

I Believe in Unicorns

A quote from the King James Version of the Bible: Deuteronomy 33:17, mentions the word “unicorns”. The KJV is not alone in this; all the earliest English translations mention unicorns. Of course, this brings **ridicule from the secular critics, “You know, them Christians believe in unicorns . . .”** Well, I believe in unicorns, and when you have finished reading this little chapter, you will too. Mind you, it won't be the fairy-tale white horse with a horn on its forehead that has its origins in Greek mythology. No, the unicorn I am speaking of is quite a different creature.

In the King James Version of the Bible there are actually nine references to a creature called the unicorn.

Numbers 23:22

God brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn.

Numbers 24:8

God brought him forth out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn: he shall eat up the nations his enemies, and shall break their bones, and pierce them through with his arrows.

Deuteronomy 33:17

His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns: with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth: and they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh.

Job 39:9

Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy crib?

Job 39:10

Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow? Or will he harrow the valleys after thee?

Psalm 22:21

Save me from the lion's mouth: for thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns.

Psalm 29:6

He maketh them also to skip like a calf; Lebanon and Sirion like a young unicorn.

Psalm 92:10

But my horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of an unicorn: I shall be anointed with fresh oil.

Isaiah 34:7

And the unicorns shall come down with them, and the bullocks with the bulls; and their land shall be soaked with blood, and their dust made fat with fatness.

The biblical description of the unicorn is rather scant, but what it does say gives one the impression that this animal is something to be respected on account of its strength. Despite being described as a powerful beast, the unicorn is not portrayed as the kind of animal that can be harnessed to work in the fields. We are left convinced that it cannot be trained. Relatively few contemporary translators have bothered to do the scholarly research necessary to identify this creature. The popular mythical image associated with the mention of a unicorn has shied the majority away. Instead of pressing on to the discovery of the mystery, they have chosen to translate the Hebrew word *reem* that represents this creature, as “wild ox”, a choice which this author considers to be an epic fail, for there are Hebrew words for both ox and wild if such a creature were originally intended.

Young’s Literal Translation of the Bible has simply transliterated the original Hebrew word *reem* without any effort to translate it, which perhaps is their honest admission that they didn’t know what a *reem* is. Other English transliterations include: *reyn*, *r’en*, *ren*, or *re’en*; probably pronounced ‘reh-ehn’ or ‘reh-ehm’.

Of over fifty modern and popular English translations and versions of the Bible available on biblegateway.com published since the year 1900, forty-five have rendered the Hebrew word *reem* as wild ox, five have it as a wild bull and one has it as a buffalo. Yet prior to the year 1900, NOT ONE English translation can be found with the words wild ox, bull or buffalo representing the Hebrew word *reem*. With the exception of one and only one (mentioned later), the early English Bibles all uniformly used the word “unicorn”.

Edit: Since writing this article I have discovered a list of other Bibles that have used the word “unicorn”: The Bill Bible 1671; The Smith Bible 1876; The Brenton Translation 1851; The Thompson Bible 1808; **Daniel Webster’s Bible 1833; The Longman Version 1841; Darby’s translation of 1890; Lamsa’s 1933** Bible translation of the Syraic Peshitta; the 1936 Masoretic Scriptures Hebrew Publishing Company, New York, the Catholic Douay version of 1950; The Word of JAH translation 1993; The 21st Century **King James Version 1994; The Revised Webster Bible 1995; the Third Millennium Bible 1998; God’s First Truth 1999; The Apostolic Bible Polyglot English of 2003; The Revised Geneva Bible 2005; The Complete Apostles’ Bible of 2005; The Apostolic Bible 2006; English Jubilee Bible 2010; Biblos Interlinear Bible 2013; The Hebraic Transliteration Scriptures 2010 by Yerusha Shen; The Work of **God’s Children’s Illustrated Bible 2011; The New Brenton Translation 2012 and The New English Septuagint Translation 2014.** Also the Modern Greek translation of the Old Testament has translated the Hebrew word *reem* to *monoceros* or *monokeros* as per the Septuagint of old. Looks like they still believe in unicorns.**

