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Serpent Symbology Based
on the Concept of Seraphim**

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“Upon Thy Belly Shalt Thou Go”: The Garden of Eden Serpent Symbology Based on the Concept of Seraphim

Noel Hudson

Abstract: *The concept of the serpentine seraphim from biblical iconography is discussed in the context of biblical serpent symbology. The association of the seraphim with Ancient Near Eastern kings, deities, and temples is noted. The concept of the seraphim as members of the Council of God is explored, and the possibility of the seraph as a symbol of Christ is discussed. These concepts are applied to the story of the snake in the Garden of Eden, and the additional explanatory power of the seraph symbol in connection with the snake is explored. Specific serpentine attributes are discussed in the context of the seed motif. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the application of this topic to the modern reader.*

There are several instances within the scriptures in which developing an understanding of the use of snake symbology can lead to new insights into the meaning of certain passages. However, in many cases it may be difficult to understand the snake imagery, since the imagery is not used in a consistently negative or positive context; rather, serpent imagery is used both as a symbol of Christ and as a symbol of Satan. As an example of the difficulty of the interpretation of serpent symbology, consider Numbers 21. While traveling in the desert after leaving Egypt, many of the children of Israel were bitten by venomous snakes. In response, Moses created a serpent of brass and raised it on a pole, asking only that the Israelites look at the image. One biblical commentator has noted that the serpent was a pagan

symbol used extensively in cultic worship by cultures throughout the Mediterranean, suggesting that

Although the serpent was associated in the Ancient Near East with the restoration of life, the most prominent element in the tradition of Moses and the bronze serpent seems to be that of sympathetic magic—the belief that the fate of an object or person can be governed by the manipulation of its exact image. Thereby a representation of a noxious creature could best drive off that creature.¹

Was Moses actually employing pagan imagery when he crafted his bronze serpent? Many Christians seem to struggle to understand how a related scripture that comments on this story of Moses (John 3:14–15) can suggest that the bronze serpent is meant to be an image of Christ when the apparently pagan roots of the symbol would suggest otherwise.² Nevertheless, “The story of the Israelites getting bitten in the wilderness by ‘fiery serpents’ and then being miraculously healed by the ‘serpent of brass’ (Numbers 21:4–9) is one of the most frequently told stories in scripture—with many of the retellings occurring in the Book of Mormon.”³ What is it about the symbolism in this story that made it so compelling to the ancient authors of scripture? Other related, but somewhat puzzling, serpentine appearances in the Bible include one in which Isaiah described certain angelic beings as six-winged flying snakes (Isaiah 6:2) and another about the serpent in the Garden of Eden who tempts Eve (Genesis 3).

This present article proposes a unique theory that results in a unified view of the usage of serpent symbolism in these scriptural passages. The proposed theory consists of the following: The seraphim are a group of heavenly beings with Christ at their head. The

1. Karen Randolph Joines, “The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87, no. 3 (1968): 251, doi.org/10.2307/3263536.

2. Michael S. Heiser, “Why Would Jesus Compare Himself to a Snake?,” *Word by Word* (blog), *Logos*, 5 June 2018, 34, www.logos.com/grow/the-healing-serpent/. Heiser asks, “Why didn’t God heal the people directly? Was the bronze serpent an idol, and thus a violation of the second commandment? Wouldn’t the Israelites have recoiled at the association of healing with a serpent?”

3. Neal Rappleye, “Serpents of Fire and Brass: A Contextual Study of the Brazen Serpent Tradition in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 217, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/serpents-of-fire-and-brass-a-contextual-study-of-the-brazen-serpent-tradition-in-the-book-of-mormon/.

fiery flying serpent is the symbol of the seraphim in general, and of Jesus Christ in particular, as the leader of the seraphim. Lucifer had also been one of the seraphim and could therefore at one time also have been symbolized by a fiery flying serpent. The cursing of the serpent in the Garden of Eden is symbolic of the loss of glory, power, and responsibility suffered by Lucifer when he was cast out of heaven and became Perdition, so that his new symbol is now the serpent, rather than the seraph.

This article first discusses the usage and origin of the term *seraphim* and the associated fiery flying serpents. The association of seraphim with temple and royal imagery is explored. The article then makes the case for viewing Christ as the leader of the seraphim. The aptness of the serpent as the replacement of a seraph as the new symbol of Perdition is discussed, and the application of this view for the modern reader is addressed in the conclusion section.

Serpents and Seraphim

A unifying attribute of two of the scriptural stories to be explored is the usage of the term *seraphim* by Neal Rappleye. He notes that

In the biblical text, "fiery serpents" is always a translation of *šrp*, Anglicized as *seraph* (pl. *seraphim*), which, as a verb, typically refers to "burning." Sometimes it is paired with the word *nḥš*, "snake, serpent," other times *šrp* itself (without *nḥš*) refers to a venomous serpent.⁴

The use of the word seraph as described by Rappleye is seen in the book of Numbers:

And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread. And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. (Numbers 21:5–6)

After God sent the seraphim among the host of Israel to punish them for their murmuring, he also prepared a way for them to be saved:

And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every

4. Rappleye, "Serpents of Fire and Brass," 219.

one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived. (Numbers 21:8–9)

While in the book of Numbers the translation of the Hebrew term is merely *fiery serpents*, the Book of Mormon refers to them as “fiery flying serpents” (1 Nephi 17:41). One view of the reason that the serpents are referred to in this manner is suggested by Elder Glen O. Jenson:

What kind of a serpent was it? The Hebrew word for *fiery* means “burning,” a probable reference to the burning pain of the bite. What does it mean for a serpent to fly? Possible explanations include the lightning speed with which a snake can strike and the propensity for some snakes to actually leap through the air at their victims. One snake that fits this general description and lives in the areas inhabited by the Israelites thousands of years ago is the saw-scale viper. Its venom causes death by internal bleeding over several days.⁵

Some scholars have concluded that the brazen serpent lifted up by Moses likely had wings,⁶ an observation that may strengthen the Christological symbolism of the serpent raised on the pole. This symbology adds significantly to the “flying” being merely a metaphorical description of their strike. The reason behind this assertion will be explained in detail below.

Fiery seraphim serpents show up again in multiple passages in Isaiah. In one such instance, the inhabitants of Palestine are warned not to rejoice when the king of Assyria, who had oppressed Israel, dies. Isaiah writes, “Because the rod of him that smote thee is broken: for out of the serpent’s root shall come forth a cockatrice, and his fruit shall be a fiery flying serpent” (Isaiah 14:29). Another instance mentions the term in order to provide additional information about the very location where Israel likely encountered serpents as they wandered in the Negev:⁷ “From whence come the young and old lion, the viper and fiery flying serpent” (Isaiah 30:6).

