

THE HORN-MOTIFS OF THE BIBLE AND THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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Undoubtedly, horn-motifs in the Hebrew Bible have frequently been too narrowly interpreted, and some of them have been completely misunderstood. Exegetical conclusions have often been based on the presupposition that the words "horn" and "horns," whenever they occur in the biblical text, must in some way be connected with bulls or other animals. Inasmuch as bull-motifs are prominent in the ancient Near East, there has been analogous interpretation of many well-known biblical passages, resulting in an attempt to level off any dissimilarities.

Investigation of the OT literature reveals that the word "horn" does occur occasionally in a biological context and in such instances has to be understood literally, but also that there are many instances where the word "horn" occurs without any reference to a ram, a goat, a bull, or some other animal provided with horns. How are references of the latter kind to be considered? What is the meaning of "horn" in such cases?

References of this sort may actually be placed in several somewhat different categories. I would suggest the following groupings of the material pertaining to "horns" in the biblical literature: (1) Depiction of literal horns (such as on altars), without any sort of explicit reference to their meaning; (2) depiction of horns, with functional aspects or dimensions indicated in the context; and (3) the use of the terms "horn" and "horns" in a purely metaphorical sense.

1. *Horns Depicted Without Explicit Reference to Their Meaning*

Horns on Altars

In the books of Exodus and Leviticus, there are several references to the horns of the altar. Were these horns simply projections or prolongations of the altar, or were they to be interpreted (as some theologians have supposed) as originating from an animistic concept?¹

Archaeological discoveries give support, not only to stone-horned altars, but also to altars presenting a bull's head with noticeable horns as part of the decor in relief (see figure 1, on p. 329). As far as Syria is concerned (where the majority of such stone altars have been found), the bull heads have been interpreted as representing local gods.² North Syrian seals with their bull-motifs may give evidence of a probable Moloch-cult.³ Recently scholars have, however, clearly refuted the earlier concept that the horns of the altars originally were *maššēbôt*.⁴ Unfortunately, many standard works still present the previous, incorrect view.⁵ As far as the OT is concerned, my research has led me to conclude that the horns of the altar there mentioned have no common ground with the "bull-decorated" altars found in the neighborhood of Palestine. Indeed, two independent strands seem to be here represented, though with a possible original source in remote antiquity.

Beings Depicted with Horns

Another well-known motif in the ancient Near Eastern context is that of beings (probably anthropomorphic gods) depicted with

¹William E. Addis, "Altar," *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (London, 1899), 1:124.

²Kurt Galling, *Der Altar in den Kulturen des Alten Orients* (Berlin, 1925), pp. 59-68.

³Margit L. Süring, *Horn-Motifs in the Hebrew Bible and Related Ancient Near Eastern Literature and Iconography*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, no. 4 (Berrien Springs, 1982), p. 284.

⁴Herman T. Obbink, "The Horns of the Altar . . .," *JBL* 56 (1937): 45; Paul W. Lapp, "The 1963 Excavation at Ta^cannek," *BASOR*, no. 173 (1964), pp. 35-37; Carl F. Graesser, *Studies in Maššēbôt* (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1969), p. 298.

⁵So, for instance, Kurt Galling, "Altar II. In Israel," *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3d ed. (Tübingen, 1957), pp. 253-255.

horns. Such depictions were already in evidence in prehistoric times. According to several authorities in the field of ancient glyptic, the headdresses with horns symbolize divinity.

To take a well-known example, the Akkadian ruler Narâm-Sin (ca. 2254-2218 B.C.) was depicted with horns to show his superiority as ruler. The king assumed deification during his lifetime, an act which was later regarded as presumptuously blasphemous. Several kings of a later dynasty were also deified, but probably posthumously.⁶

The kings of Akkad created a universal empire, comprising what came to be called *kiššat matati*, "the totality of the countries."⁷ It is important to note in this connection that the concept of universality had its prototype and origin with the moon-cult. The moon was visible everywhere and was thus a fitting symbol for universality. (By way of contrast, national deities or city-gods were restricted in several ways and were therefore easily superseded.) All the astral gods in antiquity were important, but the moon-god was considered to be the personified "father" of the astral family and also the procreator of the universe.

