

The Hidden and Revealed in the Sign of the Serpent (Exodus 4:2-5; 7:8-14)

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When Moses encounters the burning bush, God shows him three signs in order to convince him to accept upon himself the mission of taking the children of Israel out of Egypt. The sign is an act by God or his emissary and it is given as proof of God's words and their divine nature. The sign is done both at God's (or his emissary's) initiative and in response to an individual's request (Judges 6:17, 37; Kings II 11, 19, 20, Isaiah 37:30 and others). In the first sign demonstrated to Moses, his rod turns into a *nāḥāš* (נחש = serpent) (Exodus 4:2-5). This sign occurs again, but the second time the author used a different Hebrew term, *tannīn* (תנין = crocodile), to describe what the rod was turned into (Exodus 7:1-13)¹.

In the Bible, the word *tannīn*, crocodile is similar in meaning to serpent and *peten* (פתן = viper)². Both are mentioned in various passages in the Bible and have been linked to mythological traditions that were blurred by the Biblical editor and underwent theological adjustments. In order to weaken the mythological strength attributed to them by ancient Eastern cultures, the Bible stresses God's exclusive control over the serpent and crocodile³. The idea that God rules over his creations is expressed in various ways in different Biblical passages. When the sign is shown to Moses, the two facets of this concept are presented: the victory over the serpent and the victory over the crocodile. The question is why did the Biblical author deem it necessary to do so and why did he specifically use the sign of the serpent to begin the series of miracles that took place in the land of Egypt? Illuminating the hidden layer in the description of this sign and highlighting the Egyptian elements of the story at hand should answer this question.

A wide array of Egyptian texts provides some insight on the Egyptians' attitudes to the serpent and crocodile. Their fear of these animals is clearly reflected in medical texts such as the Brooklyn Papyrus and the Ebers Papyrus, which discuss serpent bites and how to treat them⁴. The fear of encountering a serpent or crocodile led to these animals being described as

¹ W.G. Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York), UAHC, 1962, p. 423.

Today there are some researchers who see the story of the rod as the first plague brought on Egypt; D.J. McCarthy, "Moses Dealings with Pharaoh," *CBQ*, 27 (1965), pp. 336-347. (There were other signs, such as the one involving leprosy, which disappeared completely and apparently were included in the description of the plague of boils and the sign of the blood, which was the first plague to strike the Egyptians.) Others note two different traditions that were preserved in the Biblical text. Regarding different opinions on the sign of the serpent, see S.E. Loewenstamm, *The Tradition of the Exodus in its Development*, Jerusalem 1987, p. 51 off. W.H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, Anchor Bible, New York 1999, pp. 190-191, 227.

² The crocodile is also used in Ugaritic mythology to mean a sea monster. See: U. Cassuto, *Biblical and Canaanite Literatures*, Jerusalem, 1972, pp. 62-90; U. Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath*, Jerusalem, 1965; J. Loewenstamm, "The Ugaritic Myth of the Sea and its Biblical Counterparts," *Eretz-Yisrael*, IX, 1969, pp. 96-101; B. Uffenheimer, "Biblical Theology and Monotheistic Mythology," *Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Jerusalem 1983, pp. 79-94; T.L. Fenton, "Differing Approaches to the Theomachy Myth in Old Testament Writers," *Studies in Bible and Ancient Near East*, eds. Y. Avishur and J. Blau, Jerusalem 1978, pp. 337-381; M.K. Wakeman, *God's Battle with the Monster*, Leiden 1973; O. Kaiser, "Die Mystische Bedeutung des Meers" in: *Ägypten, Ugrait und Israel*, Berlin 1959, pp. 44-47.

³ G.J. Botterweck, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, VII, Grand Rapids, 1995, pp. 360-366; E. Auerbach, *The Sages - Their Concepts and Beliefs*, Jerusalem 1969, pp. 81-102.

