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**KAROLIEN VERMEULEN,
EENY MEENY MINY MOE
WHO IS THE CRAFTIEST TO GO?**

EENY MEENY MINY MOE 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 **הוא ישופך ראש ואתה תשופנו עקב** 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 והנחש היה ערום מכל חית השדה אשר עשה יהוה אלהים, "and the snake was the craftiest among all living beings of the field that LORD God had made" (Gen 3:1).

³ Gen 3:14–19. On this cf. Beverly Stratton, *Out of Eden. Reading, Rhetoric and Ideology in Genesis 2–3* (JSOTSup, 208; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 140–45.

And you (=snake) shall bruise him (=son of Woman) on behalf of the heel.⁴

The relative accusative is in most translations less explicitly expressed.⁵ The verse reads as such:

He shall bruise your head

And you shall bruise his heel.⁶

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 שׁוּף, רָאָשׁ, and עָקַב. The verb שׁוּף has been discussed at length.⁷ It can mean ‘to hurt’ or ‘to bruise,’ but also ‘to watch’ or ‘to guard,’ ‘to threaten’ or ‘to hiss.’⁸ 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 אֲדַחֲשֵׁךְ יְשׁוּפְנִי is mostly understood as “surely darkness will conceal me.” The Job passage בְּשַׁעֲרֵי יְשׁוּפְנִי 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 שׁוּף is understood as ‘to bruise’ or ‘to crush.’ Scholars have brought in other cognate roots, such as שָׂאָף (‘to gasp’), שָׁפָה (‘to crush’), and נִשְׂף (‘to hiss like a snake’), in order to elucidate the meaning.⁹ The result, how-

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 Jérusalem* (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).

⁷ Robert Hayward, “Guarding Head and Heel: Observations on Septuagint Genesis 3:15,” Jeremy Corley and Vincent Skemp (eds), *Studies in the Greek Bible: essays in honor of Francis T. Gignac* (CBQMS, 44; Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2008), 17–34 (17–29); Knut Holter, “The Serpent in Eden as a Symbol of Israel’s Political Enemies,” *SJOT* 4 (1990): 106–112 (109); James Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2010), 301–02; Bruce Waltke and Cathi Fredricks, *Genesis. A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001), 94; Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 48; Robert Alter, *Genesis. Translation and Commentary* (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 13.

⁸ HALOT, 9461, s.v. שׁוּף.

⁹ Hayward, “Guarding Head and Heel,” 24, 29; Holter, “The Serpent in Eden,” 109.

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 תנינם 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-

¹⁰ Delabastita, Dirk, *Transductio. Essays on Punning and Translation* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1997); Delabastita, Dirk, “Wordplay as a Translation Problem: A Linguistic Perspective,” Harald Kittel et al., (eds), *Übersetzung: ein internationales Handbuch zur Übersetzungsforschung - Translation: An International Encyclopedia of Translation studies - Traduction: Encyclopédie internationale de la recherche sur la traduction* Vol. 1 (Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft, 26; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2004), 600–606. Translations that hint at the different meanings of the root are LXX (3rd-2nd c. BCE), Vulgate (5th c. CE), *La Bible de Jérusalem* (1956), and *Naardense Bijbel* (2004).

¹¹ HALOT, 8602–5, s.v. ראש.

¹² “The poison of serpent dragons is their wine, and the cruel venom of asps.”

¹³ הוא יהי דכיר נטר לך מאד עבדת ליה מלקדמין ואת תהי נטר ליה לסופה, “He will be remembering to keep (in memory) what you did to him from the beginning; and you shall be guarding/observing/keeping him to/for the end” (*Tg. Onq.* Gen 3:15b; variant reading: בסופא “in the end”). See also Philo, *Leg.* 3. 188–189. Hayward notices that there is a close sound and form resemblance between the Hebrew word and the Aramaic עקבא (‘end’, ‘future’, but also ‘heel’) (Hayward, “Guarding Head and Heel,” 24 n. 23).

¹⁴ Hayward, “Guarding Head and Heel,” 27; Scott Noegel, “Drinking Feasts and Deceptive Feats: Jacob and Laban’s Double Talk,” Scott Noegel (ed.), *Puns and Pundits: Wordplay in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2000), 163–180.