Moreover, the moon-cult and the bull-cult were analogous in many countries. The emblems of the moon-god, Sin, were the *crescent of the moon* and the *horns of the bull*, which emblems thus were synonymous in representing the same deity (see figure 2, on p. 331).

The influence of idol-worshipping countries on Israel is clearly revealed in the second half of the second millennium and in the first millennium B.C. Some researchers have gone so far as to propose Moses as a representative for a repressed Sin-cult, though such a depiction of Moses with horns originates as late as with Michelangelo and other medieval artists. One of the prominent views is that Moses was putting a cult-mask on his awe-inspiring face and that this mask was provided with horns. In this view, the

⁶Jacob Klein, however, in his dissertation, *Šulgi D: A Neo-Sumerian Royal Hymn* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1968), passim, proposes a theory that even such kings as Hammurabi were deified during their lifetime. But as far as the present writer knows, there are no iconographical evidences which would support such a theory.

⁷Hildegard Lewy, "Assyria, c. 2600-1816 B.C.," in *Cambridge Ancient History*, 3d ed. (1971), vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 735-738.

“horned” Moses is thus considered a vestige of a suppressed pagan cult, which, however, had to yield in favor of the Yahweh cult that from the time of the Sinai theophany asserted its dominance.⁸ At Sinai, the Bull-cult and the Yahweh-cult were supposed to have clashed.

Other scholars, in defending the “shining face of Moses,” have gone to another extreme by trying to draw analogies from mythology.⁹ There are, of course, later examples that show how idol-worshipping countries influenced the Yahweh concept. For instance, the rude sketches on the *pithoi* (storage-jars) excavated at Kuntillet Ajrud, not far from Sinai, present Yahweh with a bull-face and horns on his head and in the act of dancing with his consort, the cow-goddess Hathor. The Egyptian cow-goddess was the patron deity at Sinai (see figure 3, on p. 333).¹⁰ The picture of the dancing gods from Kuntillet Ajrud and the more familiar examples from the biblical literature (such as at Sinai, Baal-peor, Bethel, and Dan) represent a perverted “God-pattern”; they fly in the face of the normative pattern for worship in the OT.

It must be emphasized that the traditions of the Hebrew Bible represent a completely different pattern from the cultural patterns of the countries of the ancient Near East that surrounded little Palestine. For instance, in the OT, Yahweh is never described as wearing horns. Nor is Moses or any other of the biblical personalities described in this way.¹¹ Furthermore, the masks of the oracle priests are unknown cult items in Israel. As for the horns of the altar, it may safely be concluded that there was no animate concept attached to them. And finally, the crescent of the moon and the horns of the bull are emblems unknown in cultic and religious contexts in Israel; they had no connection as such with Yahweh worship.

⁸Süiring, p. 29.

⁹Elmer G. Suhr, “The Horned Moses,” *Folklore* 74 (1963): 387-395.

¹⁰William H. Shea, “The Date and Significance of the Israelite Settlement at Kuntillet Ajrud,” a forthcoming article. For a reproduction of the crude drawing of the “dancing gods,” see Ze’ev Meshel, “Did Yahweh Have a Consort?” *BARev*, vol. 2, no. 2 (March/April, 1979), plate on p. 35.

¹¹For an explanation of the misconception of Moses wearing horns, see Süiring, pp. 24-30, 422-433.

