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EENY MEENY MINY MOE
WHO IS THE CRAFTIEST TO GO?
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WHO IS THE CRAFTIEST TO GO?

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The snake was the snake –
No more; and yet not less than those he tempted,
In nature being earth also – more in wisdom,
Since he could overcome them, and foreknow
The knowledge fatal to their narrow joys.¹

According to the opening of Genesis 3, the snake is the craftiest being among all living creatures made by God.² Nevertheless, the whole eating-of-the-forbidden-fruit act cannot be hidden and results in a fitting punishment for all three players involved: the snake, the woman, and the man.³ In this article, I will concentrate on the curse addressed to the snake as it occurs in Gen 3:15b. I will argue that the lexical and grammatical ambiguity, which has caused commentators to keep on revisiting the passage, forms a linguistic-literary answer of the divine character to the serpent’s cunningness. First, I will focus on the traditional renderings and the recognized difficulties in the verse. I will continue elaborating on the ambiguities and suggest other readings, based on thematic and verbal parallels elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. In conclusion, I will suggest a possible narratological function of the double tongue.

TRADITIONAL RENDERING AND DIFFICULTIES
The traditional rendering of יהוושפף ראש אאות השופף עקבה reflects this interpretation:

He (=son of Woman) shall bruise you (= snake) on behalf of the head

¹ Harding Grant (ed), Lord Byron’s Cain, a Mystery, with Notes (London: William Crofts, 1830), 115.
² אלהים יהוה עשה אשר השדה חית מכל ערום היה והנחש אカラー, “and the snake was the craftiest among all living beings of the field that LORD God had made” (Gen 3:1).
And you (=snake) shall bruise him (=son of Woman) on behalf of the heel.  

The relative accusative is in most translations less explicitly expressed.  

He shall bruise your head

And you shall bruise his heel.

Based on these translations, the innocent reader would think of it as very structured and straightforward recognizing in it both repetition and a perfect parallelism. However, the reader has been lead astray. Neither semantics nor structure is self-evident.

The lexical ambiguity lies in the polysemy of the words שוף, ראש, and עקב. The verb שוף has been discussed at length. It can mean ‘to hurt’ or ‘to bruise,’ but also ‘to watch’ or ‘to guard,’ ‘to threaten’ or ‘to hiss.’ All of these meanings make sense in the given context. The few other attestations of the root in Ps 139:11 and Job 9:17 are not helpful in clarifying the meaning in Genesis as they are of an obscure poetic nature. In Psalms, the clause אשר עån אנך וישופני is mostly understood as “surely darkness will conceal me.” The Job passage ובשערה ישופני is even more problematic, since one does not agree upon the meaning of the word preceding the verb, being ‘storm wind’ or ‘hair.’ Yet, in this case שוף is understood as ‘to bruise’ or ‘to crush.’ Scholars have brought in other cognate roots, such as נשף (‘to gasp’), שפה (‘to crush’), and נשף (‘to hiss like a snake’), in order to elucidate the meaning. The result, how-

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4 A similar translation with a repeated verb and a separate rendering of object and additional accusative can be found in the French Bible de Jerusalem (1956), the Dutch Statenvertaling (1637), and the English Literal Translation by Young (1826/1898).
5 GCK §117 ll, 372.
6 As in a variety of translations, such as the King James Version (1611/1769), the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh (1985), the New American Standard Bible (1995), and the English Standard Version (2001).
8 HALOT, 9461, s.v. שוף.
ever, is a range of possible meanings—one more likely than the other—without much clarification. The confusion is also reflected in translations of the verse, in which disambiguation necessarily has to take place and consequently changes the original message.10

The words ראש and עקב are ambiguous as well. The former refers not only to the head and head-like positions; it can be read as its homonym ראש ‘venom’, ‘poison.’11 This meaning occurs at several places in the Hebrew Bible, such as Deut 32:32–33, Deut 29:17, and Jer 8:14. In Deut 32:33 poison and serpent are even mentioned in one breath: חמת תנינים יינם וראש פתנים אכזר.12 In Targum Onkelos, the word ראש has been taken as ‘beginning,’ connecting the serpent with the opening of the creation story, i.e., בראשית. By analogy, עקב stands for the end, probably referring to Messianic times. Philo subscribes to this temporal reading of the verse as well.13

