



## The Meaning and the Function of the Serpent (Exod 7:8–13) in the Plagues Narrative<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

In the book of Exodus, one of the most dramatic events occurs with the plagues narrative. Additionally, we can find the story of the plagues in many other biblical texts such as in the Psalms (Pss 78 and 105), the book of Wisdom, and also in the New Testament,<sup>2</sup> because the story has educational purpose

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1 An earlier version of this paper was delivered in Pentateuch: Torah section at the SBL International Meeting in Seoul, South Korea, 2016.

2 See Jacob J. Enz, "The Afterlife of the Ninth Plague (Darkness) in Biblical Literature", William Klassen (ed.), *The New Way of Jesus: Essays Presented to Howard Charles* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1980), 29-30 and 36; Archie C. C. Lee finds that "there are only three passages in the Hebrew Bible where the plagues in Egypt are listed (Pss. 78, 105; Exod. 7-12)." Archie C. C. Lee, "The Context and Function of the Plagues Tradition in Psalm 78", *JOT* 48 (1990), 83; See also John H. Choi, *Traditions at Odds: The Reception of the Pentateuch in Biblical and Second Temple Period Literature* (LHBOTS 518; New York: T&T

for the Israelites, the Egyptians, and all Christians.<sup>3</sup> Especially, to the Israelites this story tells about God, who always is on His chosen people's side, but at the same time to the Egyptians the plagues narrative shows God's mercy, because He gave them an opportunity to discover Him.<sup>4</sup>

Many scholars assert that the plagues narrative in the book of Exodus has a distinct literary pattern (like 3+3+3+1).<sup>5</sup> They divide the plagues into three groups and consider the final one (the death of the firstborn) as a 'climax.'<sup>6</sup> However, they ignore the function of Exod 7:8-13 in the plagues narrative,

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Clark, 2010), 124-127.

3 Theodore H. Epp claims the purpose of the ten plagues as follows:

First, they give a public demonstration of the mighty power of the Lord God,...

Second, the plagues were the divine visitation of wrath; that is, they were a punishment

of Pharaoh and his people for their cruel treatment of Israel,...

Third, the plagues were a judgment of God on the gods of Egypt,...

Forth, the plagues were a solemn warning to other nations that God would curse those who curse Israel.

Fifth, the plagues on Egypt also serve as a series of testings for Israel while the nation was in Egypt.

Theodore H. Epp, *Moses: Vol. II. God Strengthens His Man* (Lincoln, Nebr.: Back to the Bible Broadcast, 1975), 45-46.

4 Lester Meyer, *The Message of Exodus: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 78.

5 U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1967), 93; Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (OTL: Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 150; William A. Ford, *God, Pharaoh and Moses: Explaining the Lord's Actions in the Exodus Plagues Narrative* (Waynesboro: Paternoster, 2006), 134.

6 Thomas B. Dozeman, *Exodus* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 201; Moyna McGlynn, *Divine Judgement and Divine Benevolence in the Book of Wisdom* (WUNT 2. Reihe 139; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 179. For current studies of plagues narrative in the book of Exodus, see Ari Mark Cartun, "Who Knows Ten? : The Structural and Symbolic Use of Numbers in the Ten Plagues: Exodus 7:14-13:16", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 45 (1991), 65-119; Dorian Coover Cox, "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Its Literary and Cultural Contexts", *BS* 163 (2006), 292-311; Jonathan Grossman, "The Structural Paradigm of the Ten Plagues Narrative and the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart", *VT* 64 (2014), 588-610; Jeffrey Stackert, "Why Does the Plague of Darkness Last for Three Days?: Source Ascription and Literary Motif in Exodus 10:21-23, 27", *VT* 61 (2011), 657-676; John van Seters, "The Plagues of Egypt: Ancient Tradition or Literary Invention?" *ZAW* 98 (1986), 31-39; 장석정, "일곱째 재앙 경고(출 9:13-21) 재고", 「구약논단」 40집 (2011년 6월), 12-32; 장석정, "메뚜기 재앙(출 10:3-20) 이해", 「구약논단」 44집 (2012년 6월), 35-57.

namely the incident that Aaron's rod became a serpent. Although some scholars include the incident of the serpent as one of the plagues, they deal with this incident as an introduction of the plagues narrative.<sup>7</sup> Does the incident function just as an introduction of the plagues narrative? Dennis McCarthy asserts that "the affair of the first born is separate and the preceding episodes beginning with the trick with the rod and the serpent, not with the pollution of the Nile, form an independent unit, Ex 7,8-10,27."<sup>8</sup> He deals with the serpent not as a preface of the plagues narrative, but as one of the plagues itself. Dozeman also insists that "the plague of the sea dragon will be interpreted as the first plague in the cycle,"<sup>9</sup> because two other plagues (gnats and boils) have the same function of introducing the following two plagues, respectively.<sup>10</sup>

I strongly agree with McCarthy and Dozeman's opinions, because the incident of the serpent has significant meaning and function as one of the plagues in this narrative. In the Hebrew Bible, there are many words depicting snakes or serpents.<sup>11</sup> Among these words, we can find two words in the book of Exodus (תַּנִּינִי and נָחָשׁ). Unlike other passages, the narrator uses the word, תַּנִּינִי, in Exod 7:8-13 (the plagues of the serpent). Therefore, it can be stated that it is the narrator's intention for emphasizing this as the first plague of the narrative, because תַּנִּינִי has more powerful meaning than נָחָשׁ.<sup>12</sup> In addition, if the ser-

7 Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 94-96; Ford, *God, Pharaoh and Moses*, 126; Meyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 67-68; Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 113.

