

CLARIFYING  
BAFFLING  
BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER ONE

“REPTILE RATIONS IN  
GENESIS 3:14 AND ISAIAH  
65:25”

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# I

## REPTILE RATIONS IN GENESIS 3:14 AND ISAIAH 65:25

### INTRODUCTION

In Akkadian “eating dust” to indicate humiliation or defeat has essentially the same meaning as Hebrew “licking the dust” or putting one’s face or mouth in the dust, as in Isa. 49: 23, **וְעֵפֶר רְגְלֶיךָ יִלְחֲכוּ, אַפִּים אָרֶץ** “with their faces to the ground . . . they shall lick the dust of your feet,” and Lam 3:29, **יִתֵּן בְּעָפֶר פִּיהוּ** “let him put his mouth in the dust.” Seven examples are cited in *CAD*<sup>1</sup> under *eperu*, including, “let our enemies see (this) and eat dust (i.e., be defeated),” “dust shall be their food, pitch their ointment, sheep’s urine their drink,” and “. . . (in the nether world) where their sustenance is dust (and clay their food).” But in Hebrew **עֵפֶר אָכַל** “eating dust” was not the equivalent of “licking the dust” or “biting the dust.” Hebrew **עֵפֶר אָכַל** pertained to a diet, and early translators understood it quite literally. The curse in Gen 3:14, **וְעֵפֶר תֹּאכַל**, became *καὶ γῆν φάγη* in the Septuagint, and the Targums have simply **וְעֵפְרָא תִיכּוּל** (Pseudo-Jonathan and Onkelos) or **יְהוּי מְזוּנָךְ וְעֵפְרָא** (Neophyti). Likewise, in Isa 65:25 MT **וְנָחַשׁ עֵפֶר לְחֻמוֹ** “a serpent dust (is) his food” became *ὄφις δὲ γῆν ὡς ἄρτον* in the Septuagint, and Targum Jonathan rendered the phrase **וְחַיָּא עֵפְרָא מְזוּנִיָּה**.<sup>2</sup>

However, when **עֵפֶר אָכַל** is taken literally rather than being read as an expression of humiliation, the texts under review become problematic since snakes, being carnivores, do

not diet on dust. The rodents or insects snakes ingest may be dirty or dusty, but no dirtier than the hay oxen eat or the grass cows chew. Dirt and dust were never the serpent's "daily bread." The audience for whom Gen 3:14 was first intended would have surely concluded that the serpent had proven itself immune from the curse of eating dust since it was obviously a carnivorous creature.

Moreover, there is tension, if not contradiction, between the curse in Gen 3:14 requiring snakes to eat עֹפָר and the assertion in Isa 65:25 that in the coming peaceable kingdom snakes will be able to eat עֹפָר. Although van Ruiten (1992: 31–42)<sup>3</sup> has argued that the expression "eating dust," like the expression "licking the dust," contains an element of curse, there is no evidence to support the claim that Trito-Isaiah wanted to perpetuate the curse about the serpent's food and introduce a new *curse* making lions into straw-eating herbivores.<sup>4</sup> Hos 2:20 (English 2:18) makes it quite clear that the new covenant of peace would be a blessing for every creature, including the רֶמֶשׂ הָאֲדָמָה "creeping creature" (which surely included snakes) and the חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה "beast of the field" (which, according to Gen 3:1, included the serpent).

Given these difficulties, which cannot be dismissed simply by claiming that Isa 65:25c is a gloss (see *BHS*), the question to be addressed is whether there is another possible way of understanding עֹפָר other than "dust" which would permit a better interpretation of Gen 3:14, Isa 11:7, and Isa 65:25, as well as help in a reassessment of critical conclusions about the integrity of Isa 65:25c.

The commentators have not addressed the fact that the serpent's diet of עֹפָר did not reflect the real world in the

same way in which the curse of עֲצָבוֹן “sorrow, pain” reflected the reality of Adam and Eve’s progeny in their productive and reproductive endeavors. The possibility of עֶפֶר having some other meaning in these texts was never broached, as a sampling of critical opinion on Gen 3:14 and Isa 65:25 demonstrates.<sup>5</sup>

In reference to Gen 3:14, Skinner (1930: 79) cited Mic 7:17, יִלְחֲכוּ עֶפֶר כְּנֹחָשׁ כְּזֹחֲלֵי אֶרֶץ, “they shall lick the dust like a serpent, like the crawling things of the earth” and Isa 65:25, וְאִרְיֵה כְּבָקָר יֹאכַל-תֵּבֶן וְנָחַשׁ עֶפֶר לַחֲמוֹ, “the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent’s food.” Disagreeing with other critics, he preferred a literal meaning, stating:

