

Fiery Flying Serpent

Commentary for December 1, 2018 — What Did Isaiah Mean?

Read the "[December 2018 Newsletter](#)" to introduce this month's article "Israel and Judah: 33. Isaiah and the Death of Ahaz." In the article I quote a verse in Isaiah about a strange flying creature that God uses as a punishment to plague the Philistines oppressing the people of Judah in the time of Isaiah:

"Rejoice not thou, whole Palestine, because the rod of him that smote you is broken: for out of the serpent's root shall come forth a cockatrice [a viper], and his fruit shall be a fiery flying serpent."

• *Isaiah 14:29*

The words translated in the King James Version as "**fiery flying serpent**" translate one Hebrew term *seraph* as two English words "**fiery ... serpent**."¹ Combining words that should have not been separated, a better translation would be "**flying fiery serpent**" or more precisely "**flying seraph**."

The same "**fiery flying serpent**" is presented later in Isaiah in the same straightforward way other dangerous creatures of the Negev desert are described. Also listed are pack animals, a colt, and a camel. All these other animals were well known in desert areas:

"The burden of the beasts of the south: into the land of trouble and anguish, from whence come the young and old lion, the viper and fiery flying serpent, they will carry their riches upon the shoulders of young asses, and their treasures upon the bunches of camels, to a people that shall not profit them."

• *Isaiah 30:6*

Did such a creature as a "**fiery flying serpent**" truly exist in the time of Isaiah? They are described similarly to lions described as sent by God to punish Samaritans (2 Kings 17:25–26). And yes, there were lions in Judea and Samaria (Judges 14:5; 1 Samuel 17:34, 36–37; 1 Kings 13:25–26, 28, 20:36), likely in Syria, and definitely in Assyria around the time of Isaiah, as attested in Assyrian writings (search the internet for "[lions in Assyria](#)" which will yield several articles).

Dr. Ernest Martin understood that Scripture teaches that new animals continue to be created after the flood and even today. They are mostly microscopic creatures, fewer insects and even fewer small animals, and only occasionally large animals. He wrote on this in his article "[Creation of Life in Contemporary Times](#)." One of these post-flood creations may have been the "**flying, burning serpent**," with no mention of such a creature in Scripture before Isaiah 14:29. Read the article and decide for yourself. Keep in mind that fossilized remains of flying reptiles are well known and they were God's creations as well.

¹ The Hebrew word "seraphim" is the plural of "seraph." It sometimes identifies a spirit being that attends YHWH depending on the context.

One excellent internet presentation on this topic is "[The Fiery Flying Serpent](#)."² For even more information look at the internet search results of "[fiery flying serpent](#)." The links below come from an "Ask Historians" website, "[Flying Snakes With Bat-Wings. Origin?](#)"

[The History of Esarhaddon](#) (681 BC)

"According to the command of my lord Aššur, ... I mobilized the camels of all the kings of Arabia and loaded them with [water skins and water containers]. ... I stepped repeatedly on two-headed snakes[... whose touch] is deadly, but continued; ... – yellow snakes spreading wings."

[The History of Herodotus](#), Book II (440 BC)

"In the neighbourhood of Thebes [in Egypt] there are some sacred serpents which are perfectly harmless. ... I went once to a certain place in Arabia, almost exactly opposite the city of Buto, to make inquiries concerning the winged serpents. On my arrival I saw the back-bones and ribs of serpents in such numbers as it is impossible to describe: of the ribs there were a multitude of heaps, some great, some small, some middle-sized. The place where the bones lie is at the entrance of a narrow gorge between steep mountains, which there open upon a spacious plain communicating with the great plain of Egypt. The story goes that with the spring the winged snakes come flying from Arabia towards Egypt, but are met in this gorge by the birds called ibises, who forbid their entrance and destroy them all. The Arabians assert, and the Egyptians also admit, that it is on account of the service thus rendered that the Egyptians hold the ibis in so much reverence. ... The winged serpent is shaped like the water-snake. Its wings are not feathered, but resemble very closely those of the bat."

[The History of Herodotus](#), Book III (440 BC)

"Arabia is the last of inhabited lands towards the south, and it is the only country which produces frankincense, myrrh, cassia, cinnamon, and ledanum. The Arabians do not get any of these, except the myrrh, without trouble. The frankincense they procure by means of the gum styrax, which the Greeks obtain from the Phoenicians; this they burn, and thereby obtain the spice. For the trees which bear the frankincense are guarded by winged serpents, small in size, and of varied colours, whereof vast numbers hang about every tree. They are of the same kind as the serpents that invade Egypt; and there is nothing but the smoke of the styrax which will drive them from the trees. The Arabians say that the whole world would swarm with these serpents, if they were not kept in check in the way in which I know that vipers are. ... Now with respect to the vipers and the winged snakes of Arabia, if they increased as fast as their nature would allow, impossible were it for man to maintain himself upon the earth. ... 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."