5. Glen O. Jenson, “Look and Live,” *Ensign*, March 2002, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2002/03/look-and-live.

6. Scripture Central Staff, “Book of Mormon Evidence: Flying Fiery Serpents,” Evidence 149, 19 July 2022, evidencecentral.org/recency/evidence/flying-fiery-serpents.

7. Rappleye, “Serpents of Fire and Brass,” 219.

An article addressing flying fiery serpents notes that

The Hebrew expression translated “fiery flying serpents” (*śrp m’ipp*) in these Isaiah passages uses the same word that Numbers and Deuteronomy use to refer to “fiery serpents”: *seraph* (plural *seraphim*). This is also the word used in Isaiah 6 to describe the fiery, *winged* beings protecting the throne of God (Isaiah 6:2, 6). Thus, many scholars believe that the *seraphim* of Isaiah’s vision were winged, serpent-like creatures.⁸

The word *seraphim*, as used in Isaiah 6, might seem out of place, since Isaiah’s heavenly vision does not contain any elements that would suggest a serpentine theme. Isaiah opens his account of the vision saying,

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. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. (Isaiah 6:1–2)

John Ronning offers the following insight about the usage of the word *seraphim* here:

The meaning of venomous snake seems so out of place in Isaiah 6. . . . Some deny that it is related to the meaning of snake, instead relating it to the light associated with burning; these are shining beings. Others affirm the sense of venomous serpents and relate the picture of Isaiah 6 to the figure of the rearing cobra (*uraeus*), sometimes appearing with wings, symbol of royalty for the Pharaoh and the gods.⁹

To summarize the takeaway message from this section: the *seraphim* are fiery winged serpents as found in Isaiah’s vision as well as in the story of Israel’s wanderings in the desert found in the book of Numbers. The *seraphim* are seen variously as divine messengers, executors of divine wrath, and symbols of salvation.

Seraphim in the temple

John Gee notes the same association of the *seraphim* with temple

8. Scripture Central, “Flying Fiery Serpents.”

9. John L. Ronning, “The Curse on the Serpent (Genesis 3:15) in Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1997), 133.

imagery mentioned by Ronning. He notes the appearance of seraphim in the temple in Isaiah's vision and gives instances of seraphim in archaeological finds in Israel from the same time period as Solomon's temple.¹⁰

Karen Joines, one of the scholars who associates serpentine seraphim imagery with ancient temples, notes that, "the Israelite cult at Jerusalem was not unique in its utilization of a bronze serpent." In addition, "the phenomenon of the cultic bronze serpent was limited neither to Palestine nor to the second millennium B.C."¹¹ Joines further suggests, "the Seraphim are probably winged serpents drawn from Egyptian royal and sacral symbolism." This conclusion is based on several pieces of evidence, including the close association of the serpent with the person of the pharaoh and the mythological function of the uraeus to protect the pharaoh and sacred objects by breathing out fire on his enemies. Joines notes that uraei with human hands and faces are portrayed serving the pharaoh in the underworld.¹²

The association of seraphim with divine sovereignty and temple sites might help to explain why the term is also used for heavenly messengers. This association was not limited only to pagan temples; Rappleye explains that many artifacts containing winged serpents have been found in Israel and notes that "visually, the winged serpents depicted on artifacts from Israel and Judah are clearly inspired by Egyptian iconography."¹³ What is more, Rappleye suggests that the seraphim may have been closely associated with biblical temple symbolism in Israel (as opposed to pagan symbolism from earlier temple sites in Israel that pre-date the Exodus).

Many scholars believe that the angelic seraphim of Isaiah's vision were most likely winged serpent-like beings who acted as guardians of the heavenly throne. . . . As with the royal seals, the scenes depicted on these bronze bowls show a pair of winged serpents guarding a sacred or royal symbol, which could be an indication that in Isaiah's day,

10. John Gee, "Cherubim and Seraphim: Iconography in the First Jerusalem Temple," Paper presented at the 2020 Temple on Mount Zion Conference, Provo, UT, November 2020.

11. Joines, "Bronze Serpent," 245–46.

12. Karen Randolph Joines, "Winged Serpents in Isaiah's Inaugural Vision," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86, no. 4 (December 1967): 410–12, doi.org/10.2307/3262795.

13. Rappleye, "Serpents of Fire and Brass," 220.

there were actually *two* bronze seraphim in the temple, one on each side of the ark of the covenant, paralleling the cherubim.¹⁴

So the seraphim have an association with temples in both the pagan era and in biblical Israel. The seraphim came to be used as symbols of both royal and divine authority.

Seraphim and the Council of God

Scriptures such as Abraham 3 and 4 acknowledge the participation of a council of gods that was involved in the creation of the world. Additionally, Joseph Smith taught that a proper translation of the first line of Genesis would render it “the head of the Gods called the Gods together.”¹⁵ David Bokovoy suggests that the seraphim seen by Isaiah, as well as hosts of angels seen by Lehi and others, participated in this council:

Though the Book of Mormon refers to members of the heavenly host by the English word *angels* and Isaiah describes the beings in his vision as *seraphim*, from an Old Testament perspective, both these terms can apply to members of the assembly serving in the council that surrounded God.¹⁶

Doctrine and Covenants 38:1 provides support for the view that seraphim are members of the heavenly host:

Thus saith the Lord your God, even Jesus Christ, the Great I Am, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the same which looked upon the wide expanse of eternity, and all the seraphic hosts of heaven, before the world was made.

Bokovoy says of this passage:

The term *seraph* appears as a designation for the members of God’s premortal assembly “before the world was made” in Doctrine and Covenants 38:1. This would suggest that *seraph* in LDS theology appears as a literary allusion to the

14. Rappleye, “Serpents of Fire and Brass,” 220.

15. “History, 1838–1856, volume F-1 [1 May 1844–8 August 1844,” p. 102, Joseph Smith Papers, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-f-1-1-may-1844-8-august-1844/108#source-note.

