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Animal Sources of Pollution

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MEADVILLE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

AMONG things ritually unclean various classes are distinguished. Those which are not only unclean in themselves but which communicate uncleanness to others are called in the Talmud,¹ *fathers of pollution*, אבות המאסות. One division in the group is made up of the eight swarming things (שרץ) to which the Tora gives a special paragraph (Lev. 11 29-38). This particularity of treatment shows "that the eight animals here enumerated were looked upon as causing peculiar and intense defilement, secondary only to that produced by a human corpse."² We have in fact a right to translate: "These are the most unclean to you of all swarming things which swarm upon the earth." The pollution proceeds, it should be noticed, not from the living animals but from their dead bodies: "Whoever touches them when they are dead shall be unclean until the evening; and everything upon which any of them falls when it is dead shall be unclean. . . . And if any of them falls into an earthen vessel, whatever is in it shall be unclean, and the vessel itself you shall break in pieces." Why should the eight have this evil preëminence over the other unclean animals?

I assume that the whole list of unclean animals is proscribed for religious reasons; that is, any one in the list might be connected with non-Yahwistic worship. Origen saw this clearly when he ascribed the uncleanness of prohibited animals to their connection with demons.³ But this

¹ Kelim, i. 1.

² Kalisch, *Commentary on Leviticus* (1872), ii. p. 168.

³ *Contra Celsum*, iv. 93. I owe the citations to Kalisch (ii. p. 72), who refers to Theodoret, and among the moderns to Lengerke. Kalisch himself declines to adopt the theory.

brings us only a little way. It accounts for the prohibitions contained in the rest of our chapter but not for the extra precautions enjoined in this paragraph.

It would be advisable to find out first what the animals are. But this is a matter of no small difficulty. Six of the names occur nowhere else in the Old Testament. One name is found in two other passages, but there designates a bird which would evidently be out of place among these פָּרָשׁ, so that we have reason to suspect the soundness of our text. Our Authorized Version translates: "The weasel, and the mouse, and the tortoise after its kind, and the ferret, and the chameleon, and the lizard, and the snail, and the mole." The Revised Version accepts the weasel and the mouse, but changes the rest of the list into "and the great lizard after its kind, and the gecko, and the land crocodile, and the lizard, and the sand-lizard, and the chameleon." It is a question whether there is improvement here. Certainly we may criticise the *land crocodile* as a term calculated to give a wrong impression. It is of course based on the Greek *ὁ κροκόδειλος ὁ χερσαῖος*. But the Greek word *κροκόδειλος* originally designated a lizard of any kind. The fact that early travelers called the huge amphibian of the Nile a lizard hardly justifies us in calling a lizard a land crocodile.

As the translators confess that the meaning of nearly all these words is uncertain, we may fasten our attention on the one which is tolerably certain, that is the mouse. Is there any reason why the mouse should be regarded as specially unclean? To answer this question we have only to remember the pronounced hostility shown by the religion of Yahweh to the worship of the dead, and to recall the widespread superstition which connects the mouse with the souls of the departed. In many regions the soul is directly identified with the mouse. When the witch is asleep her soul issues from her body in the form of a red mouse.⁴ The belief is attested from so many regions that we may well suppose it to have existed among the Semites. The renegade Israelites

⁴ Schulze, *Psychologie der Naturvölker*, p. 74; Frazer, *Golden Bough*,¹ i. p. 256; *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, i. p. 523.

who lodge in the graves commune with the dead by eating the broth of abominable things (Isa. 65 4), and we may confidently include the mouse among these abominable things. In fact, it is mentioned in a passage of the same tenor (66 17).

It would be precarious to assume that the mouse was portrayed among other creeping things (שׂוֹרֵק) which were the objects of worship in the temple as late as the time of Ezekiel. But there was a tradition that golden images of mice were deposited in the sanctuary as votive offerings after a pestilence (1 Sam. 6 4). If this means that the mice had appeared in numbers in connection with the pestilence, which is not unlikely, the people would naturally see in them a confirmation of the popular belief — the souls of the dead were reappearing to seek their friends in their accustomed haunts. A Jewish tradition mentioned by Bochart says that he who eats of what the mouse has tasted forgets what he had learned; how much more he who eats the mice themselves! Is not this a faint reflection of the view which connects the mouse with ghosts? Forgetfulness is one of the attributes of the dead.

Why the mouse was identified with the ghost will be evident on reflection. The mouse is a night-roaming animal; it appears and disappears suddenly and mysteriously; it haunts houses; it seeks and yet shuns the company of man; it seems to come from the ground, the dwelling place of the shades; its voice is a squeak or chirp such as might plausibly be attributed to the disembodied spirit. In fact, the ghosts who are consulted by the necromancers give their responses in a chirp or twitter (Isa. 8 19; 29 4).⁵

I have already quoted the statement of a commentator to the effect that the pollution of these animals is second only to that produced by a human corpse. The reason is now clear. The mouse being a soul, or the second incarnation of a soul, is taboo just as a corpse is taboo. It is not necessary to determine why the corpse is taboo. The fact

⁵ Whether the mice sketched on certain Phœnician monuments (*CIS*, i. 1, p. 344) are evidences of this belief I will not attempt to say.

that the religion of Yahweh reacted strongly against everything connected with the souls of the dead explains the prohibition of the text. The dead mouse was less dangerous than the human corpse by one degree, but its defiling power was the same in kind. Food or drink which had come into contact with either was dangerous, and counteracted the sacredness which should characterize the people of Yahweh.

