

*Bob Becking (Utrecht University and University of Pretoria)*

**PHOENICIAN SNAKES AND A PROPHETIC  
PARALLELISM: AN IMPLICATION FOR ZEPHANIAH  
1:9 OF A RECENT DISCOVERY IN THE EGYPTIAN  
PYRAMID TEXTS<sup>1</sup>**

**ABSTRACT**

*The parallelism in Zeph 1:9 is not prima facie clear: how can the act of jumping over the threshold be connected to the bringing of violence and deceit into the realm of the Temple? The discovery of early west Semitic lines in the Egyptian Pyramid Texts revealed a scenario in which a guarding deity protected the inner realm of the tomb against infiltrating serpents. In assuming that Zeph 1:9 refers to the presence of a guarding deity at the threshold, the jumpers can be seen as people wanting to avoid this guardian and hence as persons who were unwelcome in the temple.*

**1. A PROBLEMATIC PARALLELISM**

In his announcement of the forthcoming and devastating Day of YHWH, the prophet Zephaniah indicates a specific group of people that will be judged. After having reproached the leading circles in Jerusalem for their political and religious trespasses, he announces:

And I will punish on that day all who leap over the threshold,  
Who fill the house of their lord with violence and deceit? (Zeph  
1:9)

A parallelism between v. 9a and v. 9b can be assumed, as in many other prophetic and poetic texts.<sup>2</sup> The connection between the two lines is, however, not *prima facie* clear. Although the words “threshold” and “house” belong to the same semantic domain, it is unclear what “leaping” has to do with “violence and deceit”. The Peshitta has created a beautiful parallelism by rendering the Hebrew for “all who leap on the threshold” with “all who are robbers and plunderers”, thus providing a clear parallel for “violence and deceit”. In modern scholarship various proposals have

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1 This study is an extended version of a paper read at the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, St Andrews, July 2013.

2 See, e.g., Collins (1978:228-244); Watson (1984:114-159); Berlin (1985); Korpel & de Moor (1988:1-61); Kugel (1998); Verdonk (2005:231-244); Tsumura (2009:167-181).

been formulated as to the character of this parallelism. Cheyne (1898:569) is willing to break the parallelism by construing the expression “all who leap over the threshold” as a concessive subordinate clause:<sup>3</sup> “though they leap with scrupulous reverence ... yet they bring with them ... hands stained with cruelty and injustice”. Elliger (1967:64) does not pay attention to the possibility of a parallel.<sup>4</sup> Van der Woude (1978:96) assumes that the indiscriminating adoption of foreign religious practices by the leading classes of Jerusalem must have been construed as contempt and offence of YHWH.<sup>5</sup> Seybold (1985:25-28, 109) construes v. 9b as a later, moralizing addition. Ben Zvi (1994:95-102) is of the opinion that the text of Zeph 1:9 is intentionally ambiguous. Berlin (1994:79-80) does not see a clear connection between the two lines. Sweeney (2003:88) sees the following connection: he construes “all who cross over the threshold” to be priests who instead of performing acts of righteousness and holiness, fill God’s house with violence and deceit.<sup>6</sup>

These proposals, however, are not convincing. They do not give an answer to the question of balance between the two parts of the verse. For a clear parallelism both cola have to express the same subject matter. The second colon reiterates the topic of the first either by using parallel words and phrases or by presenting a clear parallel concept (Watson 1984:114-159; Berlin 1985; Kugel 1998). These elements seem to be absent in the proposals mentioned above.

## 2. *RELIGIOUSLY JUMPING OVER THE THRESHOLD*

A first step on a way to a more compelling view on the parallelism between the two lines in Zeph 1:9 would be to focus on the expression *לְגַדְּמֵתָן*. The noun *מֵתָן* clearly refers to a “threshold”,<sup>7</sup> or more specifically “the space under the threshold-stone” (Zwickel 1973:25-27; Porter 1993:65-75; Hagedorn 2012:141-142). Gerleman – who still thought that *מֵתָן* was some sort of a postament – has tried to explain this expression

3 For the syntax of such clauses, see, e.g., König & Siemund (2000:342-360).

4 See also Edler (1984:124-132); Vlaardingerbroek (1999:87-90); House (1989:63, 70, 98); Robertson (1990:277-278).

5 In a similar way Irsigler (1977:241-42); Snyman (2000:89-102); Irsigler (2002:144); Udoekpo (2010:277).

6 A comparable view holds Hagedorn (2012:143).

7 As is accepted by almost all interpreters; the view of Winckler (1905:381-384), adapted by Gerleman (1942:8-14); Sabottka (1972:36-44); that *מֵתָן* would refer to a rostrum that can be climbed is now generally abandoned.