16. David E. Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants: An LDS Reading of Isaiah’s Prophetic Call,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3, no. 3 (2011): 42, scholars archive.byu.edu/sba/vol3/iss1/3.

sons of God. The fact that Isaiah describes the members of the assembly/host as “fiery beings” provides an important literary link with the Book of Mormon, which, as noted, specifically places emphasis upon the inherent luster of the heavenly host Lehi witnessed surrounding God’s throne . . . it also echoes an insight shared by the Prophet Joseph Smith concerning the status of those who dwell in God’s presence. On one occasion, the Prophet taught that those who abide with the Lord “are able to *dwell in everlasting burnings*, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power.”¹⁷

The Heavenly Council is an important part of Latter-day Saint doctrine concerning the pre-mortal existence.¹⁸ Abraham says that in that Council, “the Lord said: Whom shall I send? And one answered like unto the Son of Man: Here am I, send me” (Abraham 3:27). Isaiah’s vision appears to echo the aspect of this Grand Heavenly Council in which volunteers are called for and specific missions are assigned to participants. He tells us that the Lord asked, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” and Isaiah answered, “Here am I; send me” (Isaiah 6:8). Lehi seems to have had a similar experience (1 Nephi 1:8–18), as did Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4–8).

Abraham saw that among the Council of God were many noble and great ones and that Christ was their leader (Abraham 3:23–24). There appears to be a hierarchy among heavenly beings, as Abraham noted, but it is not clear where beings such as cherubim and seraphim fall within that hierarchy.¹⁹ Val Larsen and Newell Wright say, “The *Sôd Elohim*, council of gods, is obviously hierarchical” and that “One and the Twelve who descend from heaven [in Lehi’s vision] are divine members of the *Sôd Elohim*.” Larsen and Wright add that Lehi, Nephi, and other prophets are enrolled members of the *Sôd Elohim*. They also say “that the core members of the *Sôd Elohim* work together ‘to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.’”²⁰

17. Bokovoy, “Christ and Covenants,” 41.

18. “Council in Heaven,” Topics and Questions, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed 26 December 2024, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/council-in-heaven](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/council-in-heaven).

19. Scripture Central Staff, “Why Did Isaiah Refer to the Heavenly Hosts as ‘Seraphim’?” KnoWhy 645, 12 February 2024, [scripturecentral.org/knowwhy/why-did-isaiah-refer-to-the-heavenly-hosts-as-seraphim](https://www.scripturecentral.org/knowwhy/why-did-isaiah-refer-to-the-heavenly-hosts-as-seraphim).

20. Val Larsen and Newell D. Wright, “Theosis in the Book of Mormon: The Work and Glory of the Father, Mother and Son, and Holy Ghost,” *Interpreter*:

Who else might be considered members of the Heavenly Council and exactly how the Council and the angelic beings known as seraphim overlap is unclear. However, based on the evidenced reviewed here, it seems that the Divine Council consists of a core set of members, many “noble and great ones,” such as Michael, the Archangel. The prophets Lehi, Nephi, Isaiah, and Jeremiah were also members of the Council, and the members may be referred to as seraphim.

Christ as Seraph

As it touches upon the identity of the seraphim, the parallel prophetic callings of Isaiah and Jeremiah contain illuminating passages. At the beginning of his theophany, Isaiah felt inadequate “because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5). Isaiah’s concern was resolved by one of the seraphim who flew to him “having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged” (Isaiah 6:6–7). This visionary experience of Isaiah with the seraphim appears to be a symbolic foreshadowing of the Atonement, with the purging coal serving as a representation of the purging effect of what is often referred to as the baptism of fire, which is the reception of the Holy Ghost.

Jeremiah had a similar concern to Isaiah’s and received a similar solution: “Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth” (Jeremiah 1:9). Of these parallel accounts, Bokovoy says,

Though the literal identity of this fiery angelic being is ambiguous in the text, one possible LDS reading would interpret the seraph who cleanses Isaiah as an allusion to Christ. Additional support for this interpretation appears in Jeremiah’s comparable story of prophetic commission, where it is the Lord Yahweh himself who assumes the role of Isaiah’s seraph. . . . Moreover, interpreting the fiery being who interacts personally with Isaiah as a reference to Christ works well with the fact that the seraph that cleanses Isaiah, helping the Israelite prophet to become worthy to stand in

God's presence, may function as a symbolic allusion to the seraph in Numbers 21:8 that heals the children of Israel.²¹

The relationship between the seraph-serpent lifted up by Moses and the seraph of Isaiah's vision may not be immediately obvious. The link between these two seraphim is the shared symbolism of Christ. The seraph in Isaiah's vision purifies Isaiah's sin with fire while the seraphim in Numbers 21 purify wicked Israel with their burning bites, and the brass serpent purifies Israel from their affliction. Scriptural support for the association of the seraph serpent with Christ is in both the New Testament and the Book of Mormon:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:14–15)

Yea, did he not bear record that the Son of God should come? And as he lifted up the brazen serpent in the wilderness, even so shall he be lifted up who should come. And as many as should look upon that serpent should live, even so as many as should look upon the Son of God with faith, having a contrite spirit, might live, even unto that life which is eternal. (Helaman 8:14–15)

Rappleye identifies several parallels between the mission of Christ and the usage of the bronze serpent that confirm the identification of the serpent as a type or symbol of Christ. These include the ability to heal; an association with life, immortality, and resurrection; the functions of purification and atonement; associations with kingship; their role as dispensers of divine justice; and their identity as members of the heavenly host or as sons of God. For each of these parallels, Rappleye has extensive commentary explaining the parallels. For example, in regard to healing he explains that:

Nephi understood that the brazen serpent represented the "power . . . [to] heal the nations" (2 Nephi 25:20) and Alma, likewise, emphasized the healing function of the serpent (Alma 33:21–22). Just before telling the story of Moses raising the brazen serpent, Nephi explained that Jesus Christ would "rise from the dead with healing in his wings" (2 Nephi 25:13).²²

21. Bokovoy, "Christ and Covenants," 45.

22. Rappleye, "Serpents of Fire and Brass," 233.

He goes on to note many different ways that healing power was associated with the seraph serpent and points out similar healing powers associated with Christ. He then points out that the connection between the seraph symbol and Jesus Christ served as point of distinction between the righteous and the wicked.

The seraph-serpent is a legitimate symbol of the Lord and his emissaries, and thus rejecting it, as some had in Nephi's day, was tantamount to rejecting the Lord; those who did so would perish from the bite of the seraph-serpent—a symbolic point, to be sure, but one made all the more real given that such could indeed be the fate of anyone in Lehi's party during their time in the wilderness.²³

It is apparent from the evidence examined here that Christ is represented in some scriptures by a fiery flying serpent. The seraph-serpent can both punish and heal Israel.