The term עקב is well known as ‘heel.’ The most famous example occurs in the book of Genesis itself, when the prototypical trickster, one of the sons of Woman, enters the stage: Jacob. The word is explored twice in the story: once in connection with him holding the heel (עקב) of his older brother Esau (Gen 25:26) and once when he grasps the same heel (עקב) in a more figurative way (= cheats) by taking Esau’s blessing deceitfully (Gen 27:36).14 Thus, עקב also means ‘crafty hearted,’ ‘cunning.’15 This meaning is at-
tested in Jer 17:9, “deceitful is the heart above all,” as well as in its nominal form עֲקֵב, meaning “craftiness” in 2 Kgs 10:19 and, as already pointed out, in its verbal form in Gen 27:36.16

On top of the lexical ambiguity, the grammar is obscure. First of all, there is the question on the role of the words עֲקֵב and ראש. They have been taken as relative accusatives specifying the place of bruising.17 Another possible syntactical function is that of apposition and vocative. While Hebrew grammar does not distinguish between them,18 the meaning does slightly differ. The apposition specifies either object or subject of the phrase, whereas the vocative directly addresses either one of them.19

Secondly, when accepting the parallelism, ambiguity remains in determining the antecedent. The apposition or vocative can refer to words in the same position in both halves of the verse.

He shall bruise you, (O) poisonous one
And you shall bruise him, (O) crafty one.

Both poisonous and crafty describe the objects of the verb: you and him.

The opposite can be argued as well—the appositions do not relate to parallel positioned words. Thus, in part one, poisonous could be connected with the object ‘you,’ whereas in the second part it refers to the subject ‘you.’ In both cases, the apposition/vocative addresses the snake.

He will bite you, O poisonous one

עֲקֵב. Since the text was primarily consonantal and the consonants are also dominant on the visual level, the paronomasia remains strong enough.

16 ידענו מי הוא ואנש מכל הלב עקב “Crafty is the heart above all, and sick is it; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9); עבדיו כל הבעל נביאי כל ועתה ייחיה לא יפקד אשר כל לבעל לי גדול זבח כי יפקד אל איש אלי קראו כהניו וכל הבעל עבדי את האביד למען עבוקה עשה ויהוא, “And now, all prophets of Baal, all his servants and all his priests, call them to me, let no one fail to come, for I have a big sacrifice for Baal. Whoever fails to come, will not live. And Jehu was acting with craftiness, in order to make disappear the servants of Baal” (2 Kgs 10:19);

ויאמר רבים קרם שם עבוק ומיקנינו הממים ואת בכרתי לקח עתה והנה לקח את בכרתי אבך, “And he said: ‘Is his name not rightly called Jacob (Deceiver/Heel Grasper) for he has deceived me/attacked my heel twice. My firstborn right he has taken, and behold, now he has taken my blessing’” (Gen 27:36).

17 See note 5.

18 GCK §126 e and f, 405. Gesenius points out that vocatives can both occur with and without article. He also notes that all vocatives are in essence appositions.

19 For apposition: GCK §130 e and §131, 422–23. In Ex 7:11, another example of an apposition to a personal pronoun occurs: וישὺו νῦν ὑμᾶς οἱ θεσμοὶ κυρίων ἡλθαίς μοί... “And they, the magicians of Egypt, did also the same by their mysteries.”
And you will boot him, O crafty one.  

A READING BASED ON AMBIGUITY

Taking into account the fivefold ambiguity, the traditional rendering becomes questionable. The following represents a new reading, ambiguity included.

He shall bruise/watch/threaten/hiss you on behalf of the head/(O) poisonous one
you shall bruise/watch/threaten/hiss him on behalf of the heel/(O) crafty one.

By incorporating the possibilities for structure and lexicon, the English translation gets a flavor of obscurity as well. The interpretation process slows down because of the many lexical and grammatical options of which none has been marked or preselected.  

In what follows, I will discuss the newly introduced readings more in detail, using the grammatical ambiguity of full parallelism versus partial parallelism as main division.

FULL PARALLELISM

He shall bruise/watch/threaten/hiss you (O) poisonous one
You shall bruise/watch/threaten/hiss him (O) crafty one.

If one interprets in favor of the parallelism and thus connects the appositions with the objects of the sentences, ‘poisonous’ becomes a nickname for the snake, ‘crafty’ an epithet for the son of Woman. Poison is easily associated with serpents and therefore almost self explanatory. According to Josephus, it is at this very moment that the snake becomes poisonous as if before he was not: αφείλετο δὲ καὶ τὸν ὄφιν τὴν φωνὴν ὀργισθεὶς ἐπὶ τῇ κακοηθείᾳ τῇ πρὸς τὸν Ἀδάμον καὶ ἱὸν ἐντίθησιν ὑπὸ τὴν γλῶτταν ἅπαντι πολέμιον ἀποδείξας ἀνθρώποις.  