8 Dennis McCarthy, "Moses' Dealings with Pharaoh: Ex 7,8-10,27", *CBQ* 27 (1965), 339.

9 Dozeman, *Exodus*, 202.

10 Dozeman, *Exodus*, 201-202.

11 James H. Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent: How a Universal Symbol Became Christianized*, (AYBRL; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 446.

12 Georg Fohrer, *Überlieferung und Feschichte des Exodus: Eine Analyse von Ex 1-15* (BZAW 91; Berlin:

pent is considered as the first plague, we can find a new way of interpreting the plagues narrative. Why does the narrator use the word, נָחָשׁ, for the term of the serpent in Exod 7:8-13? What is the narrator's intention in positioning the serpent as the first plague? In answering these questions, first, I will search נָחָשׁ's meaning in the Hebrew Bible and cognate languages, and compare with other words which mean snakes or serpents. Second, I will look for a similar or parallel story to the incident of the serpent in the Hebrew Bible for supporting my opinion about this incident in Exod 7. Finally, I will explain the reason why the plague of the serpent must be considered as the first plague in the narrative.

The results of this study will reveal not only the function and the meaning of the plague of the serpent in the narrative, but also will help us understand the delicate literary structure of the plagues narrative.

## 2. The Meaning of the Serpent in the Semitic Languages

On the topic of the relationship between the serpent and the evil, Heinz-Josef Fabry insists that “it is not clear that the serpent was already considered a symbol of evil in the period of the Yahwist; it was not identified with Satan (as an enemy of God) until the rabbinic and Christian period.”<sup>13</sup> Phyllis A. Bird also asserts that the snake is “clearly not the *śātān* of later Hebrew and Chris-

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Walter de Gruyter, 1964), 59.

13 Heinz-Josef Fabry, “נָחָשׁ”, *TDOT* 9, 364.

tian tradition, although his role makes him appear as an adversary of God (or simply a ‘wise guy’ troublemaker?).”<sup>14</sup> The Hebrew word, נָחָשׁ, appears in the Hebrew Bible seventeen times, but we cannot find the images of the serpent in these texts.<sup>15</sup> In general, however, when we recall the image of the serpent, negative connotations can emerge and we want to relate its figure with Satan. The reason is that the serpent tempted Eve to sin against God in the book of Genesis. Consequently, “the general conception of the serpent ... is that the serpent acted as the representation of all things evil.”<sup>16</sup> Contrary to this negative image of the serpent, in the biblical world there are so many positive images about the serpent as follows:

1. The serpent is sometimes a good symbol in world cultures.
2. The serpent was admired in Old Testament times and within Early Judaism.
3. The serpent was appreciated in the Greek and Roman periods.
4. The serpent was a positive symbol in the Judaism of the Fourth Evangelist.
5. John 3:14 means more than a parallel between the lifting up of the serpent and of Jesus.
6. John 3:14 is a poetic statement in parallel thought so that “the serpent” is synonymous with “the Son of Man.”

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14 Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 183.

15 Archie T. Wright, *The Origin of Evil Spirits* (WUNT 2. Reihe 198; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 157-158. According to Archie T. Wright, the word, נָחָשׁ, used in the Old Testament eighteen times “as a proper name - Job 1,6, 7(2), 8, 9, 12(2); 2,1, 2(2), 3, 4, 6, 7; Zech 3,1, 2(2); and 1 Chr 21,1,” and four times “as a human adversary” - 1 Kgs 11,14, 23, 25; 5,18.

16 Leslie S. Wilson, *The Serpent Symbol in the Ancient Near East: Nahash and Asherah: Death, Life, and Healing* (Studies in Judaism: University Press of America: Lanham, 2001), 11.

7. We can find an exegesis of Numbers 21 by a Jew contemporaneous with the Evangelist, and that the Jewish expositor stresses the positive symbolism of the copper (or bronze) serpent.
8. The Fourth Evangelist does not cavalierly treat the symbolism of the serpent he inherits from Numbers 21, but appreciates it and develops it in significantly positive ways.<sup>17</sup>

An extreme case is that Jesus depicts himself “as the divine healer, ‘the Savior,’ who is ‘like a serpent’” in John 3:14.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it is important work to decide the image of the serpent in texts.

According to Charlesworth, there are eighteen words that mean as the serpent or the snake in the Hebrew Bible.

Table 1. The words that mean the serpent or the snake<sup>19</sup>

<i>Term</i>	<i>Translation</i>	<i>Major Biblical Passage</i>	<i>Symbol</i>
1. אֲפֶסֶה	“sand viper”	Isa 30:6, 59:5	N
2. כָּשָׁן	“snake”	Deut 33:22 Ps 68:23[22]	? N
3. זְחָלֵי אֶרֶץ	“snakes of the earth”	Mic 7:17; cf. Deut 32:24	P for Israel
4. לְוִיָּאֵן	“Leviathan”	Isa 27:1 Job 3:8; 40:25 [41:1] Ps 74:14	N N B?

17 Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 5.

18 Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 5.

19 Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 446. In the table, P means positive, N means negative, and B means both.