The seraph and the snake

The foregoing sections provide support for the following ideas that are critical for the concept discussed in this section:

- The seraph raised on the pole was a winged serpent that represents Christ.
- The seraphim were incorporated into the iconography of the Hebrew temple.
- The seraphim can be understood as members of the Council of God.
- Christ can be seen as the foremost of the seraphim.

With the foregoing concepts in mind, we are now able to examine the possible relationship between the seraphim and the serpent in Eden. Ronning sees certain traits of the seraphim in Isaiah that are shared with this other famous serpentine figure:

The Seraphim of Isaiah 6:2 are members of God's court appearing in the temple (v.1), who call to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts" (v. 3), and one of them flies to Isaiah and announces to him the atonement for his sins, as he touches a coal from the altar to his lips (vv. 6–7). Comparison of these creatures to the serpent of Genesis 3 yields rather detailed points of contact that are most suggestive. In both

23. Rappleye, "Serpents of Fire and Brass," 247.

passages, the serpents speak, and by their speech show knowledge of both human and divine affairs, as would be expected from those who are privy to the divine council.²⁴

Ronning compares the seraphim and the serpent of Eden on various additional points, and then concludes:

The picture of the flying serpents of Isaiah 6 therefore implies that the serpent of Genesis 3 is an evil, cursed version of the majestic members of the divine council seen by Isaiah, who perhaps is shown what the evil serpent in the Garden once was.

For Christians who lack the knowledge of additional Restoration scripture, Ronning's interpretation might seem like something of a stretch. However, Latter-day Saint doctrine has long held that Lucifer was an "angel who fell from before the presence of the Eternal God, and became the devil" (2 Nephi 9:8). Modern scripture notes that

An angel of God who was in authority in the presence of God, who rebelled against the Only Begotten Son whom the Father loved and who was in the bosom of the Father, was thrust down from the presence of God and the Son, And was called Perdition, for the heavens wept over him—he was Lucifer, a son of the morning. (Doctrine and Covenants 76:25–26)

These passages of scripture demonstrate that Lucifer was an angel of authority. He was almost certainly one of the seraphim in the Council of God. There are several points for which the symbolism of identifying Satan, the serpent in Eden, as a fallen seraph is very appealing. To begin with, this view of things provides new insight into what may have been meant by the curse on the serpent found in Genesis 3:14:

And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.

The dominant view, of course, is that the serpent was not previously a flying seraph but was instead a snake with legs. For example, Solomon Caesar Malan's "The Book of Adam and Eve," a pseudographical work of ancient Jewish stories, contains the detail of the

24. Ronning, "Curse on the Serpent," 133–34.

serpent losing his legs as part of the curse.²⁵ However, M. D. Johnson's translation of the "Life of Adam and Eve," another pseudepigraphical work, contains the detail that Satan transformed himself into an angel to deceive Eve, as well as the interesting variation of the Genesis curse, "You shall crawl on your belly and you shall be deprived of your hands as well as your feet. There shall be left for you neither ear nor wing nor one limb."²⁶ This version seems to support the notion that the serpent was in fact a seraph, for the seraphim in Isaiah were possessed of hands, feet, and wings.

A possible explanation for the ancient viewpoint of a snake that lost only its legs, as contrasted with a seraph that lost its wings (or its hands, feet, and wings), is the difference between seeing the serpent as an actual literal snake, or seeing the serpent as a symbol. If the serpent in Eden is a literal snake, then the curse removing his legs makes sense in the context given. However, if the serpent is a symbol and not an actual snake, the curse to go on his belly must also be symbolic. Certainly, both the account in Moses and the modern temple ceremony argue for the view that the serpent is symbolic, and therefore the curse should be understood in symbolic terms.

It seems likely that Lucifer had been a seraphic member of the Divine Council, so metaphorically he would have been one of the winged serpents: a being of light and power. If the wings of the seraphim can be understood in the same way as the wings of the beasts in the book of Revelation, then the insight provided to Joseph Smith about the significance of those wings can be understood in terms of Doctrine and Covenants 77:4: "Their eyes are a representation of light and knowledge, that is, they are full of knowledge; and their wings are a representation of power, to move, to act, etc."

The transformation from seraph to serpent could be understood symbolically as the loss of abilities and powers that Lucifer and his followers suffered when they were cast down. This loss of abilities may be explained metaphorically in Genesis by the snake being forced to crawl on its belly. The books of Jude and Revelation, as well as Abraham, all contain commentary on the event in which Lucifer and

25. Solomon Caesar Malan, *The Book of Adam and Eve, Also Called the Conflict of Adam and Eve with Satan*, (London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1882), 216.

26. M. D. Johnson, "Life of Adam and Eve," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983), 2:277–79, 283–84.

his followers are cast out and lose their glory and power in different metaphorical terms.²⁷ For example, the Apostle John writes:

There was a war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. (Revelation 12:7–9)

The same transition from powerful angelic being of light to a much weaker being of darkness is represented metonymically when Lucifer's name was changed to Perdition. This name change is such that Lucifer, whose name means the "Shining One,"²⁸ came to be called "Loss" (the meaning of *Perdition* is *loss*).²⁹ This was a fitting description for one who had lost glory, power, and much of the ability to act that he once possessed. Once he fell from his previous position, "he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice" (Moses 4:4). In his new role the being who was once known as Lucifer is no longer a shining bringer of light, but he has instead received the title of Satan, which means the Adversary, the one working to block men from returning to the presence of God.³⁰

What is more, Nephi, says that Satan is "that being who beguiled our first parents, who transformeth himself nigh unto an angel of light" (2 Nephi 9:9). It is consistent with the character of Satan that he would attempt to portray himself to Adam and Eve as the being he had previously been, an angel of light. Julie Smith notes an interesting variation of this same concept in one view of the Garden of Eden story

27. Gaye Strathearn, "The Overlooked Epistle of Jude," in *Shedding Light on the New Testament: Acts–Revelation*, ed. Ray L. Huntington, Frank F. Judd Jr., and David M. Whitchurch (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 227–46, rsc.byu.edu/shedding-light-new-testament/overlooked-epistle-jude.

28. "Lucifer," Guide to the Scriptures, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed 26 December 2024, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/lucifer.