I have not found any record among Hebrew scholastic works as to what this creature called *reem* is. The *reem* it seems, is considered to be like the behemoth and the leviathan mentioned in the Book of Job; animals that are presumed to be extinct. Modern Hebrew, although based on Biblical Hebrew, has had to invent new words for things not found in the Holy Scriptures and with the identity of this creature lost in antiquity, they have invented a new word for the actual animal that the *reem* represents. (Later in this article for the new word) This is completely understandable as the *reem* did not exist in the Holy Land for a very long time, long enough for all knowledge of what this creature is to be completely forgotten. Along with many other scholars, Jewish researchers have guessed that perhaps the extinct auroch (which is an ancient cattle beast also known as the urus) could be the intended animal. But as this study will reveal, the *reem* is certainly not extinct.

Twentieth Century English dictionaries uniformly give a mythological meaning to the word unicorn. This has possibly been motivated by the use of the horned horse image on the Heraldry of England and Scotland. Here are a few examples of the contemporary meaning assigned to the word unicorn:

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines unicorn as: “A fabled creature symbolic of virginity and usually represented as a horse with a single straight spiralled horn projecting from its forehead.”

Dictionary.com defines unicorn as: “A mythical creature resembling a horse, with a single horn in the centre of its forehead: often symbolic of chastity or purity.”

Merriam-Webster’s Learner’s Dictionary definition of unicorn is: “An imaginary animal that looks like a horse and has a straight horn growing from the middle of its forehead.”

The Financial Times Lexicon defines unicorn as: “A private company valued at more than \$1 billion dollars.”

Noah Webster’s Dictionary 1913: “Unicorn 1. A fabulous animal with one horn; the monoceros; often represented in heraldry as a supporter. 2. A two-horned animal of some unknown kind, so called in the Authorized Version of the Scriptures. 3. The unicorn mentioned in the Scripture was probably the urus. 4. Any large beetle having a hornlike prominence on the head or prothorax. 5. The kamichi; called also *unicorn bird*. 6. A howitzer.”

The question remains, how then did the early translators of the Bible come to use the word “unicorn” as their translation of the word *reem*? The answer to that question begins with the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Septuagint (*septuaginta* Latin for ‘seventy’). “The Translation of the Seventy” is the literal Greek title for this copy of what we now call the Old Testament which was completed sometime during the third century BC. In this Greek translation, the word *reem* is translated into Greek as *monokeros* or *monoceros*, which means in English: one-horned. It seems that the seventy Jewish scholars who were commissioned to do the translation believed in unicorns too.

The following two verses from the King James Version are at the centre of the considerable confusion that surrounds the identity of this particular creature.

Psalm 92:10

But my horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of an unicorn . . .”

Deuteronomy 33:17

His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns: with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth: and they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh.”

In Psalm 92:10, the language is clear, a singular horn on a singular unicorn, but in Deuteronomy 33:17 the English word “unicorns” is plural with a margin note that says; “literally a unicorn” (singular). This is how it reads in Young’s Literal Translation:

Deuteronomy 33:17 YLT

His honour [is] a firstling of his ox, And his horns [are] horns of a reem; By them peoples he doth push together to the ends of earth; And they [are] the myriads of Ephraim, And they [are] the thousands of Manasseh.”

The Hebrew word *reem* is definitely in its singular form and by using the singular, Young’s agrees with the ancient translators of the Septuagint. But how can we have plural horns on a one-horned beast? Isn’t the definition in the 1913 dictionary mentioned above a bit of an oxymoron: a unicorn (a one-

horned beast) is “a two-horned animal of some unknown kind” . . . Duh? Talk about confusion. However, there are two possible explanations to the enigma of this verse that we will now explore.

This first attempt requires a little knowledge of Hebrew and English grammar, in particular the **difference in the use of the words ‘a’ and ‘the’**. The ‘a’ being the indefinite article and the ‘the’ being the definite article. In the Hebrew language there is no indefinite article. Whenever a noun is indefinite, **the context is all there is to define what is meant. Therefore, whether it’s *reem* or a *reem* depends on the context.** When the noun is definite, the Hebrew always uses the definite article with the exception of proper nouns which are not prefaced with either a definite or an indefinite article. What follows will illustrate how this information helps us understand the seeming incongruity of this particular verse.

