

WINGED SERPENTS IN ISAIAH'S INAUGURAL VISION¹

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ISAIAH 6 records that שְׂרָפִים עֹמְדִים ("standing seraphim") were attendants of Yahweh, "the King," in Isaiah's inaugural vision in the temple.² Each שְׂרָף had six wings with which to cover its face, its feet, and to fly, as it repeated the famous trisagion. Also one brought redemption to Isaiah.

The uniqueness of these שְׂרָפִים in the OT and their obviously perplexing character have apparently led few scholars to concern themselves with their identification and significance.³ However, there is sufficient linguistic and archeological evidence to suggest that the seraphim are to be identified as winged serpents and are Egyptian symbols of sacral and regal sovereignty.⁴

Linguistic association of the serpent and the seraphim

The Hebrew word שְׂרָף appears seven times in the OT and designates a kind of serpent, but only in Isaiah 6 is it plural and used to refer to a creature attending Yahweh.⁵ הַשְּׂרָפִים הַנִּהְיִים ("the *saraph* serpents")

¹ Based on one chapter of the writer's Th.D. dissertation entitled "The Serpent in the Old Testament" at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1966.

² Apparently, the seraphim numbered two. The phrase וְהָאֶמְרָה וְהָאֶמְרָה suggests as much. See Engnell, *The Call of Isaiah*, pp. 34-35. These seraphim may have been standing on the throne. They were standing לְפָנָיו ("on the top of" it or him). See Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 751. The construction could as well refer to the throne as to Yahweh.

³ In fact, I could find nothing more than a few isolated sentences in several commentaries and general works.

⁴ A tradition preserved by Herodotus is worthy of note: "Vipers are found in all parts of the world, but the winged serpents are nowhere seen except in Arabia, where they are all congregated together. This makes them appear so numerous" (*Hist.* iii, 109). He reports also journeying near the Egyptian-Arabian border to inquire about these creatures and there discovering heaps of serpent ribs. The Egyptian explanation was that the winged serpents entering Egypt from Arabia were engaged and destroyed by ibis birds, thus giving rise to veneration of them (ii, 75). Herodotus believed that only Arabia had frankincense-producing trees and that they are guarded by variegated, winged serpents which twined about every tree (iii, 107).

⁵ See Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 977; Koehler and Baumgartner (ed.), *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, p. 932. It may be that the word is related to a

bit the Hebrews of the exodus (Num 21 6-9). Moses prayed for the people when they requested that the נָחָשׁ be removed, and Yahweh commanded him to make a שָׂרָף. Moses obeyed by constructing a נָחָשׁ בְּרָזָה ("a bronze serpent") and then נָחָשׁ is used to refer to the biting serpents earlier called *saraph* serpents. In Deut 8 15 Yahweh is lauded for bringing Israel through the wilderness with its שָׂרָף נָחָשׁ, and Isaiah twice speaks of a שָׂרָף מְעוֹפֵף ("a flying serpent": 14 29, 30 6).⁶ In summary, *a saraph is a serpent, and for Isaiah it may have wings*, as is the case with the seraphim of Isaiah 6. The earliest and the latest OT usages of *saraph* date probably in the same one-hundred-year time span; that the word would alter meanings for Isaiah in this relatively short period is unlikely.

The serpent and Egyptian royal symbolism

In ancient Egypt the erect cobra or uraeus standing on its coil was the symbol of royalty — whether of the pharaoh or of the gods.⁷ The sun disk of Horus-Re, the sun god, has a uraeus draped over it.⁸ Numerous other deities were represented with the uraeus on the head-dress.⁹ As the embodiment of Re the pharaoh donned the same symbols of authority. The pharaoh, and often his wife, is almost always represented with the standing uraeus on his forehead.¹⁰ A pyramid text states that the pharaoh is guarded by the uraeus-serpent, "the living,"