⁴ J.F. Nunn, *Ancient Egyptian Medicine*, Norman 1996, pp. 183-189.

having hostile, supernatural powers that bring bad luck. The Egyptians believed that by worshiping these threatening forces they could appease the gods and make the destructive forces in them into forces of protection and agents of justice. Consequently, the Egyptians were disgusted by the serpent and crocodile, but at the same time, they also admired them in both the world of the living and the world of the dead⁵. Thus it can be concluded that the Biblical text's use of serpent and crocodile reflects mythological traditions that were also part of the ancient Egyptians' worldview for hundreds of years.

The fear of encountering a snake features prominently in an Egyptian story dating from the period of Sesostri I (*sn-wsrt*), from the 12th dynasty (1943-1898 BCE). This story describes the life of a sailor whose ship is wrecked and who then escapes to a deserted island. Suddenly the earth there trembled and a serpent of frightening proportions appears: "And it was a snake that was coming and he was 30 cubits (long) and his beard was more than two cubits..."⁶. The snake first appeared with his satanic power and threatened to kill the sailor. As the story develops, the snake's positive powers were revealed and the sailor merited protection, security and valuable gifts. The serpent is also depicted in a similar fashion in the Instruction of Amenemope (*imn-m-ipt*): "Give your goodness before people. Then you are greeted by all welcomes the Uraeus one, spits on Apopis (*'3pp*)"⁷. In other words, the serpent, Uraeus grants protection, whereas the serpent, Apopis, symbolizes hostility and danger. The Egyptian texts specifically refer to different types of serpents: some had negative attributes and some had positive attributes. Some examples are: the serpents, Hefau (*hf3w*)⁸ and Apopis, which represented negative forces and the serpents, Khty (*hty*)⁹ and Mehen (*mhn*)¹⁰, which were perceived as being good and protective omens. Egyptian culture had a special place for the cobra, i.e., Uraeus, who is described as standing on his tail and ready to bite instantly. Uraeus became the symbol of the royal crown and its wearer was perceived as one with protective powers and deterrent abilities. Egyptian writings stress the power of the Egyptian king to defeat his enemies when he is adorned with the crown of Uraeus. The Uraeus was also believed to provide its wearer with magical powers and the ability to perform sorcery. With the passage of time, it was identified with the goddess, Maat (*m3't*), who represented the cosmic order¹¹.

Holding serpents as an omen of strength and for protection against harmful forces is an image that appears frequently on amulets known as the Cippus stelae. These stelae feature the god,

⁵ R.O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, Oxford 1969, spells no. 241, 242, 292, 293, 378, 380, etc.

⁶ M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature I*, Berkeley 1973, pp. 211 off; H. Goedlicke, "The Snake in the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor," *GM*, 39 (1980), pp. 27-31.

⁷ M. Lichtheim (note 6 above), II, p. 153; G. Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt*, Austin, 1994, pp. 20 off; J.F. Borghouts, "The Evil Eye of Apopis," *JEA*, 59 (1973), pp. 114-150.

⁸ R.T. Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt*, London 1991, p. 241.

⁹ E.A.W. Budge, *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*, II, New York, 1973, pp. 233.

¹⁰ R.O. Faulkner, (tr. & ed.), *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 3 vols., Warminster 1977, spells no. 493, 495, 758-760.

On the god, Mehen, see P. Piccione, "Mehen Mysterious and Resurrection from the Coiled Serpent," *JARCE*, 27, (1990), pp. 43-52. The pyramid texts feature the phrase "Mehen's ways." See R.O. Faulkner (above note 5), spells no. 659 and 756.

Also discovered were games known as "Mehen games," after the twisting serpent. Illustrated texts from the period of the New Middle Kingdom help to explain the game. The purpose of the game was to walk along nine circles created by the serpent's twisting and reach the serpent's head located in the center circle. Each circle represented a path that had to be crossed. Between each path was a circle called "the path of fire" and the Mehen's goal was to protect the paths of fire. Each path had a gate and in the middle of the game was the "bad" god. This game emphasizes the fact that the perception of the snake Mehen as a protector was common in ancient Egypt.