Take this statement: “The Return of the Lion and the Unicorn”. In my mind, the Unicorn refers to the whole multitude of unicorns. But without the context of what I have written, the sentence itself could refer to a single unicorn. In my case, the word “Unicorn” is used in the singular to represent a proper noun, to speak of the plurality of **unicorns. In English we use a definite article, ‘the’, but in Hebrew when a word is used as a proper noun, no definite article is used. They would say, “The Return of Unicorn”, and the context would determine what is meant. The plurality of horns upon the *reem* is therefore appropriate IF it is speaking of the *reem* as a species.** The context in Deuteronomy 33:17 certainly allows for it to be referring to the “ten thousands of Ephraim” and the “thousands of Manasseh”, not just the two horns representing Joseph’s sons, **but a myriad of horns representing their descendants that are imbued with strength to push the peoples to the ends of the earth.**

This explanation is of course based on the presumption that the plurality of unicorns is intended. Perhaps it is with this in mind that the KJV translators chose to insert the plural proper noun in the main text with a centre column reference noting the singular. Likewise the translators of the Septuagint using the term *monoceros* in the singular, using it as a proper noun referring to the multitude.

However, there is another explanation that is equally plausible. In the Greek (*monoceros*) and in the Latin based English word (unicorn), the name of the creature is also descriptive of the creature. It is one-horned. But the Hebrew word *reem* is not descriptive at all. What description is available to us from the Hebrew is limited to the context of the Scriptures. If we dismiss the possibility just offered that the species is intended, and accept that the *reem* mentioned in the two verses is the same beast, we can come to but one conclusion; that the *reem* can be a one-horned creature AND it can be a two-horned creature.

And nature itself provides us with just such an animal. It is the rhinoceros. The one-horned rhinoceros is called in Latin, *rhinoceros unicornis*, and this creature is found alive today in northern India and Nepal. Its relative, the two-horned rhinoceros is called in Latin, *diceros bicornis* and is mostly living in the southern regions of the African continent. The gradual reduction and/or change of their range, which previously included Northern Africa and the Land of Israel according to archaeological findings, has been going on for thousands of years. The lion and the bear are examples of other animals that used to be living in Israel according to Scripture (1 Samuel 17:34-36), that are now only found in Zoos in the Holy Land.

In 2015 a total of over 3,500 Indian one-horned rhinoceros were estimated to be living in the wild. These unicorns are considered a threatened species, possibly becoming endangered because of illegal hunting for their horns that are prized in Asian countries for so called medicinal reasons; Vietnam apparently being the prime culprit. There is also a sub species called the Javan rhinoceros that is also known as the lesser one-horned rhinoceros. This smaller variety of unicorn is on the extremely endangered list as their numbers are now less than a hundred. The Javan unicorn was until recent times found in Vietnam but they have been hunted to extinction in that country. With powdered unicorn horn

being more expensive by weight than gold, it's a real problem trying to thwart those that are involved in the poaching of these beasts.

As mentioned above, all English Bible translations before the year 1900 used the word unicorn. So let's take a look at a couple of English dictionaries from the nineteenth century and see what we find.

Noah Webster's Dictionary 1828

U'NICORN, n. [L. *unicornis*; *unus*, one, and *cornu*, horn.] **1. An animal with one horn; the monoceros;** this name is often applied to the rhinoceros. **2.** The sea unicorn is a fish of the whale kind, called narwal, remarkable for a horn growing out at his nose. **3.** A fowl.

Noah Webster's Dictionary 1844

U'NI-CORN, n. [L. *unicornis*; *unus*, one, and *cornu*, horn.] **1.** An animal with one horn; the monoceros. This name often applied to the rhinoceros. **2.** The sea unicorn, called narwal, is of the whale kind, and is remarkable for a horn growing out at his nose. **3.** A fowl. *Grew. Fossil unicorn, or fossil unicorn's horn*, a substance used in medicine, a terrene crustaceous spar. *Cyc.*

Note: "narwal" is now spelt narwhal or narwhale.