cuneiform word for serpent, *širu*. See Paul Toscanne, "Études sur le Serpent, Figure et Symbole dans l'Antiquité Élamite," *France. Délégation en Perse, Memoires*, (1911), pp. 155 f. See also Friedrich Delitzsch, *Assyrische Thiernamen*, p. 88, and W. W. G. Baudissin, *Studien zur Semitischen Religionsgeschichte*, 1, p. 258. Archibald H. Sayce says that the Egyptian *seref* means "flying serpent," and that many modern Egyptians believe a serpent grows wings when it becomes old. See Sayce, "Serpent-Worship in Ancient and Modern Egypt," *Contemporary Review*, 64 (1893), p. 529. Stanley A. Cook (*The Religion of Ancient Palestine in the Light of Archaeology*, p. 54) believes this Egyptian word means a winged griffin. Apparently, the author of I Enoch believed the seraphim to be serpents. En 20 7 mentions the angel Gabriel "who is over Paradise and the serpents and the cherubim." In En 71 7 the cherubim and the seraphim appear together as guardians of the throne of the Lord of Spirits, and in En 61 10 they appear together among the host of God. Probably, "serpents" has replaced "seraphim" in En 20 7; see R. H. Charles, *The Book of Enoch*, p. 357.

⁶ In Isa 30 6 שָׂרָף is in parallelism with נָחָשׁ ("viper").

⁷ The Egyptians worshiped the cobra under the name "the big one," commonly known today as uraeus, the Greek transcription of the Egyptian word. See A. S. Yahuda, "The Symbolism and Worship of the Serpent," (Lecture delivered to the Society for the Study of Religions [London, England], November 7, 1938).

⁸ W. R. Cooper, "Observations on the Serpent Myths of Ancient Egypt," *Journal of Transactions of the Victoria Institute*, vi (1873), fig. 1.

⁹ See James B. Pritchard (ed.), *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, fig. 542 ff.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, fig. 381 ff.

which comes from the head of Re.¹¹ In "The Prophecy of Nefer-Rohu" it is said of the pharaoh, "The uraeus-serpent which is on his brow stills for him the treacherous of heart."¹² According to W. R. Cooper the Egyptian word for uraeus is the hieroglyphic determinative of "king."¹³ Representations of erect uraei were found in the tomb of Pharaoh Tut-Ankh-Amen on his furniture,¹⁴ on a bracelet from his forearm,¹⁵ and as amulets about his neck.¹⁶ On the golden diadem found encircling his skull are three uraei, one on the brow and one hanging beside each ear.¹⁷ A pair of uraei in beadwork is on his skullcap.¹⁸ This same kind of symbolism is found also in the tomb of Rameses VI.¹⁹ A function of the uraeus is to protect the pharaoh and sacred objects by breathing out fire on his enemies.²⁰

At times these majestic serpents are endowed with various aids to implement desired functions. Uraei with human hands and faces are portrayed in the tomb of Rameses VI as towing the boat of Re through the underworld at night.²¹ On an Egyptian papyrus the entire scene is portrayed.^{22a} Re (the sun) wearing the solar disk draped with a uraeus is seated in his boat. A god spears the serpent Apep (darkness and the underworld) as majestic two-handed uraei, along with four jackals, pull the boat toward the goddess of morning. The sun defeats darkness each morning because standing majestic uraei provide its power and direction. The serpent is often invested with wings. Winged serpents are found on the coffins of pharaohs;²² one from the coffin of Oimeneptah I has four wings symbolizing "the four corners of the earth."²³ Around the neck of Pharaoh Tut-Ankh-Amen was a golden amulet of the winged serpent Buto.²⁴ In "The Book of Gates" inscribed in the tomb of Rameses VI is found the figure of a winged serpent named "The

¹¹ No. 1108C. See Samuel A. B. Mercer (tr.), *The Pyramid Texts*.

¹² See James B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, pp. 44 ff.

¹³ Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

¹⁴ Howard Carter and A. C. Mace, *The Tomb of Tut-Ankh-Amen*, III, pl. v. See the ecclesiastical throne on pl. XXXIII and the royal perfume vase in vol. II, pl. XLVIII-XLIX.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, II, pl. LXXXVI.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pl. LXXXVIII.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pl. LXXV.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pl. XXXII.

