

## MOSES DEHORNED IN MODERN BIBLES

You're not going to believe this, but Moses had horns! That's right, horns. Like a goat. Growing right out of his forehead.

Or at least that's what a lot of people used to think. The place to read all about this is in the Jewish scriptures at Exodus 34:29-35.

Here's the story: The Lord had used Moses to hornswoggle the Israelites out of Egypt. They escaped to the relative safety of the peninsula east of the Gulf of Suez and pitched camp at the foot of Mount Sinai.

Then things went haywire. Moses climbed the mountain to talk with the Lord. But he was gone for over a month, and the people got restless. So they made themselves a gold-plated bull to worship.

When Moses finally came back, he was madder than Old Harry. He broke the two stone plates on which the Ten Commandments had been engraved and went on a rampage.

After the dust settled Moses chiseled another pair of slates and hiked back up the mountain. Once more the Lord dictated the legal conditions of his covenant with the Israelites.

That's where Exodus 34 picks up the story. When Moses came down the second time, he seemed so different the people couldn't stand to look at him. In fact, they made him wear a veil over his face.

What was the problem? Every modern English translation of the Bible says that "Moses' face was shining" because he had been talking with the Lord. You get the impression it was as bright as a mercury vapor lamp. The people couldn't bear to look full in the face of this human spotlight.

But there's more to it than that. The Hebrew word which is translated as "shine" is virtually the same as the word which is rendered everywhere else as "horn."

So when St Jerome translated the Bible into Latin around 400 years into the Christian era, he put it this way: When Moses came down the mountain, he didn't know "that he had horns" because he had been talking with the Lord.

You can guess what happened. For centuries people thought Moses was afflicted with some kind of horny growth. Artists and sculptors often pictured him if not with long pointed antlers, at least with short stubs bumping out of his forehead.

In other cases the shining face and the horned forehead ideas were combined, and Moses was pictured with bright rays of light shooting out the top of his head. Either way the impression was that Moses' appearance had been dramatically changed because he had spent a month or so in face to face contact with God.

Scholars have tried to figure out where this horn idea came from. They have discovered that in the ancient world both the Mesopotamians and later the Greeks often pictured their gods and goddesses with horns. Sometimes the horns were stuck right on the top of their heads; sometimes they were wearing turbans with horns on the side.

In some Near Eastern cultures it was a custom for priests to wear makes with horns when they were performing their religious duties.

In other cases, kings and famous rulers were pictured with horns. So the idea that Exodus 34 wanted to picture Moses with horns isn't so crazy after all.

But nobody really believes that today. Everyone goes for the shining face theory. That's the way the ancient Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures understood it.

And that's obviously the way St Paul took it. His comment in the Christian scriptures about Moses' shining face is at 2 Corinthians 3:7-16.

It's one of those confusing little details which will never be solved to everyone's satisfaction.

Which means it's one of the things which keeps Bible readers coming back for more. You never know when you're going to run into some oddball idea which will wake you up.

But Moses sprouting horns? Don't lose any sleep over it.