by comparing the Hebrew verb לָלַךְ with Arabic *daraġa*, “to mound”. In his view, the expression would refer to a cultic act in which a priest was climbing a platform (Gerleman 1942:9; Udoekpo 2010:277). It is, however, much more convincing to make a connection with the report on Philistine priests who would not dare to tread the threshold of the temple of Dagon in Ashdod (1 Sam 5:5).<sup>8</sup> In the light of that comparison, Zeph 1:9 could easily be seen as referring to the act of jumping over the threshold. This act would then represent the more folkloristic or traditional side of religion. It was fuelled by fear for threatening demons supposedly dwelling under that threshold.<sup>9</sup> Extra-biblical evidence for this reasonable proposal, however, has until recently not been found (Uehlinger 1996:58). The closest parallel comes from a passage in the Hittite text, *KUB* 11.17 Rev. iv:6-11, where the king has to stamp on the threshold when leaving the sanctuary to demonstrate his power over the demonic world. Although this text shares the conceptual model of Zeph 1:9, it could not be seen as a parallel.

### 3. SEMITIC SERPENT SPELLS IN THE EGYPTIAN PYRAMID TEXTS

The next step would be to pay attention to a recent discovery in the Egyptian Pyramid Texts. Pyramid Texts are collections of religious apophthegms that in the period of the Old Kingdom were engraved on the walls of the tombs of the Pharaohs (Allen 2005:1-14; Hays 2012:69-289). The amount and the order of spells and proverbs vary from tomb to tomb. It can be assumed that the writers at the Egyptian court had a broad arsenal of texts at their disposal. The selection of sayings was – as can be assumed – connected to the character of the deceased. Egyptologists generally accept that the Pyramid Texts as we now know them go back to oral traditions that reach beyond the period of the construction of the first

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8 This connection has already been seen by the Targum which reads in Zeph 1:9: בַּנְמוּסֵי פְּלִשְׁתִּי, “according to the customs of the Philistines”. See Cathcart & Gordon (1989:166); Ho (1997:218-222).

9 See especially Donner (1970:42-55). His view is now widely adopted, see Van der Woude (1978:96); Edler (1984:129-31); Seybold (1985:27-28); Schroer (1987:169-77); Deissler (1988:240); Albertz (1992:304); Berlin (1994:79-80); Irsigler (2002:142-144); Sweeney (2003:85-88); Norin (2002:75-100); Wöhrle (2006:201); Jin-Hi (2006:24); Hagedorn (2012:141-142). Criticism of this view is uttered by Ben Zvi (1994:95-102), who, however, did not present an alternative interpretation. Cogan (1993:411) also has his doubts.

pyramids (Baines 2004:15-41; Steiner 2011:1-3). The Pyramid Texts have their function to safeguard the journey of the deceased Pharaoh to the Heavenly Egypt. Within the Pyramid Texts different kinds of sayings occur. Next to hymns and litanies, texts are found that present in a dramatic way the mythological battle – with political consequences – between Horus and Seth (Tobin 1993:93-110; Meurer 2002). The greatest section in the Pyramid Texts, however, is formed by eulogies and other lines that praise the deceased. Finally, in this corpus magical spells are to be found that aim at shielding the Pharaoh on his journey from all sorts of evil, especially from attacks by snakes.<sup>10</sup>

The serpent spells, however, contain lines, that are inscrutable even for a seasoned Egyptologist. They read like abracadabra. Sethe labels these lines as magic words that are difficult to interpret and look like *hocus pocus* (Leitz 1996:385). Faulkner (1969:56) and Altenmüller (1972:258) construe these lines as untranslatable from first to last. Mathieu (2002:191) is of the opinion that in some of these lines a magical palindrome is detectable. Allen (2005:5-55) offers a translation that is, however, both puzzling and incomprehensible. Hays (2012:278) states that he “does not possess the skills to make a guess as to the original language of the *voces magicae*”.