29. Merriam-Webster, s.v. "Perdition," accessed 26 December 2024, merriam-webster.com/dictionary/perdition.

30. Sarah Fisher, "Satan: ADVERSARY Is Not a Name," *Hebrew Word Lessons* (blog), 16 June 2019, hebrewwordlessons.com/2019/06/16/satan-adversary-is-not-a-name/.

that attempts to explain why Eve may have been inclined to trust the serpent: “Another variation of this theme is that Eve thought she was speaking to Jesus Christ, who is sometimes symbolized by a serpent, as in Helaman 8:14–15.”³¹ Andrew Skinner suggests a very similar theory. He writes, “Satan came to Eve clothed, as it were, in the garb of the Messiah, using the signs, symbols, and even the language of the Messiah, promising things that only the Messiah could rightfully promise.”³²

In discussing how the symbol of the serpent could have been a symbol of both Christ and Satan, Skinner speculates that

other signs, symbols, and tokens were also instituted in pre-mortality to represent deity, but the one that Satan absolutely could not imitate was the dove. However, as the pre-eminent counterfeiter and deceiver, Satan could and *does* usurp these other signs and symbols properly reserved for God in order to try to legitimize his false identity as a god. This is why Satan chose to use the sign of the serpent as the best means of deceiving Eve as well as her posterity from that moment on.³³

Perhaps Satan portrayed himself to Eve as not just a serpent, but as a fiery flying serpent (a seraph). Skinner goes on to say, “By usurping and manipulating the symbol of the serpent, he tried to validate his false identity and his lies, insisting that following his ways would elevate our first parents to the status of the very God represented by the true image of the serpent.”³⁴ If we modify Skinner’s statement to replace *serpent* with *seraph*, the counterfeit seems to fit even better with Satan’s strategy of transforming himself nigh to an angel of light.

The second part of the curse on the serpent, “dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life,” may also have metaphorical meaning beyond the obvious observation that snakes slither through the dust. This

31. Julie M. Smith, “Paradoxes in Paradise,” in Adam S. Miller, ed., *Fleeing the Garden: Reading Genesis 2–3* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2017), 16n52.

32. Andrew C. Skinner, “Savior, Satan, and Serpent: The Duality of a Symbol in the Scriptures,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 370.

33. Skinner, “Savior, Satan, and Serpent,” 370.

34. Skinner, “Savior, Satan, and Serpent,” 370.

pronouncement could be understood in terms of a Babylonian belief about the afterlife that originated with the Sumerians. In Isaiah 14, the prophet likens Satan to the king of the Babylonians who, after he dies, is jeered at by the other dead kings who say,

Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us? . . . How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground . . . thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit. (Isaiah 14:10–12)

In addition to confirming the view described above of Satan and his followers having lost much of their power on the occasion of their fall from heaven, this passage, understood in conjunction with the curse on the serpent, suggests a metaphorical understanding for the curse. In the view of the ancient Hebrews, disembodied souls would go down to Sheol, a place of darkness, a pit full of worms down in the dust.³⁵ This was similar to the Babylonian view in which “there the spirits of the dead (*gidim*) dwelt in complete darkness with nothing to eat but dust and no water to drink.”³⁶ The ancient story of the “Descent of Ishtar” notes that in the underworld, “dust is their sustenance and clay their food. They see no light but dwell in darkness.”³⁷ Christopher Hays notes that

This text, a later Semitic rendition of the Sumerian “Descent of Inanna,” is first attested in the Late Bronze Age. Certain of its details (dust, darkness, and a shortage of good food and drink) are already familiar from Sumerian underworld texts. . . . [T]his description seems to have been accorded great esteem in Akkadian canonical literature. . . . [I]n short, the pericope above seems to have become an increasingly popular description of the world of the dead in Akkadian literature.³⁸

35. Sarah Fisher, “Sheol: the GRAVE? Gehenna? Hades? HELL?” *Hebrew Word Lessons* (blog), 27 October 2019, hebrewwordlessons.com/2019/10/27/sheol-the-grave-gehenna-hades-hell/.

36. Ira Spar, “Mesopotamian Deities,” Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, April 2009, metmuseum.org/toah/hd/deit/hd_deit.htm.

37. Christopher B. Hays, “Chirps from the Dust: The Affliction of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:30 in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 2 (2007): 310.

38. Hays, “Chirps from the Dust,” 310.

Hays associates Isaiah 29:4 ("from low in the dust your words shall come; your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost, and your speech shall chirp (תצפצר) out of the dust") with the Mesopotamian view of the underworld, and suggests that the biblical authors shared many of their concepts of the underworld, including the views of sheol as a dusty pit, with the Mesopotamians.³⁹ Lewis Paton also suggests that the Hebrew concept of Sheol was influenced by the Mesopotamians and states that "Sheol is conceived as a place of dust" and that "'dust' is a synonym of Sheol."⁴⁰

Assuming that the concept of Sheol was indeed influenced by the Babylonians, and that dust and eating dust are representative of Sheol, the curse on the serpent could be meant to indicate that Satan's fate is to remain as a disembodied soul forever, a state that metaphorically consists of eating dust, with no water to drink. Satan may therefore be understood as a fallen seraph. He has lost much of his former glory and power, and is doomed to remain as a disembodied spirit forever. Perhaps it is due in part to this loss of power and abilities that he has come to rely so heavily on deception to achieve his aims among mortal men. It may also help to explain why Satan and his followers seem so eager to possess mortal bodies, as seen in the New Testament, such as in Mark 5:12.

Serpents and Snares

With the association between the devil and the serpent established so early on in the scriptural record, one might expect that the sage words of the prophets would be littered with references to serpentine attacks as a metaphor for the enactment of devilish designs. Indeed, in several cases those who are portrayed as acting in a devilish fashion are described as "lying in wait," just as a serpent might lie in wait for its prey. This imagery is first applied in the story of Cain. Genesis 4:7 in the King James translation of the Bible has God warning Cain that "sin lieth at the door." The Hebrew version of the phrase seems to have more of an association with serpentine behavior than is apparent from how it has been rendered in English. Umberto Cassuto in his commentary on this passage makes particular note of the Hebrew term

39. Hays, "Chirps from the Dust," 316, 324.

40. Lewis Bayles Paton, "The Hebrew Idea of the Future Life, III: Babylonian Influence in the Doctrine of Sheol," *The Biblical World* 35, no. 3 (March 1910): 164, jstor.org/stable/3141464.

used and says that “it symbolizes the evil impulse; the analogy is that of an animal lying in wait for its prey.”

