
HALF FLESH AND HALF EARTH CREATURE IN CLASSICAL RABBINIC LITERATURE

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Abstract

The spiritual world of the Jewish sages in the Mishnah and Talmud period (1th-5th centuries), as well as the doors of the study halls, were open to news from the external-secular world in various areas. The current article focuses on vermin or mouse that is half flesh and half earth. This creature was mentioned in the Mishna and Talmud literature in halakhic and ideological contexts. This miraculous hybrid creature was also described in the writings of Greek and Roman sages, and this phenomenon is grounded in a broader outlook mentioned by Aristotle concerning spontaneously generating creatures. According to the Greek and Roman sages, such as Diodorus, Ovid and Pliny, the mice can be seen in the area of the Nile in Egypt, when the water that floods the fields retreats to the river's normal channel. According to the Amoraim the mouse is created in a valley, apparently because it is a low place where the ground is normally moist and sometimes muddy. It seems that the origin of this belief is the fact the mice emerge from the earth with part of their body covered in mud and those observing from afar may receive the impression that they are half earth and half flesh.

Keywords: mouse, ancient beliefs, Mishnah, Talmud, spontaneous generation

1. Introduction

The ancient classical literature, both non-Jewish and Jewish, contains considerable documentation of creatures with irregular or unusual features. Some examples are people and animals with irregular dimensions, such as Cyclical Snake (*ὄρφοβόρος*, Ouroboros) [1], dragons [2, 3], a fire-resistant salamander created in furnaces [3, *Babylonian Talmud*, Hagiga 27a, Sanhedrin 63b; 4-6], a hyena (*Hyaena hyaena syriaca*) that can change its sex and may change into a bat [3, Baba Kamma 16b; 7; 8], and the *shamir*, a fabled creature (worm) capable of cutting through rock, which helped King Solomon and his people to cut rocks for building the First Temple [2, avot 5:6, Sota 9:12; 3, Sota 48b, Gittin 68a; 9].

Other sources attest to hybrid creatures originating from the mating of humans with angels, i.e. the giants (*nefilim*) who lived in Noah's period that are described in the biblical text as those born to the sons of God and the daughters of

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humans (Genesis 6.4) [10-12]; mating of humans with animals, such as centaur, a mythological creature which is half human, half horse creature [13]; as well as the hybrid products of different types of animals, such as the ostrich perceived as a cross between a bird and a camel [14], the *arvad* or *habarbar*, formed by crossbreeding a snake and a lizard [7, Berakhot 8:6, 12b; 3, Hullin 127a; 15; 16], and others [17-19]. Discussions of mythological animals that do not exist in reality indicate the ancients' world of beliefs and views and raise the question of how such views were formed and developed. It seems that in the ancient Jewish sources mythological creatures express the greatness of God and the complexity of his creation.

2. Purpose of the article

The current article discusses a vermin (*sheretz*) or mouse “that is half flesh and half earth” (henceforth also “half-mouse”), mentioned in the Mishna and Talmud literature in halakhic and ideological contexts. (The Mishna was redacted by R. Judah the Prince at the end of the second century CE. The Mishna is the first major written redaction of the Jewish oral traditions and laws. Tannaim (‘repeaters’ or ‘teachers’) were the rabbinic sages whose views are recorded in the Mishnah. The Talmud is a collection of commentaries on and elaborations of the Mishnah and certain auxiliary materials. The term ‘Talmud’ refers to the Jerusalem Talmud which was compiled in the Land of Israel (c. 400 CE), and the collection known as the Babylonian Talmud compiled by the scholars of Babylonia (c. 500 CE). *Amoraim* were the rabbinic sages whose views are recorded in the Talmud.) I shall discuss rabbinical sources dealing with the phenomenon and show how Jewish sages were influenced by the world of beliefs common in their non-Jewish environment. The questions explored in the discussion of this issue are:

1. What underlies the view concerning the existence of this creature?
2. Where and how was this mouse created?

3. Discussion

3.1. A vermin or mouse that is half flesh and half earth in early rabbinical literature (Mishnah and Sifra)

The first mention of a creature that is half flesh and half earth was in the tannaitic literature (first and second centuries AD) with regard to the laws of purity and impurity (in Hebrew: *Tumah and taharah*). According to the Jewish halakha, a person (male or female) or object (such as tools, clothing, food) which contracts impurity becomes impure (in Hebrew: *ṭamé*), and forbidden of certain sacred activities (such as entering to the temple) until undergoing predefined purification actions, such as ritual immersion in a natural source of water or *mikvah* (ritual bath). Impurity can be caused by many ways, such as contacting with a human corpse (‘impurity of the dead’), touching or holding carcass of an

animal or a beast (*nevelah*) or touching dead vermin (*tumhat sheretz*) (Leviticus 5.2, 11.1-47, 22.5-6).