Steiner (2011) – who previously recognized with Charles Nims a Semitic text in the Demotic Papyrus Amherst 63 containing among others an extra-biblical version of Ps 20 (Nims & Steiner 1983:261-274) – has made plausible that these passages in the serpent spells should be construed as Semitic texts. Or to be more precise: the serpent spells contain in his view the oldest West Semitic texts known. They precede the earliest Ugaritic inscriptions by a millennium and are a few centuries older than the earliest known East Semitic, Akkadian texts. It should be noted that his view is not unchallenged among Egyptologists.<sup>11</sup> From the point of view of a Semitist, his proposal, however, makes sense. This implies that I offer my ideas with some caution and I am prepared to reiterate in case scholars will be able to falsify Steiner’s proposal. Although I share both the caution and the warning that we do not have West Semitic texts contemporary to the serpent spells as expressed by

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10 The standard edition of the Pyramid Texts is to be found in Sethe (1908); for a recent translation, see Meurer (2002:269-315); and Allen (2005).

11 Schneider and Sapir posted criticism on some details at the ANE-list. See <http://www.talkingpyramids.com/serpent-spells-2/>. Their criticism was, however, never published.

Morgenstern (2012:450-451) in his review of Steiner's book, I nevertheless think that we should accept Steiner's proposal until proven incorrect. The criticism by Hays (2012:276-280), looks impressive but concentrates on the fact that Steiner did not read the serpent spells in the wider context of the Pyramid-texts. Hays does not offer criticism at the level of linguistics. Breyer (2013:141-146) makes a whole set of valuable philological remarks that cast doubt on Steiner's thesis, but do not falsify it.

#### 4. TRANSLATION

I here offer my translation of the pertinent passages in the serpent spells, based on the interpretation of Steiner. Lines in Semitic are presented in SMALL CAPS.

PT 232-238<sup>12</sup>

- §236a        Come, poison! Come, poison!  
                  Look, poison! Look, poison!
- §236b        You, whose mother is Rīr-rīr!<sup>13</sup>  
                  You, whose mother is Rīr-rīr!  
                  Look, poison! Look, poison!
- §236c        Be washed away from me, o (poison of a) foreign land!  
                  Do not ignore me!
- §237a        Fall, o serpent that came forth from the earth!  
                  Fall, o glow that came forth from the abyss!
- §237b        Fall down!  
                  Crawl away!
- §238a        A gaze is upon you, o you that moves on your belly.  
                  Get back on your spine, o you that dwells in the *naut*-bush.

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12        Different systems for numbering the lines in the Pyramid Texts exist. See Allen (2005:3-5); and Hays (2012).

13        The spells hint at a being indicated with 333, which is to be seen as a rendition in hieroglyphs for three *'ālephs*. The *'āleph* indicates the sound /r/. In fact, *rrr* should be read. Steiner (2011:15-22) construes this word as the personal name of a goddess Rīr-rīr. She should be seen as a two-headed serpent goddess with heads on both ends of the body who could be called upon in case of distress. Her name signifies something like "Spittle-Spittle". Cf. the Semitic noun רִיר, "spittle", in 1 Sam 21:14 and Job 6:6. It refers to the phenomenon that snake-poison is spit out through spittle. The goddess, however, safeguards against threatening serpents.

- §238b Retreat before her  
Who jubilates with both her faces.
- §239a UTTERANCE (*kawwu*)<sup>14</sup> OF RĪR-RĪR,  
THE MOTHER-OF LIFE, THE MOTHER-OF LIFE.<sup>15</sup>
- §239b You have had intercourse  
with the two female guardians at the threshold of the door.  
TURN ASIDE, O MY BELOVED, O LION.
- §240 HIS UTTERANCE: “COME, COME TO MY HOUSE!”  
“Cord” son of “Mother’s milk” is this your name.
- §241a The spittle has come to nothing;  
that which is in the dust,  
has fled into the house of his mother.
- §241b Monster, lie down.
- §242a The bread of your father is for you,  
you whose attack was unsuccessful.
- §242b Your own bread of your father is for you,  
you whose attack was unsuccessful.
- §242c The gold of jubilation,  
Hadad,<sup>16</sup> your bull, the esteemed one  
against whom this had been undertaken.

PT 281-282

§422a HIS WHISPERING, THE UTTERANCE OF HIS SPELL:

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14 Cf. 𐤎𐤓𐤐, “their voice, sound”, in Ps 19:5.

15 Steiner (2011:28) translates *im ḥw* with “mother snake”. In view of the distant parallel with 𐤎𐤓𐤐 𐤎𐤓𐤐, “mother of all living”, in Gen 3:20 and of the fact that a meaning “snake, serpent” for \**ḥw*, is only attested in Aramaic (*ḥewyāh*) and not in other west Semitic languages, a rendition with “mother of life”, is more probable.