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20 I have adopted here Robert Alter’s rendering of the verb שוף. He recognizes the different meanings at play and keeps the Hebrew sound connection through alliteration (Alter, Genesis, 13).


22 Josephus, Ant. 1.50: “He also deprived the snake of speech, angry because of his malice towards the Man, and he inserted poison under his tongue, and made him an enemy to men.” Also found in Tg. Ps.-J. Gen 3:14 and Pirqē R. El. 14:3.
In the second line of the parallelism, humans become connected with craftiness. They figured out the advantages of eating from the tree. This is the first proof of shrewdness or, as Carol Meyer has put it: “Hence the woman’s dialogue with the prudent reptile should be considered not a blot on her character but rather a comment on her intellect.”23 Afterwards the couple realized that their violation of the rules might arouse problems, which causes them to hide, another well thought act.24

A reading of עקֵב as ‘crafty’ and in a derived meaning even as ‘liar’ or ‘deceiver’ also occurs later on in the Bible, for which I again refer to the Jacob cycle. In Genesis 25 through 27 Jacob reveals himself as a true trickster, misleading first his elder brother by taking away his birthright (Gen 25:31–34) and later on his blind father by pretending to be Esau in order to be blessed by Isaac (Gen 27:36). Notice the obvious and well chosen play upon the relation between the different meanings of the root. This generates, besides the first name etiology ‘Jacob, the heel grasper,’ a second one: ‘Jacob, the trickster.’25 The double meaning lives on at several other places, such as Gen 49:19, Ps 41:10, and Hos 12:4.26

Moreover, in this particular story, the term ‘crafty’ should ring a bell.27 At the moment the snake comes into play, it is described as עְקֵב מִכְלָן חַיָּה ווֹשָד “the craftiest one of all living beings of the


24 Stratton, Out of Eden, 161–62.

25 See note 14.

26 עקֵב יגד הוא ידודנו דגוד גגד , “Gad raiders will raid him, and he will raid at their heels/at (the) last/deceitfully” (Gen 49:19); אשר שלומי איש גם עקֵב עלי הגדיל לחמי אוכל בו בטחתי , “Even my ally, whom I trusted, he who eats my bread, he has lifted up the heel against me” (Ps 41:10); בבטן אלהים את שרה ובאונו אחיו את עקֵב עלי הגדיל לחמי אוכל בו בטחתי , “In the womb, he grasped the heel of his brother/he supplanted his brother, and in his adulthood he strove with God” (Hos 12:4).

field.” The concept of shrewdness initially characterizes the snake. By using it for human offspring, a shift takes place. It might imply that mankind and snake became allies by sharing the same knowledge or that the quality would pass on from serpent to man. The former is supported by the fact that the three characters get along very well up until God manifests himself in the garden. He is the one spreading discord between serpent and mankind, as mentioned in verse 15:

אַחֲרֵיהֶם אִשָּׁת בָּנִי וַאֲשֶׁר בָּנִי בָּנִי בוֹ כְּעָלְיוֹ.

It is exactly the word ערם that establishes a relation between snake and humans. While mankind was naked in Gen 2:25 and the snake crafty in Gen 3:1, this distinction disappears as the story progresses. Rabbinical sources already connected the nakedness of the first couple with the serpent: אשר ברוחם ו.behaviour עין לא בני עד הנותנים. Likewise, scholars as Sam Dragga and Ellen Van Wolde have picked up on the role of sexual knowledge in the story. Rashi noticed the odd conclusion in Gen 3:7 that man realized that he was naked. He comments:

ומלךصلا וידעו כי ערומים הם אף הסומה יודעফ כה ער

While choosing a figurative interpretation of ערם is one option, it may be clear that man and woman also become part of a certain knowledge and craftiness which they obtain thanks to the רם ‘cunning’ snake.

