

RABIES IN THE TALMUD

by

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Rabies (hydrophobia) is a disease of great antiquity having been described in the pre-Mosaic Eshnunna Code of ancient Mesopotamia approximately 4000 years ago, as follows: "If a dog is vicious and the ward authorities have had [the fact] made known to its owner, but he does not keep it in, it bites a man and causes [his] death, then the owner of the dog shall pay 2/3 of a mina of silver".^{1,2} The disease was more specifically described by Democritus in the fifth century B.C. and later by Aristotle^{1,2} Galen^{1,2,3} and Celsus.^{2,4} The disease was known to Rufus of Ephesus in the second century,⁵ Oribasius in the fourth century⁶ and Aetius of Amida in the sixth century.⁷

Major progress in the understanding and treatment of rabies was made with Louis Pasteur's description of preventive vaccination in 1885, and the discovery in 1903 by Adelchi Negri of cell inclusions, staining deeply with methylene blue eosin, in the central nervous system of patients afflicted by hydrophobia.

The present essay is an examination of the Talmudic quotations dealing with the bite of a mad dog, the description of the symptomatology of such a rabid dog, and the recommended cures for one bitten by such a dog. It is impossible to ascertain with any degree of certainty what influence, if any, ancient references to rabies, particularly the Eshnunna Code, had on the following Talmudic opinions and statements.

The Babylonian Talmud (*Mishnah Yoma* 8:6) states as follows: "... if one is bitten by a mad dog, he may not be given the lobe of its liver to eat, but Rabbi Matthia ben Heresh permits it . . .". The therapeutic use of parts of the rabid animal, particularly the liver, for individuals bitten by such an animal, was recommended by many ancient physicians including Dioscorides, Galen and others.⁸ In the Talmud, only Rabbi Matthia ben Heresh, who lived in Rome, advocates this type of therapy, since he believed in its curative value, (perhaps a forerunner of modern homeopathy), and hence permitted the consumption of the liver of the rabid animal by the patient. The other sages of the *Mishnah* consider it useless, deny its curative value, and hence prohibit its use since it is derived from a non-Kosher animal.

The Talmud continues (*Yoma* 83b) with the following description of a rabid animal:

Our Rabbis taught that five things were mentioned in connection with a mad dog: its mouth is open, its saliva is dripping, its ears flap, its tail hangs between its thighs, and it walks on the edge of the road. Some say it also barks without its voice being heard. Where does it [the dog's

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madness] come from? Rab said witches are having their fun with the dog. Samuel said an evil spirit rests on it. . . .

The Talmudic discussion then mentions that even if a person only rubs against the mad dog, there is danger, and he should remove and destroy his clothes. Samuel further said that one should kill it by throwing something at it, avoiding direct contact with the rabid animal. From these Talmudic statements, it is obvious that the etiology of rabies was not at all understood, although the symptomatology was correctly recognized.

The treatment for someone bitten by a mad dog is detailed in the Talmud (*Yoma* 84a) as follows:

What is the remedy [for the bite of a mad dog?] Abaye said Let him take the skin of a male hyena (or leopard) and write upon it: I, so and so, the son of that and that woman, write upon the skin of a male hyena *Kanti, kanti, kloros, G'd. G'd, Lord of Hosts, Amen, Amen, Selah*. Then let him strip off his clothes and bury them in a grave at the crossroads for 12 months of a year. Then he should take them out and burn them in an oven, and scatter the ashes. During the 12 months, if he drinks water, he shall not drink it but out of a copper tube, lest he see the shadow of the demon and be endangered. Thus the mother of Abba ben Martha who is Abba ben Minyumi, made for him a tube of gold [for drinking purposes].

The reason for the copper tube is explained by Preuss⁸ and Epstein:⁹ otherwise the patient would see the reflection of the mad dog in the water, and would be further endangered by cramps in the throat and inability to drink, i.e. hydrophobia.

The Jerusalem Talmud (*Yoma* 8:5) relates that *Rebbe* (Rabbi Judah the Patriarch) gave "liver" to his germanic servant who was bitten by a mad dog, but in vain. The effort was futile and the patient died, from which the Talmud concludes that "let no man tell you that he was bitten by a mad dog and lived". This quotation is also found elsewhere in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Berachoth* 8:5).

A final quotation dealing with the bite of a mad dog is found in the Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbath* 121b):

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: All animals that cause injury [i.e. kill] may be killed [even] on the Sabbath. Rabbi Joseph objected. Five may be killed on the Sabbath, and these are they: the Egyptian fly, the hornet of Nineweh, the scorpion of Adiabene, the snake in Palestine, and a mad dog anywhere. . . .

The above ruling is codified by Maimonides¹⁰ and Karo.¹¹ Other animal bites are mentioned in the Talmud (*Yoma* 49a, *Chullin* 7b, *Baba Kamma* 84a) but the wound inflicted was probably not associated with rabies. Furthermore, snake bites are frequently discussed in the Talmud but the poisons injected by the venomous snakes do not produce the clinical picture of what is today known as rabies or hydrophobia.

It seems appropriate to conclude with a quotation from Moses Maimonides' *Treatise on poisons*¹² written in the year 1198, wherein he not only depicts the signs and symptoms of rabies and the treatment, but in which he recognizes the long incubation period:¹³

On mad dogs. The early physicians already noted the varied character of a mad dog's symptoms . . . The mad dog always wanders about by himself, in a roundabout way, leaning on walls and

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never barking . . . Everything mentioned in the literature against the bite of a mad dog is useful, if at all, only when applied before rabies sets in. When such is the case I have as yet seen nobody who escaped with his life. A person bitten by a mad dog does not always experience greater pain than that following the bite of a normal dog. The dangerous symptoms indicating rabies appear as a rule only after eight days, sometimes even much later. It therefore follows that anybody bitten by a stray [insane] dog should adhere to the general rules, that is bandaging, incision, sucking out, copious bloodletting from the affected spot by means of cupping glasses, vomiting, and treatment by theriac. Then he should follow the directions bearing on the eventual application of the remedies against the bite of mad dogs, which I am about to enumerate . . . Rhamnus infectoria-Lycium hindi—of which half a siklus should be taken daily in cold water. Another remedy: Gentiana lutea, crushed and sifted, 1 siklus daily in cold water. Best of all are river crab, roasted, ground and sifted, the ashes mixed with water and taken daily 1 dram a day . . .

The exciting conclusion of Maimonides' lengthy discussion on the therapeutics of rabies concerns the story of a weaver's boy who was bitten by a dog. There was no indication that it was a mad dog and, therefore, the physicians closed the wound at the end of a month. The boy recovered from the bite but "a long time afterwards", the boy developed the usual symptoms of rabies and died.

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