5. נָחָשׁ	“serpent”	Gen 3:1 Gen 49:17, Ps 140:4[3] Exod 4:3, 7:15; Num 21:7 Prov 23:31, Ps 58:5[4] Isa 14:29	P N P N P for Israel
6. נָחָשׁ הַנְּחֹשֶׁת	“bronze serpent”	Num 21:4-9	P
7. עֲכָשׁוּב	“asp”	Ps 140:3[4]	N
8. פֶּתֶן	“cobra”	Ps 91:13	N
9. צִפְעָה	“pit viper”	Isa 14:29	P for Israel
10. צִפְעָנִי	“viper”	Prov 23:32	N
11. קַפּוּז	“arrow-snake”	Isa 34:15	N for Israel
12. רַהַב	“Rahab”	Ps 89:11; Isa 51:9-11 Job 9:13-14, 26:12-13	N N
13. שָׂרָף	“burning-serpent”	Isa 14:29	P for Israel
14. נָחָשׁ שָׂרָף	“fiery serpent”	Deut 8:15	N
15. שָׂרָף מְעוֹפֵף	“flying serpent”	Isa 14:29 Isa 30:6	P for Israel N for Israel
16. שְׂרָפִים	“winged-serpent”	Isa 6:2-6	P
17. שְׂפִיפּוֹן	“adder”	Gen 49:17	P for Israel
18. תַּנִּין	“dragon”	Ps 91:13, Job 3:8, [Exod 7:9, 10, 12]	N

Through the table above, we can recognize that the words meaning serpents originally do not have negative connotation, but the texts or the contexts decide the final image of the words. Charlesworth divides the eighteen Hebrew words above meaning serpent into three categories (*specific terms, generic terms, and fundamentally mythological terms*). If we follow his assertion, נָחָשׁ is a ge-

neric term for snakes, but תַּנִּין is a mythological term for serpents.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, the book of Exodus uses תַּנִּין and נָחָשׁ with the same literal meaning - a serpent. Wilson insists that “נָחָשׁ is used interchangeably with תַּנִּין” in Exod 7.<sup>21</sup> Pnina Galpaz-Feller agrees to Wilson’s opinion stating that “in the Bible, the word tannin, crocodile is similar in meaning to serpent and *peten* (פֶּתֶן = viper).”<sup>22</sup> However, we do not know if the serpents in the texts have positive or negative meaning, because the word ‘serpent’ has a dipolar meaning in the Hebrew Bible, and “snakes were often perceived ambivalently as aid or opponent, as bringing death or life.”<sup>23</sup>

In the ancient times, the Egyptians thought that the serpent protects the Pharaoh and is one of gods that decides their destiny.<sup>24</sup> They called these deities as ‘good serpent’ and ‘good fortune,’ because they thought the deities control their life (including healing and fertility) and death.<sup>25</sup> As we have seen, the image of the serpent was adapted with positive image as a controller of their life, leading them to happiness.

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20 Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 450; John Day, *God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 5; David A. Diewert, “Job 7:12: Yam, Tannin and the Surveillance of Job”, *JBL* 106 (1987), 203-215.

21 Wilson, *The Serpent Symbol in the Ancient Near East*, 74. See also John D. Currid, “The Egyptian Setting of the Serpent: Confrontation in Exodus 7:8-13”, *BZ* 39 (1995), 207; Scott B. Noegel, “Moses and Magic: Notes on the Book of Exodus”, *JANES* 24 (1996), 47; Philippe Guillaume, “Metamorphosis of a Ferocious Pharaoh”, *Bib* 85 (2004), 234.

22 Pnina Galpaz-Feller, “The Hidden and Revealed in the Sign of the Serpent (Exodus 4:2-5; 7:8-14)”, *BN* 114/115 (2002), 24.

23 Rick R. Marrs, “John 3:14-15: The Raised Serpent in the Wilderness: The Johannine Use of an Old Testament Account”, James E. Priest (ed.), *Johannine Studies: Essays in Honor of Frank Pack* (Malibu: Pepperdine University Press, 1989), 137.

24 Wilson, *The Serpent Symbol in the Ancient Near East*, 16.

25 Wilson, *The Serpent Symbol in the Ancient Near East*, 171-182; Karen Randolph Joins, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament: A Linguistic, Archaeological, and Literary Study* (Haddonfield: Haddonfield House, 1974), 111.



On the contrary, in Ugaritic writing, *tannin* is enemy to be destroyed.

I muzzled Tannin [the Sea Dragon],  
yea, I muzzled him,  
I smote the Crooked Serpent,  
the monster of seven heads.<sup>26</sup>

The Akkadian cognate of שָׁרָפַת means “to live, to stay alive, to recover.”<sup>27</sup>  
In KTU 1:100:73-76, שָׁרָפַת functions “as a symbol of protection, life, and fertility.”<sup>28</sup>

(73) *tn. km.nhšm.yhr.tn.km* Give, as the ⟨marriage price⟩, serpents! An *adder*  
give as

(74) *mhry.wbn.btn.'itnny* My marriage price, and sons of asp, (as) my love gift!

(75) *ytt.nhšm.mhrk.bn.btn.* I will give serpents (as) thy marriage price, sons of asp

(76) *'itnnk* (As) thy love gift.<sup>29</sup>

Interestingly, we can see the word, *'itnn*, in line 74 and 76. *'itnn* is similar to תַּנִּין morphologically. Wilson suggests that “the derivation of אַתַּנִּן (*'itnn*) is far more likely to stem from תַּנִּן - *tnn* (with prosthetic א) which underlies both the Ugaritic antecedent and the Biblical Hebrew תַּנִּין - *tnyn* - ‘serpent, dragon

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26 U. Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath: Canaanite Epics of the Patriarchal Age* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1971), 93.

