



# Media Spotlight

A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR MEDIA

## SPECIAL REPORT

# THE UNICORN

## FABLED BEAST OF MYTH & MAGIC

by Albert James Dager



**O**f all the mythical beasts of religion, folklore, art, and literature, the unicorn holds the greatest sway over man's imagination. The origins of its legends lost in time, this fabulous beast has held a part in virtually every culture, sought out by kings and popes of old for its magical qualities.

The unicorn most prominent in the West today is depicted as a graceful horse with a long, tapering horn protruding from its brow. But this is only one of many imaginative portrayals.

Variouly described as an ox, ram, goat, bull, antelope, wild ass, horse, rhinoceros, even as a serpent and as a fish, the unicorn has eluded any specific delineation. And in spite of the claims of men to have seen the unicorn, evidence of such an animal has never materialized.

### THE BIBLICAL UNICORN

In view of the Bible's references to the "unicorn" (Numbers 23:22, 24:8; Job 39:9-10; Psalms 29:6, 92:10), would it not be reasonable to assume that it did at one time exist, perhaps having gone the way of the dinosaur into extinction? Perhaps it even exists still, indigenous to some faraway land, its habitat some inaccessible region, hidden from the sight of man.

Wishful thinking aside, the unicorn remains nothing more than a figment of man's imagination. The origins of the biblical unicorn can be traced to the third century B.C., when seventy-two Jewish scholars in Alexandria produced the Septuagint (a translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek). Finding several references to an animal called the "*re'em*,"

they were puzzled as to its meaning. No one was sure what the *re'em* was, although they deduced that it was large, fierce, and horned. They "resolved their confusion by deciding to use the term *monoceros*, later Latinized into *unicornus*. These references in the Bible in large part account for the entrance of the unicorn into European consciousness. Its presence in the Old Testament and, a few centuries later, in the Talmud, extended the unicorn's pedigree as far back as Adam and Eve. And because the animal was mentioned in the Bible its existence could certainly not be doubted; the Word of God attested to it."<sup>1</sup>

The controversy over the true identity of the *re'em* lasted for centuries and was mired in complexities. It was eventually identified as the giant aurochs, a species of wild buffalo that lived in Mesopotamia and became extinct around 500 B.C.

Working from the Septuagint, early translators of the Bible into English retained the word "unicorn," rather than seek a more accurate rendering from the Hebrew. The translators of the King James Version employed the earlier English versions as guides and also retained the word "unicorn." Thus they gave so great a sanction to this pagan myth that the idea of the unicorn as a reality persisted among Europeans until as recently as the eighteenth century.

Was this an oversight, or were there other influences?

### THE LUNAR UNICORN

The unicorn, being a representation of the moon, played a significant part in the prevalent sun-worship of the early British. In British mythology, the sun was represented as a lion, the moon as a unicorn. This myth is an integral part of British heraldry:

"The emblems of heraldry perpetuate the symbolism expressive of the solar worship of primitive times. We see the Royal

Arms of England, supported by the solar lion and the lunar unicorn.

"The two creatures," says [Robert Brown, Jr., in *The Unicorn*] are naturally antagonistic. In the ancient myth, the Unicorn, when rushing at the Lion, sticks his horn fast in a mythic Tree, behind which his opponent has taken refuge, and the Lion coming round devours him whilst thus defenceless. This is the explanation of the myth. The Lion-Sun flies from the rising Unicorn-Moon, and hides behind the Tree or Grove of the Under-world, the Moon pursues, and sinking in his turn, is caught in this mysterious Tree, and sunslain."<sup>2</sup> (See illustration, page 2)

Although the myth of the lion and the unicorn can be traced to Babylon, the unicorn's role in British heraldry may have been one reason the KJV translators gave sanction to this mythical beast. Out of other myths came its identification with Christ.

### THE VIRGIN AND THE UNICORN

During the Middle Ages, bestiaries—moral tales centered on real or imagined animals—were very popular. Details varied according to regions and religious proclivities, but the most famous legend of the unicorn describes the method of its capture by a virgin. A concise description of this legend is presented in Volume 11 of the encyclopedic *Man, Myth & Magic*:

"According to this tale, the unicorn, a small kid-like beast armed with a sharp pointed horn, is too fleet and fierce to be taken by hunters. Only a virgin seated alone under a tree in a forest can capture it; because it is irresistibly attracted by the odours of virtue, the unicorn approaches the virgin, lays its head in her lap and permits itself to be caressed into sleep. She breaks its horn, the dogs leap, the huntsman pounces, and the unicorn is taken to the palace of the king.

"Details vary, vividly, from text to text; in some the unicorn indulges in familiarities remarkably unsuited to virginal virtue, and in others the virgin is a boy in disguise. Although this legend of unknown provenance, is transparently erotic, it was tortured into ill-fitting Christian significance. The treacherous virgin was identified with the Mother of God, and the unicorn with Christ and also, despite its dubious familiarities, with purity. The single horn was said to symbolize the unity of Father and Son, and also the 'horn' of the cross, the upright beam projecting above the transverse. The huntsman became the Holy Spirit acting through the

