

S8: Does the Bible teach that snakes once walked?

Genesis 2:13-15 records Gods curse on the clever serpent after her nefarious role in the garden story:

“Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.”



Some Biblical interpreters have thought that this implies snakes must have once walked until God cursed them. After all, if snakes were limbless and already slithered on their bellies, what kind of curse is this? What kind of punishment is grounding a child when the child is already grounded? Interestingly enough, due to some fossil evidence, scientists believe ancient snakes did walk. We can even see what scientists call vestigial structures on the bellies of some snakes today. The image above from Wikipedia is an example of pelvic spurs on a snake or vestigial legs. These are remnants of evolution that have generally lost most if not all of their function today. Think wisdom teeth or our tailbones as human examples.

Is the Bible then shown to possess scientific knowledge well ahead of its time? Not unless we are willing to push the Garden story back over 100 million years to a time when snakes actually had limbs. This certainly did not occur 6,000 years ago. Derek Kidner writes, “These words do not imply that hitherto serpents had not been reptiles . . . but that the crawling is henceforth symbolic (cf. Isa. 65:25) – just as in 9:13 a new significance, not new existence, will be decreed for the rainbow.” Bill Arnold writes:

“This curse does not mean the serpent once walked upright with legs anymore than it wants the reader to assume the serpent will now literally eat dust as opposed to its previous fare. Rather these are idioms for humiliation. The serpent, who had been characterized as the shrewdest of all the animals, will now become the most humble. The changed relationship is between the offspring of the woman and that of the serpent, which relationship will henceforth be marred by enmity (3:15).”

The same exegetical logic that would require snakes to have walked would also require a current diet of dust. Unless we have a valid reason to think the first part of the curse was not an idiom while the second one was, we must reject the idea that the Bible gets snake evolution correct. Besides, even though in the distant past snakes did walk, the same cannot be said of their ability to talk!