27 Wilson, *The Serpent Symbol in the Ancient Near East*, 50.

28 Wilson, *The Serpent Symbol in the Ancient Near East*, 53.

29 Wilson, *The Serpent Symbol in the Ancient Near East*, 52.

(?).”<sup>30</sup> At the same time the word means “some kind of wedding symbol”<sup>31</sup> as a gift. In the Hebrew Bible, *'tnn* seems to mean “some form of deity or at least the symbol of a divinity.”<sup>32</sup> In Gen 1:21, תַּנְיִן has positive meaning as “a symbol for creation.”<sup>33</sup> No doubt, words derived from *'tnn* have both positive (as a gift) and negative (as a deity against God) meanings in the Semitic languages.

If the word ‘the serpent’ has both two meanings in the text, the incident of the serpent in Exod 7:8-13 can be interpreted as follows; the gift (Aaron’s serpent) from God which destroyed the Egyptians’ deities (the magicians’ serpents) using the power of God with a single strike.

### 3. Comparison between the Serpent’s Story in Gen 3 and the Incident of the Serpent in Exod 7:8–13

There is similar story with Exod 7:8-13 in the Hebrew Bible. In the incident of the serpent, there are three important elements: the rods made by wood, Aaron’s serpent, and the Egyptian magicians’ serpents. We can find similar elements in Gen 3.<sup>34</sup> There are two kinds of trees, Eve, and the serpent. Mary Condren insists that “the original Eve did appear in the form of a Serpent.

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30 Wilson, *The Serpent Symbol in the Ancient Near East*, 54. According to Wilson, ‘*tu-un-na-nu*’ in Ugaritic means snake.

31 Wilson, *The Serpent Symbol in the Ancient Near East*, 59.

32 See Hos 9:1 and Mic 1:7. Wilson, *The Serpent Symbol in the Ancient Near East*, 55-57 and 59.

33 David K. Goodin, “The Noble Leviathan and the Twisted Serpent: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective on the Ecological Message of Genesis, Job and Isaiah”, Willem B. Drees, Hubert Meisinger, and Taeda A. Smedes (eds.), *Creation’s Diversity: Voices from Theology and Science* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 51.

34 See Peter Enns, *Exodus* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 197.

The name Eve, *hawwah*, means ‘mother of all the living’ but *hawwah* also means ‘serpent’ in many Semitic languages.”<sup>35</sup> In addition, the cognates of Eve’s name means snake in all Old Aramaic, later Aramaic, and Arabic.<sup>36</sup> Therefore we can assume that there were two kinds of serpents (Eve and the serpent) in the Garden of Eden at that time.

In Gen 3, Eve ate the fruit from the *wrong* tree, because God had prohibited from eating the fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden. In contrast, the serpent of Aaron in Exod 7:8-13 swallowed the *right* rods made by wood, because the rods must be removed in front of Pharaoh and his officials.<sup>37</sup> Eve (as one of the serpent) did not obey God’s command by eating the fruit of the tree, but Aaron’s serpent showed all of the people in the court of Pharaoh the power of God by devouring the Egyptian magicians’ rods. Eve’s eating in Gen 3 was the starting-point of the banishment from the paradise, while the actions of Aaron’s serpent in Exod 7:8-13 was the restarting-point of the journey to the Promised Land. As Cornelis Houtman mentions, the incident in Exod 7:8-13 means “Israel triumphs over Egypt in the power of YHWH.”<sup>38</sup>

George E. Pennell’s interpretation about Gen 3 is very interesting, because he asserts that the serpent was a counterpart of God.

All will be well, and Jehovah will be the supreme God of their world. However,

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35 Mary Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland* (Harper & Row: New York, 1989), 7; Howard N. Wallace, *The Eden Narrative* (HSM 32; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 147-148.

36 Dolansky, “A Goddess in the Garden?: The Fall of Eve”, 18-19.

37 According to Enns, the serpent “represents a sign of Egyptian royal authority (think of a pharaoh’s cobra-like headdress worn as a symbol of his authority).” Enns, *Exodus*, 109.

38 Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus 1* (HCOT; Kampen: Kok Publishing House, 1993), 393.

at this juncture another ambitious counselor enters the picture. He is the serpent, who symbolized the highest wisdom of the natural world. ... He (the serpent) is not one of the beasts of the field which Jehovah had created. He is wiser, more subtle than any of them. He is considered no less than one of the gods. He is considered on the same level as Jehovah. He talks and counsels with the man and woman, just as Jehovah does. His interest is to persuade them to disregard the communications and counsel of Jehovah. He makes himself another and wise god than Jehovah.<sup>39</sup>

Consequently, this story can be interpreted as the gift (Eve, Adam's serpent) from God followed to the other deity (the cunning serpent), because she disobeyed God's command. Pennell supports my interpretation in that Adam and Eve selected *Serpent worship* for themselves, but "it ended in frustration and failure."<sup>40</sup>

Some scholars assert that the serpent, שֶׁרֶפֶן, is associated with Asherah, the goddess.<sup>41</sup> אֲשֶׁרָה is related with Asherah's old epithet.<sup>42</sup> Shawna Dolansky argues that "the conjunction of tree, goddess, and snake constitutes a widespread mythological theme in the ancient Near East."<sup>43</sup> If it is right, who is

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39 George E. Pennell, *Jehovah, Not the Serpent, Thy God: A Study of the J Document* (Denver: Big Mountain Press, 1966), 16-17.

40 Pennell, *Jehovah, Not the Serpent, Thy God*, 17.

41 Wilson, *The Serpent Symbol in the Ancient Near East*, 127; Shawna Dolansky, "A Goddess in the Garden?: The Fall of Eve", Sarah Malena and David Miano (eds.), *Milk and Honey: Essays on Ancient Israel and the Bible in Appreciation of the Judaic Studies Program at the University of California, San Diego* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 3.