The Mishna discusses a vermin that is in the process of formation and development, only at the end of which it will become a fully living creature. The sages were divided on the question of whether a person who touches such vermin becomes impure: “A vermin which is half flesh and half earth, if a man touched the flesh he becomes unclean, but if he touched the earth he remains clean. Rabbi Judah says: even if he touched the earth that is over against the flesh he becomes unclean.” (Mishnah, Hulin 9:6)

According to the first opinion, a person who touches the flesh is rendered impure, similar to the law concerning one who touches a dead vermin, however one who touches the earth part of the mouse does not become impure as this part has not yet become a vermin. R. Yehuda, the well-known fourth *Tannaim* generation, disagrees and is of the opinion that since the mouse will eventually, at the end of the process, become a creature of the flesh, it is impure at this stage as well.

In some manuscripts and print versions of the Mishna the wording is “a *sheretz* that is half flesh and half meat” (such as in Parma manuscripts (Parma, Biblioteca Palatina - 3173 [De Rossi 138], p. 131 R); Kaufmann manuscripts (Budapest, Akademia-Kaufmann A 50, p. 92a); and Napoli press 1492). The word *sheretz* is mentioned in the Mishnah and Talmud sources as a collective term for little and unclean creatures. *Sheretz* is described as an organism which can be found at home or eaten by chickens, rats and snakes [20]. Accordingly, *sheretz* might be interpreted broadly as referring to various types of vermin, such as insects, lizards and mice. However, some versions of the Mishna have ‘mouse’ (*akhbar*), i.e. this is a specific type of vermin. Here I shall discuss the attribution of this irregular trait to mice specifically.

The next ancient source after the Mishna to explicitly mention ‘a mouse that is half flesh and half earth’ is the Sifra, a midrash halakha on the book of Leviticus from the rabbinical period, also called ‘Torat Kohanim’ or ‘Sifra De’ve Rav’. The final redaction date of the Sifra is unknown, but the redactors of the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud were familiar with it. The Sifra mentions the law of the half-mouse beside other mice, of which two appear to have been fish that were called “mouse” (Sifra, Shmini, parasha 5: 4-6). It refers to their natural habitat and to how they are created:

1. The land mouse – This is apparently the house mouse, but the Sifra may have been indicating a broader range that includes rats, voles, and other rodents.
2. The ‘sea mouse’ – ‘Sea mice’ are mentioned in several places in the Talmud (Niddah 43b). Mice do not live in the sea nor in watery habitats. This seems to be a fish that is called ‘sea mouse’ in classical literature (*Balistes carolinensis*) of which Oppian says that it lives in the Mediterranean and is considered a strong and courageous fish (compare to Rashi on Hulin 126b: “It is a fish that resembles a mouse and it is called ‘mouse’”). (Oppian writes: “The charax likewise is there and nimble tumbling Goby and the savage tribe of sea-mice, which are bold beyond all other fishes and contend

even with men; not that they are so very large, but trusting chiefly to their hard hide and the serrated teeth of their mouth, they fight with fishes and with mightier men” [21].) Some scholars, such as Lewysohn, suggest that this is the blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*) mentioned by Aristotle as mostache-whale, i.e. mouse whale [Aristotle, *Historia Animalium* III, 12; 22; 23]. Others claim that this is a mistaken translation of Aristotle’s work, but there is also an opinion that the designation of the whale as a ‘mouse’ is possible but ironic [24].

3. An ‘amphibian’ mouse that lives on land and enters the water – this may mean a type of *Blennius*, of which some species live on the Mediterranean coast of Eretz Israel in places of tide. Oppian describes the character of the fish to live in the two habitats: “A fish there is which haunts the sea-washed rocks, yellow of aspect and in like build unto the grey mullet; some men call him Adonis; other name him the sleeper-out, because he takes his sleep outside the sea and comes to the land, alone of all them that have gills” [21, p. 221].
4. A mouse that is half flesh and half earth – the Sifra distinguishes between two types of mice. One is a mouse that is *pareh veraveh*, i.e. capable of reproducing, apparently the land mouse (see above). And the second is a mouse that is half flesh and half earth, created of the earth, which is incapable of reproducing. According to this conception, only a creature born as a result of mating can reproduce, but this is not possible when it is created of the earth in a spontaneous process.

