) of two ways:¹

Historical scholars ask why John would have dressed and eaten in such a manner, and the explanation is usually that by so doing he could live an austere life dependent on no one but God. He dressed himself in what could be found in the desert (loose camel hair woven together and fastened with a strip of animal skin) and he ate what he could find there (either literal locusts or, possibly, a type of bean pod that was popularly called a “locust”).

Redaction critics ask why Matthew and Mark wanted to tell their readers these details; the answer is usually that they wanted to liken John to Elijah, who is described in a similar manner in 2 Kings 1:8 (compare Matthew 17:9–13; Mark 9:9–13).

Early Church Tradition

Some writers in the first few centuries of church history offer comments.

Jerome (ca. 347–420):

John the Baptist had a religious mother and his father was a priest. Yet neither his mother's affection nor his father's affluence could induce him to live in his parents' house at the risk of the world's temptations. So he lived in the desert. Seeking Christ with his eyes, he refused to look at anything else. His rough garb, his girdle made of skins, his diet of locusts and wild honey were all alike designed to encourage virtue and continence.

(Letter 125.7)²

John Chrysostom (ca. 349–407):

You may ask, why did he wear a leather girdle? . . . Elijah also was so clothed, and likewise many others among holy men, either because they were engaged in heavy labor, or were upon a journey, or in any other necessity that involved labor, and because they despised ornament, and followed an austere way of life.

It was necessary that the precursor of the One who was to undo the age-long burdens of men, such as toil, malediction, pain and sweat, should in his own person give some token of the gifts to come, so as to stand above these tribulations. And so it was that he neither tilled the earth, nor plowed the furrow, nor did he eat bread of his own sweat, for his table was easily prepared, and

his clothing more easily than his table, and his dwelling more easily than his clothing. For he had need neither of roof, nor bed, nor table, nor any such thing. But even while still within this flesh of ours he lived an almost angelic life. His clothing was put together from the hair of camels, so that even from his garments he might teach us that we free ourselves of human needs, and need not be bound to this earth, but that we may return to the pristine dignity in which Adam first lived, before he had need of garments or of clothing. (*The Gospel of Matthew*, Homily 10)³

Cyril of Jerusalem (313–386):

He fed on locusts to make his soul grow wings. Sated with honey, the words he spoke were sweeter than honey and of more profit. Clothed in a garment of camel's hair, he exemplified in his own person the holy life. (*The Catechetical Lectures* 3.6)⁴

1. See Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).
2. P. Schaaf et al., eds., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, 14 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1887–94), 6:246
3. Schaaf et al., eds., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st series, 14 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1887–94), 10:63
4. J. Ballie et al., eds., *Library of Christian Classics*, 26 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953–66), 4:93–94.