¹⁵ This requires a slightly different vocalization, namely עֶקֶב instead of

tested in Jer 17:9, “deceitful is the heart above all,” as well as in its nominal form עקבה, 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 עקב 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*

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

¹⁶ עקב הלב מכל ואנש הוא מי ידענו (Jer 17:9); “Crafty is the heart above all, and sick is it; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9); ועתה כל נביאי הבעל כל עבדיו וכל כהניו קראו אלי איש אל יפקד כי זבח גדול לי לבעל כל אשר יפקד לא יחיה ויהוא עשה בעקבה למען האביד את עבדי הבעל ויאמר הכי קרא שמו יעקב ויעקבני זה פעמים (2 Kgs 10:19); “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); את ברכתי לקח והנה עתה לקח ברכתי ויאמר הכי קרא שמו יעקב ויעקבני זה פעמים (Gen 27:36); “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 vocative: GCK §126 e and f, 405. For apposition: GCK §130 e and §131, 422–23. In Ex 7:11, another example of an apposition to a personal pronoun occurs: ויעשו גם הם חרטמי מצרים בלהטיהם כן, “And they, the magicians of Egypt, did also the same by their mysteries.”

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 עקב 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 aetiology ‘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 ערום מכל חייית השדה “the craftiest one of all living beings of the

²³ Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 92. A positive evaluation of the woman in Genesis 2–3, and in general in biblical interpretation, has been introduced by Phyllis Trible. See Phyllis Trible, “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” *JAAAR* 41 (1973), 30–48, esp. 35–42; Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 72–113, esp. 110–11.

²⁴ Stratton, *Out of Eden*, 161–62.

²⁵ See note 14.

²⁶ גַּד דְּגוֹד יְדוּדוֹ וְהוּא יִגְד עֵקֶב, “Gad raiders will raid him, and he will raid at their heels/at (the) last/deceitfully” (Gen 49:19); גַּם אִישׁ שְׁלוּמֵי אִשֶּׁר, “Even my ally, whom I trusted, he who eats my bread, he has lifted up the heel against me” (Ps 41:10); בְּבֶטֶן אֶת אֶחָיו וּבְאוֹנוֹ שָׂרָה אֶת אֱלֹהִים, “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).

²⁷ On the ambiguity of עָרַם see Gerda De Villiers, “Why on Earth? Genesis 2–3 and the Snake,” *OTE* 20 (2007), 632–40 (638); Walter Moberly, “Did the Serpent Get It Right?” *JTS* 39 (1988), 1–27 (24–25); Ellen Van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds. Semantic Studies of Genesis 1–11* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 6–9; John Sawyer, “The Image of God, the Wisdom of the Serpents and the Knowledge of Good and Evil,” Paul Morris and Deborah Sawyer (eds), *A Walk in the Garden: Biblical, Iconographical and Literary Images of Eden* (JSOTSup, 136; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 64–73 (68–69); Paul Kübel, “Ein Wortspiel in Genesis 3 und sein Hintergrund: Die “kluge” Schlange und die “nackten” Menschen,” *BN* 93 (1998), 11–22 (17); Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 72.

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: *וַאִיבָה אִשִּׁית בִּינְךָ וּבֵין הָאִשָּׁה וּבֵין זֶרַעְךָ וּבֵין זֶרַעָהּ*.²⁸ It is exactly the word *עָרִם* 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: *אֵלָא לְלַמְדָּךְ מֵאִיזוֹ סָבָה הַנְּחֹשׁ עֲלֵיהֶם: אֵלָא לֵרְאוּ אֹתָם עֲרוּמִים וְעוֹסְקִים בְּתַשְׁמִישׁ לְעֵין כָּל וְנִתְאָוָה לָהּ*.²⁹ Likewise, scholars as Sam Dragga and Ellen Van Wolde have picked up on the role of sexual knowledge in the story.³⁰ Rashi noticed the odd conclusion in Gen 3:7 that man realized that he was naked. He comments: *אִף הַסּוּמָה יוֹדֵעַ כִּשְׁהוּא עָרוּם אֵלָא מֵהוּ וַיִּדְעוּ כִּי עֲרוּמִים הֵם*.³¹ While choosing a figurative interpretation of *עָרִם* 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 *עָרִם* ‘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,³² is promised a harsh time: eating dust, crawling on his belly, and always having to watch out for man.³³ 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 *עָרוּמִים* and *עָרוּם*, 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).