The narratives in Genesis 3 and 4 establish a motif used in numerous other scripture stories in which the antagonist of the story is depicted acting in serpentine fashion. Ronning,⁴¹ Hamilton,⁴² Verrett,⁴³ and others⁴⁴ have noted how actions such as lying in wait, betraying one’s close kin in an attempt to gain wealth or power, and being trampled or having one’s head crushed are all part of the established motif that indicates an antagonist is acting in a manner consistent with the “seed of the serpent” depicted in Genesis. Abimelech is an excellent example of a biblical antagonist who acts in a serpentine fashion as he murders dozens of his close kin in order to obtain the throne (Judges 9:4–5), lies in wait to murder another set of relatives (Judges 9:34), and has his head crushed as a punishment from God for his wicked behavior (Judges 9:51–57). I have explored this pattern in detail elsewhere.⁴⁵ For the purposes of this article, suffice it to say that the establishment of a serpentine counterfeit acting to destroy the righteous followers of God and usurp the dominion first granted to the righteous seed of Adam and Eve by God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1:28) is a well-established pattern.

From serpents lying in wait to the seed of the serpent setting snares

At some point, the animal cunning of the predatory serpent lying in wait to capture and kill its prey as a metaphor appears to have undergone a transition into the lying in wait of a human predator who sets lures and snares to entrap the unwary. In some cases, the serpent metaphor and the snare metaphor are both present in a given scriptural narrative. One example of this is in Psalm 140, where David utilizes the

41. Ronning, “Curse on the Serpent.”

42. James Hamilton, “The Skull Crushing Seed of the Woman: Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Genesis 3:15,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 30–54.

43. Brian A. Verrett, *The Serpent in Samuel: A Messianic Motif* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2020).

44. Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 1, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 80.

45. Noel Hudson, “The Seed of the Serpent and the Seed of the Woman in the Standard Works,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 63 (2025), 1–50, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-seed-of-the-serpent-and-the-seed-of-the-woman-in-the-standard-works/.

framework of the seed motif to clearly identify his enemies as seed of the serpent. He says of them, "They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adders' poison is under their lips" (v. 3), and "The proud have hid a snare for me, and cords; they have spread a net by the wayside; they have set gins for me" (v. 5). There is a logical relationship between the two metaphors, as both can be conceived of relying on treachery and cunning to kill their intended victims. Both metaphors are also combined in Jeremiah 5:28, which says, "For among my people are found wicked men: they lay wait, as he that setteth snares; they set a trap, they catch men." This serpentine behavior of lying in wait, and the treacherous behavior of laying traps and snares, are both identified with the actions of the wicked seed of the serpent, who are the servants of the devil. Several Book of Mormon authors have leveraged the biblical motif of the seed of the serpent, and within this motif they also make use of the same set of imagery in characterizing the seed of the serpent. For example, Alma₂ tells Zeezrom,

Thou seest that we know that thy plan was a very subtle plan, as to the subtlety of the devil, for to lie and to deceive this people. . . . And behold I say unto you all that this was a snare of the adversary, which he has laid to catch this people, that he might bring you into subjection unto him. (Alma 12:4–6)

Alma₁, Alma₂, Amulek, Nephi₁, and Nephi₂ all utilize the snare metaphor, perhaps based in part on the usage found in Isaiah and Jeremiah (for example, Isaiah 29:21). Isaiah's prophecy in chapter 29 and adjacent chapters is structured in a way that mirrors the contrast between the seed of the woman (the righteous servants of God) and the seed of the serpent mentioned above, with the wicked seed of the serpent saying,

We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves. (Isaiah 28:15)

This description of the wicked by Isaiah is similar to statements made by the wicked judges who confront Nephi₂ (Helaman 7–9) and who believe themselves protected from the action of justice, since they have their secret combination to protect them from the consequences of their actions (Helaman 7:5). Indeed, it is worth noting that

the very thing that Isaiah warns about in his prophecy comes to pass in the story of Nephi₂. Isaiah prophesies,

All that watch for iniquity are cut off: That make a man an offender for a word, and lay a snare for him that reproveth in the gate, and turn aside the just for a thing of nought. (Isaiah 29:20–21)

The phrase he “that reproveth in the gate” refers to a judge or prophet of the people of Israel. A biblical commentary on verse 21 notes, “‘The gate’ was the place where judgment was given and public assemblies held. If anyone boldly stood up and reproved the oppressors ‘in the gate,’ they instantly set to work to lay a trap for him and bring him to ruin.”⁴⁶ A related comment on Amos 5:10 (“They hate him that rebuketh in the gate, and they abhor him that speaketh uprightly”) notes, “The gate of Eastern cities was the place of public resort (Proverbs 1:21), either for business (Deuteronomy 25:7), or the administration of justice (2 Samuel 15:2), or for gossip. So ‘he that rebuketh in the gate’ may be a judge, or a chief, or a prophet (Jeremiah 17:19; Jeremiah 19:2).”⁴⁷

Nephi₂ has been all three types of “reprovers in the gate” mentioned above—judge, chief, and prophet. In Helaman 7 he has just returned home from an unsuccessful mission and he laments the wickedness of the people in a very public and vocal prayer. His prayer is heard by passers-by who were “near unto the garden gate by which led the highway” (Helaman 7:10). As Nephi₂ expounds the sins of the people, wicked judges who are also near the gate attempt to make him an offender for a word. Nephi₂ calls upon the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah, among others, as witnesses of the truth of his words (Helaman 8:20). He even goes so far as to give the people a prophetic sign that his words are true. However, the wicked judges “caused that Nephi should be taken and bound and brought before the multitude, and they began to question him in divers ways that they might cross him, that they might accuse him to death” (Helaman 9:19). Their motives in doing so closely mirror Isaiah’s prophecy of those who “turn aside the just for a thing of nought.” Helaman 7:5 explains that the wicked judges were

condemning the righteous because of their righteousness;

46. “Isaiah 29,” Pulpit Commentary, Bible Hub, accessed 26 December 2024, biblehub.com/commentaries/pulpit/isaiah/29.htm.

47. “Amos 5,” Pulpit Commentary, Bible Hub, accessed 26 December 2024, biblehub.com/commentaries/pulpit/amos/5.htm.

letting the guilty and the wicked go unpunished because of their money; and moreover to be held in office at the head of government, to rule and do according to their wills, that they might get gain and glory of the world.