It is a prosaic explanation to say that the serpent, crawling on the ground, inadvertently swallows a good deal of dust (Boch. *Hieroz.* iii. 245; Di. al.); and a mere metaphor for humiliation (like Ass. *ti-ka-lu ip-ra*; *KIB*, v. 232f.) is too weak a sense for this passage. Probably it is a piece of ancient superstition, like the Arabian notion that the *ḡinn* eat dirt (We. *Heid.* 150).<sup>6</sup>

Speiser (1964: 22) translated “on dirt shall you feed” (as though there were a preposition in the clause) but offered no comment as to whether he meant “dirt you shall feed on” or if he was changing עֶפֶר from being the serpent’s diet to the place where the serpent ate. Similarly, von Rad (1961b: 89) noted, “It [the serpent] appears to live from the dust in which it hisses,” thereby dismissing the diet of dust in exchange for the serpent’s dusty habitat.<sup>7</sup> Sarna (1989: 27) also called attention to Mic 7:17, Psa 72:9, and Isa 49:2–3 (“He made my mouth like a sharp sword . . .”), stating in light of these texts, “. . . [the serpent’s] flickering tongue appears to lick dust,” as

if “licking dust” were the same as “swallowing dust” or “speaking” with a sharp tongue.

The commentators on Isaiah 65 have not been any more helpful in addressing the issues raised.<sup>8</sup> Torrey (1928: 470–471) argued that Isa 11:7 borrowed from Isa 65:25, commenting

the parenthetical allusion to the serpent’s food (!) is another example of the writer’s sly humor which is likely to appear suddenly. As he thinks here of the improved diet of once dangerous beasts, Gen 3:14 comes into his mind and he adds the reflection ‘No change for the old serpent!’

Smart (1965: 281) side stepped the issue by making Isa 65:25 a gloss from 11:7, asserting that 65:24 was the conclusion of the chapter since

it seems more likely that Second Isaiah would have concluded the picture of the servants’ felicity with a promise of God’s readiness to help rather than with a general description of wild beasts at peace with each other in all Palestine.

Westermann (1969: 410) similarly concluded

The passage might well have ended with v. 24. Verse 25 follows on somewhat abruptly and does not entirely suit what precedes it . . . . There [Isaiah xi 6–9], the peace among the animal-world is depicted with broader strokes of the brush and in greater detail; it is generally assumed that 65:25 is a quotation of Isa. 11.

Young (1972: 517) observed only, “[the] *Serpent* on this construction is a *casus pendens*. B [Codex Vaticanus =] ὄφις δὲ γῆν ὡς ἄρτον.” Whybray (1975: 278–279) provided the lengthiest commentary, stating

This [v. 25] is a condensed version of 11:6–9. . . . and dust shall be the serpent’s food: it is probably useless to seek a logical link between this phrase and the rest of the verse. It

impairs the metrical structure, and its allusion to the eating habits of animals seems to be its only link with the context. It is a gloss based on Gen 3:14.

Ridderbos (1985: 572) conjectured, “The allusion [of dust being the serpent’s food] is evidently to Genesis 3:14; the implication seems to be that the serpent will submit to its curse without hurting human beings anymore.” But this interpretation, which follows several nineteenth-century proposals cited by Alexander (1875: 455), begs the question for the enmity between snakes and humans was very real long before post-exilic times, but snakes subsisting on עֶפֶר “dust” was as unreal then as now.

### CLUES FROM ARABIC COGNATES

Two unrecognized Arabic cognates of עֶפֶר provide a more reasonable interpretation of Gen 3:14 and Isa 65:25. Hebrew lexicographers have long recognized the stems עֶפֶר I “dry earth, dust” and עֶפֶר II “young hart, stag” (the former being cognate to Arabic عَفْر (*‘afar*) and the latter to غُفْر (*‘gufr*). But until now they have not recognized עֶפֶר III, cognate with Arabic غُفْر (*‘gfr*), which Lane (1867: 842; 1877: 2274) defined as “[the غُفْر (*‘gifr*) is] a certain دَوَيْبَةَ (*duwaybbat*) [by which may be meant a small beast or creeping thing, or an insect]” i.e., a synonym of دَابَّة (*dābbat*) about which Lane noted “The dim. [signifying *Any small animal that walks or creeps or crawls upon the earth, a small beast, a small reptile or creeping thing, a creeping insect, and any insect, and also a mollusk, . . .*] دَوَيْبَةَ (*duwaybbat*).”