42 Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 33.

43 Dolansky, "A Goddess in the Garden?: The Fall of Eve", 13. See also Duane E. Smith, "The Divining

the goddess in Gen 3? Dolansky suggests that Eve is the female deity, because the verb, קָנָה (to create), in Gen 4:1 is closely related to “Asherah’s epithet in Ugaritic mythology, *qnyt ’ilm*, ‘creatress of the gods.’”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Howard N. Wallace believes that Eve was the wife of God as the goddess in the story of Gen 3, because she said that I created a man with God (Gen 4:1).<sup>45</sup>

If Eve acts as the female deity and also one of the serpents in Gen 3, what is the function of the other serpent in Gen 3? Was its duty deceiving Eve in Gen 3? Wilson disagrees about the serpent’s duty as just the deceiver in Gen 3. He insists that “what is clear from this story is that Yahweh exacts death. The serpent is not the agent by which life is taken from man; he is the protector of life, the antagonist to Yahweh the killer.”<sup>46</sup> His judgment about the story of Gen 3 gives us keen insight for interpreting these two stories. Eve’s disobedience to God brings all human beings to death. The serpent poses as God (the giver of life), but just gives Eve insufficient wisdom (עֵרוֹם). After biting the fruit, Adam and Eve know their nakedness (עֵרְוָה). Anthony York suggests that “the words ‘naked’ and ‘wiser’ are separated by only six words in the Hebrew text, but are virtually identical. ... We are to make some connection between ‘naked’ and ‘wiser,’ given the literary propensities of the writer.”<sup>47</sup> Although York wants to connect *a knowledge of good and bad* and knowing

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Snake: Reading Genesis 3 in the Context of Mesopotamian Ophiomancy”, *JBL* 134 (2015), 32-46.

44 Dolansky, “A Goddess in the Garden?: The Fall of Eve”, 19.

45 Wallace, *The Eden Narrative*, 158.

46 Wilson, *The Serpent Symbol in the Ancient Near East*, 127.

47 Anthony York, “The Maturation Theme in the Adam and Eve Story”, Joseph Coleson and Victor Matthews (eds.), *Go to the Land I Will Show You: Studies in Honor of Dwight W. Young* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 405.

nakedness as a result of eating the fruit in Gen 3,<sup>48</sup> we cannot find evidences that the knowledge helps their life. Therefore, the narrator intends to emphasize, using similar pronounced words, about their change after eating the fruit (disobeying God's word); they knew that they were naked (Gen 3:7) as their acquired wisdom.<sup>49</sup>

Like the story of Gen 3, in the incident of the serpent in Exod 7:8-13, Aaron's serpent shows God's omnipotence, because "Aaron and Moses are not magicians. They do not rely on 'secret arts' (v.11), ... and the turning of Aaron's staff into a snake is no trick."<sup>50</sup> On the contrary, the Egyptian magicians' serpents as a symbol of Egyptian gods' strength<sup>51</sup> imitate God's ability using a certain trick. The result is that Aaron's serpent becomes the first sign to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land, but the magicians' serpents become the first sign to destroy the Egyptians and Pharaoh himself.<sup>52</sup> From my analysis, there are very similar contents between the two stories as the following table. Therefore, if we understand these similarities of these stories, these will be clues to interpret the incident of the serpent more reasonably.

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48 York, "The Maturation Theme in the Adam and Eve Story", 404-405.

49 Although the serpent gave life to Adam and Eve, he must be considered as an opponent of God. Thomas L. Brodie's explanation about the wiseness of the serpent helps us to solve this problem.

The serpent is clever, and cleverness is good, part of the general goodness of creation (Gen. 1). But the serpent is not in the image of God; it is not cleverness that makes one like God. In fact, the cleverness, though good in itself - made by God - helps to instigate evil. Thus the origin of evil - the greatest puzzles - fades into the origin of good. Evil is not an independent force; it is part of a larger reality, which is essentially good.

Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 150.

50 Enns, *Exodus*, 198; See also Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 37.

51 Enns asserts that "snakes represent Egyptian power." Enns, *Exodus*, 197.

52 See Ezek 29:3. In this text YHWH says Pharaoh is נָחָשׁ.

Table 2. The similarities between two stories

	Exod 7:8-13	Gen 3
one tree (rod)	<i>Aaron's rod</i> led Israelites to the freedom.	<i>The tree of life</i> led Adam and Eve to life.
another tree (rod)	<i>The magicians' rods</i> led Egyptians to the wrong gods.	<i>The tree of knowledge of good and evil</i> led Adam and Eve to death.
one serpent	<i>Aaron's serpent</i> showed God's power.	<i>Eve</i> disobeyed God's commandment.
another serpent	<i>The Magicians' serpents</i> imitated God's ability.	<i>The serpent</i> imitated God's wisdom.

#### 4. The Incident of the Serpent as One of the Plagues

When it comes to the number of the plagues in the book of Exodus, most of us will agree that there were ten plagues, because we know that the number of plagues is ten without a doubt. We cannot find any information that there were 'ten plagues' at that time in the book of Exodus. Accordingly, there are possibilities that other plagues existed in the book of Exodus. The most possible candidate of the plagues is the incident in which Aaron's rod became a serpent in Exod 7:8-13. Victor P. Hamilton asserts that in the incident of the serpent, "one key ingredient is missing . . . there is no damage or injury to any person or any animal, or to anybody's crops or fields or drinking water. Nobody's life is threatened. It is more of a contest than a plague."<sup>53</sup> However,

<sup>53</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 2011), 117.

it is especially important that the incident of the serpent has similar structure with two other plagues (gnats and boils).

