

Eric X. Jarrard*

Double Entendre in Exodus 34: Revisiting the קרן of Moses

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1 Introduction

The enigmatic events following the covenant renewal in Exod 34 have provoked considerable scholarly debate, often hinging on the treatment of קרן. The tendency in modern scholarship—to render קרן as related to a photic phenomenon associated with the face of Moses—is supported by the vast majority of ancient sources.¹ To support this claim, most commentators point to the tradition of the

1 The Peshitta is closest to the Hebrew (קרן עור פניו) with *'zdhy mš'k' d'pwhy* («the skin of his face was glorified»). The LXX has δεδόξαται ἡ ὤψις τοῦ χρώματος τοῦ προσώπου αὐτοῦ («the appearance of the skin of his face was glorified»). The Peshitta follows Targum Onkelos and Fragmentary Targum closely, Targum Neofiti deviates with *nhr zyw 'yqrhwn d'pwy* («the splendor of the glory of his face shone» and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan adds *dhwh lyh mn zyw 'yqr šknt' d-haššēm* («which he received from the splendor of the glory of the Lord's Shekinah»). Although only Targum Neofiti includes a specific reference to photic phenomena, nonetheless the Syriac, Greek, and Aramaic all allow for a fairly large semantic range whereby photic phenomenon could be included, but the less traditional »horns« would certainly not be allowed.

For further discussion of the differences and their meanings, see William H. Propp, »The Skin of Moses' Face—Transfigured or Disfigured?,« *CBQ* 49 (1987): 375–86. On the dismissive treatment of the double meaning of קרן, see Carol Meyers, *Exodus*, NCBC (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 266; Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 221; 262.

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*Kontakt: Eric X. Jarrard, Harvard University, E-Mail: eric_jarrard@mail.harvard.edu

radiance of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible,² and emphasize the presence of luminosity and effulgence in ancient Near Eastern iconography and poetic expression.³ This interpretive preference, however, not only dismisses the more substantiated rendering of קרן as »horns«, there is also substantial support for reading Moses's appearance as possessing horns after his encounter with God.⁴ The horned tradition, not unlike its photic counterpart, finds precedent in historical translations, albeit significantly less ancient and more Christian.⁵

Like most divisive arguments, interpretation of קרן has left little room for ambiguity.⁶ In fact, to be persuaded by one over the other requires an almost willful ignorance of the opposing position. In order truly to appreciate the multivalency of קרן one must at least allow for the possibility that the term was chosen precisely because the word serves as a double entendre. That is, it remains a distinct possibility that the use of קרן in Exod 34 is an attempt to depict not simply a horned *or* radiant Moses, but rather a horned *and* radiant Moses.

Unfortunately, proving the case for an intended use of קרן for its ability to function as a double entendre is not as simple as proving both meanings have individually persuasive evidence. In order to argue for an intended double enten-

2 On the radiance of YHWH, cf. Ps 104:2, Hab 3:3–4. Menahem Haran, »The Shining of Moses' Face: A Case Study in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography,« in *In the Shelter of Elyon: Essays on Ancient Palestinian Life and Literature in Honor of G.W. Ahlström*, ed. W. Boyd Barrick and John R. Spencer, JSOTSup 31 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984): 159–173; Seth L. Sanders, »Old Light on Moses' Shining Face,« VT 52 (2002): 400–406; Shawn Zelig Aster, *The Unbeatable Light: Melammu and Its Biblical Parallels*, AOAT 384 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2012), 337–351.

3 Meyers, *Exodus*, 266. See also »Letter of the Ruler of Gezer (Gazaru) (EA 292),« trans. William Moran (COS 3.92C): 239; and Joshua Philpot, »Exodus 24:29–35 and Moses' Shining Face,« BBR 23 (2013): 1–12, who argues that Moses's shining face signifies God's »goodness and grace«.

4 Jack Sasson argues that Exod 34:29–35 presents Moses with physical horns; »Bovine Symbolism and the Exodus Narrative,« VT 18 (1968): 380–387. Some scholars have also defended a reading of קרן as »horns« by attempting to recover the ritual use of a horned mask. On the use of a ritual mask, see Hugo Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit*, FRLANT 18 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), 246 f.n. 7; Anton Jirku, »Die Gesichtsmaske des Mose,« 42–55; Elias Auerbach, *Moses* (Amsterdam: G. J. A. Ruys, 1953), 154–159; and Karl Jaroš, »Des Mose »strahlende Haut,« ZAW 88 (1976): 275–280.