The things of nought the judges were pursuing as they attacked the reprover in the gate were the glory, riches, and vain things of the world (Helaman 7:21). The wicked judges, who are clearly portrayed as seed of the serpent,⁴⁸ try the very same approach that Zeezrom had used against Amulek, cited above (Alma 12:4–6), as they try to lay a snare using money as the bait (Helaman 9:20). However, just like Amulek, Nephi₂ is able to perceive and avoid their trap. As he reproves the wicked judges in the gate for corrupting both the laws and the hearts of the people, Nephi₂ calls upon the symbology of the brazen serpent as proof that God gives men the power to prophesy. He skillfully weaves the themes of the coming of the son of God with his warning of the destruction of the wicked who reject the word of God. The story of the brazen serpent is the perfect choice because it exemplifies both the destruction of the faithless wicked and the salvation of those who look to the son of God with faith. He says,

Behold, ye not only deny my words, but ye also deny all the words which have been spoken by our fathers, and also the words which were spoken by this man, Moses, who had such great power given unto him, yea, the words which he hath spoken concerning the coming of the Messiah. Yea, did he not bear record that the Son of God should come? And as he lifted up the brazen serpent in the wilderness, even so shall he be lifted up who should come. (Helaman 8:13–14)

The story of Nephi₂ exemplifies Isaiah's prophecy in a way that combines the duality of the seraph symbol (as both destroyer and redeemer), as well as the metaphor of the snares laid by the wicked. Isaiah's other usages of the symbolism of snares also complement the story of the bronze serpent in which the seraphim are both the instrument of destruction as well as the instrument of salvation of the people. This dual role is explained by the refusal of the wicked to look to the Lord for relief. Since they refuse his aid, they suffer the consequence for their sins. Thus, Isaiah prophesies that for Israel, the Lord of Hosts

48. Noel Hudson, "The Chains of Hell, the Bands of Death and the Seed Motif," forthcoming.

shall be for a sanctuary; but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken. (Isaiah 8:14–15)

Although the snare described here is associated with the Lord, it seems that he is a snare to Israel due not to malice on his part, but to their refusal to allow him to save them. One Bible commentator notes, “By rejecting the counsel of God; by despising his protection, and by resisting his laws, they would be unexpectedly involved in difficulties, as birds which are caught in a snare.”⁴⁹ The usage of the snare imagery in Isaiah and throughout the scriptures seems to be as a metaphor primarily to describe the secret machinations of the wicked with which they attempt to entrap the righteous. In several cases, the wicked are shown as being caught up in poetic justice in which they fall victim to their own machinations. Such is the case in several iterations of the seed of the serpent motif,⁵⁰ including the story of Nephi₂ reproofing at the gate. In this story, Seantum and Seezoram are both members of the secret band of Gadianton (Helaman 8:28) and therefore ought to be protected from justice by their secret combination. However, they are not protected from the naked ambition of one another, and so it is that Seantum murders Seezoram in order to obtain the judgment seat, and is in turn betrayed by the blood of his brother on his cloak. This is but one of many examples of the operation of poetic justice to punish the wicked.

Earlier we saw that Joines believes the usage of the brazen seraph is an instance of sympathetic magic, but I suggest that it is rather an instance of poetic justice instead. The concept of poetic justice is not seen only in instances of the seed motif such as the one just mentioned, but it is mentioned throughout the scriptures. David, for example, in mentioning the snares of the wicked, pleads with the Lord: “Keep me from the snares which they have laid for me, and the gins of the workers of iniquity. Let the wicked fall into their own nets, whilst that I withal escape” (Psalms 141:9–10). David likewise portrays divine poetic justice in Psalm 7:15–16 wherein the wicked “made a pit, and digged it, and is fallen into the ditch which he made. His mischief shall

49. Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Bible* (1834), sacred-texts.com/bib/cmt/barnes/isa008.htm.

50. Hudson, “Seed of the Serpent.”

return upon his own head, and his violent dealing shall come down upon his own pate."

Isaiah likewise uses the imagery of both pits and snares in describing the divine justice that causes the wicked to catch themselves up in their own machinations. In Isaiah 24: 16 he laments the treachery of the people and issues a warning:

Fear, and the pit, and the snare, are upon thee, O inhabitant of the earth. And it shall come to pass, that he who fleeth from the noise of the fear shall fall into the pit; and he that cometh up out of the midst of the pit shall be taken in the snare. (Isaiah 24:17–18)

We may conclude that the snares and pits set by the wicked to capture the righteous represent the same metaphorical concept as the serpent lying in ambush. A common theme found in the seed motif, including the instances examined here that include the operation of the seraph on a pole, is the operation of divine justice that results in the wicked being caught up in their own traps.

Slicing snares asunder

The righteous, in contrast to the wicked seed of the serpent who set snares and lie in wait, are shown in the scriptures as using their faith and the word of God to either avoid or destroy the snares of the wicked. Mormon, for example, suggests wielding the word of God like a sword to slice the snares of the wicked asunder:

Whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God, which is quick and powerful, which shall divide asunder all the cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil, and lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course across that everlasting gulf of misery which is prepared to engulf the wicked. (Helaman 3:29)

It makes sense that since the snares of the devil are metaphorical, they must be sliced asunder with a metaphorical sword, and the sharpest metaphorical sword available to do the job is the word of God. Indeed, in the estimation of Alma₂, the word of God is more powerful than a literal sword. As Alma 31:5 puts it, "The preaching of the word had . . . more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else." This is why in every case in which a Book of Mormon prophet invokes the story of the brazen serpent, he also comments on the importance of faith in the word of God, which

allows the man of God to perceive the traps and snares of the serpent and to slice them asunder. Nephi, the first author in the Book of Mormon, links the ability to perceive error to the sort of faith that allowed the Israelites to look to the brazen serpent and be saved. This faith in Christ leads to salvation, and since faith in Christ is developed by hearing the word of God, Nephi meticulously recorded the word of God that he had received in order to lead future generations to salvation.