¹¹ An example of this appears in the description of Ramses II in his eight year see J.H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, London 1988, II § 38, 62, 721, 895; H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, Chicago 1948, p. 107; J.D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*, Grand Rapid, Mich. 1997, pp. 83-103.

Horus, as a naked, curly-haired boy, surrounded by the cobra serpent, Uraeus. Or Horus stands with both feet on the back of a crocodile with his right foot turned slightly inward and animals clasped in his hands, usually serpents. Above Horus' head, most of the stelae depict the protector god, Bas. Engraved on the backside of the stelae are magical serpents. Protective powers against poisonous serpents, scorpions and other animals were attributed to these stelae. The stelae were intended for wearing, as indicated by the loop on the end of them, as well as for placing in temples to be seen by those coming there in search of cures. Such stelae were also found in graves, where they had been placed in order to protect the deceased from animals waiting to ambush them in the world of the dead¹².

There are also other sources for images of figures clasping serpents: some archeological excavations uncovered scarabs featuring figures clasping serpent-shaped rods¹³. A wall illustration in the Edfu Temple shows a king guiding a flock of animals with a serpent-shaped rod in his hand. Excavations at Thebes uncovered a wooden figure from the seventh century BCE wearing a demonic mask in the image of a lion holding serpent-like rods in its hand. This figure was found near a box containing magic tools and next to a papyrus containing spells¹⁴. A stela from King Tantamani, from the 25th dynasty, (c. 664-656 BCE) engraved in the Gabel Barkal Temple depicts a dream in which the king holds a serpent in each hand; when the king awoke, he asked what the meaning of his dream was. He heard a prophecy that Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt would be given to him, the prophecy came true and in the last part of the stela, the king declares that the prophecy told to him indeed came true¹⁵. The king, who came from the Kushite dynasty, was crowned at Napata and afterwards conquered Egypt. The stela commemorates this conquest and the clasping of serpents emphasizes this success.

One of the symbols of royalty that always appears in Egyptian iconography is the rod. The rod appears in the ancient kingdom in shepherding scenes, and is used by the shepherd to guide his flock. This image is later transplanted into royal scenes where the king is seen holding a slightly shorter version of a shepherd's rod in his hand. In this case, the king is perceived as the shepherd of his people. For example, the Instruction of Merikare (*mri-k3-r'*) says: "Well tended is mankind – god's cattle,"¹⁶ and the Berlin 3029 Papyrus states in the writings of Sesostris I: "I will settle firm decrees for Harakhty. He begat me to do what should be done for him, to accomplish what he commands to do. He appointed me shepherd of his land, knowing him who would herd it for him"¹⁷. Starting with the 18th dynasty (1550/1539-1295 BCE), high officials appear in Egyptian iconography with rods in their hands.

¹² K.C. Seele, "Horus on the Crocodiles" *JNES* 6 (1947), pp. 43-52; Ritner, R.K., 'Horus on the Crocodiles: A Juncture of Religion and Magic in Late Dynastic Egypt', in: W.K. Simpson (ed.), *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt*, Yale Egyptological Studies, Yale 1989, pp. 103-116; R.K. Ritner, "A Uterine Amulet in the Oriental Institute Collection," *JNES*, 43 (1984), pp. 219-220; R.K. Ritner, "O. Gardiner 363a: A Spell Against Night Terrors," *JARCE*, 27 (1990), pp. 25-41; K. Martin, "Uräus," *LÄ*, VI (1986), pp. 864-868.

¹³ D. Ben-Tor, *The Scarab, A Reflection of Ancient Egypt*, Jerusalem 1989, p. 70, no. 42-43 and O. Tufnell and W.A. Ward, *Studies on Scarab-seals II*, Warminster, 1984, pp. 352-353 pl. XLVII, 10c2c.