16 The serpent spells twice mention a deity that is indicated in the text as *H’y-tʒw*. Steiner (2012:38), construes this morpheme as an epithet that he quite literally renders with “The One that Appears in Flame”. The context, however, makes clear that this deity possesses power over the “Byblites”, since he commands these threatening serpents to retreat. Steiner is correct that *H’y-tʒw* would refer to an ancient Byblite deity. I would like to go one step further by offering a proposal for identification of *H’y-tʒw*. In my view, this name refers to the West Semitic storm and thunder god, Hadad or Haddu. Concerning this deity, see Greenfield (1999:377-382); and Green (2003). Texts from Ugarit mention Hadad/Baal as a god battling against serpents. See KTU<sup>3</sup> 1.5:1-2; 1.82:7-8.

- “RĪR-RĪR IS IN ME”.
- §422b SEE MY MOUTHS, SEE MY VULVAE,  
MY MOUTHS, SEE MY VULVAE.
- §422c WHO AM I?  
RĪR-RĪR, FRAGRANT PERFUME FOR THE NOSE, AM I.
- §422d Go! Go!  
N’y-snake! N’y- snake!
- §423a O, (snake of) this foreign land,  
like the mouth of a vulture against me!  
This is (the true nature) of your attack.
- §423b O, (snake of) this foreign land,  
like the mouth of a vulture against me,  
(you are) a subject to the Gold of Jubilation.
- §423c Hadad and Jubilation!  
That is your bull, the esteemed one  
against whom this had been undertaken.
- PT 286-287
- §427a HURRY AWAY FROM RĪR-RĪR,  
WHOSE HANDS BRING DEATH.
- §427b The Byblites have crawled back.  
O, praised one of the Red Crowns.
- §427c RĪr-rĪr of the sea, RĪr-rĪr of the sea.  
O, praised one of the Red Crowns,  
may you praise my name!
- §428a O, fugitive from its mother!  
O, fugitive from its mother!
- §428b You really are a fugitive!  
You really are a fugitive!  
O lion, disappear!

##### 5. RĪR-RĪR VERSUS PHOENICIAN SNAKES

It seems clear that a snake called RĪr-rĪr is protecting the tomb against evil powers who are embodied as snakes from a foreign land (§423a). In §427a, they are depicted as *kbnw*. Allen (2005:53) already remarked that the Egyptian noun *kbnw*, “Byblites”, does not refer to inhabitants of that Phoenician city, but stands metonymically for snakes or serpents from that harbour city. Steiner (2011:10-14) correctly noted that already in the fourth millennium BCE trade contacts between Egypt and the Levantine

harbours had developed.<sup>17</sup> The Byblite serpent would have come as stowaways on ships to Egypt. These Byblites are also indicated as “(serpent of) a foreign land”. The presence of Byblite serpents in Egypt elucidates the use of west Semitic in the serpent spells: one should whisper at a foreign snake in its own mother’s tongue.

## 6. *PROTOTYPICAL SCENARIO*

At first sight, the lines in these sections are only loosely connected (Hays 2012:276-80). A closer inspection, however, reveals that the sections are the expression of a very specific prototypical scenario. This idea refers to a schematic recapitulation of a series of connected acts that form the basis of all sorts of epic tales, in literary form as well as in movies (Van Wolde (2010:54-60). The scenario that is expressed by the lines just translated from the Pyramid texts can be summarized in the following stages:

- (1) One or more serpents want to enter a forbidden space;
- (2) At the threshold they are waylaid by a guard who is in the service of the master of that house;
- (3) The guard executes acts to hinder the entrance;
- (4) In case the serpents do enter the forbidden realm, they are confronted with a series of spells;
- (5) The serpents crawl back; and
- (6) they move on their back through the dust and spit their poison into a hole in the earth.

This is a scenario that resembles the scenarios that are at the background of many ancient Near Eastern tales<sup>18</sup> and biblical stories that relate the defence against threatening and sometimes demonic danger.

The text provides a mechanism that organizes order on two levels. On the one hand, it safeguards the deceased on his journey to the land of no return. On the other hand, it safeguards the Egyptian society. The death of a Pharaoh had always been a *tempus nefas*: a threatening period for the order in the community. The texts also govern human conduct. Nobody is allowed just to enter in the silent realm of the tomb. This institution is a hint for possible rebels not to disturb the peace of the country. Next to that

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17 See also Joffe (2000:113-123); Kansa (2001).