2. *Horns Depicted, with Functional Aspects Indicated in the Context*

There are several OT passages which are not merely descriptive of horns in the ways noted above, but which add reference to a functional aspect or dimension. These references are mainly found in cultic contexts. So, for instance, is the case in Exod 30:10, where there is mention of "atonement" being made on the horns of the altar of incense in the sanctuary. There are also references of similar nature that have a political context; e.g., 1 Kgs 22:11, "And Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah made for himself horns of iron, and said, "Thus says the Lord, "With these you shall push the Syrians until they are destroyed"" (RSV). According to Othmar Keel, the *lô* in the context is not reflexive but should be interpreted with the meaning "for him." In other words, Zedekiah made a cap with iron horns, not for himself, but *for the king*. The horns transformed the king, as *ngh* ("to gore") implies, into an invincible, triumphant bull.¹²

The verb *ngh* is used in ancient Near Eastern contexts, not only literally of horned animals, but also metaphorically of kings. In the ancient Near East, gods wearing "horned" helmets, crowns, or caps are likewise occasionally referred to as bulls (wild oxen). Since the time of Shalmaneser III (859-824 B.C.), depictions of kings fighting with the wild ox (not with the domestic ox) appear also in Assyrian inscriptions. Just as the wild ox was the symbol for fierce, aggressive strength and power in attack, the domestic bull became the symbol of fertility. At times, these two different traditions merged, and the source of the original tradition was forgotten.

Mention may be made here of some ancient literary references to kings or even to a whole people, wherein the epithet "bull" is applied. For instance, Egyptian Pharaohs Thutmose III and Seti II are described as "invincible" and "a young bullock with horns," respectively.¹³ And in the OT, Deut 33:17 provides a poetic passage in which "firstling bull" with "horns of a wild ox" is a term descriptive of "the ten thousands of Ephraim" and "the thousands

¹²Othmar Keel, *Wirkmächtige Siegeszeichen* (Freiburg, Switzerland, 1974), pp. 131-132.

¹³Süring, p. 321.

of Manasseh." The identification here is not simply of a king or other leader, but rather of the Joseph tribes. Incidentally, in the monarchy period, after the secession of the ten tribes from the United Kingdom, "Ephraim" and "Israel" were terms used synonymously to describe the northern nation constituted by these ten tribes.

A further example of this sort of "contextually explained" reference to horns is in evidence in 1 Kgs 1:50-51 and 2:28, where the importance of the horns of the altar may be seen in a social context. When Adonijah feared death at the hand of Solomon, he grasped "the horns of the altar"; and so too was the case with the less-fortunate Joab.

3. "Horn" or "Horns" Used in a Purely Metaphorical Sense

The category of OT texts wherein the term "horn" or "horns" is used in a purely metaphorical way is also the category that requires the most intensive study and careful application. This sort of metaphorical use occurs in several kinds of literary portrayal, such as hymnic texts, prophetic oracles, and apocalyptic vision.

Hymnic Texts

The hymnic texts, with their grand and lofty expressions, make use of metaphors more often than any other genre of literature. It is in the context of such texts that we are especially confronted with the horn-motif on a *vertical* level. Such is the case, for instance, in the parallel texts 2 Sam 22:3 and Ps 18:2, wherein God is referred to as "my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold" (RSV). It is apparent that the term *qrn* ("horn") is explicitly combined with "salvation" in the locution *qeren yiš'î*, "the horn of my salvation."

There are compelling reasons why the word *qrn* in these passages should not be given the negative aggressive connotation originating in the bull metaphor. Each epithet in the immediate context paints a positive portrait of Yahweh. If we were to maintain the traditional (and incorrect) analogy here, that "horn" is a figure of speech pertaining to the animal kingdom, such a "horn"

would imply attack, aggressiveness, and eventually “killing” (see figure 4, on p. 337). The context makes clear that the situation is quite different—not one that is negatively forceful, with destructiveness, but one that resounds with peaceful repose in God as the source of safety, security, salvation. One wonders if it is not simply “eisegenesis” to make the former application, apparently based on an *a priori* assumption of uniformity of the horn-motif in the various ancient Near Eastern cultures.

