

Serpentine / Reptilian Divine Beings in the Hebrew Bible: A Preliminary Investigation

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Introduction

The focus of this brief overview into the matter of serpentine / reptilian beings in the Hebrew Bible arises from a study of the biblical שֶׁרָפִים (*seraphim*). Traditionally, the word *seraphim* has been understood to derive from the Hebrew verb שָׂרַף (*saraph*; “to burn” – hence, *seraphim* would mean “burning ones” or “fiery ones”). While this is certainly possible, there is another very plausible (and I would say more likely) possibility that either eliminates *seraph* as the root, or co-exists and overlaps with it (I think the latter). This alternative root would mean there are clear, unmistakable references to serpentine / reptilian beings in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament.

Naturally, for readers of *The Façade* (or inquirers on my website), this would dovetail with what I refer to as the “Watcher paradigm” – that the Watchers, reptilian beings described in religious texts of great antiquity (cf. the Dead Sea fragment 4QAmram), are the “root origin” of the worldwide serpent mythologies that have serpentine gods / flying serpentine beings as those divine beings which bestowed high technology to mankind and which fathered the first line of god-(human) kings.

The Data to Consider

It is plain from the contents of the Hebrew Bible that a *saraph* is a serpent. The word (as a singular or plural noun) occurs seven times. During the desert wanderings of the Israelites under the leadership of Moses, God judges the people (Numbers 21:6) by sending הַנְּחָשִׁים הַשֶּׂרָפִים (*hannachashim hasseraphim*; “seraph serpents”) to bite them. The translation “seraph serpents” is more accurate than “fiery serpents” (KJV) as we shall see. When the people prayed (Numbers 21:7) that the “serpents” (there, *nachash*) be taken away, Moses intercedes for the people. God then instructs Moses to make a *saraph* (שָׂרָף) and to put it on a pole, so that all who would look at it would be healed from the bites (Numbers

21:8). Moses responds (Numbers 21:9) by building a נַחֲשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת (*n^echash n^echosheth*). Note that in this narrative, the Hebrew words *nachash* and *saraph* are used interchangeably. This points to the fact that a *saraph* is not a “fiery thing” but simply a serpent. As further proof of this interchangeability, in Deuteronomy 8:15 Yahweh is praised twice for bringing Israel through the desert with its notorious *nachash saraph*.

With this interchange as backdrop, the prophet Isaiah’s use of *saraph* / *seraphim* sets up the issue of reptilian / serpentine divine beings. In Isa. 14: 29 and 30:6, Isaiah mentions the שָׂרָף מְעוֹפֵף (*saraph m^e opheph*; literally, “flying serpent”). More on this below. The famous throne room vision of Isaiah in chapter 6 of his book notes that in the throne room of Yahweh there were *seraphim* –serpentine beings. These beings also had wings and could fly, and had human features as well (hands, face, feet):

Isa 6:1 In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. 2 Above it stood the **seraphim**: each one had **six wings**; with two he covered his **face**, and with two he covered his **feet**, and with two he did fly. 3 And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, [is] the Lord of hosts: the whole earth [is] full of his glory. 4 And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 Then said I, Woe [is] me! for I am undone; because I [am] a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then flew one of the **seraphim** unto me, having a live coal in his **hand**, [which] he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: 7 And he laid [it] upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. 8 Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here [am] I; send me.

In putting these features together, let’s return first to Isaiah 30:6. In that text, the flying serpents come from the Negev, that desert area between Palestine and Egypt. These were either real animals, or the term denoted some type of spiritual (cosmic) enemy. The latter seems preferable, since throughout the ancient world certain deities were described in such terms (flying serpents), and there is no such flying animal.¹ The term could also be used of human enemies, as is implied by the other reference to flying serpents above, Isaiah 14:29:

¹ Some speculate that Isaiah is referencing a pterodactyl-like animal, which is both unlikely and unnecessary given the surrounding religions.

Isa 14:29 Rejoice not, O Philistia, because the rod of him that smote you is broken: for **out of the serpent's (*nachash*) root** shall come forth an asp, and his fruit shall be a flying serpent (*saraph m^e 'opheph*).