Instead of sharing the power, it could also have shifted. The serpent, a symbol of life and rejuvenation—associated or motivated by the renewal of skin, is promised a harsh time: eating dust, crawling on his belly, and always having to watch out for man. Each of these elements suggests a reduction of power and influence. The humans on the other hand might be in pain working and

28 Gen 3:15: “Enmity I will place between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed.”

29 “But it teaches you as a result of what plan the snake had upon them. He saw them naked and having intercourse before everyone’s eye, and he desired her” (Rashi on the Torah Gen 3:1, Gen. Rab. 18.6). Ellen Van Wolde states that “the hypothesis the reader developed in the beginning on the basis of the iconic relation between עורום and ערם, has been verified by the text,” since serpent and humans correspond with each other in their nakedness, their awareness, and their knowledge of procreation (Van Wolde, Words Become Worlds, 9).


31 “Even a blind man knows when he is naked, but what then is ‘and they knew that they were naked’? There was one commandment in their hands and they became denuded of it” (Rashi on the Torah Gen 3:7).


33 Gen 3:15.
bearing (Gen 3:16–19), but they will live on through their descend-
ants, as can be read in both Gen 3:16, in which offspring is an-
nounced, and Gen 3:20, an ode to the woman, the life giver.34 The procreative power, inherent to the knowledge which at first was the snake’s, has clearly shifted to man.

**PARTIAL PARALLELISM**

Another option is to disregard the parallelism snake-poison versus human-crafty by connecting both as vocatives/appositions to the snake.

He shall hurt you, O poisonous one

And you shall hurt him, O crafty one

After all, God is addressing the snake in a second person. A vocative is a logical and proper way to underscore this. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible vocatives are used when characters engage in a conversation, with a human (e.g. in 2 Sam 14:4, “help, O king”) or even with heaven and earth (e.g. in Isa 49:13, “shout with joy, O heaven, and exalt, O earth”).

Moreover, both epithets can describe the snake. The poisonous interpretation has been discussed before. Crafty is a fitting term to depict the serpent since that is the first word connected with him—and it resonates throughout the story.

Although many scholars have disregarded any symbolic con-
notation of the snake, the serpent was a loaded image in the an-
cient Near East which would have evoked certain elements by at

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34 See full parallelism.

35 See full parallelism.


least some of the readers/listeners. James Charlesworth has outlined many positive and negative aspects of the reptile, stressing its duality and revising the distorted idea that a snake must represent evil and evil only. Its power has also been attested in ancient Near Eastern iconography, more often than not fulfilling a positive role. One has found such serpentine images and rea in Palestine as well. These findings show us that the Israelites did not live in isolation and probably were well aware of their surroundings, the cults that existed there, and the imagery they used.

The duality of the snake as a symbol is in Genesis 3 countered by the use of ambiguous structure and vocabulary. Whether the audience actually would have seen the animal as a representative of other gods or other politics, as has been suggested by some scholars, is debatable. The same applies to the opposite position that the serpent here introduced is indeed demythologized and denuded


from any connotative power whatsoever.\footnote{See note 37.} What is clear is that, when God utters the curse in 3:15b, the snake looses at least his peaceful cohabitation with humans and his upright position both literal and figurative. By revealing his true nature, i.e., a carrier of knowledge,\footnote{On the relation between the snake and wisdom see Charlesworth, \textit{The Good and Evil Serpent}, 246–47; 314; Joines, “The Serpent in Gen 3,” 4–8.} he is stripped of part of his very being. In language, however, he remains עירם.

A side note can be made about the relation between the snake and עקב as heel. Iconography shows that the snake often is portrayed with legs.\footnote{Charlesworth, \textit{The Good and Evil Serpent}, 87–88; Hayward, “Guarding Head and Heel,” 21.} Especially in Jewish sources, it is stated explicitly that the animal’s legs/feet are cut off as part of God’s intervention in Genesis 3.\footnote{Josephus. \textit{Ant.} 1.50: ποδῶν τε αὐτὸν ἀποστερήσας, “And when he had deprived him of the use of his feet”; Rashi on the Torah Gen 3:14: “He had feet and they were cut off”; Tg. Pq-J. 3:14: בשתים לאחד כנפים שש כנפים שש לו ממעל עמדים שרפים ייעוף ובשתים רגליו יכסה ובשתים פניו יכסה “Seraphim stood above him, each six wings, with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, with two he flew away.”}\footnote{Isa 6:2: שחרמי עמידים מעללו ושם כנפים שניים לבנים בחלינה, “Seraphim stood above him, each six wings, with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, with two he flew away.”} This implies that the serpent would have had a heel as well, as such being very similar to mankind.\footnote{Charlesworth, \textit{The Good and Evil Serpent}, 312–13.} The use of the word עקב in connection with the snake would then create a sarcastic undertone as if God would want to remind his interlocutor that he has deprived him not only of his craftiness, but also of his feet.