5 Jerome, following Aquila's *kekaratōto*, translated the Hebrew as *cornuta esset*. St. Gildas of Britain also includes *cornutam(que) faciem*. Aelfrick uses »gehyrned«. These translations would become the basis for the tendency in the Medieval and Renaissance periods to artistically render Moses with physical horns. See, Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art and Thought* (Berkley, CA: University of California, 1970), 13–17; 23–27; 61–75; 81 f.

6 The closest modern scholars come to acknowledging the non-mutual exclusivity of meanings is to allow that Jerome's translation was fully aware of both possibilities and deliberately chose the horned tradition over the possibility of radiance; see Maxine Blendis, »The Horns of Moses,« JBL 72 (1999): 247.

dre, one must not only rehearse the evidence for both cases individually, but also present a preponderance of evidence that substantiates the claim that the two manifestations were not mutually exclusive. That is, one must prove that the state of קרן in Exod 34 describes a specialized state of being characterized by the protruding of horns from, *and* the radiance of, Moses's skin.

To find proof of such a state, an exploration of both the biblical corpus and comparative traditions will help to determine accurately whether קרן in Exod 34 means horns, radiance, or perhaps both. In what follows, I will attempt to answer these questions by demonstrating that קרן is employed in Exod 34 as a double entendre to describe the two primary physical characteristics—a simultaneous protrusion of horns and a manifested luminosity. I intend to develop this discussion in two parts. First, I will examine the meaning of קרן within the biblical corpus including the review of the key points in the existing arguments for how to best translate קרן in Exod 34. Second, I will demonstrate a precedent in ancient Near Eastern iconography for the representation of simultaneously horned and radiant beings through the examination of various cylinder seals.

2 קרן

In the Hebrew Bible there are only four occurrences of the root קרן as a verb. Three of these four occur in the Exod 34 in the qal perfect. Because their proper translation is the focus of this essay, we will, for the time being, set them aside, and attempt to resolve their meaning using other instances within the biblical corpus. The fourth—a hiphil participle—occurs in Ps 69:32: וְיָטִיב לִיהוָה מְשׁוֹר פֶּרֶם וְתִיב מִפְּרִי־מִקֶּרֶן. Concerning this fourth instance the meaning cannot be mistaken; קרן here is related to horns. Not only is מקרן coupled with מפריס («hooves»), but both terms also refer to פר («bull») and שור («ox»).

Luckily, there are seventy-six other instances of קרן in its nominal form (קֶרֶן) that can help to further resolve the ambiguity in Exod 34. Of these instances, there are three primary categories in which קֶרֶן can be grouped: animal, cultic, and metaphorical.⁷ Let us now examine these three categories in closer detail.

⁷ A single instance—Hab 3:4— may not fit into one of these three categories; see discussion below.

2.1 Animal Horns

In the first category—animal—we can include all those instances that refer to the anatomical part of the animal, its various instances of being repurposed as a tool in the Israelite cult, and replicas of the literal animal horn. At quite a few places in the Hebrew Bible, קרן refers to the horns of actual animals. In Gen 22:13, the ram is caught by its קרן in the underbrush; it describes the weapon of animals (Ezek 34:21); the goring part (the horn) of the wild ox (Deut 33:17); and ivory tusks brought by the Dedanites in trade (Ezek 27:15). Similarly, קרן can also refer to those cultic tools made from repurposed animal horns such as the shofar (Josh 6:5),⁸ and horns of oil used for anointing David in 1 Sam 16:1–13 and Solomon in 1 Kgs 1:39. Finally, קרן can also refer to iron replicas of horns used as weapons, as those used to destroy the Arameans in 1 Kings and fashioned by God for the Israelites (Mic 4:13).⁹

2.2 The Horns of the Altar

In the cultic category, we can include those instances referring to features of cultic items fashioned to resemble, or conceived of as resembling, an animal's horn. The references in this category consistently refer to the four קרן at the corners of both the altar of burnt offering and incense altar (Exod 30:2–10). In Exodus, these horns are overlaid with bronze (Exod 27:2; 38:2) and gold (Exod 37:25), and touched with blood (Exod 29:12). The קרן of the altar are ubiquitous and found throughout the Hebrew Bible,¹⁰ including as a place of refuge for Adonijah from Solomon (1 Kgs 1:50), and as a gesture of mercilessness of God towards Israel for their transgressions (Amos 3:14).