The three plagues are stereotyped. (1) Yahweh addresses Moses and Aaron and commands one or the other to perform a miraculous sign with his staff, (2) which they do. (3) The action by Aaron and Moses prompts (initially) a similar action by the Egyptian magicians. (4) Each plague ends with a summary of how Pharaoh would not listen to the sign, thus fulfilling a divine prediction. It is also noteworthy that there are no conditions presented to Pharaoh in any of these plagues. Instead they focus more on magical powers produced by Aaron or Moses and at least initially by the Egyptian magicians.<sup>54</sup>

If we follow Dozeman's opinion, we can see the beautiful literary structure in the plagues narrative. At the same time, we can assume that there was the narrator's intention for making the structure of the plagues narrative to be prominent to the readers, because "the P historian added three plagues to the cycle: the sea dragon (7:8-13), the gnats (8:16-19), and the boils (9:8-12)."<sup>55</sup>

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54 Dozeman, *Exodus*, 195. See also Mark S. Smith, *The Pilgrimage Pattern in Exodus* (JSOTSup 239; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 199.

55 Dozeman, *Exodus*, 194.



Table 3. Three plagues added into the cycle<sup>56</sup>

<i>So-called Non-P History</i>								
	blood	frogs		flies	death of cattle		hail- storm	locusts
<i>The plagues cycle</i>								
↑			↑				↑	
Added								
sea dragon	blood	frogs	gnats	flies		boils	hail- storm	locusts
<i>So called P History</i>								

In addition, the Egyptian magicians play an important role in this literary structure. There is staircase parallelism in these three plagues. In the incident of the serpent, the magicians made their staffs as the serpents. In the plague of gnats, they did not make gnats like Aaron. Finally, in the plague of boils, they could not do anything. Therefore, in the plagues cycle, it is certain that the incident of the serpent acts as a first plague.

Remarkably, these three plagues function as an introduction of the following two plagues. Dozeman insists that “the introduction to each cycle reinforces an element of nature in the progression of the plagues: the sea dragon underscores the element of *water*; gnats are associated with the *land*, and boils with the *air*.”<sup>57</sup>

In the plagues narrative, the rod has special literary function. The rod is an important object for dividing the plagues into three groups - the first for Aar-

<sup>56</sup> In accordance with Dozeman’s opinion.

<sup>57</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus*, 202.

on's rod, the second for no rod, and the third for Moses' rod.<sup>58</sup>

Table 4. Classification by whose rod

<i>Plague</i>	<i>Aaron's rod</i>	<i>No rod</i>	<i>Moses' rod</i>
Serpent	O		
Blood	O		
Frogs	O		
Gnats	O		
Flies		O	
Livestock		O	
Boils		O	
Hail		O	
Locusts			O
Darkness			O
First-born			O
Red Sea			O

Although Enns hesitates to include the incident of Red Sea as one of the plagues, if we divide the plagues by existence or non-existence of the rod, the incident of Red Sea must be included as a final plague in the narrative. The word, *בָּלַע* (to swallow), is found in the book of Exodus only two times - the serpent (Exod 7:12) and Red Sea (Exod 15:12).<sup>59</sup> According to Fretheim, the incident of the serpent in Exod 7:8-13 shows “the fate of the Egyptians at the Red

58 See Enns, *Exodus*, 194.

59 Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (The New Cambridge Bible Commentary; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 81.

Sea.”<sup>60</sup> Therefore the word, **בְּלַעַ**, shows what is the first and final plague in the narrative because “the final demise of the Egyptians is already hinted in (Exod) 7:12.”<sup>61</sup> If we want to understand the literary structure of the plagues narrative, we must acknowledge the incident of the serpent as the first plague. The following parallel structure of the book of Exodus supports my opinion because the plagues narrative is divided into one literary unit with same theme.

#### Section 1

Part 1: Salvation of Moses (1:1-2:25)

Part 2: Commissioning of Moses (3:1-7:7)

#### Section 2

Part 3: Salvation of Israel (7:8-18:27)

Part 4: Commissioning of Israel (19:1-40:38 [and beyond])<sup>62</sup>

Dozeman divides the three groups of the plagues above into four cycles by the origin of the disasters. In addition, he asserts that “darkness may qualify as a plague, but it will be interpreted under the heading ‘The Defeat of Pharaoh,’ because it introduces the setting of darkness for the death of the Egyptian firstborn at midnight.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 113; See also Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 115.

<sup>61</sup> Enns, *Exodus*, 196.

<sup>62</sup> Waldemar Janzen, “Jethro in the Structure of the Book of Exodus”, Jon Isaak (ed.), *The Old Testament in the Life of God’s People: Essays in Honor of Elmer A. Martens* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 170. It is certain that the book of Exodus has a well-designed literary structure.

<sup>63</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus*, 202.

Table 5. Dozeman's classification of the plagues by the origin<sup>64</sup>

<i>Cycle 1</i> (7:8-8:15)	<i>Cycle 2</i> (8:16-9:7)	<i>Cycle 3</i> (9:8-10:20)	<i>Cycle 4</i> (10:21-14:31)
Nature: water	Nature: land	Nature: air	Nature: light/dark
Introduction: Aaron; sea dragon	Introduction: Aaron; gnats	Introduction: Moses; boils	Introduction: Moses; darkness
blood	flies	Hail	Death of firstborn; time: midnight
frogs	cattle	locusts	Defeat of army; time: dawn

In the structure above, the incident of the serpent plays an important role as the introduction in *Cycle 1* and the first plague.