According to these nineteenth century dictionaries, the word unicorn was often applied to the rhinoceros and there was no hint of mythology. Although the Greek mythological creature was probably known, its prominence in the English language was insufficient to gain a mention in the compendium of English words. We see here a classic example of how the definition of a word can change over time. With regards to the word "unicorn", that change, which is recorded in the editions of most English dictionaries, was rather rapid toward the end of the nineteenth century. Around that time, the change of the translation of the Hebrew word *reem* in most of our more popular modern Bibles also changed. This change in the common usage of the word unicorn, to become associated with the mythical image of an imaginary horned horse, was most likely the catalyst that caused the modern translators to shy away and retranslate the word to "wild ox" as found in our contemporary Bibles, perhaps to avoid embarrassment.

What shall we presume? Certainly we cannot presume the *reem* to be a "wild ox". A wild horse can be trained and a wild ox can be trained but no one has ever trained the rhinoceros to work in the fields. **God's portrait of this animal in the Scriptures suitably describes this beast so we are left with the choice** of which rhinoceros was intended by Moses when he wrote Deuteronomy 33:17.

Early Latin translations used five different words to represent the word *reem* that appears in the Hebrew: *Rinoceros*; *Rinocerotis*; *Rinocerota*; *Unicornium*; *Unicornis*. Were they using the term interchangeably, or did they discern a difference? The King James translators were not entirely ignorant of the term either because in Isaiah 34:7 they included a centre column reference regarding the word "unicorns" stating: "or rhinocerots". As I mentioned above, there happens to be one English Bible translation (that I know of) that has translated the word *reem* into both unicorn and rhinoceros in their main text, and that is the Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition. Here are the two verses in question:

Deuteronomy 33:17 DRA

His beauty as of the firstling of a bullock, his horns as the horns of a rhinoceros: with them shall he push the nations even to the ends of the earth. These are the multitudes of Ephraim and these the thousands of Manasses.

Note the different verse numbering in this translation, took me a while to find the text.

Psalm 91:11 DRA

But my horn shall be exalted like that of the unicorn . . .”

If we now presume that the two-horned rhinoceros is what is intended in Deuteronomy 33:17, the context also allows for a plausible interpretation. Ephraim and Manasseh being the tribes descended from Joseph were to become great, but Ephraim was to become greater than Manasseh. The two-horned rhinoceros has one horn greater than the other, thus the ten thousands of Ephraim could be symbolised by the greater horn and Manasseh symbolised by the lesser horn, yet their oneness and closeness to each other is preserved for the context in this particular verse reveals that together they represent Joseph.

This whole mystery of the unicorn is somewhat symbolic and probably prophetic. It was a variety of **rhinoceros that symbolized the strength of the descendants of Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.** They became the leading tribes of the Kingdom of Israel after they separated themselves from Judah. It not only symbolized their strength, it probably symbolises their stubbornness in **that they can’t be trained**, and also the peak of their destiny in that nothing in the animal kingdom stands against them. **In the wild they don’t get on with lions, and lions** sometimes have a go at the rhinoceros but to no avail. The **rhinoceros just drives them off (I’ve seen wildlife videos of their interaction online).** Just as the identity and whereabouts of the *reem* became mostly lost, the identity and the whereabouts of Ephraim and Manasseh were likewise mostly lost.

The modern day Hebrew word for rhinoceros is *karnaf* **a compound word meaning ‘horn’ and ‘nose’**, probably a translation back to Hebrew of the Latin *rhinoceros* which itself is actually a transliteration from the ancient Greek *rhino* and *keros* meaning **‘nose’ and ‘horn’**. To my knowledge, *karnaf* has not yet been linked to the original word *reem*, which is remarkable considering the seventy Jewish scholars of antiquity clearly identified the *reem* as a one horned creature (*monoceros* or *monokeros*) in their Greek translation.

This disconnect is amazingly symbolic of the ongoing breach between Israel and Judah that is prevalent to this day. When I am reminded that Manasseh means forgetfulness, and I see the forgotten identity of the descendants of Joseph and the forgotten identity of the *reem*, it not only **blows my mind, it also makes it hard to believe that God didn’t have a hand in these parallel lost identities.** Join with me in declaring: Oh my God, you are amazing.