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BRIEF STUDIES

NOTES ON THE UNICORN

The translators of the Septuagint encountered a strange animal in certain passages of the Old Testament (Num. 23:22; Deut. 33:17; Job 39:9; Ps. 22:21; 29:6, 92:10; Is. 34:7). These texts referred with some awe to an animal called **אֶיָּוִן**. There was no indication of the size of the animal or any zoological description. Nor was there even a comparison with a better-known animal. Characteristics of this animal were that it was fierce, fleet, and untractable in every respect. Apparently under the spell of dim recollections of some obscure rumors, the translators of the Septuagint rendered the Hebrew word with *μόνοκερως*, that is unicorn, or rhinoceros. Later translators of the Bible followed this. The Vulgate has *unicornus*; the French Bible *licorne*. Luther translated *Einhorn*.

Later Samuel Bochart and others thought the oryx antelope was meant. This animal, the oryx, called *rim* by the Arabs, was proverbially a formidable enemy both to humans and to other animals of the ancient world. This theory soon collapsed when an animal *rimu* was discovered in Assyrian texts. Fortunately there were pictures on the Assyrian and Babylonian bas reliefs accompanying the text, and zoologists had little trouble in identifying it as the wild ox. It was the *urus* or *aurochs*, the *bos primigenius*, that largest and most formidable wild ox that ever existed.

The *urus* apparently was rather widespread over much of Europe and the Middle East. It was well known in Roman times. There is a reference to it in the Nibelungenlied. In 1555 Conrad Gesner remarked that the *urus* could be found only in Lithuania. At that time there were only about 30 of them alive. By 1602 the herd had shrunk to four. The last survivor was an old female, which

died one day in 1627. It is quite possible that the *urus* was the ancestor of domestic cattle. It is believed that domestication was accomplished in Asia.

Reference to the unicorn first appears in the writings of Ctesias, a Greek historian and one-time physician to the Persian king Artaxerxes II. Ctesias returned from Persia about 398 B. C. and wrote two works. One of these was a book on India which is known to us in the form of a condensed abstract made some 1,300 years later by Photius, patriarch of Constantinople. Part of the abstract runs as follows: "There are in India certain wild asses which are as large as horses and larger. Their bodies are white, their heads dark red, and their eyes dark blue. They have a horn on the forehead which is about a foot and a half in length. The dust filed from this horn is administered in a potion as a protection against deadly draughts. The base of this horn for some two hands' breadth above the brow is pure white. The upper part is sharp and of a vivid crimson, and the remainder or middle portion is black. Those who drink out of these horns made into drinking vessels are not subject, they say, to convulsions, or to the holy disease [epilepsy]. Indeed, they are immune even to poisons if either before or after swallowing such they drink wine, water, or anything else from these beakers." Apparently Ctesias refers to the Indian rhinoceros.

Next to refer to the unicorn is Aelian, who wrote in Greek, although he lived in Italy and was a friend of Pliny the Elder. Aelian spoke of inaccessible mountains in the interior of India and of the strange beasts that could be found there. Among these, he said, one was the unicorn. Apparently he, too, was describing the rhinoceros. Pliny himself refers to the unicorn. He, too,

apparently is referring to the rhinoceros. In both Assyrian and Babylonian bas reliefs the *urus* is shown in strict profile, so strict in fact that only one horn is visible.*

JOHN KLOTZ

TRADITION AS A PROTESTANT PROBLEM

In *Theology Today* (January 1961) Prof. R. M. Brown of Union Theological Seminary (New York) discusses Father George Tavard's recent book *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (New York: Harper's, 1959), which in an expansion of the title the writer calls "The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation." Dr. Brown in his article first gives a summary of the position taken by Father Tavard, then adds a number of comments arising out of the book itself, and lastly stresses some basic issues raised by the book that require renewed Protestant attention. To us the concluding sentences seemed timely and important; we therefore quote them in part.

The fact about the committing of the apostolic witness to writing is the fact that *the text is there* (italics in original). We can distort it, misinterpret it, and twist it, to be sure, and the history of the church is full of sorry examples of how men have done this. But we

can never get quite away with it, for the text remains — to speak its Word more powerfully than our word, to rise up and drown out our voices when we go too far astray from it. It has done this before, and it will do it again. This self-recuperative power of the Word is the secret of renewal in the life of the church. Only as we are ready to concede this priority to the Scriptural witness can we have any hope of transmitting faithfully the apostolic witness. Without the text we would inevitably distort the witness. We do it all the time, and it is the givenness of the text that finally thwarts us in this endeavor. None of this can be guaranteed by human means. There is an "apostolic succession," but it is measured not by the imposition of a certain number of validated hands; it is measured by our fidelity to the apostolic witness, the norm for which is Holy Scripture. Continuity there is, but it is God's and not ours. . . . The Holy Spirit can be indifferent to human channels, even channels guaranteed to possess the proper credentials. He can, as he has done before, raise up children of Abraham out of the most unpromising looking stones. We can never claim that he must use us. We can only hope that we will be used by him.

These statements sum up Dr. Brown's antithesis to erring Protestantism and tradition-bound Romanism, which, as the book of Father Tavard shows, places "Holy Church" above "Holy Writ."

JOHN THEODORE MUELLER

* A more extended treatment of the unicorn legend may be found in Ley, Willy, *The Lungfish, the Dodo, and the Unicorn* (New York: Viking, 1948), pp. 19—34.