The obvious question is what was the Mishna and Sifra’s source for their view concerning the existence of this irregular mouse?

3.2. A mouse that is half earth and half flesh in classical literature

Much of the sages’ knowledge derived from the scientific and natural world of the classical era, such as from the works of Aristotle (384-322 BC), Pliny (23-79 CE) and Dioscorides (c. 40-90 CE). A miraculous hybrid mouse was described in the writings of Greek and Roman sages [17, p. 183-184; 22, p. 345-347; 25; 26], and this phenomenon is grounded in a broader outlook mentioned by Aristotle concerning spontaneously generating creatures (Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, V, 1) [6, 27, 28].

One of those who testified to the existence of half-mice was the Roman naturalist and natural philosopher Pliny the Elder in his book ‘*Naturalis Historia*’. Pliny mentions these mice when describing the flooding in areas near the Nile in Egypt. He writes: “But credibility is given to all these statements by the flooding of the Nile, with a marvel that surpasses them all: this is that, when the river withdraws its covering, water-mice are found with the work of generative water and earth uncompleted – they are already alive in a part of their body, but the most recently formed part of their structure is still of earth” [Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, IX, 84].

The Egyptian culture, religion and nature very interested the Greek and Roman authors, so they reported on many phenomena related to the Nile and its plants and animals. Pliny relates that the mice can be seen when the water that floods the fields retreats to the river's normal channel. It is evident that these mice are alive, but one part of their body is incomplete and is made of earth. According to Pliny, half-mice are real creatures. He does not try to explain its feasibility, maybe because as others in the classical world he believed in spontaneously generating. It is clear that Pliny was not witness to the existence of the exceptional mouse, but he relies on testimonies of others. We shall explain the possible reasons for this misconception further on.

The Jewish sages who heard of this unusual creature from their surroundings appear to have clarified its halakhic status in their learned discussions. The attitude to spontaneously generating creatures was voiced in Talmudic sources with regard to other creatures. The Talmud discusses whether it is allowed to kill lice formed from sweat and dirt in Sabbath, because it is created spontaneously and not by matting of male and female (Babylonian Talmud Sabbath 107b). In another case the early rabbis discussed whether it is not forbidden to eat worms that develop spontaneously in fruit and not by matting (Hullin 67a-b) [29].

3.3. The half-mouse in Talmudic literature (5th century CE)

A mouse formed of earth is mentioned in two major debates in the Babylonian Talmud. In Sanhedrin 91a it is brought as part of an ideological discussion on the resurrection of the dead (see below), and in Tractate Hulin 126b in an interpretation, expansion, and discussion on the Mishna in Tractate Hulin 9:6 concerning matters of purity and impurity. The various versions of these two debates mention "a mouse that is half flesh and half earth" and not "vermin" as in the above mentioned versions of the Mishna. This is the version of the Talmud in München manuscripts, in Soncino press (1489) and Vilna Press (The Widow and Brothers Room) [30]. The version *akhbar* (mice) is also found in Sanhedrin tractate 91b, in Soncino Press (1498), and in Vilna Press (The Widow and Brothers Room) [31].

The impression is that the Sifra was the ancient source from where the 'half mouse' reached the Talmud and subsequently later discussions in medieval and modern times. Some later sages, such as Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides 1138-1204), had before them a version that mentioned *sheretz* (vermin) [32; *Mishne Torah*, *hilkhot shear avot ha-tumah* 4:11]. However, many others, such as R. Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi, 1040–1105) had the Talmud's version and attributed this quality to the mouse (see Rashi in his commentary on Hulin 126b).

The half-mouse was mentioned, as stated, in ideological contexts as well. A heretic, according to the researchers, one of the early Christians [33], protested to Rav Ammi, a well-known Eretz Israel amora in the third generation, that the resurrection of the dead is untenable. At first, Rav Ammi explained to the heretic that a person who believes that God created the world *ex nihilo* finds it easier to

believe that He can resurrect the dead. Further on, he used the natural world to prove to the heretic that the process of creating the half-mouse shows how earth is transformed into a living creature. Moreover, it is impossible that Rav Ammi has chosen to prove the possibility of resurrection that is super-natural phenomenon by half flesh and half earth mouse that is also abnormal and unusual natural phenomenon.