¹⁹ N. Rambova (ed.), *The Tomb of Rameses VI: Plates*, pl. 68.

²⁰ Cf. the uraei on the sarcophagus of Oimeneptah I guarding Paradise. See Cooper, *op. cit.*, fig. 33. E. Amélineau believes the uraeus symbolically protected the pharaoh because it embodied the spirit of his deceased ancestors. See Amélineau, "Du Rôle des Serpents dans les Croyances Religieuses de l'Égypte," *Revue de L'Histoire des Religions*, 52 (1905), p. 15.

²¹ N. Rambova (ed.), *The Tomb of Rameses VI: Text*, fig. 103.

^{22a} N. Rambova (ed.), *op. cit.*, *Text*, fig. 54.

²² See Cooper, *op. cit.*, fig. 19, 102, and p. 330.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Carter and Mace, *op. cit.*, II, pl. LXXXIX.

Leader.”²⁵ Over it is written, “She causes to rise before Re. It is she who leads the Great God in the Gate of the Eastern Horizon.”²⁶ The Ram God of Mendes can be represented with a two-winged uraeus over its back.²⁷ The dead Osiris lying on his bier is portrayed with a winged uraeus hovering at his head.²⁸ The tomb of Rameses VI contains paintings of two-winged uraei, one wing raised and one lowered majestically supporting the cartouche of the pharaoh.²⁹ A representation from a painted coffin includes two two-winged uraei, with wings raised and lowered, majestically and protectively standing about Osiris in the Djed Pillar (symbol of stability and resurrection).³⁰ On a papyrus from the Twenty-First Dynasty (about 1065–935 B.C.) a deceased is portrayed presenting his heart to a winged serpent, guardian of the underworld.³¹ Winged serpents also guard Re during his nightly journey.³²

The association of the throne of the pharaoh with winged serpents is demonstrated archeologically by the recovered throne of the fourteenth-century B.C. pharaoh Tut-Ankh-Amen.^{32a} Each arm of the throne, which is overlaid with sheet gold and richly adorned with polychrome faience, glass, and stone inlay, is formed by two wings of a four-winged uraeus rising vertically from the two back corners of the seat. Several other erect uraei crested with sun disks are stationed about the throne, the most dominant and majestic features of which are the winged uraei.

Was this symbol known and used by the Israelites? Archeological evidence reveals that it was known in Palestine and that it became a part of Israel's royal symbolism. Numerous Palestinian scarabs, some with inscribed Hebrew names, bear the Egyptian uraeus, sometimes winged. At least three scarabs with winged uraei have been found at Megiddo,³³ two at Gaza,³⁴ four at Beth-shemesh,³⁵ and five at Lachish.³⁶ Adolf Reifenberg reports other Hebrew scarabs dated in or near the time of Isaiah which bear either two-winged or four-winged uraei.³⁷ Evidence

²⁵ Rambova (ed.), *op. cit.*, Text, p. 208.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

²⁷ E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, II, fig. opposite p. 64.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, fig. 6.

²⁹ Rambova (ed.), *op. cit.*, Plates, pl. 71–72.

³⁰ Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, fig. 41.

³¹ N. Rambova (ed.), *Mythological Papyri: Plates*, pl. 3, sc. 1.

³² Budge, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 174 ff.

^{32a} Carter and Mace, *op. cit.*, I, pl. LXII, LXIV.

³³ Robert S. Lamon and Geoffrey M. Shipton, *Megiddo I*, plate 69:50, 52; P. L. O. Guy, *Megiddo Tombs*, plate 131:9.

³⁴ Flinders Petrie, *Ancient Gaza I*, pl. XIII:51; *Ancient Gaza IV*, pl. IX:300.

³⁵ Elihu Grant, *Ain Shems Excavations*: II, pl. LI:2, 10, 15, 18.

³⁶ Olga Tufnell et al., *Lachish II: The Fosse Temple*, plate 45:134; *Lachish IV*, pl. 38:286, 301, 312; pl. 39:368.