Some of the hymnic texts appear to be strongly Messianic. So, for instance, Ps 132:17, “I will make a horn to sprout for David”—where the *qrn* has been rightly translated and interpreted to mean “an invisible kingdom” that will have its “full accomplishment in the Messiah.”¹⁴ Many such texts that refer to the dynasty of David seem to imply a Messianic prophecy, even though eschatological fulfillment is not explicitly stated.

Prophetic Texts

From among the prophetic texts, Jer 48:25 may serve as a typical one: “The horn of Moab is cut off, and his arm is broken, says the Lord.” The impending doom of the kingdom of Moab was at hand, and the “*qrn* Moab” (“horn of Moab”) appears to be used as a technical term here, referring to the domination of Moab in a political or national sense. The “horn” seems to refer indirectly, as well, to the many cities of the tableland of Moab (see vss. 21-24).

Another text that may be noted is Ezek 34:21, which proclaims an indictment: “You butt with side and shoulder, thrust at all the weak with your horns, . . .” The act of goring (as by an ox) is in view in the term *t'nagg'hû* (a Piel). This term derives from *ngh*, which we have already seen means “to gore.” The metaphor here is clear, and the aggressive act is self-evident.

Apocalyptic Texts

Horns appear in apocalyptic visions, such as those of Daniel in the OT and the book of Revelation in the NT. In such contexts, what is the correct interpretation of “horns”?

¹⁴Cf. James G. Murphy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Andover, Eng., 1875), p. 152; and Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary on Books 3-5 of the Psalms* (London, Eng., 1975), p. 451.

A close investigation of the "horn-passages" in the book of Daniel shows that the ordinary morphological interpretation of the word "horn" in its singular construction breaks down in apocalyptic context. The singular *qeren* in Daniel is used to indicate powers which are active on the *horizontal* or *earthly* level, whereas the singular "horn" in the hymnic and prophetic texts seems to refer, as we have seen, either to a power operating on the vertical (heavenly) level, or to a "kingdom" or people as a sort of cryptic device. A further usage of *qeren* in non-Danielic OT texts reveals that the singular word "horn" occurs in idiomatic expressions.

By way of contrast, the dual and plural forms, "horns," in the book of Daniel seem to conform more regularly to the normal patterns found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible indicating that "horns" mainly represent earthly powers operating on the horizontal level.

In Dan 7:8, the *qrn* refers to a horn which Daniel describes as *qeren* ²*aḥari ṣ^cērâh*, "another horn, a small/little one" (in contrast to the ten horns). In Dan 8:9, in a parallel prophetic sequence, again a "little horn" is brought to view—in the Hebrew, *qeren*-²*ahat miṣṣ^{ec}îrâh*, which together with the verb *yaṣa*², means literally, "one horn came from smallness/littleness." It seems reasonable that an identification of these horns can be made on at least three grounds called to attention recently by William H. Shea: (1) the same symbolism used; (2) the same general pattern pertaining to each (namely, [a] arising "at a somewhat similar time in history," [b] beginning small and becoming great [7:8 and 8:9], [c] being blasphemous [7:8, 25 and 8:11, 25], [d] persecuting God's faithful ones [7:21, 25 and 8:11, 25], [e] appearing "to endure for protracted periods of prophetic time" [7:25 and 8:14], and [f] eventually suffering similar fates [7:26 and 8:25]); and (3) the fact that the structuring of Daniel's prophetic sequences in a parallel fashion indicates the later prophecies of the book as explanations of its earlier ones (an intent specifically stated in at least two instances, as well: 9:22-23 and 10:1, 14).¹⁵ Shea has also pointed out that the correspondence between these "little horns" of Dan 7 and 8 "is greater than those aspects of their work not mentioned in both

¹⁵William H. Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation* (Washington, D.C., 1982), pp. 30-31.

passages," and that none of the "individual characteristics are mutually exclusive so as to rule out that they [the horns] could refer to the same power."¹⁶

Both of these horns are described as operating on a horizontal level, though the latter one (8:9) is described as reaching out into a new direction, namely the vertical, and having partial success. It is quite generally held that the two "little horns" are each a symbol for the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes, but there are various reasons which make such a view untenable in the context.