It is possible that our results thus far may help us to determine what the other animals of the list are. For it is not unreasonable to suppose that a similar superstition exists in the case of all. It is tolerably certain that one of the number was a lizard; probably more than one lizard is in the list. Now the lizard is an uncanny animal for the same reasons which exist in the case of the mouse. It lives in crevices in houses, comes forth and disappears unexpectedly, seems to court and yet to shun the company of man, often lurks about graves, utters unearthly sounds or what the imagination of man interprets as such. For these reasons it is associated with the spirits of the dead just as the mouse is. The soul of the witch may take this form as well as that of a mouse. The flesh of the lizard is used in magic rites as are fragments of human bodies. In Africa it is credited with power to discover the thief. Mohammed believed that lizards are descendants of disobedient Israelites, and the Bedawin still call the lizard the brother of man. These indications of ancient animistic belief show why the religion of Yahweh classes this animal with the mouse.⁶

The first name in our list is that of the ~~𐤀𐤍~~ which our version renders *weasel*, following the lead of the Greek, apparently corroborated by the Targums. Bochart argues at length for the *mole*, which is favored by Arabic and Syriac usage. The Talmud seems to allow us to render either *mole* or *weasel*, or perhaps the tradition, wishing to be on the safe side, included both animals under the word. It is of course improbable that two animals so different in habit were called by the same name. And if the resemblance to the mouse

⁶ Schulze, *Psychologie der Naturvölker*, pp. 225, 274, 277; Frazer, *Golden Bough*,² i. p. 256; Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, i. p. 326.

counts for anything, we should decide for the mole. The true mole is said to be unknown in Palestine, but there is a mole-rat which burrows underground like the true mole and is common about ruins and in the outskirts of villages.⁷ These habits put it into the same class with the mouse. So appropriate is the mole in this connection that the Greek translators found it later in the list. One wonders a little whether the house-rat so familiar to man does not belong here.

Of the mouse enough has been said, unless it is best to note that the second Targum specifies black, red, and white mice. Next in the list is the צב after its kind. The corresponding Arabic word designates a lizard, and this is doubtless the reason why the Revisers render *the great lizard*. The *qabb*, however, is a large lizard hunted and eaten by the Arabs, which does not haunt houses. It is doubtful, moreover, whether so many varieties of it were known in Palestine that the writer would feel obliged to caution his readers against 'its kinds.' The Greek gives us the *land-lizard* and omits the phrase *after its kinds*. The Targum has חַרְדוֹנָא , which the lexicons variously render *tortoise*, *lizard*, and *crocodile*. Our Authorized Version has *tortoise*. In our perplexity we may take refuge in a tradition represented by Rashi that the *toad* is the animal intended. We thus escape the necessity of enumerating five kinds of lizards, after mentioning the lizard after its kinds. The toad is one of the animals in which the souls of the dead embody themselves in popular tradition, and thus belongs in the same class with the mouse and the lizard. It has not lost its uncanny character even in modern times. It inhabits gardens if not houses, lurks in holes and crannies, and is especially active at night, all which gives opportunity to the imagination.

Concerning the other five names we can do little but 'note the difficulty and pass on.' The אַנְקָה is represented in the traditions by the *shrew-mouse* (Greek and Latin), the *hedgehog* (Rashi), the *ferret* (AV), the *gecko* (RV), the *toad* (Luzzatto), the *chameleon*, and the *spider*. What

⁷ I do not find *μυφίρα* in the lexicons. It is the reading of one manuscript according to the Cambridge Old Testament in Greek.

animals the Targums have in mind when they render **מִיִּנְקַת חוּיָא** and **פְּלִיַת חוּיָא** is not easy to make out. Onkelos gives us **יִלָּא**, which the lexicons define to be the *centipede* or the *blood-sucker*.

For the remaining names we have not quite such an embarrassment of riches, and the most of the renderings already quoted recur as equivalents for one or other of the Hebrew words in our list. For the sake of completeness we may add the *newt*, the *skink* (a kind of lizard), the *frog*, the *tortoise*, the *salamander*, the *sand-lizard*, and the *snail*. Some of these are improbable because we have other Hebrew words for them, as the *hedgehog* and the *frog*. One suggestion I will venture to make though I am aware that it rests on a slender basis. As was remarked above one name in this list (**תְּנִשְׁמַת**) occurs also in the list of unclean birds. This would seem to make it impossible here in the class of **שָׂרָץ** were it not for the fact that there is one animal which partakes of the nature of a bird and of that of a reptile—to the common man, that is. This is of course the bat. And while I have no direct assertion to quote proving that the bat is ever thought to be a returning spirit, I think it altogether probable that such a belief exists or has existed. It is to be observed, on the authority of Professor Bacon, that in Palestine the chief habitat of the bat is the tombs; with which cf. Isa. 2 20. This fact would of course strengthen my argument. The bat indeed seems to lend itself to just such a superstition. The only objection to finding it in our text is that we have another Hebrew word for it. But as there are several species of bat in Palestine this objection is not conclusive.

What I have tried to show is that this list of specially unclean animals adds to the evidence already in our possession that the worship of spirits of deceased men was a part of the primitive religion of Israel.