



Available online at www.mikelanderson.com

No. 1

May 2009

Fiery serpents and vile worms Mike L Anderson

The Son of God believed that living things could point us to God. He said birds "do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"¹ Birds point us to Jehovah-Jireh - God as provider.

So much for birds. But not all things are bright and beautiful. What about the creatures that are more loathsome than lovely?

A Monty Python song puts the matter in blunt relief:

"All things dull and ugly,
All creatures short and squat,
All things rude and nasty,
The Lord God made the lot."

How do we relate vermin to our loving heavenly Father? Jesus seems to intimate something about this. Before looking at what he said, let us examine the Old Testament passage to which he refers.

Fiery serpents

"They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out

of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

Then the LORD sent venomous [actually fiery] snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived".²

What exactly are these fiery serpents?

Vile worms

Based on the symptoms and geographical location, most parasitologists accept that these "fiery serpents" were not reptiles at all, but parasitic nematodes called Guinea worms.³ Humans contract the debilitating disease by drinking unfiltered water containing larvae-infected copepods. The juveniles burrow into intestinal tissues and reproduce. The offspring are the final-stage worms. Females migrate to the skin. As they emerge a blister forms causing an excruciatingly painful, burning sensation.⁴ The name for the disease, dracunculiasis, means "affliction with little dragons".⁵

When the ancients use the term snake, we should not make the mistake of thinking they were being zoologically particular. The Greek Agatharchidas in the second century BC, long after the incident recorded by the Israelites, gave a description matching the symptoms of Guinea worm, but called the creatures "little snakes".⁶ Remember too that the Israelites lumped bats with birds.⁷ At up to a metre in length, Guinea worms are longer than many snakes. We can understand if the ancients had trouble classifying it.

Attempts have been made to absolve the Guinea worm on the grounds that dracontiasis is unlikely to cause such a high mortality.⁸ But the "fiery serpents" had little accomplices. Guinea worms cause secondary infections such as tetanus and gangrene that are a grave risk particularly in a world untouched by the benefits of modern medicine. Also, the parasite may well have been less evolved and more dangerous in the past. (Parasites often

become more benign since they do not benefit from killing off their host). And in defence of snakes, they do not typically go after people *en masse*. Parasites do.

Bronze serpent on a pole

It has been said, "If there's anything in nature that might call God's plan into question, it's the guinea worm".⁹ Another online magazine goes further asking, "Are you carrying around some vestigial conviction that God is good, or that Nature loves you? We guarantee that our newest Schopenhauer Award nominee, the Guinea Worm, will fix that in one easy lesson".¹⁰ How can our loving heavenly Father let Guinea worms feed on us? The creature is certainly incompatible with a designer (it evolved from free-living forms¹¹). But is it incompatible with the Benevolent Creator revealed in Jesus and the Bible?

If the Israelites were plagued by Guinea worms, then the bronze serpent on a pole suggested a treatment.¹² It was a revolutionary idea. The ancients would have felt despairingly helpless against the creature. The serpent wrapped around the pole gave people a simple way to deal with the parasite; you coiled it up using a stick. The bronze serpent on a pole worked as a visual aid showing that humans could do something about disease. Unlike using say snake oil against gout, the stick is a demonstrably effective treatment. Through Moses, God in his mercy inspired the people against the disease and sanctified the use of medical tools to eradicate parasites. Though simple, the stick has successfully treated dracunculiasis since antiquity.

Humans have done something about disease. The Guinea worm scourge is on the verge of being relegated to history. In 1986 there were 3.5 million cases reported globally in twenty countries. Last year it was down to less than five thousand in six countries!¹³ The remarkable thing about this story is that it has come about with a very limited budget and very largely by persuading people to use simple technologies and changing their behaviour.¹⁴

A man on a tree

If Guinea worms did plague the Israelites, then what was Jesus doing allowing a parasite to symbolise him!

He said, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."¹⁵

Is a parasitic worm really any worse than a snake? The traditional serpent represented Satan himself in the Garden of Eden. So how could a serpent represent the Son of God? It has been said, "...calling Christ our "healing serpent" offends us royally."¹⁶ Either way we have a demonstration of the incredible humility of God. Martin Luther was able to say of Christ, "He must have the form of a serpent; but even if He were still more repugnant to the eye and resembled a devil or vile worm, ... I look upon Him as my Savior."¹⁷

The parasite on a pole points us towards the work of Jesus on the cross.

Jesus allowed the human race to treat him like a worm, wrapping him around a tree. He revealed once and for all that God is not impervious to human suffering, but was prepared to go through it himself. Just as the parasite was wrapped around the pole and died for the sake of the patient, so Jesus was tied to the cross and died for his spiritual patients.

