

# SERAPHIM

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## CULTURAL INSIGHT

*Seraphim* comes from a Hebrew word that means “burning or fiery ones.” *Seraphim* is the Hebrew plural of the word *seraph*. The form *seraphims* in the King James Version is not correct as *seraphim* is already a plural word.

Seraphim appear in Isaiah’s vision of the Lord in Isaiah 6 as a category of heavenly being. They are not described in Isaiah 6 except for having three pairs of wings (Isaiah 6:2). In this vision, the seraphim praise Jehovah, and their association with fire is made clear as they apply a fiery coal to Isaiah’s lips. They are sometimes associated in Jewish and Christian thought with cherubim, but that association is not part of the biblical text.

In the English of the King James Version, seraphim only appear in Isaiah 6, but in Hebrew, they also appear in Numbers 21, where the word is used to describe the snakes that Jehovah sends as a consequence of the Israelites’ murmuring (Numbers 21:5–6). This means that the bronze serpent that served as healing symbol for the Israelites was an image of a seraph. Although the seraphim are not described as winged in Numbers 21, when Nephi was describing the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness, he described the beings as “fiery *flying* serpents” (1 Nephi 17:41; emphasis added). This language may come from Isaiah 14:29 (which we know Nephi had access to since he quoted it in 2 Nephi 24:29).

The association of the seraphim with snakes in Numbers 21 suggests that the seraphim in Isaiah 6 were also snakes. In fact, we have found Israelite seals from the period of Isaiah that portray snakes with multiple pairs of wings in a manner similar to Egyptian iconography. This iconography is likely behind the image of the seraphim in Isaiah’s vision of fiery heavenly beings who stood above the throne of God.

### ***Related verses***

Numbers 21:4–9

Deuteronomy 8:15

Isaiah 6:1–8

Isaiah 14:29

Isaiah 30:6

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