This definition of غُفْر (*‘gifr*) certainly fits the Hebrew עֶפֶר in Gen 3:14. Although a few snakes can swallow a small stag

or young hart (= עפר II), many more can devour smaller creatures like rabbits, rodents, or insects (= עפר III = دويبة *duwaybbat*). Consequently, in light of the Arabic cognate غفر (*ġifr*) it seems reasonable to translate וְעָפָר תֹאכֵל in Gen 3:14 as “rodents shall you eat,” or the like, a translation which corresponds to reality and indicates an etiological element in the narrative.

In addition, Arabic غفر (*ġfr*) may be read not only as *ġifr* but also as *ġafar*, the Hebrew cognate of which can be labeled as עפר IV. Lane defines غفر (*ġafar*) as

Small herbage . . . [or] a sort of small sprouting herbage, of the [season called] ربيع (*rabîʿ*) growing in plain, or soft, land, and upon the [eminences termed] آكام (*ʿakâm*) . . . (which) when green, resembling green passerine birds standing; and when it is dried up, resembling such as are red, not standing.

This definition of غفر (*ġafar*) (= עפר IV) fits well the cognate עפר in Isa 65:25.

Since some may consider these suggestions for Hebrew stems עפר III and IV the result of “fishing about” in the Arabic lexicon,<sup>9</sup> traditions in Megillah 18<sup>a-b</sup> and Rosh Hashanah 26<sup>a-b</sup> need to be kept in mind. They speak of biblical and Mishnaic words “of which our teachers did not know the meaning . . . (לא הוו ידעי רבנן מאי)” until the words were heard being used by Arabs in the marketplace and by handmaids in the household of the Rabbi.<sup>10</sup>

If the עפר in Isa 65:25 is stem IV and cognate with Arabic غفر (*ġafar*), the phrase וְנָחַשׁ עָפָר לְחִמּוֹ can be translated “sprouts (will be) the serpent’s food,” or the like. Thus, the prophetic vision of the peaceable kingdom anticipated lions

and snakes being transformed from carnivores to herbivores, admitting that some of the plants may have animal-like or bird-like appearances—if the Arabic nuances of *غفر* (*ḡafar*) were also true of Trito-Isaiah's *עפר*. For Trito-Isaiah, all creatures—serpents, snakes, and reptiles included—would be free from the curse of their own predacious behavior and the predatoriness of others.

If the poetry of Trito-Isaiah was originally oral poetry, free from the ambiguities of homographs, an effective wordplay would have been transparent: serpents which ordinarily feasted on *עפְרִים* “small creatures” would dine in the new age only on *עפְרִים* “sprouting vegetation.” Unfortunately, the voiced velar fricative (ע = *ḡ*) was lost in the spelling—even if retained in speech—having merged with the voiced pharyngeal fricative (ע = *ʿ*),<sup>11</sup> resulting in the homophones *עפָר* “dust,” and *עפָר* “sprouting plant” and the homographs *עפר*, stems I, II, III, and IV, noted already. Had the poet been controlled by post-exilic orthographic canons, it seems very unlikely that the ambiguous *עפר* would have been used without a clarifying modifier.

With the *غفر* (*ḡfr*) and *عفر* (*ʿfr*) Arabic cognates in mind, we can prepare a more realistic menu for the serpent mentioned in Gen 3:14 and in Isa 65:25. Since Hebrew *עפר* can equal the Arabic *غفر* (*ḡfr*) as well as *عفر* (*ʿfr*), it could have meant dirt, dust, crawling creatures, or sprouting vegetation. However, contextually, the *עפר* “entrée” in Gen 3:14 is best understood as a collective noun meaning “small crawling or creeping creatures.” But the context of Isa 65:25 suggests that the “entrée” there was some sort of “sprouting vegetation.”<sup>12</sup> When so read, these verses are no longer at odds with each

other, and Gen 3:14 is consistent with the observable eating habits of snakes and reptiles.

The question of the priority of Isa 11:7 or 65:25 remains open. I agree with van Ruiten and others who have argued for the priority of Isa 11:7. However, there is no longer sufficient justification to isolate Isa 65:25c as a late addition. When read as a term for sprouting vegetation, עֵפֶר (stem IV) is the synonymous parallel of תִּבְנֵן, “straw,” matching the parallelism of the lion and the serpent. Since glossators seldom transformed bi-colons into fully synonymous tri-colons, the third colon was no doubt in the original poetic line. Trito-Isaiah’s point in 65:25 appears to have been that the transformation of all carnivores into herbivores will restore Eden’s harmonious coexistence for all creatures. Serpents will participate in the restoration of the Edenic vegetarian diet (Gen 1 29a) by shifting, so to speak, from eating *hares* to eating *herbs*.