[The History of Animals](#) by Aristotle (350 BC)

"Of animals that can fly some are furnished with feathered wings, as the eagle and the hawk; some are furnished with membranous wings, as the bee and the cockchafer [a large beetle]; others are furnished with leathern wings, ... The creatures that have feathered wings or leathern wings have either two feet or no feet

² From *Creation Research Society Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 4, March, 2006, pp. 241–251.

at all: for there are said to be certain flying serpents in Ethiopia that are destitute of feet."

[On the Nature of the Gods by Cicero](#), Chapter XXXVI (45 BC)

"... the ibis, being a tall bird, with legs that do not bend, and a long beak of horn, destroys a vast number of serpents; in killing and eating the winged snakes that are brought in by the south-west wind from the Libyan desert, it preserves Egypt from plague ..."

[Geography of Strabo](#), Book XV (23 AD)

"Megasthenes says that ... in other places there are reptiles two cubits long [about 3 feet] with membranous wings like bats, and that they too fly by night, discharging drops of urine, or also of sweat, which putrefy the skin of anyone who is not on his guard."

[Characteristics of Animals by Aelian](#) (200 AD)

"The Black Ibis does not permit the winged serpents from Arabia to cross into Egypt, but fights to protect the land it loves, while the other kind encounters the serpents that come down the Nile when in Flood and destroys them. Otherwise there would have been nothing to prevent the Egyptians from being killed by their coming."

[The Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus](#), Book XXII (353 AD)

"Among Egyptian birds, the variety of which is countless, the ibis is sacred, harmless, and beloved for the reason that by carrying the eggs of serpents to its nestlings for food it destroys and makes fewer those destructive pests. These same birds meet the winged armies of snakes which issue from the marshes of Arabia, producing deadly poisons, and before they leave their own lands vanquish them in battles in the air, and devour them."

[The Etymologies of Isidore](#), V (600 AD)

"The iaculus is a flying snake. ... For they spring up into trees, and whenever some animal happens by they throw (*iactare*) themselves on it and kill it, whence they are called iaculus (cf. *iaculum*, 'javelin'). Also in Arabia there are snakes with wings, called sirens (*sirena*); they move faster than horses, but they are also said to fly."

God's Ongoing Creations

Perhaps God operates a system of continual renewal filling ecological niches after post-flood animals became extinct. Extinctions happen continually, not just because of human actions which are actually very few, but imbalances in creation needs to be corrected. Understand that God not only creates, He sustains His creation, maintains it, and replaces necessary missing elements. We are told that sustaining, maintaining and replacing is one of the functions Christ does continually:

"For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist."

• *Colossians 1:16–17*

Next, the apostle Paul wrote this about Christ, said to be at God's right hand:

"Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high."

• *Hebrews 1:3*

In the Book of Revelation past and current creation is mentioned.

"Thou are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for you have created all things, and for your pleasure they are [meaning, at the present time or at least at John's time] and were created."

• *Revelation 4:11*

Conclusion

So what should we think about the "burning" description of the flying serpent? There are at least two possibilities. First is that these flying serpents did in fact breath fire, hence "fiery" or "burning" flying serpents.³ God describes another of his marvelous creations called "leviathan":

"By his sneezings a light shines, and his eyes are like the eyelids of the morning. Out of his mouth go burning lamps [torches], and sparks of fire leap out. Out of his nostrils goes smoke, as out of a seething pot or caldron. His breath kindles coals, and a flame goes out of his mouth."

• *Job 41:18–21*

Does this sound familiar? This is a description of flying dragons in many folklore stories around the world, some of the dragons reportedly breathed fire.

A second possibility is that the "burning" describes a fiery-like appearance of the flying serpents. A luminous creature flying at night would have a glow or a florescence to them, like fireflies (abundant in Wisconsin where I grew up) probably seen by most of you, inherent to the animal's natural characteristics. There are self-luminescent fish (including giant squids!) in the deep oceans. Search the internet for "[luminescent animals](#)." Whatever the case, the "fiery flying serpents" were created by God through Christ at some time.

God will increase physical creations after Christ returns. The earth will be in a state of near total destruction after the Day of YHWH, but it will be renewed and become like a paradise during the 1,000 year reign of Christ. More new creations occur as circumstances require them. Still later God will create a new heavens and a new earth (Isaiah 65:16–17, 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1–5). Then the New Jerusalem will come down from the old heaven to the new earth (Revelation 3:12 and chapter 21). New Jerusalem is being prepared (created) at present as Jesus indicated in John 14:2–3. At that time YHWH and Christ will dwell on the new earth. New Jerusalem will be His domicile and Temple. God through Christ continue to create marvelous creatures up to today, and will create more.

David Sielaff
david@askelm.com

³ See "[Bombardier Beetle](#)" (CreationWiki website) which spray a boiling hot mixture of caustic chemicals as a defense mechanism. There are over 500 species of [Bombardier beetles](#) (Wikipedia).