18 See, e.g., some Sumerian texts in Krebernik (1984), the Ugaritic text, KTU<sup>3</sup> 1.100, and an Aramaic scorpion spell (Steiner 2001:259-268).

it should be noted that Rīr-rīr is positioned at the threshold of the pyramid. Such a threshold marks the transition from “outside” to “inside” and should be construed as liminal space.<sup>19</sup> Here Rīr-rīr functions as a “doorkeeper” defending the peace in tomb and country as it is in continuous threat at the liminal threshold.

#### 7. *A SIDE STEP: PS 24*

Over fifty years ago, Koch argued that a set of texts from the Hebrew Bible would contain the remnants of a “ritual for the entrance to the temple” (Koch 1961:45-60). Pss 15 and 24, Isa 33, Mic 6 would contain reflections of this liturgy. I will not discuss the merits of Koch’s proposal in detail here. I will only take over his assumption that these texts refer to a preferred moral behaviour on the side of those who are allowed to enter the holy precinct. The morality is connected to the ethos expressed in the Decalogue. A programmatic text is Ps 24:3-4:

Who may ascend the mountain of YHWH?  
Who may stand in his holy place?  
The one who has clean hands and a pure heart,  
who does not trust in an idol  
or swear by a false god (Botha 2009:535-553).

This implies that the liminal space on the threshold of the temple may not be crossed by deceitful people. I will come back to this point in my remarks on Zeph 1:9.

#### 8. *ZEPH 1:9 AND STAGE 2 OF THE PROTOTYPICAL SCENARIO*

In my opinion, the religious ritual of leaping over the threshold in Zeph 1:9 can be connected to Stage 2 of the supposed scenario. At the threshold of the tomb of the Pharaoh, a serpent-goddess was present protecting and safeguarding the inner realm of the pyramid. The two female guardians in §239b refer to the one goddess Rīr-rīr. Supposedly, Rīr-rīr not only was seen as a two-headed animal but also as having genitals on both ends of her body, as can be inferred from §422b. Her having intercourse with the threatening serpents should be seen as a functional act. As doorkeeper she guarded over the first defence line against the Byblite or Phoenician

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19 On the religious function of the threshold in the ancient Near East, see Hartenstein (1997:116-122); and Berlejung (1998:27-28). An abundance of literature exists on the anthropological concept of liminality. See, e.g., van Gennep (1960); Girard (1972); and Douglas (1984).

snakes. The aim of her copulating with the intruders is to bring the penetrating serpents into a dependent position, making a second defensive line possible.

Reading Zeph 1:9 from the implied prototypical scenario designed above leads to the following interpretative proposal. “Those who leap over the threshold” could be construed as a group of people wanting to enter the realm of the temple. This space, however, is forbidden territory for them. In the preceding verses in the book of Zephaniah, its author has outlined why on the forthcoming Day of YHWH inhabitants of Jerusalem will be devoured. The immoral and illicit conduct of the elite of the city has, in the opinion of the author, estranged them from God. V. 9 adds another set of evildoers to this catalogue. In my opinion, “jumping over the threshold of the temple in Jerusalem” is seen as act of avoiding a confrontation with a guardian deity. This implies that the divine being at the gate should not be seen as a demon, but rather as a safeguarding divine being defending as a doorkeeper the liminal space at the threshold of the temple.

This interpretation also provides clarity in the parallelism with v. 9b. “Those who leap over the threshold” could be construed as persons who, for reasons outlined in Zeph 1, are not allowed to enter the sacred realm of the temple. The reason for the fact that they are not welcome is underscored by v. 9b. As a result of their moral and religious conduct, they will bring violence and deceit into the temple in a similar way as they have brought violence and destruction to the city of Jerusalem. This interpretation connects the text of Zeph 1:9 with the ethos demanded for those who would enter the temple in Pss 15 and 24. This interpretation supplies a clear parallelism at the level of concept in v. 9.<sup>20</sup> In addition, this interpretation might supply a distant parallel between Zeph 1:9 and a line in a Hittite instruction to priests and temple officials:

Neither pig nor dog is ever to cross the threshold (of the temple).<sup>21</sup>

By their illicit conduct, the elite of Jerusalem have rendered themselves as unfit for the temple as unclean animals were in ancient Hattushas.

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20 As an implication, I would propose, with Nel (1989:155-167), not to see Zeph 1:8-9 as the result of a complex redaction-historical process; *pace* Edler (1984); Seybold (1985:25-28); Ben Zvi (1999:232-261); Neef (1999:530-546); Wöhrle (2006:199-205); Hagedorn (2012:141-143).

21 *KUB* 13.4 = *CTH* 264 iii 55-83. See Moyer (1981); and Collins (2006:156-57).

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