⁸ Cf. Hans Seidel, »Horn und Trompete im alten Israel unter Berücksichtigung der ›Kriegsrolle‹ von Qumran,« *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Karl-Marx Universität, Leipzig* 5 (1956–1957): 589–599, esp. 592b, 593a.

⁹ Othmar Keel, *Wirkmächtige Siegeszeichen im Alten Testament: Ikonographische Studien zu Jos 8,18–26; Ex 17,8–13; 2 Kön 13,14–19 und 1 Kön. 22,11* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 131

¹⁰ See also Lev 4:7, 8:15, 9:9, 16:18; Jer 17:1; Ezek 43:15–20; Ps 118:27.

2.3 Metaphorical Horns

In the final category, we can group together occurrences where קרן comes to have symbolic meaning, or to generally signify a protuberant feature. In the former category, we can include the four קרנות that scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem (Zech 2:1). In the latter category, we can include the horn as a general metaphor for power including the קרן of Moab (Jer 48:25), and the horns of the goat representing the Median-Persian kings (Dan 8:6–20). Likewise, קרן is also used to refer to a hill, which juts out from the land like a horn, on which God plants his unfruitful vineyard (Isa 5:1).

Of the eighty occurrences of קרן in the Hebrew Bible, these three categories—animal, cultic, and metaphorical—are able to accommodate seventy-six. Still, that leaves four occurrences (the three in Exod 34 and one additional) that scholars have generally read against the overwhelming precedent for the translations justified by the comparative texts above. Before turning to the three instances of קרן in Exod 34, we should first examine one final outlier.

2.4 The Curious Case of Habakkuk 3:4

The use of קרן in Hab 3:4 is particularly noteworthy, as it serves as the primary reference point for scholars choosing to interpret קרן in Exod 34 as »radiance«. Unfortunately, the textual basis for this interpretation is tenuous at best.

ונגה באור תהיה קרנים מידו לו ושם חביון עזה

Scholars have debated at great length how best to interpret this verse, and although rehearsing these arguments and their conclusions pertaining to the entire verse would be significantly out of scope for this essay, the interpretation of the specific phrase קרנים מידו is important for our discussion.

As in the case of Exod 34, the difficulty has been whether to interpret קרנים here as some photic phenomenon or as horns. Scholars on both sides of the debate draw from ancient Near Eastern iconography, and, as in the case of Exod 34, there is substantial evidence to justify either interpretation.¹¹ There are a few

¹¹ For scholars who have interpreted Hab 3:4 as »horns« see, W. F. Albright, »The Psalm of Habakkuk,« in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy Dedicated to T. H. Robinson*, ed. Harold H. Rowley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1950): 11 f.; Jack M. Sasson, »Bovine Symbolism:« 386; Theodore Hiebert, *God of My Victory: The Ancient Hymn in Habakkuk 3*, HSM 38 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986),

points that we should note about the interpretation of this verse in light of itself, and as a textual counterpart to Exod 34. First, there is an obvious temptation to translate קרנים as a photic phenomenon based on the preceding phrase כְּאוֹר (»the brightness was like light«). However, owing to a number of factors including the verse's textual corruption, W. F. Albright concluded, »there is no real basis for the usual rendering ›rays‹ instead of ›horns‹, which is deduced from this one passage and does not appear in any early versions.«¹² Second, most attempts to translate קרנים in Hab 3 use Exod 34 as a counter-text, but Hab 3:4 is used as the primary justification for translating קרן in Exod 34 as a photic phenomenon; thus, this logic can be dismissed outright on the basis of its circularity.