Rav Ammi describes the process in the following way: “And if you do not believe that a being can be created from dust, go out to the valley and see an akhbar, a creature that today is half flesh and half earth, and tomorrow the being will develop and all of it will become flesh. Lest you say that creation of living creatures is a matter that develops over an extended period, ascend a mountain and see that today there is only one snail there; then ascend tomorrow, after rain will have fallen, and see that it will be entirely filled with snails.” [3, Sanhedrin 91a]

R. Ammi instructed the heretic, who questioned the resurrection of the dead, to go out to a valley and see the process in which mice are created from earth. It may be assumed that the valley was chosen because it is a low place where the ground is normally moist and sometimes muddy (compare the formation of mice in moist ground in the vicinity of the Nile as related by Pliny). R. Ammi notes that the mouse undergoes a gradual (evolutionary) process of becoming a regular mouse. At first, it is half earth and half flesh, and by the end of the process it becomes a mouse of flesh.

The phenomenon described in the ancient sources, both Jewish and non-Jewish, has no basis in reality. R. Ammi tries to bring, in support, the example of snails that are ‘born’ of the earth after the rain. It is clear, however, that during the dry season they burrow into the earth or in moist crevasses and come out of their hiding places when it rains [34]. The ancients may have believed that mice and snails are formed of the earth for similar reasons. Mice and voles live in holes and crannies in the fields. Sometimes, when it rains or when their habitats are flooded, as described by Pliny regarding the flooding of the Nile, they emerge from the earth with part of their body covered in mud and those observing from afar may receive the impression that they are half earth and half flesh.

4. Conclusions

The spiritual world of the *Tannaim* and *Amoraim*, as well as the doors of the study halls (*batei midrash*), were open to news from the external-secular world, and in the current article we dealt with a topic related to the natural world – a vermin/mouse that is half flesh and half earth. In general, the sages’ knowledge of natural matters came from two major sources: observation by the sages and information that entered their world from the surroundings, i.e. the classical world. The sages’ occupation with the issue of the half-mouse shows that they were attentive to news that reached them through rumors or from educated and knowledgeable people in their times [6]. The belief in spontaneous generation was common in the Roman world, and as stated it was also reflected in Jewish

sources dealing with the formation of lice, worms, and mice (Babylonian Talmud Sabbath 107b).

The belief in the existence of this irregular mouse is evident in the classical literature, such as in the works of Diodorus, Ovid and Pliny. These sources associate the half-mouse with the Nile's high and low tide, and it is interesting that later sources also limit its geographical range to Egypt. This phenomenon raises the question, of course, of whether it was a myth that developed in this area and spread to the Greco-Roman world, or a phenomenon observed in other regions as well. We saw that the Babylonian source associates the creature with a 'valley' in general and even recommends observing it in real time. Namely, some saw the mouse as a more extensive phenomenon and not only one that develops in a certain geographical region. It may be assumed that it was attributed to areas with moist ground that has 'loose matter' (mud), enabling new formation of the mice.

The source of the perception whereby the mouse was formed from earth appears to be the biblical source that speaks of the formation of animals from the earth on the sixth day of the Creation (Genesis 2.19). On one hand, it seems that the mud in wet regions created a misconception among the ancients that mice mired in mud, particularly during the high and low tide, were formed from the earth.

In Jewish literature, the Mishna is the initial source that documents "vermin that is half earth and half flesh" (this is the wording in most of the versions), however over the generations some sources replaced this with "mouse", following the Sifra and the Babylonian Talmud. Interestingly, this mouse is not mentioned in the discussions of the Jerusalem Talmud and no explanation for it has been found to date. The Jewish sources deal with a half-vermin or mouse in two contexts: matters of halakha (laws of purity and impurity) and philosophy (proof of the resurrection of dead from the earth). Notably, the Jewish sources do not mention the phenomenon in order to enrich existing zoological knowledge, rather it is discussed in the study halls only in a religious context.

The experiments conducted by the famous French biologist, chemist and microbiologist Louis Pasteur (1822-1895) in the latter half of the 19th century proved that the spontaneous generation outlook is baseless. The new scientific discoveries that disproved the spontaneous development of creatures from rot or earth are one of many manifestations of the contradiction between science and religion. In the rabbinical literature of the 20th-21st centuries there are still rabbis who advocate the approach of the ancient sages. (R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994) claimed that, in general, the Torah should be seen as a source of absolute Divine truth versus science that is based on conjectures [35-38].) Others, in contrast, claim that the sages issued their halakic rulings taking into account the knowledge of their times, however once it has been proven otherwise the new knowledge cannot be disregarded and contemporary halakha must be determined based on the conclusions of modern knowledge.

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