Moreover, we can find stronger evidence to support my judgment about the incident of the serpent being the first plague in the narrative. According to the fable of the Egyptian creation, a creator (Ra-Atum) appeared in the mound in the flood, which Ogdoad made in chaos. The mound in the flood seems to mean the earth (made after the flood of the Nile).<sup>65</sup> Traditionally, an ancient proverb said, "Egypt was the gift of the Nile."<sup>66</sup> The proverb means that the Nile is so important for the Egyptians that it was worshiped because the Egyptians could not maintain their lives without the Nile, and thus it is natural that they regarded the Nile as the source of life.<sup>67</sup> The creator appearing in

<sup>64</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus*, 205.

<sup>65</sup> Claude Traunecker, *The Gods of Egypt* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 14. "All the country irrigated by the Nile was Egypt and all the people who lived below Elephantine and drank the Nile's water were Egyptians."

<sup>66</sup> John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in the Book of Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 90.

<sup>67</sup> "Many Egyptian deities were associated with elements of the ancient Egyptian environment." David P.

the initiative mound made in the Nile gave birth to the following offspring. Thus, we can assume that the serpent and the frogs plagues can be inferred as the judgment of Ogdoad who had existed in the chaos before the appearance of the creator. Ogdoad (who was called as eight gods) which had the male divinities (four frogs) and the female divinities (four serpents), ruled the era before the creation.<sup>68</sup>

Before the beginning of the blood plague (when Moses and Aaron warned Pharaoh) Aaron's serpent ate the Egyptian magicians' serpent (Exod 7:12). When Pharaoh and his magicians saw that Aaron's rod was changed into a serpent, they might be reminded of female divinities appearing in Ogdoad, which appeared in their story of creation. Lurker mentions the serpent in Egypt "as a chthonic animal the snake was one of the life-creating powers, for example, the four female members of the Ogdoad bore snake heads."<sup>69</sup> The serpent was very important for the Egyptians, whether the serpents were made from their rods with abilities of magicians or with their trickery.<sup>70</sup> In that sense, the fact that Aaron's rod ate the magicians' serpents defines the beginning of judgment against the Egyptian gods.<sup>71</sup>

If so, why did God not judge the Nile the first time (which was the origin of Re-Atum as a creator) but judge the serpents (which means the female gods of Ogdoad

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Silverman, "Divinity and Deities in Ancient Egypt", Byron E. Shafer (ed.), *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 33.

68 Manfred Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt: An Illustrated Dictionary* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 91.

69 Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt*, 108.

70 K. A. Kitchen, "Magic and Sorcery", *NBD3*, 716.

71 Enns, *Exodus*, 194.

as a prelude of the plagues)?<sup>72</sup> The answer to this question can be drawn from the perspective of Egyptian women. According to the tomb of the ancient Egyptian, “female workers are usually portrayed with grace and dignity.”<sup>73</sup> Additionally, women in ancient Egypt were described as the assistants and companions of their husbands.<sup>74</sup> So, women in the society of Egypt did not have a despised position but one equal to men and lived as helpers who aided men. In this sense, the ancient Egyptians might depict their wish on the tomb in the sense that they hoped for such an equal relationship between men and women.<sup>75</sup>

In Exod 1, when Pharaoh ordered his subjects to save the females of Israel, the Egyptians might have thought that the Israelite females would be assistants of the Egyptian males. However, the female adults of Israel and Egypt dispersed Pharaoh’s plan and became assistants to accomplish God’s plan.<sup>76</sup>

The fact that Aaron’s serpent ate the magicians’ serpents points to God’s judgment of the female gods, which helped Re-Atum. Furthermore, the event of the Nile being changed into blood indicated God’s judgment on the original god of Egypt, Re-Atum as the creator. The following plague of frogs was God’s judgment of the male gods in the form of Ogdoad.<sup>77</sup> The remaining plagues are meant as God’s judgment on the offspring of Re-Atum and divine beings related to the offspring of Re-Atum. God also judged the sun god,

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72 Enns, *Exodus*, 194.

73 Barbara S. Lesko, “Women’s Monumental Mark on Ancient Egypt”, *BA* 54 (1991), 4.

74 Lesko, “Women’s Monumental Mark on Ancient Egypt”, 4.

75 Lesko, “Women’s Monumental Mark on Ancient Egypt”, 7.

76 J. Cheryl Exum, “You Shall Let Every Daughter Live’: A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10”, *Semeia* 28 (1983), 75.

77 Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt*, 91.

Re, through the darkness plague which was also considered a creator to the Egyptians.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, the first three plagues (serpent, blood, and frogs) mean the judgment of the Egyptian gods which considered as the creators in the Egyptians' creation story, because all the Egyptian including Pharaoh had believed in these gods as their creators. So, God must show His ability as the creator of the heaven and the earth,<sup>79</sup> because the Egyptian must know who the real God is. We can find this theme (namely 'the recognition motif') all over the book of Exodus.<sup>80</sup>

Table 6. The relationship between the plagues and Egyptian gods

plague	serpent	blood	frogs	gnats ~ locusts	darkness
Egyptian gods	Ogdoad (female)	Re-Atum	Ogdoad (male)	The related gods to Re-Atum	Re

If we exclude the incident of the serpent from the plagues, it would bring the result of misunderstanding the plagues narrative, because the first three plagues including the serpent make the perfect judgment on the Egyptians' creators from the Nile.