More recent work on Hab 3:4, connects קרנים to the Sumerian word *SI* meaning »horn« (*qarnu*) and »radiance« (*šarūru*), especially in relation to the properties of the moon.¹³ Gareth Wearne notes: »The semantic range of *SI* is expanded to include both the affective: *šuharruru*, ›to daze‹, and the physical: *arāmu*, ›to mask‹, suggesting that the metaphorical conception extended beyond the physical appearance of the moon to encompass abstract qualities associated with its radiance.«¹⁴ Taking these properties into account, Tsumura has argued Hab 3:4 may in fact be an instance of Janus parallelism, wherein קרנים refers to both »horns«, and »light«.¹⁵ Thus, the primary cypher through which scholars have argued Exod 34 should be analyzed —especially those scholars who interpret קרן in Exod 34 as referring to the »radiance« of Moses—may in fact be intended to mean both »rays« and »horns«. Tsumura offers the following translation for Hab 3:4:

18; B. Kedar-Kopfstein »קָרָן,« *TDOT* 13: 157–174; Robert D. Haak, *Habakkuk* (Leiden/New York: E. J. Brill, 1992), 86–88. On photic phenomena, see Theodor H. Gaster, »On Habakkuk 3,4,« *JBL* 62 (1943): 345; J. H. Eaton, »The Origin and Meaning of Habakkuk 3,« *ZAW* 6 (1964), 145; 148; Michael P. O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 234 f.; Jimmy Jack McBee Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 134 f. Tsumura reads it as Janus parallelism (see below), »Janus Parallelism in Hab. iii 4,« *VT* 54 (2004): 113–116.

12 William F. Albright, »The Psalm of Habakkuk,« *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy Presented to Professor Theodore H. Robinson*, ed. H. H. Rowley (Edinburgh: Clark, 1950): 14 n. 1.

13 While I think the Sumerian connection is valuable and underscores the correlation between the concepts of »radiance« and »hornedness« in the Israelite imagination, Tsumura uses this connection (see below) to support his argument for Janus parallelism, which may actually be better resolved with the conclusion that YHWH has both light and horns.

14 Gareth Wearne, »Reading Habakkuk 3:4 and Deuteronomy 33:2 in Light of One Another,« *TC* 19 (2014): 6.

15 David Tsumura, »Janus Parallelism«, 126.

The brightness shall be as the light;
He has rays/horns from his hand,
Where his power is hidden.¹⁶

Thus, we can exclude Hab 3:4 as a reference text for translating קרן in Exod 34 as »radiance« for three reasons: (1) many interpretations rely on circular logic to interpret both Exod 34 and Hab 3:4 as »radiance«; (2) of the seventy-six instances of קרן in the Hebrew Bible, it seems nonplussing to argue that Hab 3:4 is the single instance wherein קרן should be interpreted solely as a photic phenomenon; and (3) קרנים in Hab 3:4 is best understood to mean both horns and light.¹⁷

3 Options for Translation

3.1 Translating קרן in Exodus 34 as Radiance

In light of these new arguments relating to Hab 3:4, it may be helpful to return to how this text has been used to interpret קרן in Exod 34. Many scholars including Cassuto, Morgenstern, DeFraine, Noth, and Childs all interpret קרן in Exod 34 on the basis of Hab 3:4.¹⁸ Although these grounds must be excluded for the above-cited reasons, there does seem to be substantial evidence to suggest photic qualities of קרן in Exod 34.

A radiance of YHWH, wherein the deity's physical appearance emanates light, is well attested throughout the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps the most famous instance of this is in the priestly blessing in Num 6:25 (יאר יהוה פניו אליך ויחנך),

¹⁶ Tsumura, »Janus Parallelism«: 116. It is difficult to render this idea in translation. Minor emendations to the line breaks could add clarity: »The brightness shall be as light: he has rays / Horns from his hand, where his power is hidden.« Admittedly, any translation wherein a single word is translated into two separate words to express an apparent double entendre would fall short and the English language lacks a word that would connote both attributes; perhaps something like »beams« comes closest.

¹⁷ It also seems likely, given the sea imagery and reference to the plague that Hab 3:4 may, in fact, be an intertextual reference to the Exodus, thus making the direct correlation to Exod 34 more likely.

¹⁸ Umberto Cassuto, *Perush al Sefer Shemot* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1951), 313–315 [Hebrew]; Julian Morgenstern, »Moses with the Shining Face,« *HUCA* 2 (1925): 1–27; Jean DeFraine, »Moses ›cornuta Facies,« *Bijdragen* 20 (1959): 28–37; Martin Noth, *Das zweite Buch Mose Exodus*, ATD 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), 220; Fritz Dumermuth, »Moses strahlendes Gesicht,« *TZ* 17 (1961): 241–248; and Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 609.

but the description is ubiquitous.¹⁹ Propp and others have speculated that it is primarily on these grounds that the early interpreters built their readings.²⁰