¹⁴ G. Pinch (above note 7), pp. 55-57.

¹⁵ J.H. Breasted (note 11 above), IV § 919; K.A. Kitchen, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt*, Warminster 1986, pp. 393 off.

¹⁶ M. Lichtheim (note 6 above), I, p. 106.

¹⁷ M. Lichtheim (note 6 above), I, p. 116; The shepherding theme appears in the Bible. God is perceived as the shepherd of His people and David is seen as the prototype of the king as shepherd. This model is highlighted in the story under review "Now Moses tended the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midyan, and he led the flock far away into the desert...." Exodus 3:1. Moses, the shepherd, will lead his people in the desert. The shepherding motif also appears in ancient Near Eastern cultures. See: J.W. Vancil, 'Sheep, Shepherd', *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. V, ed. D.N. Freedman, New York 1992, pp. 1187-1188.

In Egypt, rods were frequently used and they were linked to the embodiment of various gods and endowed their users with divine powers. Bas reliefs and drawings from the Early Kingdom show the gods' holding rods in their hands and then presenting them to the king. According to the Egyptians, these scepters were also supposed to provide authority over the forces of nature. The importance of the scepter as a symbol of authority, i.e. the pharaoh, can be seen clearly in P. Harris 500 which is today in the British Museum. The papyrus describes Djehuty's conquest of Joppa by trickery during the period of Tuthmosis III. Djehuty was the king's general who was responsible for that operation. Djehuty needed to use trickery in order to enter the fortified city. At the beginning of the papyrus, we learn that Djehuty hosted the prince of Joppa. The prince asked to see the king's scepter, which symbolized the power of Tuthmosis III. Djehuty showed him the scepter and used it to kill his guest¹⁸.

Egyptian perceptions reveal another layer of the sign of the serpent that was previously hidden. During the first sign, God asks Moses: "What is that in your hand and he said, a rod." (Exodus 4:2) Moses is not aware of the hidden significance of the rod in his hand as a symbol of authority and power. To him it was a simple shepherd's rod to be used for guiding a flock in the desert. God asks Moses to cast the rod on the ground and the text states: "And he cast it on the ground." This repetition is meant to emphasize that this entire episode is being directed by God. The same is true of what follows – God asks Moses to take the serpent by its tail and Moses obeys¹⁹. This is where there the shaping of Moses' persona takes place and he undergoes a kind of rite of passage symbolizing his readiness for the leadership and then he asks "Who am I" (Exodus 3:11. When the rod was transformed into a serpent, he flees. Moses is frightened, put off and refuses to accept the mission. In order to make the sign a more powerful one, God asks Moses to take the serpent by its tail. At the end of the sign, the serpent becomes a rod, just as it was to begin with. When Moses takes the rod in his hand, it is as if he is symbolically accepting the leadership role. This sign is a kind of rite of initiation at the end of which he will undergo circumcision²⁰. It separates between the frightened Moses and the mature, responsible Moses who recognizes his own power, and grasps the rod, which is the symbol of authority. Moses' grasping the serpent and the rod gives him special powers, which he will need in order to carry out his mission in the land of Egypt. Much symbolism was attributed to the snake in ancient Near Eastern cultures, but the snake grasping motif was actually quite common in Egypt. Therefore, on the surface, the first sign helps to allay Moses' fears about the mission. Underneath the surface, clasping the serpent, on one hand, gives Moses protections and on the other hand gives him the ability to attack his enemies. From that point onward, he possesses magical ability and via his actions will be able to implement the principles of Maat – instituting universal justice and order.

The sign that God showed Moses when he was alone recurs similarly when Moses and Aaron face Pharaoh, his servants and magicians (Exodus 7:9-12), that is, in public. Unlike in the first case, God announces in advance that a sign will happen. And through hints, we are informed

¹⁸ On rods in Egypt, see: G. Graham, 'Insignias', *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. II, ed D.B. Redford, Oxford 2001, pp. 163-167.

