

UNICORNS, SATYRS, AND THE BIBLE

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In several different places, my Bible speaks of the unicorn and the satyr. However, we now know that neither of these creatures actually existed, but instead had their origins in mythology. Why, then, are they mentioned in God’s Word as if they were real animals? Does the Bible pander to pagan mythology?

On occasion, Bible writers used phrases, terms, and references that were in common use at the time they penned the books of the Bible. For example, both the writer of Job (9:9; 38:31) and the prophet Amos (5:8) referred to heavenly constellations such as Orion and the Pleiades. And, in order to make an important point to the people to whom he was speaking on one occasion, the apostle Paul even quoted from their own poets (Acts 17:28).

However, the Bible never “panders to pagan mythology” by incorrectly referring to non-existent, mythological animals as if they were real, living creatures. It is true that the word “unicorn” appears in the King James Version (nine times: Numbers 23:22; 24:8; Deuteronomy 33:17; Job 39:9,10; Psalms 22:21; 29:6; 92:10; and Isaiah 34:7). What, exactly, was this unicorn? And why is it found in certain versions of the Bible? The editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* answered the first question when they wrote that the unicorn was

a mythological animal resembling a horse or a kid with a single horn on its forehead. The unicorn appeared in early Mesopotamian artworks, and it also was referred to in the ancient myths of India and China. The earliest description in Greek literature of a single-horned (Greek: *monokeros*; Latin: *unicornis*) animal was by the historian Ctesias (400 B.C.), who related that the Indian wild ass was the size of a horse, with a white body, purple head, and blue eyes; on its forehead was a cubit-long horn coloured red at the pointed tip, black in the middle, and white at the base. Those who drank from its horn were thought to be protected from stomach trouble, epilepsy, and poison. It was very fleet of foot and difficult to capture. The actual animal behind Ctesias’ description was probably the Indian rhinoceros.

Certain poetical passages of the biblical Old Testament refer to a strong and splendid horned animal called *re’em*. This word was translated “unicorn” or “rhinoceros” in many versions of the Bible, but many modern translations prefer “wild ox” (aurochs), which is the correct meaning of the Hebrew *re’em* (1997, 12:129).

Strong support for such a view, along with the answer to the second question, comes from a rather unusual source (and one that certainly would be considered a “hostile witness” in regard to the truthfulness and accuracy of the Bible). In volume one (on the Old Testament) of his two-volume set, *Asimov’s Guide to the Bible*, the late infidel, Isaac Asimov (who was serving as the president of the American Humanist Association when he died in 1992) dealt with the topic of the unicorn as it is found in the King James Version when he wrote:

The Hebrew word represented in the King James Version by “unicorn” is *re’em*, which undoubtedly refers to the wild ox (*urus* or aurochs) ancestral to the domesticated cattle of today. The *re’em* still flourished in early historical times and a few existed into modern times, although it is now extinct. It was a dangerous creature of great strength and was similar in form and temperament to the Asian buffaloes.

The Revised Standard Version translates *re’em* as “wild ox.” The verse in Numbers is translated as “they have as it were the horns of the wild ox,” while the one in Job is translated “Is the wild ox willing to serve you?” The *Anchor Bible* translates the verse in Job as “Will the buffalo deign to serve you?”

The wild ox was a favorite prey of the hunt-loving Assyrian monarchs (the animal was called *rumu* in Assyrian, essentially the same word as *re’em*) and was displayed in their large bas-reliefs. Here the wild ox was invariably shown in profile and only one horn was visible. One can well imagine that the animal represented in this fashion would come to be called “one-horn” as a familiar nickname, much as we might refer to “longhorns” in speaking of a certain breed of cattle.

As the animal itself grew less common under the pressure of increasing human population and the depredations of the hunt, it might come to be forgotten that there was a second horn hidden behind the first in the sculptures and “one-horn” might come to be considered a literal description of the animal.

When the first Greek translation of the Bible was prepared about 250 B.C., the animal was already rare in the long-settled areas of the Near East and the Greeks, who had no direct experience with it, had no word for it. They used a translation of “one-horn” instead and it became *monokeros*. In Latin and in English it became the Latin word for “one-horn”; that is, “unicorn.”

The Biblical writers could scarcely have had the intention of implying that the wild ox literally had one horn. There is one Biblical quotation, in fact, that clearly contradicts that notion. In the Book of Deuteronomy [33:17—BT], when Moses is giving his final blessing to each tribe, he speaks of the tribe of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) as follows: “His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns....”

Here the word is placed in the plural since the thought of a “one-horn’s” single horn seems to make the phrase “horns of a unicorn” self-contradictory. Still, the original Hebrew has the word in the singular so that we must speak of the “horns of a unicorn,” which makes it clear that a unicorn has more than one horn (1968, pp. 186-187).

Dr. Asimov was correct on all counts. The word *re'em* does refer to the wild ox, and is translated as such in almost all later versions of the Bible. The translators of the Septuagint rendered *re'em* by the Greek *monokeros* (one horn) on the basis of the relief representations of the “wild ox” in strict profile that they found in Babylonian and Egyptian art (cf. Pfeiffer, et al., 1975, p. 83). The charge that the Bible “panders to pagan mythology” cannot be sustained, once all the relevant facts are known. Even certain atheists (like Asimov) acknowledge as much. It also is of interest to note that

As a biblical animal the unicorn was interpreted **allegorically** in the early Christian church. One of the earliest such interpretations appears in the ancient Greek bestiary known as the Physiologus, which states that the unicorn is a strong, fierce animal that can be caught only if a virgin maiden is thrown before it. The unicorn leaps into the virgin’s lap, and she suckles it and leads it to the king’s palace. Medieval writers thus likened the unicorn to Christ, who raised up a horn of salvation for mankind and dwelt in the womb of the Virgin Mary (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1997, 12:129, emp. added).

But what about the satyr? In Greek and Roman mythology, Satyr was a half-man/half-beast god and frequent companion of Bacchus, the Graeco-Roman religion’s god of fruitfulness and vegetation (known more popularly as the god of wine and ecstasy). In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *sa'ir* occurs some fifty-two times. It is related to the term *se'ar* (hair), and generally means “a hairy one.” It is used, for example, to speak of the male goat that was employed as the Israelites’ solemn, collective sin offering on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16).

In two cases, however, the King James Version renders *sa'ir* as “satyr” (Isaiah 13:21 and 34:14). But the specific context of both passages makes it quite clear that the term is being used to refer to the wild goats that frequently inhabited the ruins of both ancient Babylon and Edom. On two different occasions in the KJV, the word is translated “demon” (Leviticus 17:7; 2 Chronicles 11:15), where it denotes a pagan god in goat form (cf. the New International Version). In regard to 2 Chronicles 11:15, respected Old Testament scholar J. Barton Payne wrote:

Far from being mythological “satyrs,” as claimed by “liberal” criticism, the *sirim* appear to have been simply goat idols, used in conjunction with the golden calves (1969, p. 400).

It is evident once again that the Bible does not lower itself to superstitious mythology. “Satyr” is merely a translation error, not a case of “mistaken identity” wherein a mythological creature was thought by the inspired writers to be a living, breathing animal.

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