Unsurprisingly, YHWH's reputation for a shining visage also finds considerable parallels in other ancient Near Eastern traditions. Menahem Haran notes:

The closest ancient Near Eastern anthropological parallel to the shining of Moses' face is the Mesopotamian concept of *melammu*. This substantive basically indicates the brilliant light that radiates from the gods and seems to be taken as mostly surrounding their heads, as is said of Marduk in the Babylonian Creation Epic: *me-lam- mi rašub-ba-ti a-pi-ir rašu-uš-šu*, 'with his terrible *melammu* his head was turbaned' (*Enuma eliš*, IV, 58).²¹

The concept of *melammu* in Mesopotamian religion is interpretively useful. Although the precise definition of *melammu* is debated, it is generally accepted to mean something akin to »radiance«. ²² This radiance is a property of a deity, and is first transferred to a human ruler in the Lugalbanda Epic and in the historical document of the royal hymn of Ur-Nammu. ²³ The concept of kingly *melammu* continues to gain prominence in Sumerian royal annals and persists into the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods. It is in these later periods that a closer anthropological parallel can be drawn to the biblical text. In his discussion of Exod 34, Menahem Haran points out that representatives of the gods, including kings, bear *melammu* as proof of their divine authorization, which was often represented in cylinder seals with figures surrounded by rays ending in balls or stars. ²⁴

¹⁹ The imagery is especially pervasive in the poetic expression, cf. Ps 4:7, 44:4, 89:16, 31:17, 67:2, 119:135; Isa 60:1–5 (קוֹמִי אֲוִרִי כִּי בָא אֲוִרֶךְ וּבְבוֹד יְהוָה עֲלֶיךָ זֶרַח).

²⁰ Propp, »The Skin of Moses' Face«: 379–381. Propp further suggests that these interpretations are also based on an intentional conflation of אֲוִר as אֲוִרֶךְ.

²¹ Haran, »The Shining of Moses«: 168. See also, A. Leo Oppenheim, »Akkadian *pul(u)h(t)u* and *melammu*«, *JAOS* 63 (1943): 31 f. Elena Cassin, *La Splendeur divine*, Civilisations et Sociétés 8 (Paris: Mouton & Co., 1968), 65–82.

²² E. Cassin, *La splendeur divine: Introduction à l'étude de la mentalité mésopotamienne* (Paris: La Haye Mouton, 1968); again Oppenheim, »Akkadian *pul(u)h(t)u* and *melammu*«: 31–34; and W. H. Römer, »Beiträge zum Lexikon des Sumerischen«, *BibOr* 32 (1975): 146–157.

²³ Vladimir V. Emelianov, »On the Early History of *melammu*«, in *Language in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the RAI 53* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 1109–1119.

²⁴ See, e. g., Gustavus A. Eisen, *Ancient Oriental Cylinder and other Seals with a Description of the Collection of Mrs. W. H. Moore*, OIP 47 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1940), Nos. 83–84; 95; Anton Moortgat, *Vorderasiatische Rollsiegel* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1940), Nos. 598–599; 601–603; Edith Porada, *Corpus of Ancient Near Eastern Seals*, Bollingen Series, 14 (New York: Pantheon, 1948), Nos. 679–682; 685; 691; 698; 704–705 (n.b. figs. 1–3, below). Haran states that depictions of *melammu* date to the late Assyrian period, but similar iconographical representations are present as early as 2700 BCE in Argonite cylinder seals (see fig. 3).

Thus, if one were to read Exod 34 as a transfer of physical characteristics from the deity to Moses, which most scholars do, and one were to base this argument on the reputation of YHWH's appearance in the Hebrew Bible, a case could be made for קרן as having photic qualities. Moreover, the ancient Near Eastern parallels that attest to deities surrounded by *melammu* or divine radiance further substantiate this case. It is ironic, then, that the radiance of YHWH serves as the basis of some scholarly arguments that קרן should be translated as »hornedness«.