The motif of murdering guests recurs in many stories. In the Bible it appears, for example, Yael kills Sisra Judges 5:24-27 and Yehu kills the prophets of Baal, after inviting to perform some rites Kings II 25:21-25 and it also appears in The Odyssey, where Odysseus kills Penelope's suitors Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated from the Greek by S. Tchernichovsky, Tel Aviv 1987, pp. 414 off; H. Goedlicke, "The Capture of Joppa," *Chd'E*, 86 (1968), pp. 219-233; J.B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, Princeton 1969, pp. 22-23.

¹⁹ According to the Abarbanel, Moses was afraid of the serpent and grabbed it forcefully by the body and not by the tail Don Yitzhak Abarbanel, Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Shemot, Jerusalem, 1964, p. 36.

²⁰ D.F. Zelig, *Moses, A Psychodynamic Study*, New York 1986, pp. 72-74.

that the sign will be a miracle for Moses and Aaron, but not for Pharaoh (verse 4). The advance notice of the events removes any doubts about the possibility of the phenomenon being a coincidence, thereby making the sign that much greater. This time Aaron performs the sign, and not Moses, and he does it using his own rod and not Moses' rod, in order to eliminate any suspicion on our part lest Moses' rod has hidden powers²¹. The rod is not transformed into a serpent as it was at first, but into a *tannin* (crocodile) (Exodus 7:9). It is no coincidence that the Biblical author chose to use a crocodile in the sign that takes place on Egyptian territory. He did not do so for literary reasons alone, in order to diversify the story, nor did he do so because of the commonness of crocodiles in the waters of the Nile River. The crocodile, like the serpent sparked a fear in the hearts of the Egyptians that was very tangible because of the crocodiles that dwelled in the Nile River. And like the serpent, it too appeared in Egyptian culture as a destructive and killing force and at the same time also as something with great power, as the ruler of the Nile and the ally of the sun god. The crocodile was also worshiped as a sacred animal. The Biblical story's use of the crocodile created a connection between the sign it describes and a familiar Egyptian story about a rod that was transformed into a crocodile. This story appears in the Westcar Papyrus which tells of Pharaoh Snefru, the founder of the fourth dynasty (2600 BCE) and is dated to the 18-17 centuries BCE²², although the folkloric literary material in it is much older and is based on traditions attributed to the 26th century BCE. The story, about magic that was performed in the time of King Cheops, tells of the wife of a magician who betrays her husband. When the husband learns of his wife's meeting with her lover at the house of pleasures on the lake, he takes a box that contains instruments of magic, prepares a small crocodile made of wax, tosses it into the lake and the figurine turns into a giant crocodile, seven cubits long, which grabs the lover and drags him into the lower world. At the end of the story, the husband collects the crocodile, which reverts back to being wax. It is interesting to note that wax was one of the most common tools used in magic in ancient Egypt²³. Another interesting point is that the person performing the magic is a chief lector priest, associated with an institution known as the house of life, which was attached to the palace or a temple and was a place where subjects such as medicine, astronomy, magic and others were studied. The magicians appear in our passage as the Hebrew term, *hartōm*, which is a variation of the Egyptian, *hry-tp*, which means, "that is at the head." *hry-tp* is a shortening of the title *hry-tp hry-hb*, which means "the one who stands at the head of those (the priests) who are declaiming"; the title is generally translated as chief lector priest. The *hry-hb* priests were training to read the books that were kept in the house of life²⁴.