First, a close study of Dan 7:7, 24 and 8:3, 5, 21-22 reveals that the word *qrn* is used with the interchangeable meaning of "king(s)"/"kingdoms," and it appears that the term "king(s)" is used in the sense of a ruling house or dynasty, rather than as designating an individual. Second, the attempt to make the ten horns of Dan 7 represent a *succession* of ten individual rulers (as held in the common view) hardly does justice to the context, for the *contemporaneity* of the ten is surely suggested by the fact that the "little horn" puts down three of those ten (7:24): If the ten were successive Seleucid rulers, only the last of these—not a total of three—should have been put down. (Also, the very diversity of lists given by the commentators as to the identity of these suggested kings only tends to confirm the tenuousness of the view.)

It is beyond the scope of this article to pursue this matter further, but it may be mentioned that other cogent arguments against the identification of the "little horn" of Dan 7 and the "little horn" of Dan 8 with Antiochus Epiphanes have appeared in recent literature,¹⁷ and that serious questions have also recently been raised concerning the paralleling identification so generally

¹⁶Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁷See, e.g., Shea, *Selected Studies*, pp. 25-44. Also, now see a fascinating new book that appeared in November of last year, as part of the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth on November 10, 1483: Ricardo Abos-Padilla, *Plädoyer für Antiochos IV. Epiphanes, 47 ½ Thesen über das Buch Daniel—Martin Luther zum 500. Jahrestag seiner Geburt dargebracht* (Bad Homburg, Germany, 1983). This volume is one of a two-part series, and deals with Dan 7 and 8, the other volume to follow up with another "47 ½ theses" on Dan 9, 11, 12. (There is an obvious and intended play on the 95 Theses of Martin Luther.) This present volume dealing with Dan 7 and 8 raises some crucial and ponderous questions concerning the common attempt to identify the "little horn" of those two chapters with Antiochus Epiphanes.

made in attributing the activities of the "northern tyrant" of Dan 11 to Antiochus and in drawing supposed allusions to the Maccabean crisis from that chapter.¹⁸

4. Summary

We have endeavored in the foregoing sections to look broadly at the horn-motifs as used in the biblical literature, particularly the OT, and I have discussed these under three basic types of usage. As a brief summary, it may be stated that in general the biblical motifs of "horn(s)" move on a vertical level, whereas the motif of "horns" in the broader ancient-Near-Eastern context move on a horizontal level.

That there may be overlapping in the OT horn-motifs as to dimension and/or direction is, however, possible, as the portrayal given in Dan 7 and 8 indicates. Here the horizontal (or horizontal expanded to include vertical) is in view.

In any event, careful analysis of each context is always necessary in order to be able to present as dependable an exegesis as possible.

¹⁸See, e.g., Arthur J. Ferch, "The Book of Daniel and the 'Maccabean Thesis,'" *AUSS* 21 (1983): 129-141, esp. 134-136. Ferch makes an analysis—a significant one, in my opinion—which compares the historical setting of the Maccabean period with the so-called, supposed allusions of Dan 11 to the crisis for the Jews that occurred under Antiochus Epiphanes. The *incongruity*, not the similarity, is what stands out when this sort of comparison is made.

Some other studies have been appearing which undercut the "Maccabean Thesis" from the other end of the chronological tunnel—studies that relate to the increasing evidence which points to a sixth-century (rather than second-century) date for the book of Daniel. See, e.g., Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Book of Daniel: Evidences Relating to Persons and Chronology" and "The Book of Daniel and Matters of Language: Evidences Relating to Names, Words, and the Aramaic Language," *AUSS* 19 (1981): 37-49, 211-225, plus a series of five articles by William H. Shea on the historical chapters of the book of Daniel, in the Spring, Summer, and Autumn issues of 1982 and the Summer and Autumn issues of 1983 of *AUSS*.