Opinion

EarthBeat



Biblical figures surround the marble statue of Moses, Michelangelo's masterpiece at the Church of St. Peter in Chains in Rome. The famous sculpture, originally planned as part of Pope Julius II's tomb inside St. Peter's Basilica, was completed in 1545 at the church. (CNS/Catholic Press photo)



by Damian Costello

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At the central Vermont church I attend, in a stained-glass window that depicts the transfiguration, Moses has horns. When I researched why, I learned about the aurochs, a now extinct megacattle species, and discovered its "fearful powers" were a meaningful part of the faith of Israel, and still empower the church today.

My church's stained-glass window isn't an anomaly. Moses is often depicted with horns. The most famous example is Michelangelo's statue at the church of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome.

Moses' horns are often explained as a mistake in biblical translation, because the Hebrew words for "rays" and "horns" are similar. St. Jerome used "horns" in the Vulgate, which is what survived in the Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition of the Bible: "And Aaron and the children of Israel seeing the face of Moses horned, were afraid to come near" (Exodus 34:30).

But there is good reason to think Jerome's use of "horns" was intentional. Journalist Elon Gilad points to the Jewish tradition of portraying Moses with horns and suggests that as a resident of the Holy Land in dialogue with Jews, Jerome drew on that context.

Moses' horns also point to a theological truth. In the biblical text and Hebrew tradition, horns are a symbol of royal and spiritual power.

We see it in Psalm 18, what David sings after defeating Saul: "My God, my rock of refuge, my shield, my saving horn, my stronghold!" In the New American Bible, the

note reads: "My saving horn: my strong savior. The horn referred to is the weapon of a bull and the symbol of fertility."



A stained-glass window shows the transfiguration, at St. Augustine Parish in Montpelier, Vermont. (Damian Costello)

In the Bible, kings themselves are referred to as "horns," particularly in the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation (i.e., Daniel 7:7-8, 24; Revelation 5:6).

Early translations of Scripture often referred to a "unicorn," but recent linguistic scholarship shows that these mentions most likely pointed to the now-extinct

aurochs (*Bos primigenius*), a massive wild cattle species that stood up to six feet tall at the shoulder, weighed over a ton, with horns up to 2.5 feet long.

Aurochs ranged through North Africa, Europe and Asia, including Palestine. The Hebrews, as nomadic people wandering in and out of aurochs land, saw their horns kill lions and hyenas and felt the aurochs' great mating battles shake the earth, as evidenced in the Book of Job where God asks from the whirlwind if Job has the power to control the aurochs (Job 39:9-12).

Not surprisingly, ancient peoples hunted aurochs. The aurochs' "strength and speed are extraordinary; they spare neither man nor wild beast which they have espied," Julius Caesar described in his first century B.C. *The Gallic Wars*. He continued, "These the Germans take with much pains in pits and kill them. The young men harden themselves with … this kind of hunting."

The horns served as a kind of totem as "those who have slain the greatest number of them, having produced the horns in public, to serve as evidence, receive great praise," said Caesar. They "anxiously seek after" the horns, "and bind at the tips with silver, and use as cups at their most sumptuous entertainments."

Hebrews used horns as cups, too, but in a sacred manner: "You have given me the strength of a wild ox; you have poured rich oil upon me" (Psalm 92:11, also 1 Samuel 16:13, 1 Kings 1:39).

The shofar, an instrument made of animal horn, was traditionally used to announce the beginning of the Sabbath, the new moon, the anointing of a king and in battle.

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Peoples of the ancient Near East saw in the horn not just an object but the essence of the animal from which it came. They deeply identified with animals. This is true of

Israel and the aurochs.

Toward the end of their 40-year Exodus journey through the desert, Balak, the King of the Moabites, asked Balaam to curse Israel. Instead, after ceremonies of sacrifice of bulls and rams, Balaam repeatedly blessed them, twice declaring, "They have the like of a wild ox's horns" (Numbers 23:22, 24:8).

Just before he died, Moses sang a long song and blessed the people. Expanding on Balaam's vision of Israel having the aurochs' power, Moses says the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh have the horns of the aurochs' with lyrics that even more so apply to him:

> His firstborn bull, majesty is his!
>
> His horns are the horns of a wild ox;
>
> With them he gores the peoples,
>
> attacks the ends of the earth. (Deuteronomy 33:17)

No wonder Moses, who the Lord strengthened "with fearful powers" (Sirach 45:2) — to confront Pharaoh, to lead the people out of slavery and through the sea and desert, to be the only one to see God and live — had horns.

Gilad fleshes out the spiritual power of Moses' horns to battle evil spirits in the Jewish tradition with a couple of ancient poems, such as "The Lord Lowered the Sky to Sinai," an Aramaic poem from about the time of Jerome. "I placed horns of majesty on your head so that if an angel comes near, you will gore him with them," "I will not descend, I will not descend," Moses chanted in a 9th-century poem in Hebrew, "Until I prove myself a hero, until I gore your bodies with my horns."

A recently restored fresco showing Moses and the copper snake is seen at the Pontifical Sanc

A recently restored fresco showing Moses and the copper snake is seen at the Pontifical Sanctuary of the Holy Stairs Oct. 8, 2020, in Rome. (CNS/Paul Haring)

As I was researching the horns of Moses, horns unexpectedly emerged from the very ground I was standing on. At the time, I was also researching an old granite church in Newport, Vermont, St. Mary Star of the Sea. A couple of longtime parishioners told me stories about its construction in the early 1900s as we stood in front of the church and looked over the U.S.-Canadian border at the mountains of Quebec.

Granite for the church came from quarries at least two miles away and the stone had to be hauled by animals. During the construction, an ox, upon finishing the long walk from one of the quarries to the church site, collapsed where the front stairs now stand. Unable to move it, the laborers buried it there.



St. Mary Star of the Sea in Newport, Vermont (Damian Costello)

The story cast me back to the Temple in Jerusalem, where the sacrifice of horned oxen and rams was an essential part of liturgies. Like Moses, horns adorned the four corners of two altars of the Temple, one altar for the twice daily sacrifice of incense and the other for the sacrifice of oxen and rams.

I was fascinated. If the Newport parish ox story is true — and I think that it is — St. Mary Star of the Sea stakes a greater claim to its Temple ancestor than maybe any other church in the world, containing within it a sacrifice of the Old Temple, an ox that gave its life to build the church.

I also felt the energy of something giving voice to a hidden presence that has never left. Something like the chant of Moses on Sinai in the 9th-century Hebrew poem: "I will not descend, I will not descend."

Pope Benedict reminded us in *The Spirit of the Liturgy* that along with the synagogue, the Temple is the most important source for the structure and imagery of church buildings. The imagery of horns has fallen away, perhaps because the theology of the early church developed in a largely urban culture, far from the land on which the ancestors of the faith lived and worshiped.

Perhaps it's no accident that in returning to the Holy Land, St. Jerome saved this remnant and is showing our connection to "fearful power" — that of Moses on Sinai goring evil spirits, of Israel goring the nations with aurochs horns and of centuries of prayer offered up at the Temple of Jerusalem.

There’s more to the story. My research continues, turning now to focus on what might be an even more compelling reason to see horns depicted in a church: Jesus, the mighty horn of salvation (Luke 1:69).