³⁰ Sam Dragga, “Genesis 2–3: A Story of Liberation,” *JSOT* 55 (1992), 3–13 (4–5); Ellen Van Wolde, “A Reader-Oriented Exegesis Illustrated by a Study of the Serpent in Genesis 2–3,” Chris Brekelmans and Johan Lust (eds), *Pentateuchal and Deuteronomistic Studies: Papers Read at the XIIIth IOSOT Congress, Leuven 1989* (BETL, 94; Leuven: Peeters, 1990), 11–21 (16).

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).

³² Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 49, 259; Karen R. Joines, “The Serpent in Gen 3,” *ZAW* 87 (1975), 1–11(1–3).

³³ Gen 3:15.

bearing (Gen 3:16–19), but they will live on through their descendants, as can be read in both Gen 3:16, in which offspring is announced, 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 הוֹשַׁעַה הַמֶּלֶךְ, “help, O king”) or even with heaven and earth (e.g. רְנוּ שָׁמַיִם וּגְיִלֵי אָרֶץ, “shout with joy, O heaven, and exalt, O earth” in Isa 49:13)

Moreover, both epithets can describe the snake. The poisonous interpretation has been discussed before.³⁵ Crafty is a fitting term to depict the serpent since that is the first word connected with him—עָרַם—and it resonates throughout the story.

Although many scholars have disregarded any symbolic connotation of the snake,³⁶ the serpent was a loaded image in the ancient Near East³⁷ which would have evoked certain elements by at

³⁴ בעֶצֶב תִּלְדֵי בָנִים, “in pain you will bear children” (Gen 3:16); Gen 3:20, וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ חַוָּה כִּי הוּא הִיְתָה אִם כָּל חַי הַיָּמִים, “and the man called the name of his wife Liv, for she is the mother of all living” (Gen 3:20). Scholars, such as Claus Westermann and John Skinner, reject the position of verse 20 in the current story, arguing that there is no point in calling the woman a mother unless a birth is mentioned. Therefore, they think the verse belongs either just in front or after Gen 4:1 in which Cain is born (see Claus Westermann, *Genesis I* [BKAT, 1.1; Neukircherer: Neukircherer Verlag, 1999] 364–65; John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* [ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930] 85–87). The current reading, however, supports the position of the name giving in Gen 3:20, forming the climax of the power shift and the affirmation of the newly required knowledge of men. On the power of procreation see also Van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds*, 10–11.

³⁵ See full parallelism.

³⁶ Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis. The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 26; De Villiers, “Why on Earth?,” 633; Sawyer, “The Image of God,” 66–67.

³⁷ Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*; Le Grande Davies, “Serpent Imagery in Ancient Israel: the Relationship between the Literature and the Physical Remains,” (PhD diss., Utah, 1986); Joines, “The Serpent in Gen 3,” 1–11; Karen R. Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament* (Haddon-

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.³⁸ One has found such serpentine images and *realia* in Palestine as well.³⁹ 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 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.⁴⁰ The same applies to the opposite position that the serpent here introduced is indeed demythologized and denuded

field, N.J.: Haddonfield House, 1974); Othman Keel and Silvia Schroer, *Schöpfung – Biblische Theologien im Kontext altorientalischen Religionen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), passim.

³⁸ Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 58–124, 196–268.

³⁹ Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 122–124; Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament*, 1, 20, 98–99.

⁴⁰ As political symbol see Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 288–89; Holter, “The Serpent in Eden,” 106–12; De Villiers, “Why on Earth?” 637; Terje Stordalen, “Man, Soil, Garden: Basic Plot in Genesis 2–3 Reconsidered,” *JSOT* 53 (1992), 3–26 (3); Manfred Görg, “Das Wort zur Schlange (Gen 3,14f): Gedanken zum sogenannten Protoevangelium,” *BN* 19 (1982), 121–40, esp. 131–39; Joel Rosenberg, *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 189–99. As a religious symbol see Holter, “The Serpent in Eden,” 107; Nahum Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary on Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1989), 27; Hayward, “Guarding Head and Heel,” 34; Dragga, “Genesis 2–3,” 6–7; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 73; Richard Averbeck, “Ancient Near Eastern Mythography as It Relates to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible: Genesis 3 and the Cosmic Battle,” James Hoffmeier and Alan Millard (eds), *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 328–56 (351); Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 314. Most often Egypt and Ugarit are mentioned as possible adversaries incorporated in the snake. The former is mainly linked to a political reading connected with the reign of Solomon and his open internationalism. On a broader scale the snake has been taken as a symbol for any political enemy of Israel. Politics of another kind occur in Rosenberg’s interpretation, in which the own species is preferred over the animal companion represented by the snake. He transposes this conflict to the theme of “generational continuity, a delicate condition requiring both harmony between parents and children and harmony between siblings” and suggests an allegorical relationship between Genesis and the Davidic stories (Joel Rosenberg, “The Garden Story Forward and Backward, The Non-Narrative Dimension of Gen. 2–3,” *Prooftexts* 1 [1981], 1–27 [7–8, 19]; Rosenberg, *King and Kin*).