³⁷ Reifenberg, *Ancient Hebrew Seals*, fig. 4; nos. 5, 15. Both Reifenberg and Johannes

more significant comes from a construction at Samaria identified by its excavators as Ahab's palace of ivories. Many of its artistic designs are Egyptian, and some of the symbolism involves the uraeus, sometimes winged. A representation of the divine child Horus was found there with erect uraei in his crown.³⁸ Uraei crowned with solar disks came to light, and a representation of a human brow was uncovered donned with a standing uraeus.³⁹ As in Egypt, uraei are erected on the top of a wall, a door, or a piece of furniture.⁴⁰ A uraeus with one wing raised and one lowered was standing on a papyrus blossom.^{40a} An ivory handle in the form of a winged uraeus wearing the double Egyptian crown came from the floor of Ahab's courtyard.^{40b} In summary, *Israel was acquainted with the symbol of the winged serpent* and, apparently incorporated it into its royal symbolism.

Conclusions

A plausible conclusion in view of the linguistic and archeological evidence is that the seraphim of Isaiah's inaugural vision are to be understood in the light of the Egypt symbol of the winged uraeus. Yahweh is called "the King" (6 5), and in his temple he is like a majestic monarch whose regalia fills his palace. The Egyptians used the crawling serpent as an emblem of chaos and evil, but the uraeus is always standing. The seraphim of Isaiah 6 are standing. The four wings of an Egyptian uraeus represent the pharaoh's rule to extend to the four corners of the earth; the winged seraphim chant "the whole earth is full of his glory" (6 3). The reverent repetition of the trisagion of the seraphim shook the temple, filling it with smoke; the Egyptian uraeus belched consuming fire on the pharaoh's enemies. The wings of the seraphim are raised and lowered, as so often are those of the uraei. At a period when Egyptian art was so common in Palestine, it is not surprising to find it in the symbolism of Isaiah. Also, if the symbol of the winged uraeus could find a place in the palace of the ninth-century B.C. Israelite kings, it may well have been in the palaces of the eighth-century B.C. monarchs in Jerusalem yet unexcavated.

As did the Egyptians, Isaiah attributed to these serpents certain members of the human body to enable them to perform specific tasks. The uraeus in Egypt may at times have hands when needed to tow the

Pedersen suggest that such creatures are identical with Isaiah's seraphim. See Pedersen, *Israel*, III-IV, p. 711.

³⁸ J. W. Crowfoot and G. M. Crowfoot, *Early Ivories from Samaria*, pl. 1:1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pl. III:2; pl. XII:5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pl. XXII:2; cf. p. 11.

^{40a} *Ibid.*, pl. XIII:4. A fragment of a similar uraeus is reported (p. 30).

^{40b} G. A. Reisner et al, II, pl. 56:f (described in I, Al).

boat of Re, feet on which to stand or walk, a human face to express its connection to a goddess, or wings to symbolize the extent and majesty of the divine reign. These instruments belong neither to that creature at all times nor to its basic identification, for the uraeus remains basically a serpent. Such is the case with the seraphim of Isaiah 6: hands are needed to transport a glowing stone to Isaiah, wings to express the divine majesty, feet on which to stand, and voices with which to praise Yahweh.⁴¹ However, why each serpent in Isaiah 6 had six wings eludes precise explanation.⁴²

Apparently, Isaiah modifies the Egyptian significance of the winged uraeus when he makes one of the seraphim an agent of divine redemption and healing. To Isaiah the seraphim are not only emblems of majesty, sovereignty, dominion, and protection, but also are bearers of purification. To Isaiah Yahweh is the sovereign God *and* the redeeming God. Winged serpents are emblems of kingship, but the faith of Isaiah finds a place for them in the process of redemption.

⁴¹ Thus Kurt Galling (*Biblisches Reallexikon*, col. 382 ff.) discusses them under "Mischwesen."

⁴² However, a six-winged creature came from Tell Halaf; *ibid.*, col. 383, no. 3.