Pharaoh, without any particular excitement, calls the magicians. The magicians in Egypt, who were generally referred to as *hk3w*, were a common feature and also worked in service of the king. For example, in the Westcar Papyrus, the lector priests perform miracles for Pharaoh. In Bubastis, in the celebration hall of King Osorkon II (*wsrkn*) (874-850 BCE), an illustration was found showing three magicians (*hk3w*) participating in a march of the learned ones,

²¹ The rod was perceived as God's rod already in Exodus 7:17. Regarding the demythologizing of the rod, S.E. Loewenstamm, *Encyclopedia Biblical*, IV, pp. 825-832; U. Cassuto, "The Rise of Historiography in Israel," *Eretz-Israel*, 1 (1951), pp. 85-88; *ibid*, *Biblical and Canaanite Literatures* (note 2 above), pp. 12-19. On the development of the motif in the book of Joshua see: Y. Amit, "And Joshua stretched out the javelin that was in his hand" Joshua 8:18', *Shnaton – an Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, V-VI, (1981-1982), pp. 11-18.

²² A. Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Poetry and Prose*, republished 1995, pp. 36-38.

²³ E. A. W. Budge, *Egyptian Magic*, London 1988, pp. 77-78.

²⁴ The *hartummim* in the Bible appear in the story of Joseph Genesis 41:9 and in the book of Daniel 2:2. On the *hartummim*, see: R.K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, Chicago 1995, pp. 220-233; J. Quaegebeur, "On the Egyptian Equivalent of Biblical *Hartummim*" in *Pharaonic Egypt*, ed. S.I. Grol, Jerusalem 1985, pp. 172-182.

According to Redford, the origin of the word *hartummim* is in the Demotic language. Contrary opinion: Quaegebeur's article above, L. Habachi & P. Ghalioungui, "The House of Life of Bubastis," *Chd'E*, 91 (1971), pp. 62 off; A.H. Gardiner, "The House of Life," *JEA*, 24 (1938), pp. 157-179; G. Pinch (note 14 above), pp. 47-60.

holding scrolls in their hands²⁵. The magicians in the Biblical story copied Aaron's action without any trouble, because it was part of the known repertoire of magical performances in Egypt, as is apparent in the Westcar Papyrus. The Bible stresses that the miracle is an action by God, whereas magic and sorcery are done in accordance with human desire: "Every man cast down his rod." In contrast to the first sign, the crocodiles did not revert back to being rods. The power of the sign was in the fact that Aaron's rod swallowed up the other rods-crocodiles: "But Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods" (Exodus 7:12). The act of swallowing marks the high point of the sign. The victory of Aaron's rod is emphasized even more by the choice of the word *bāla'* (בבל, swallow), which has important Egyptian connotations relevant to our discussion.

The verb, *bāla'* in Egyptian (*shb*) is typical of the crocodile, which is depicted in Egyptian literature as aggressive, gluttonous and lustful. The hieroglyph (*msh*) was used not only to describe a crocodile, but also as a definition for the words representing such concepts as gluttony, lust, anger and aggression. The Pyramid texts already contain the phrase *3d*, anger, along with a determinative of crocodile. The same is true of the phrases *skn* – lustful and greedy, *hnty* – greedy and *3f* – voracity. The quality of lust (*skn*) is particularly emphasized by the crocodile, which in addition to being referred to as *msh*, is also called *snk*, a word that sounds like *skn*. In spell 317 from the tomb of Unas (*wnis*), the king is depicted as Sobek, the crocodile, who is gluttonous, wastes water, spills his seed and covets married woman²⁶. In a papyrus dating from the Middle Kingdom, "The Eloquent Peasant," a high-ranking official is admonished for not having been less like a greedy crocodile. In the Instruction of Petahotep, from the Middle Kingdom, as well, a bribe taker is compared to a crocodile: "If he robs he is like a crocodile in court"²⁷. A similar description appears in the coffin texts²⁸.