from any connotative power whatsoever.⁴¹ What is clear is that, when God utters the curse in 3:15b, the snake loses 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,⁴² he is stripped of part of his very being. In language, however, he remains ערם.

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.⁴³ 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 3.⁴⁴ Also in Isa 6:2 one talks about a legged snake.⁴⁵ This implies that the serpent would have had a heel as well, as such being very similar to mankind.⁴⁶ 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.

FUNCTION

Previous research has overemphasized the role of the snake as true incarnation of evil.⁴⁷ By using deceitful language, he tricked mankind into breaking the rules. The snake questioned God's commandment, playing on the כל עץ, "any tree" or "every tree," and engaging the woman in a dialogue that would arouse her interest in the tree.⁴⁸ 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

⁴¹ See note 37.

⁴² On the relation between the snake and wisdom see Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 246–47; 314; Joines, "The Serpent in Gen 3," 4–8.

⁴³ Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 87–88; Hayward, "Guarding Head and Heel," 21.

⁴⁴ Josephus. *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: רגלים היו לו ונקצו, "He had feet and they were cut off"; *Tg. Ps.-J.* 3:14: על מעד תהי מטייל וריגלך יתקצו, "Upon your belly you will be walking, and your feet will be cut off"; *Gen. Rab.* 20:5: על בשעה שאמר לו הקב"ה על, "At the moment when the Holy One Blessed is He said to him: 'Upon your belly you will go,' ministering angels descended and they cut off his hands and his feet."

⁴⁵ Isa 6:2: שרפים עמדים ממעל לו שש כנפים שש כנפים לאחד בשתים יעופף, "Seraphim stood above him, each six wings, with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, with two he flew away."

⁴⁶ Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 312–13.

⁴⁷ Moberly, "Did the Serpent Get it Right?" 13; Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 32f., 438; David Cassel, "Patristic and Rabbinic Interpretations of Genesis 3 – A Case Study in Contrasts," *Studia Patristica* 39 (2006), 203–11 (206–07); Van Wolde, "A Reader-Oriented Exegesis," 15.

⁴⁸ Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 291–92.

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 **ביום** and **מות**. 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 descendants 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 **עֵרִם**. 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 (rivalling) god of a surrounding culture,⁵⁵ or whether he is an ally, protecting God’s position⁵⁶ and serving as his messenger.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ ומעץ הדעת טוב ורע לא תאכל ממנו כי ביום אכלך ממנו מות תמות

“And from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat from it, for on the day that you shall eat from it, you will surely die” (Gen 2:17).

⁵⁰ Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 310.

⁵¹ Dragga, “Genesis 2–3,” 7–8; Moberly, “Did the Serpent Get it Right?” 13; Van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds*, 9–10; De Villiers, “Why on Earth?” 634.

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.⁵⁸ The end of Genesis 2 becomes less of a side note as it opens up to Genesis 3.⁵⁹ The same counts for Genesis 3 that already foreshadows other mentions of heels and tricksters, especially Jacob.⁶⁰

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.

tian wise men), Num 21:4–9 (snakes sent by God and snake image healing and watching the people), Jer 8:17 (serpents sent by God), and Amos 9:3 (God commands snake to bite).

⁵⁷ Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 247–48.

⁵⁸ Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 292–93.

⁵⁹ Dragga, “Genesis 2–3,” 5–6; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 71.

⁶⁰ Gunther Plaut, “Benno Jacob’s method, an examination of Genesis 3,” Walter Jacob and Almuth Jürgensen (eds), *Die Exegese hat das erste Wort. Beiträge zu Leben und Werk Benno Jacobs* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 2002), 148–151 (150).