I have spoken plainly that ye cannot err. And as the Lord God liveth that brought Israel up out of the land of Egypt, and gave unto Moses power that he should heal the nations after they had been bitten by the poisonous serpents, if they would cast their eyes unto the serpent which he did raise up before them, and also gave him power that he should smite the rock and the water should come forth; yea, behold I say unto you, that as these things are true, and as the Lord God liveth, there is none other name given under heaven save it be this Jesus Christ, of which I have spoken, whereby man can be saved. Wherefore, for this cause hath the Lord God promised unto me that these things which I write shall be kept and preserved, and handed down unto my seed, from generation to generation. (2 Nephi 25:20–21)

The story of the seraph on the pole in the Book of Mormon, then, is a story of the duality of divine justice: to punish the wicked who refuse to exercise even a particle of faith and to save the righteous who muster the faith to look and live. As Skinner explains, “The agent of both harm *and* healing, death and life, is, in this instance, the serpent.”⁵¹ The duality of divine justice is also shown in the story of the serpent as depicted in the modern temple ceremony. Adam and Eve express their willingness to repent, and they are granted forgiveness of their sins and a return to divine favor. The serpent, however, is cursed by God because he acts to try and frustrate the plan of God. This duality is exemplified in the book of Isaiah with the imagery of the Holy One as both a refuge and as a snare. That duality is also expressed in the motif of the seed of the serpent. This motif, used to represent the differential outcomes for the just and the wicked, makes use of imagery of the snare, the seraph, and the crushing of the head of the seed of the serpent. In discussing the head-crushing imagery of Genesis 3:15,

51. Skinner, “Savior, Satan, and Serpent,” 366.

Skinner notes emphatically, “We may even add at this point that the woman’s seed would be able to crush the evil serpent’s head by the power given to them from the true serpent, the Messiah!”⁵²

The seraph and Quetzalcoatl

Our discussion of flying serpents would not be complete without mentioning the iconography of Quetzalcoatl. The symbol of the feathered serpent is common throughout ancient Mesoamerica across cultures as diverse as the Olmec, Toltec, Maya, and Aztec.⁵³ Diane Wirth notes that while some of the associations of Quetzalcoatl with Christ are rather questionable and are based on a common interest between converted indigenous peoples and Spanish Catholic missionaries to find Christian symbols in Mayan mythology, there are some aspects of the Quetzalcoatl story that

may be derived, in part, from Mesoamericans’ remembrance of Christ’s visit to the Americas. Those parts that fit the native traditions are these: a deity playing a role in the creation, “raising the sky”; a deity associated with the bread of life (a correspondence to maize); a deity assisting the dead; a deity shedding blood to save mankind; a deity dying on a tree (the Maize God’s head hung in a tree); a deity resurrecting and being responsible for the rebirth of the deceased; and a personage of light who is associated with the sun.⁵⁴

The fact that feathered serpent iconography is found across cultures in the lands that may have been inhabited by the Jaredites and the descendants of Lehi may indicate a shared symbology that predates both cultures. That the seraphim of Moses features in the teachings of Book of Mormon authors multiple times suggests that the symbol was a powerful one in Nephite thought. The Quetzalcoatl story may provide evidence that this symbol continued to hold special significance for the people long after the civilizations of the Nephites and Jaredites had crumbled to dust.

52. Skinner, “Savior, Satan, and Serpent,” 369.

53. Diane E. Wirth, “Quetzalcoatl, the Maya Maize God, and Jesus Christ,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 11, no. 1 (July 2002): 7–13, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol11/iss1/3.

54. Wirth, “Quetzalcoatl,” 15.

Summary and Conclusions

There has been much discussion, from the times of the earliest biblical commentators until now, about the Garden of Eden story and the place that the serpent plays in the story. The trees of life and knowledge, the humans created from the dust of the earth, and the perfidious serpent who sought to beguile the innocent Eve all combined to create a story that, despite its apparent simplicity, contained enough depth of meaning that it has been the source of both confusion and insight for millennia. Likewise, the story of the flying fiery serpents and Moses lifting up the seraph on a pole has occasioned much puzzled speculation in its own right.

The view of Christ-as-seraph and Satan as fallen seraph propounded in this paper provides an interpretive key for the story of the serpent in the garden. This view fits quite well with the additional information the scriptures of the Restoration have made available. The comment of Nephi¹ about Satan who “transformeth himself nigh unto an angel of light” is but one example among many of inspired commentary that throws additional light on the original story. Combining this comment with the concept of the seraphim angels and Satan’s penchant for imitation leads to a conclusion that is interesting and satisfying in light of the possibility that the serpent of Eden was meant as an imitation of the divine seraph.

The relationship noted here between the seed of the serpent and those who set metaphorical snares lends credence to the notion of a metaphorical evolution that connects the serpentine behavior of lying in ambush with the human behavior of laying traps. The collocation of both of these metaphors in a couple of biblical accounts reinforces the idea that both are meant to signify the action of the seed of the serpent.

The potency of the word of God in enabling one to discern between convincing counterfeits and the true representations of divine action is made clear in the accounts examined above. Illustrating the various ways in which the adversary acts and how to discern his behavior seems to be a major reason behind framing stories in terms of the seed of the serpent motif. From the moment he was called as a prophet, Moses found himself thrust into situations in which he was required to exercise his faith in the Only Begotten to distinguish demonic duplicity from distinct divinity:

Blessed be the name of my God, for his Spirit hath not

altogether withdrawn from me, or else where is thy glory, for it is darkness unto me? And I can judge between thee and God; for God said unto me: Worship God, for him only shalt thou serve. Get thee hence, Satan; deceive me not; for God said unto me: Thou art after the similitude of mine Only Begotten. (Moses 1:15–16)

The devil's attempts at deception continued throughout the prophetic stewardship of Moses, with his imitations coming one after another in Egypt, including in the guise of miraculous serpents (Exodus 7:12). By the time that he raised up the seraph in the desert, Moses was quite well-versed in distinguishing ersatz copies from the real thing, and his action in raising the brazen serpent is deserving of all of the scriptural commentary and employment of parallel symbolism that it has received. The fact that the symbol may have persisted in Mesoamerica despite centuries of apostasy and mingling with the philosophies of men is a testament to the strength of the original symbol and its associated motif.

The average human in the fast-paced modern world likely has little experience with even common serpents, let alone fiery flying serpents. However, like Eve, the possibility exists that when we least expect it, our normal daily routine may be disrupted by the sudden appearance of a beguiling serpent pursuing a course of action that, if left unchecked, could lead to death, curses, or exile. In fact, in the book of Ether, Moroni frames the story of Akish in the classic seed of the serpent motif,⁵⁵ and then interrupts the flow of the narrative to warn:

Wherefore, O ye Gentiles, it is wisdom in God that these things should be shown unto you, that thereby ye may repent of your sins, and suffer not that these murderous combinations shall get above you, which are built up to get power and gain—and the work, yea, even the work of destruction come upon you, yea, even the sword of the justice of the Eternal God shall fall upon you, to your overthrow and destruction if ye shall suffer these things to be. (Ether 8:23)

This warning suggests that no matter how distant the symbolism of serpents and seraphim in ancient Hebrew literature may seem from everyday life, there are subtle serpents slithering among us even now,

55. Hudson, "The Chains of Hell."

and their actions may directly impact our lives in ways we might not anticipate and for which we may not be fully prepared.



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