\textbf{FUNCTION}

Previous research has overemphasized the role of the snake as true incarnation of evil.\footnote{Moberly, “Did the Serpent Get it Right?” 13; Charlesworth, \textit{The Good and Evil Serpent}, 32f., 438; David Cassel, “Patristic and Rabbinic Interpretations of Genesis 3 – A Case Study in Contrasts,” \textit{Studia Patristica} 39 (2006), 203–11 (206–07); Van Wolde, “A Reader-Oriented Exegesis,” 15.} By using deceitful language, he tricked mankind into breaking the rules. The snake questioned God’s commandment, playing on the 

אף על "any tree” or “every tree,” and engaging the woman in a dialogue that would arouse her interest in the tree.\footnote{Charlesworth, \textit{The Good and Evil Serpent}, 291–92.} Nobody seems to have noticed that God’s answer to the snake in 3:15 is of a similar craftiness. The only issue discussed is
how to solve the paradox of a truth speaking serpent and a lying God. Indeed, the snake was right: man and woman did not die when they ate from the fruit, even though God had said so.49 This brought exegetes to introduce new readings of the terms בִּיּוֹם and מוּת. Mankind would not die at the very moment they ate, but they would later on as they had no longer access to the tree of life, once expelled from the garden.50 Thus, both God and the snake were right. A second option was to interpret ‘to die’ in terms of immortality through descendents rather than immortality an sich.51 

Regarding language and story, however, there is no point in asking who was right and who got it wrong. The snake, by using ambiguous language, lives up to the expectations as introduced by the qualifier בְּעַרְם. In what follows, ambiguity becomes a leading element. When God finally makes his entrance in the garden, he fights the snake with his own tools. Instead of answering him in plain language and using semantics only to make his point, he primarily relies on the form to get his message across. The divine character multiplies the ambiguity which has been introduced by the snake. As such, he excels the serpent at the verbal level. In consequence, he replaces the snake as craftiest in the story and surpasses any power the snake would have had.52

Notice that the suggested function is valid whether the snake is God’s adversary, in the range of the devil,53 a political enemy of Israel,54 a (rivaling) god of a surrounding culture,55 or whether he is an ally, protecting God’s position56 and serving as his messenger.57

49 וְמֵעַמֵּה דַּרְשֵׁהוּ עַל רֹעֵר לא תֵאכְלֶנָּה מִמֵּה יַרְבֵּעַ מִמֵּה מָתָה (Gen 2:17).

50 Charlesworth, The Good and Evil Serpent, 310.


52 Dragga has argued the opposite: “And whereas the serpent’s words prove sufficient to protect the tree of life, Yahweh’s words fail to guard the tree of knowledge. This exhibition of Yahweh’s verbal impotence obviously diminishes the punitive power of the Gen. 3.14–19 monologue.” By isolating the ambiguity instead of seeing it as a tool that has been used throughout the story, Dragga overlooked the power of it. Unable to solve the fact that God had lied (which is irrelevant in se), he concluded that the divine character is rather powerless in this episode (Dragga, “Genesis 2–3,” 9–10).

53 Waltke, Genesis, 90.

54 See note 40.

55 See note 40.

56 Charlesworth, The Good and Evil Serpent, 83, 437–38; Stratton, Out of Eden, 138–39. In the Hebrew Bible see also the role of the serpent in Ex 4:2–5; 7:8–12 (snake rod of Moses swallows the snake rods of the Egyp-
Finally, the ambiguous words have a cohesive function as well. They are narrative glue, connecting different stories with each other and establishing a unity. The end of Genesis 2 becomes less of a side note as it opens up to Genesis 3. The same counts for Genesis 3 that already foreshadows other mentions of heels and tricksters, especially Jacob.

**CONCLUSION**

We can conclude that the lexical and grammatical ambiguity in Gen 3:15b, a mere stumbling block for the interpreter or translator, is meaningful and purposeful. It has semantic and formal echoes in other biblical stories and strengthens the cohesion of both small and larger narratological units. Taking into account the specific setting of the divine being addressing the catalyst of the transgression, the ambiguity is also a means of power. Not only what God is saying matters—which turns out to be much more than what the verse reveals at first sight—but even more how he is saying it. His sophisticated formulation is an answer to the snake’s cunningness. Through the means of literature and linguistics God shows himself the crafty being *par excellence*, outclassing the s(S)nake.

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