78 About the relationship between the plagues and the Egyptian gods, see Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 159-160; John H. Walton, *Chronological Charts of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 43.

79 The plagues cycle is strongly related to the creation narrative. See William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18* (AB 2; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 345-346; Fretheim, *Exodus*, 109-110.

80 Dozeman, *Exodus*, 197-198.

## 5. Conclusion

In the Hebrew Bible, the word ‘serpent’ has both positive and negative image. So, it is the reader’s take to decide its meaning after reading the texts. In ancient times, the serpent has a lot of symbolic meanings such as healing, fertility, gift, deity, and enemy. Therefore, we can interpret the incident of the serpent as follows: God’s gift repelled His enemy, the Egyptian gods.

There is parallel story with the incident of the serpent in Gen 3. Both narratives have similar elements that build the stories. In Gen 3, there are two serpents. One serpent (Eve) was God’s, but she disobeyed God’s order. Another stood against God. Also, there were two kinds of trees. One is related to life, another is associated to the expulsion from the paradise. In our text, Exod 7:8-13, there were two kinds of serpents transforming from the rods. One is God’s, but others are Egyptian gods’. Also, there were two kinds of rods. Aaron’s rod became a starting point of Israelites’ relief from Egypt to the Promised Land, but the magicians’ rods showed the fate that all the Egyptian gods (including Pharaoh as a living god) will be perish because the rod means pastoral care and kingship in the ancient times.<sup>81</sup>

So why is it that the narrator chose the Hebrew word, תַּנִּינִי (not נֶחָשׁ) in Exod 7:8-13? The reason is “its strong mythological import.”<sup>82</sup> By doing so, the narrator wants the reader to understand that the incident of the serpent is

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81 James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 154. Propp also insists that “the rod is the conduit for Yahweh’s power.” Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 621.

82 Noegel, “Moses and Magic: Notes on the Book of Exodus”, 47; Meyers, *Exodus*, 81.



one of the plagues in this narrative. In the plagues narrative the gods of Egyptians are impuissant.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, wise men and sorcerers (namely the magicians) of Egypt made the plagues more terrible. If they were wise like their title, they should have not tried to imitate the plagues, but should have removed the plagues from the land of Egypt. As the wise serpent (עֲרֹם) in Gen 3 had just given Adam and Eve nakedness (עִירְמוּם) as their wisdom,<sup>84</sup> the magicians showed their stupidity in the plagues narrative.<sup>85</sup>

As mentioned above, the incident of the serpent plays an important role as the first plague in the narrative. This incident functions as an introduction of the first three plagues like two other plagues (gnats and boils). Also, the rod has a special function to divide the plagues into three groups (with Aaron's rod, without a rod, and with Moses' rod). Moreover, the incident of the serpent shows that the plagues are perfect judgment to the Egyptian gods considered as the creators (Ogdoad) with the plague of frogs. Therefore, in the Exod 7:8-13, Aaron's serpent means "a symbol of the God of Israel while Israel was still in

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83 James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 155.

84 Ronald Hendel insists about the new knowledge after eating the fruit in Gen 3 that "ironically their new knowledge is most immediately perceptible as consciousness of their own bodies: 'They knew (וַיֵּדְעוּ) that they were naked' (3:7)." Ronald Hendel, "Leitwort Style and Literary Structure in the J Primeval Narrative", Shawna Dolansky (ed.), *Sacred History Sacred Literature: Essay on Ancient Israel, the Bible, and Religion in Honor of R. E. Friedman on His Sixtieth Birthday* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 98.

85 Those incidents show that God and His people are wiser than others. Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's two dreams using God's wisdom, but all the magicians and wise men of Egypt could not. Likewise, Aaron transformed the rod to the serpent using God's ability, but the Egyptian magicians could not. See Calum M. Carmichael, "Joseph, Moses, and the Institution of the Israelite Judicature", Joseph Coleson and Victor Matthews (eds.), *Go to the Land I Will Show You: Studies in Honor of Dwight W. Young* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 17.

Egypt.”<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, the two kinds of the serpents mean “the battle between the ‘Serpent’ Pharaoh and the ‘Serpent’ YHWH.”<sup>87</sup>

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## The Meaning and the Function of the Serpent (Exodus 7:8-13) in the Plagues Narrative

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This study aims to discuss the incident of the serpent in the plagues narrative of Exod 7:8-13. In this paper, I argue that the incident of the serpent is included as one of the plagues as a starting point that leads up to God's judgment.

In order to prove my opinion, firstly, I analyze the Hebrew words that mean the serpent or the snake, and search their usages in cognate languages. Especially, by focusing on תַּנִּינִי and נָחָשׁ mentioned in Exod 7, I investigate that such words meaning a serpent could have a positive or negative meaning depending on the context. Secondly, by comparing the story of Eve and the

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serpent in Gen 3, which is a similar story with the incident of the serpent in Exod 7, I suggest a new interpretation for this incident. Finally, I explore the literary structure of the plagues narrative and the relationship between the plagues and the Egyptian gods. It reveals that the incident of the serpent is the starting point of the plagues narrative and, at the same time, should also be counted as one of the plagues in this narrative.

This study highlights not only the importance of the incident of the serpent (which is easy to miss), but also helps us understand the delicate literary structure of the plagues narrative the narrator designs. In addition, it accentuates that YHWH is clearly showing the Egyptians, as well as to the Israelites and also to the reader, that the Egyptian gods worshiped by the Egyptians are worthless through the plagues (with the incident of the serpent) in this narrative.

## Keywords

serpent

rod

the plagues narrative

the Egyptian gods

literary structure

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