But why on a cross? If God let Jesus die of old age, would his death have been any less efficacious for our redemption? In his wisdom, God chose Christ on a cross, a very public visual aid of the power of God's plan of redemption and the extraordinary extent of his sacrificial love. It worked. To this day Christ on the cross persuades many, many to come to him to be forgiven, to find spiritual life and to do something for others. One person that was so persuaded was former USA president, Jimmy Carter, who said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "I worship Jesus Christ."¹⁸ He and his wife Rosalynn founded the centre that has led the global campaign to eradicate Guinea worm.¹⁹

Extracting God's plan from the origin of the Guinea worm (or our own personal suffering) is far too parochial. When Jesus mentions the serpent on a pole in the desert, it is to point us to a Great Plan. His plan did not begin and end with the origin of the fiery serpents, but continues right through to their demise. It most especially includes the demise of his very own Son so that we might have eternal life. Is a parasitic worm on a stick really any more ugly than a tortured man on a cross? Yet our loving heavenly Father has achieved our redemption out of the crucifixion. God is working to this day to make all things bright and beautiful.

If you found this article helpful please give it to someone else.

Mike L Anderson, Ph.D. (Philosophy of Evolutionary Biology) is a writer, speaker and educational software developer focusing especially on Jesus and evolution. He is married to Janice and they three children.

Editor: Rachel C Anderson Email:rachel@@mikelanderson.com

Copyright (2009) held by the author. The article may be freely copied on condition it is done so in its entirety without alteration and free of charge.

To subscribe to "Consider the Creatures" put "subscribe ctc" in the subject line of an e-mail message to: "ctc@mikelanderson.com"

To unsubscribe to "Consider the Creatures" put "unsubscribe ctc" in the subject line of an e-mail message to: "ctc@mikelanderson.com"

P O Box 218, Betty's Bay, 7141, South Africa
E-mail: mike@mikelanderson.com www.mikelanderson.com

Board: Dr A Potts, Revd R Anderson, M Koegelenberg, S Peacock (CA)SA
Bank Details: Mike Anderson Donation Account, Standard Bank,
Rondebosch, Account No: 075594404, Branch Code: 25009,
Savings Account, PlusPlan SME

Notes

¹ Matthew 6:26-27. This does not mean that Jesus believed that nature alone could unambiguously reveal God. He presumed a background of special revelation.

² Numbers 21:4-9.

³ Cox, F.E.G. (2002) History of Human Parasitology. *Clinical Microbiology Reviews* 15(4):595-612.

⁴ Ballantyne, C. (2008) What is Guinea Worm Disease? *Scientific American*, December 8, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=what-is-guinea-worm-disease>

⁵ Barry, M. (2007) The Tail End of Guinea Worm - Global Eradication without a Drug or a Vaccine. *The New England Journal of Medicine* 356 (25): 2561-2564.

⁶ Schmidt, G.D. and L.S. Roberts (1989) *Foundations of Parasitology* Tim Mirror/ Mosby College Publishing, Missouri, USA, p.482.

⁷ Leviticus 11:19.

⁸ Adamson, P.B.(1988) Dracontiasis in antiquity. *Medical History* 32:204-209.

-
- ⁹ Paulson, T (2001) Plotting the end of guinea worm disease. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* <http://www.seattlepi.com/africa/worm23.shtml>
- ¹⁰ Anonymous, (2003) Prince of Parasites: the Guinea Worm. *The exile* http://www.exile.ru/articles/detail.php?ARTICLE_ID=6877&IBLOCK_ID=35&phrase_id=21487
- ¹¹ Blaxter, M.L. (1998) A molecular evolutionary framework for the phylum Nematoda. *Nature* 392: 71-75.
- ¹² Schmidt, G.D. *Ibid.*, p.486.
- ¹³ Staub, E. (2008) Guinea Worm Cases Hit All-Time Low: Carter Center, WHO, Gates Foundation, and U.K. Government Commit \$55 Million Toward Ultimate Eradication Goal. http://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/gates_120508.html
- ¹⁴ Barry, M. (2007) *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ John 3:14-15.
- ¹⁶ Marshall, R.F. (2001) Our Serpent of Salvation: The Offense of Jesus in John's Gospel. *Word & World* 21(4):385-393.
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Marshall, R.F. (2001) *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Text from the Nobel lecture given by The Nobel Peace Prize laureate for 2002, Jimmy Carter in Oslo, Dec. 10, 2002. <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/jec/nobel.phtml>
- ¹⁹ Ballantyne, C. (2008) *Ibid.*, Barry, M. (2007) *Ibid.*