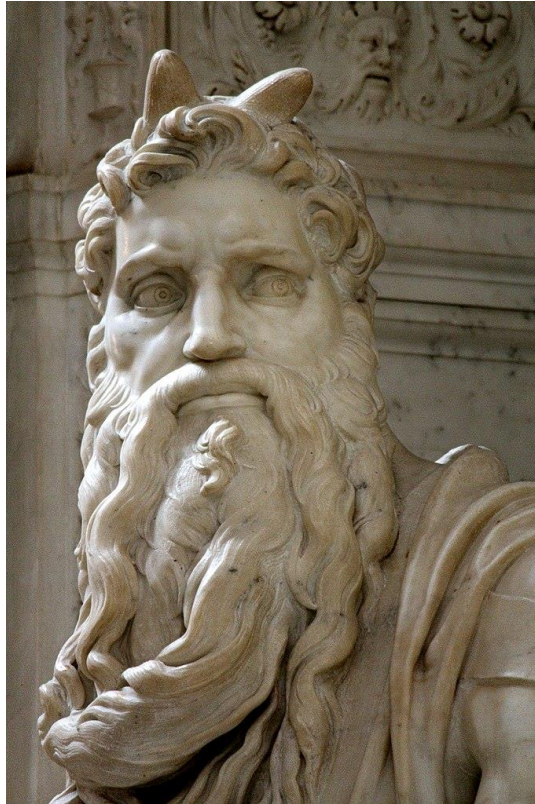


Moses' Horns



Exodus 34:29 "Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God."

This morning's sermon will explain why in our popular imagination and depictions the devil has horns, because that tradition comes directly from this verse from Exodus which I just read to you. Yet the path to the devil having horns from this verse is not obvious, and the route to get there is rather circuitous, so pay attention.

In the story from Exodus today, Moses has gone back up to the mountain to talk with God and receive again the Ten Commandments, having broken the first set in anger after the Hebrews famously worshipped the golden calf. When Moses comes down this time, his face, we are told, shines with a divine light, so much so that he has to wear a veil over his face, at least for a little while. Interestingly, there is no mention of Moses' face shining the first time he came down the mountain with the first set of Ten Commandments. Anyway, Moses' direct conversation face to face with God is an important remembered event in the life of the people of Israel. It is reflected in the story of Jesus' Transfiguration on the mount in today's Gospel, where Jesus' face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. And theologically, the story of Moses' veiled face shining with the light of God is used by St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians today to explain why the Jews with whom he was arguing, did not understand the Jewish Scriptures the same way Paul did, because metaphorically speaking at least, Paul declares there's a veil that lies over their minds.

So how do we get from there to the devil having horns, you might ask? Well, the Hebrew in this passage from Exodus is a little obscure. What it seems to be saying is that rays of light shone forth from Moses' face after speaking with God, except instead of using the common word for "rays of light," the writer

used an ambiguous Hebrew term. And St. Jerome, when he translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Latin, into the famous Vulgate translation that the Western Church used as its standard for more than 1500 years, he translated that obscure Hebrew word as "horns", you know, small at one end and larger at the other, like horns of light radiating from Moses' face. Modern English translations get closer to the actual Hebrew meaning, I think, by saying that Moses' face was "radiant" as in the New International Version (NIV) or "was sending out rays of light" as in the Complete Jewish Bible translation (CJB) or simply "shone" as in our New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). But Jerome in the Vulgate Latin translation wrote that Moses' face was simply "horned", or "cornuta" in Latin, from which we get the English words like cornet or cornucopia.

And those in the Middle Ages who read the Bible literally from the Latin Vulgate believed then that Moses thus had 'horns' on his head. This should encourage you NOT to read the Bible literally, especially in translation. And this is why, for instance, Michelangelo in his famous sculpture of Moses for the tomb of Pope Julius II in the Church of Saint Peter in Chains in Rome innocently sculpted horns on Moses' head in 1515, clearly visible horns as pictured in your bulletin today, based upon that literal reading from the Latin Vulgate. Other images of Moses with horns can be founded elsewhere in the Western Church,

for example, in the stained-glass windows at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, or Chartres Cathedral or Sainte-Chapelle, or in the Italian sculptures of Donatello. Notice, however, that you don't find such artistic representations of Moses with horns in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, because the Eastern Churches didn't use the Latin Vulgate translation, but primarily used that famous Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, which did not make the misleading translation here that Jerome did, though the Septuagint certainly made other mistranslations that famously gave us Moses crossing the Red Sea, or that voice of John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan, or the Virgin Birth, all mistaken or misleading translations in their own right.

So, Jerome made a slight mistranslation of today's Exodus passage and Western Christians began to believe for 1500 years that Moses had actual horns on his head. Now Moses is the most often named Jew in the New Testament and is a symbol for Christians of the people of Israel. So eventually it came to be widely believed that all Jews had horns on their heads. That vicious rumor continued right into the 20th century, as the Nazis repeated it again and again. That's why Jews wear those yarmulkes, Germans were told, to hide their horns, all because St. Jerome mistranslated this passage from Exodus.

And about the same time that these Western artists began to depict Moses with horns, and that popular legend began to suggest that all Jews had horns, the Jews as a people were becoming more and more despised in Europe. And much of that despising of them was the result of the Fourth Lateran Council of the Roman Catholic Church in 1215, which allowed the Jews to do something that was strictly forbidden for Christians. The Fourth Lateran Council allowed the Jews to practice usury within the Holy Roman Empire, that is, to charge interest in the lending of money, which was strictly forbidden by our Scriptures. Jews for instance were strictly forbidden by their own laws to charge interest to Jews, but they were allowed to charge interest to non-Jews, like Christians. Before this time, the practice of charging interest in the lending of money had been clearly forbidden by the Scriptures of both Jews and Christians, and Muslims. But now, the Jews and only the Jews were allowed to charge interest within the Holy Roman Empire, and only to non-Jews. Thus, the Western Church enabled the Jews to become the first modern bankers of Medieval Europe, and the Jews were hated for it at the time, and they have been hated for it ever since. As a result of this hatred, there were innumerable massacres of the Jews by Christians during this period. Edward I drove them out of England in the early 14th century. They were driven from Spain and Portugal in the 15th

century, victimized in France, and massacred by the Crusaders. They have been hunted and persecuted right into our own century, as it was indeed our generation that tried what was called the "Final Solution" to the ancient problem of the Jews; systematic extermination. Six million of them were killed by the Nazis in gas ovens and firing ditch.

So, for centuries the Jews were commonly depicted by Christians in an evil light, with horns, a slanderous stereotype that exists even today. In the midst of these Jewish persecutions, the Jews were hated as God-killers and became identified as agents of the devil. Now while the Bible doesn't tell us what the devil looks like, it does seem to tell us, they mistakenly thought, what the Jews looked like, at least in Jerome's mistranslation. And since the Jews were often viewed, unfortunately and unfairly as agents of the devil, the idea spread that the devil's agents must look like him, just as we Christians are made in the image of God, so it was thought that the devil must have horns just like his representatives, the Jews. Later the devil will be depicted with the hooves and tail of a pig, and a pitchfork, but this horrid depiction began with a mistranslation of the Hebrew Bible and a racist hatred and jealousy, unworthy of Christians of any time.

So, in the end, let me be clear, the devil doesn't really have horns, anymore than Jews do, or Moses did. But Moses' face

did shine with the radiance of God's light and love, and so did
Jesus' on the Mount on Transfiguration, and so should ours.

AMEN.