WTT Isa 14:29 אֶל־תִּשְׂמְחִי פְּלִשְׁתַּ כְּלָךְ כִּי נִשְׁבַּר יִשְׁבֵּט מִכֶּךָ
כִּי־מִשְׁרָשׁ נִחַשׁ יֵצֵא צִפֹּעַ וּפְרִיּוֹ שָׂרָף מְעוֹפֵף:

This passage is noteworthy on several levels. Three times the enemy of Israel, the “chosen seed” (cf. Genesis 3:15ff.) is described in serpentine terms. The “root” or “seed” (offspring, in Hebrew idiom) is described as the root of the *nachash*. Readers of *The Façade* will instantly recognize this being as the one in the garden of Eden who seduced Adam and Eve. In *The Façade*, I argue that the “serpent” (Hebrew, *nachash*) in the Eden story of Genesis 3 was not a snake – it was a divine being, a rebel of the divine council, which met in Eden, the garden of God.² God curses all parties concerned at the Fall in Genesis 3. One of the curses involves the “seed” of the *nachash* being bitterly opposed (a perpetual enemy) of the “seed” of the woman (Eve). The seed of the woman is obviously humanity (and ultimately, the Messiah; cf. Gal. 3:16). Who are the seed of the *nachash*? They are both the original enemies of the divinely chosen seed of the godly (Noah), produced by fallen divine beings in Genesis 6:1-4. These offspring are called the *nephilim* (giants) and *gibborim* (mighty warriors). The *nephilim* and / or *gibborim* produce succeeding generations of enemies of God’s chosen seed (Israel). It is no mistake that Moses and Joshua and their armies continually run into these descendants (like the *Anakim*; cf. Deuteronomy 3 and Numbers 13). Later enemies, like the Philistines spoken of in Isaiah 14:29 above, are logically referred to as the “seed of the *nachash*” (recall Goliath the giant was a Philistine, and a descendant of one the *nephilim* lines).

Curiously, though, they are also called “flying serpents”. What about that?

² See Ezekiel 28:10ff. Note the PDF file available on my website bookstore that details these terms as standard descriptions in ancient Canaan for the divine council’s meeting place.

In general (preliminary) terms, it seems to me that “flying *seraph*” would be a better translation of Isaiah 14:29 –

his fruit shall be a flying *seraph* (*saraph m' opheph*).

The meaning behind this, as I see it, is that Israel’s enemies would be descendants of the reptilian / serpentine beings who seduced human women in Genesis 6. These beings are called Watchers in the book of 1 Enoch, and are described as reptilian in the Dead Sea fragment, 4QAmram. It is clear from several passages in 1 Enoch that the writer there considered the seraphim to be serpentine beings (cf. 1 Enoch 20:7, 71:7; 61:10 – a description of the *cherubim* and the serpentine beings who guard God’s throne –cf. Isaiah 6).

Seraphim, then, are reptilian / serpentine beings – they are the Watchers (the “watchful ones” who diligently guard God’s throne, which is carried [cf. Ezekiel 1, 10] by the cherubim, who may also serve as guardians).³ There are “good” serpentine beings (*seraphim*) who guard God’s throne (so Isaiah 6’s *seraphim*), and there are fallen, wicked serpentine beings (*seraphim*) who rebelled against the Most High at various times, and who became the pagan gods of the other nations. Interestingly, 4QAmram adds a feature to the serpentine Watcher that stands opposed to the good heavenly watchers: the evil Watchers of 4QAmram are also described as “dark”. This stands in opposition to the luminous or “brassy” appearance of good heavenly *seraphim*.

A Brief note on the Root of Seraphim

Above I noted that there was an alternative root possibility that dovetails more readily with the serpentine context of *seraphim*. Rather than the traditional root of *saraph* (“to burn”), the root of *seraphim* may come from the Egyptian *srf* (“serpent”). Isaiah especially is known for its Egyptian flavor in parts, and there are numerous texts and artworks in

³ This conclusion is very tentative, and reflects my *suspicion* that the reason that descriptions of seraphim, cherubim, and Watchers (in Daniel) as “human like beings clothed in white linen” have overlapping features (hands, feet, human face, wings) is that they are names for the same entities (cf. not all cherubim have four faces, e.g.). This would make Satan an original Watcher – at one time a guardian of the divine throne. I am still thinking about all this, though, and my views may change.

Egypt that describe and depict serpents. Many of them have the *srf* as having wings or flying. Others combine this description with fire (and so this may give rise to a dual wordplay in the Hebrew Bible – where seraphim refers to a luminous serpentine divine being). This seems most consistent.

For further reference (texts and iconography):

Karen Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament: A Linguistic, Archaeological, and Literary Study* (Haddonfield House, New Jersey, 1974)

“Serpent” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Brill, 1999)