Articles in JHS are being indexed in the ATLA Religion Database, RAMBI, and BiBIL. Their abstracts appear in Religious and Theological Abstracts. The journal is archived by Library and Archives Canada and is accessible for consultation and research at the Electronic Collection site maintained by Library and Archives Canada (for a direct link, click here).

Volume 10, Article 14  doi:10.5508/jhs.2010.v10.a14

KAROLIEN VERMEULEN,
EENY MEENY MINY MOE
WHO IS THE CRAFTIEST TO GO?
Eeny Meeny Miny Moe
Who is the Craftiest to Go?

Karolien Vermeulen
Ghent University

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 re-
sults 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 ambigu-
ities and suggest other readings, based on thematic and verbal para-
lels 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
וה הוא יושפ המקライ האשה שספ kék
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 וההוא היה יושפ מקלה ואשה וספ kék, “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.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 שָׁנַה, רַעַם, and הָעַבְּדָה. The verb שָׁנַה 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 אַל הָעַבְּדָה is mostly understood as “surely darkness will conceal me.” The Job passage הבחרה שופטי 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 שָׁנַה is understood as ‘to bruise’ or ‘to crush.’ Scholars have brought in other cognate roots, such as בַּשֶּׁפֶת (‘to gasp’), שֶׁפֶת (‘to crush’), and נָשָׁה (‘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 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. שָׁנַה.
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.\(^\text{10}\)

The words נְאָשָׁן and נָּאֵב are ambiguous as well. The former refers not only to the head and head-like positions; it can be read as its homonym נָּאָשָׁן 'venom', 'poison.'\(^\text{11}\) 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: נָּאָשָׁן וַתִּנְתֶּה יָמִים וַתִּרְאוּשׁ פָּתִים אַבֹּר.\(^\text{12}\) In Targum Onkelos, the word נָּאֵב has been taken as 'beginning,' connecting the serpent with the opening of the creation story, i.e., נָּאֵב רַבָּא. By analogy, נָּאֵב stands for the end, probably referring to Messianic times. Philo subscribes to this temporal reading of the verse as well.\(^\text{13}\)

The term נָּאֵב 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 (נָּאֵב) of his older brother Esau (Gen 25:26) and once when he grasps the same heel (נָּאֵב) in a more figurative way (= cheats) by taking Esau's blessing deceitfully (Gen 27:36).\(^\text{14}\) Thus, נָּאֵב also means 'crafty hearted,' 'cunning.'\(^\text{15}\) This meaning is at-
tested in Jer 17:9, “deceitful is the heart above all,” as well as in its nominal form עֵקְבָּה, meaning “craftiness” in 2 Kgs 10:19 and, as already pointed out, in its verbal form in Gen 27:36. On top of the lexical ambiguity, the grammar is obscure. First of all, there is the question on the role of the words אשר and יעובד. They have been taken as relative accusatives specifying the place of bruising. Another possible syntactical function is that of apposition and vocative. While Hebrew grammar does not distinguish between them, the meaning does slightly differ. The apposition specifies either object or subject of the phrase, whereas the vocative directly addresses either one of them.

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

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

16 See note 5.
17 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.
18 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: יִנְשֶׁהָ נָּא אֵלֶּה הַרְפָּאִים מִצְוֵי בַּלְתִיסֵהּ מִכֶּם, “And they, the magicians of Egypt, did also the same by their mysteries.”
And you will boot him, O crafty one.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{A Reading Based on Ambiguity}

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

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
He & shall bruise/watch/threaten/hiss you  
& on behalf of the head/(O) poisonous one  
\smallskip
you & shall bruise/watch/threaten/hiss him  
& on behalf of the heel/(O) crafty one.
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

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.\textsuperscript{21}

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.

\textbf{Full Parallelism}

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
He & shall bruise/watch/threaten/hiss you (O) poisonous one  
You & shall bruise/watch/threaten/hiss him (O) crafty one.
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

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: \textit{ἀφέλεσθαι δὲ καὶ τὸν ὄψιν τὴν φωνὴν ὄργανος ἐπὶ τῇ κακοσθείᾳ τῇ πρὸς τὸν Ἀδαμὸν καὶ ἑν ἐνίθησιν ὑπὸ τὴν γλῶτταν αὐτῷ πολέμιον ἀπὸ τῆς ἀνθρώπος.}\textsuperscript{22}

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


\textsuperscript{22} Josephus, \textit{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 Pirqe 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.” Afterwards the couple realized that their violation of the rules might arouse problems, which causes them to hide, another well thought act.

A reading of עֵקֶב 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.’ The double meaning lives on at several other places, such as Gen 49:19, Ps 41:10, and Hos 12:4.

Moreover, in this particular story, the term ‘crafty’ should ring a bell. At the moment the snake comes into play, it is described as "the craftiest one of all living beings of the..."
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: אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם. 28 It is exactly the word רֵעֵר 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: רַעֵר אָמַת עָמוֹד וְעָמוֹדשׁ עַל יֵשֵׁץ עַל יֵשֵׁץ עַל יֵשֵׁץ עַל יֵשֵׁץ. 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: אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם אֲנִי אִיתָה בְּעֵרָבָּם. 31 While choosing a figurative interpretation of רֵעֵר 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 רֵעֵר ‘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 רֵעֵר and רֵעֵר, 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 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, “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.\(^{35}\) 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 connotation of the snake,\(^{36}\) the serpent was a loaded image in the ancient Near East\(^{37}\) which would have evoked certain elements by at

\(^{34}\) 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 realia 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. 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, he is stripped of part of his very being. In language, however, he remains הַנִּפְרוּ.

A side note can be made about the relation between the snake and עַד as heel. Iconography shows that the snake often is portrayed with legs. 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. Also in Isa 6:2 one talks about a legged snake. This implies that the serpent would have had a heel as well, as such being very similar to mankind. The use of the word עַד 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. By using deceitful language, he tricked mankind into breaking the rules. The snake questioned God’s commandment, playing on the כל ב, “any tree” or “every tree,” and engaging the woman in a dialogue that would arouse her interest in the tree. 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.
44 Josephus. *Ant.* 1.50: מָנוֹן יִתְנָה לְפָתַרְפִּים, “And when he had deprived him of the use of his feet”; Rashi on the Torah Gen 3:14: רִלִּים וְיָתְנָה לְפָתַרְפִּים, “He had feet and they were cut off”; Tg. Pz-f. 3:14: יָתְנָתִים וְיָתְנַה לְפָתַרְפִּים, “Upon your belly you will be walking, and your feet will be cut off”; Gen. Rab. 20:5: בְּשֵׁשׁ שָׁמיִים לְחָקֵה יִתָּנֵה, “Upon your belly you will be walking, and your feet will be cut off.”
45 Isa 6:2: שֵׁשׁ לְשׁוֹמָעְתִּים מָנוֹן לִירֵי מְקָרֵי וּלְשׁוֹמָעְתִּים לִירְאוּתִים יָתְנִיאוּ, “Seraphim stood above him, each six wings, with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, with two he flew away.”
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. This brought exegetes to introduce new readings of the terms בֵּית and מָתָן. 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. 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.

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 יְסֹד. 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.

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

---

49 מְבָטֵּא דְּרֵעַ תִּשׁנַע לָא חַלְמוֹל מָמֵא יֵבְשָׁא אַּבָּל מָמֵא מָמֵא מָתָן

49 “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.


52 Drarga 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, Drarga overlooked the power of it. Unable to solve the fact that God had lied (which is irrelevant in so), he concluded that the divine character is rather powerless in this episode (Drarga, “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 Egypt-
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.

---