### NOTES

1. *CAD* 4: 184–190, especially 186. For studies which focus on dust, see Hillers (1987: 105–109) and Rainey (1974: 77–83).
2. For the Septuagint references see Zeigler (1939: 365) and Wevers (1974: 92); for the Targums see Berliner (1884: 2); Stenning (1949: 218–219); Díez Macho (1968: 15); Wevers (1974: 92); Aberbach, M. and B. Grossfeld (1982: 37); Clarke and Aufrecht (1984: 4); and *The Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch: Codex Vatican (Neofiti I)*, Jerusalem: Makor, 1979, Volume I: 7.
3. See especially van Ruiten 1992: 41–42.

4. van Ruiten (1992: 41) concluded,

The grazing of the wolf, the eating straw of the lion can be interpreted as curses for these predatory animals. At the same time these curses are blessings for the domesticated animals, the lamb and the ox. . . . It is not the harmony between the strong and the weak, which is the most important point In (*sic*) Isa 65, 25, but the righteous judgment in which the curse for the strong will be a blessing for the weak.

However, van Ruiten introduced his study with the assertion, “. . . the harmonious state of the animal world reflects the perfect relationship between YHWH and his servants, described in v. 24. This relationship results in the disappearance of evil and ruin from the holy mountain.” One must ask, therefore, how the *perfect relationship* of the new cosmos can be structured—without evil—on a paradigm of curses for the strong and blessings for the weak? The tension between Isa 11:7 and 65:25 was removed by van Ruiten, but in the process Trito-Isaiah is made to envision a new cosmos which is less than perfect.

5. See van Ruiten 1992: 31–32 for bibliography and a summary of critical opinion on redactional issues relative to Isa 11:6–9 and 65:25.

6. The abbreviations used by Skinner are for S. Bochartus, *Hierozoicon, sive bipertitum opus de animalibus Sacrae Scripturae*, edited by E. F. K. Rosenmüller (1793–1796, vol. 3, p. 245); A. Dillmann, *Die Genesis*, Kurtzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament, sixth edition, 1892: 533; E. Schrader, *Keilinschriftliche Bibliothek*, 1889: 232–233; and J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, second edition, 1897: 150.

7. von Rad (1961a: 74) stated, “*Woher diese Lebensweise; vom Staube, in dem sie züngelt, scheint sie sich zu nähren* (Jes. 65,25; Mi 7,17).”

8. See note 5, above.

9. Compare L. E. Stager (1986: 225) who critiqued Craigie’s translation (1971: 349–352) of פָּרָזַן in Jud 5:7 as “warrior.” Stager noted in disagreement, “Craigie has gone fishing for etymologies in the vast reservoir of Arabic and hooked a root (*baraza*, ‘going forth to battle’). . . .”

10. *Babylonian Talmud: Megillah* 18<sup>a-b</sup> (Epstein 1938: 111–112) and *Rosh Hashanah* 26<sup>a-b</sup> (Epstein 1938: 118–119). For other examples, see Barr (1968: 56–58, 268), noting especially his statement that

. . . the ancient translators did their task remarkably well, considering the circumstances. Their grasp of Hebrew, however, was very often a grasp of that which is *average* and *customary* in Hebrew. . . . there was a strong tendency towards the levelling of the vocabulary and the interpretation of that which was rare as if it was that which was more normal.

Barr’s words are true for many more recent interpretations and translations. For other examples of using Arabic cognates to resolve long-standing cruces in the Biblical text, see McDaniel 1983: 262–264 and 397–398; McDaniel 2002: 236–237 and 339–341, and the following chapters in this volume.

11. Sáenz-Badillos (1993: 69) noted that the date of the neutralization of velar and pharyngeal phonemes, including *‘ayin* (ع) and *‘gayin* (غ), is unclear since the difference between these phonemes was still felt at the time of the Septuagint translation.

12. The possible cognates are not exhausted by the definitions cited here. See Lane 1877: 2089 for *عفر* (*ʿipr*) “a boar, a swine” and *عفر* (*ʿipir*) “wicked, crafty, evil” and 1874: 2274 for *غفر* (*ḡifr*) “the young of a cow” and *مغفیر / مغافیر* (*mīḡfir / maḡâfir*) “mellon, manna, honey,” with the latter meanings being attractive alternatives for Isa 65:25.