The Biblical author chose the verb, swallow, and not the verb, devour, to highlight the Egyptian connotation of the sign demonstrated to an Egyptian audience. The reference to a crocodile swallowing up something is also used later on by the prophet Jeremiah, when he describes Babylon as a crocodile swallowing up Israel (Jeremiah 51:34). A crocodile swallowing up spells was a common motif in Egypt. In spell no. 1017 in the coffin texts, we read: "I took away their strength, swallowed their spirit, ate their magic." In the case under review as well, Aaron's crocodile swallowed the magic of the magicians. The coffin texts contain other spells for getting rid of a crocodile who steals magic. Swallowing, over the course of time, acquired the metaphorical meaning of internalizing and knowing that which was swallowed. That is also the case with Aaron's crocodile, which now "knows" the magicians' secrets²⁹.

The sign demonstrated in Egypt is performed in front of Pharaoh, his servants, courtiers and magicians. Despite the similarity to the sign shown to Moses, the target audience in this case is different, and therefore the Biblical author makes some changes that ostensibly seem marginal: the second sign is performed by Aaron, not Moses, the rod becomes a crocodile and not a serpent. This is a common sign that does not instill fear in the hearts of the spectators, or even spark any interest. Pharaoh's response is to invite the magicians to repeat the act. For a moment, it seems as if Aaron's act, even though it was carried out at the behest of God, is a

²⁵ G. Pinch (note 14 above) p. 53 and A.H. Gardiner, *Professional Magicians in Ancient Egypt*, Proceedings of the Society for Biblical Archeology, 1917.

²⁶ M. Lichtheim (note 6 above), I, p. 40.

²⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 174,177, 66.

²⁸ R.O. Faulkner (tr. and ed.), *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, II, Warminster 1977, spell 424.

²⁹ R.O. Faulkner, (note 28 above), 3, spell 424, 1017; *ibid* (note 5 above), text 273, 274; R.K. Ritner (note 24 above), pp. 102-110; S.B. Noegel, 'Moses and Magic: Notes on the Book of Exodus', *JANES*, 24 (1996), pp. 45-59.

simple magic trick³⁰. However, the moment Aaron's rod, the crocodile, swallows the magicians' crocodiles, a clear dichotomy emerges between the magicians' abilities, which are human, and divine ability³¹. The Biblical author therefore uses Egyptian raw materials in order to highlight the Egyptian atmosphere and builds up the hidden message in the sign. He belittles the power of the magicians, who became famous for their magical talents, and stresses the helplessness of Pharaoh and his god, in the face of the absolute will of God. When Aaron's rod swallows the magicians' rods, the conflict reaches its peak. When the crocodile is swallowed, it is as if the entire Egyptian royalty, which was depicted as a crocodile, was swallowed up.

The use of terms from Egyptian culture: rod, crocodile, serpent, magician and swallowing and the adjustment of their meanings to the Biblical text add another layer that was previously hidden and contribute to an understanding of the entire story, as well as the sign of the serpent, in particular.

The first sign of the serpent performed in front of Moses has a different significance than the second one; the only similarity between the two is in the way the sign is performed. On the surface level, the purpose of the first sign is to instill Moses with confidence and convince him to accept the mission, whereas under the surface it hastens his initiation while providing him with special powers to impose justice, hinting at the transformation over the years of Moses into someone who instituted law and order. The second sign stresses the exclusivity of God, who overpowers the Egyptian magicians, and His supernatural abilities (swallowing the magicians' rods), by virtue of His being the Creator of the world and its ruler. Below the surface, the sign stresses the swallowing up of the entire Egyptian kingdom, when magic was in the service of a flesh and blood king. The sign also hints at Aaron's role as a priest in service of God.

³⁰ Josephus Flavius senses the difference between the first and second signs that were performed. The second time, Moses is not frightened by the event and Josephus perceives the hartummim's act as a competition between divine and earthly abilities, see Josephus Flavius, *The History of the Jews*, translated by A. Shalit, Jerusalem 1967, book II, § 286-287.

³¹ Philo of Alexandria, *Historical Writings*, Vol. I, Suzanne Daniet-Nataf, ed., Jerusalem 1986, section 93.