3.2 Translating קרן in Exodus 34 as Horns

Looking to marry YHWH's reputation of radiance to the obvious lexicographical evidence for translating קרן as »horn«, some scholars have suggested that Exod 34 attests to a quality of Moses's skin after experiencing over-exposure to the deity's radiant presence. Eerdmans, Albright, and Propp all understand קרן in Exodus as referring to what can only be referred to as an extreme sunburn or leathery quality of Moses's skin. Propp further supports this claim in other ancient Near Eastern traditions:

One is hard-pressed to find other ancient Near Eastern texts in which a human converses with a deity and comes away looking like that deity. On the other hand, the Bible is replete with tales of men who were maimed or killed by contact with the divine sphere. Accordingly, we might suppose that the unusual condition of Moses' skin after meeting Yahweh was in fact an injury or disfigurement.²⁵

But here, it is necessary to correct Propp's argument with the *melammu* traditions wherein representatives of the deity are gifted with the deity's physical properties deity as reward and physical substantiation of their position. Therefore, while Propp is correct in pointing to the otherwise deleterious effects of humans meeting YHWH, this does not represent the full spectrum of deity encounters in the ancient Near East. Moreover, there is considerable evidence within Exodus to suggest that Moses was gifted with extraordinary powers so as to avoid any deleterious effects suffered by other mortals.

There have also been a number of attempts to explain Moses's appearance with the wearing of a cultic mask.²⁶ Anton Jirku argues that Moses comes down the mountain wearing the mask—which he obscures with the מסוה (»veil«)—to

²⁵ Propp, »The Skin of Moses' Face«: 49.

²⁶ Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit*, 246 f.n. 7; Jirku, »Die Gesichtsmaske des Mose«: 43–45; Auerbach, *Moses*, 154–159; and Jaroš, »Des Mose ›strahlende Haut«: 275–280.

avoid scaring the Israelites. Auerbach, Gressman, and Jaroš, on the other hand, argue that the *מסוה* itself is the cultic mask. None of these explanations are particularly appealing. As for the first, it seems unlikely that Moses would forget he was wearing such a mask, or even if he did, the text lacks an explanation for why it could not be removed when Moses was not functioning in a cultic role. The *מסוה* as a cultic mask is equally unappealing, because it seems completely illogical that Moses would wear a cultic mask when appearing before the Israelites only to remove it when he went before God. Furthermore, both explanations fail to account for the final clause of v. 29: *בדברו אתו*. That is, there is a causal relationship between Moses's appearance and his speaking with God that the explanation of an extended use of a cultic mask cannot reasonably accommodate.

Other scholars have sought to connect Moses's appearance with an association with an idolatrous cult.²⁷ Jack Sasson argues that Exod 34 represents a vestige of a suppressed cult to which Moses was connected:

More confirmation to our image of Moses as symbolized by a calf comes from the subsequent history of his descendent ... It is not surprising to learn that their objects of adoration were golden calves (2 K. x 29), strongly hinting that some sort of an ancestor cult was being perpetuated.²⁸

But Sasson's explanation, too, seems speculative and unsatisfying. While one can certainly imagine that if Moses had been associated with idolatrous cultic worship at Hazor, this association would be deeply suppressed, but why leave it in at all? Even if one were to argue that the association of Moses with idolatrous worship had been lost by the time Exodus was in its final stages of redaction, Sasson fails to account for why Moses's face was only changed *after* speaking with the God of Israel. Sasson does not suggest that this transformation was some sort of punishment for idolatrous worship, but given his argument, this seems the only logical explanation for the disfigurement. Like the association of *קרן* with the radiance of YHWH, to understand *קרן* as horns, we must explore the possibility of YHWH's connection with bovine imagery.

The horned image of YHWH is best characterized by Jon Levenson in his exploration of divine imagery in the Temple. Levenson notes:

Not only is YHWH described as being endowed with something »like the horns of a wild ox« (Num 24:8), but one of his epithets is *'avir ya'aqov*, a term often rendered as »Mighty One of Jacob«; but better rendered »Bull of Jacob« (Gen 49:24; Ps 132: 2, 4). The bovine imagery and

²⁷ Sasson, »Bovine Symbolism«: 380–387.

²⁸ *ibid.*: 387.

epithets are a carryover from the Canaanite god 'El, with whom YHWH was identified even in »orthodox« theology (e. g., Gen 33:20; Isa 43:12).²⁹

Levenson further speculates that a bull image of YHWH may have been so pervasive, that it existed in the Jerusalem Temple itself, up to and including an icon of the image of the face of YHWH—perhaps even a bull mask—inside the Ark of the Covenant. So, from Levenson, we can glean a variety of important examples where the Israelite God is associated both with bovine imagery and, or perhaps *because of*, the Canaanite God 'El.

To these biblical examples we can also add a number of ancient Near Eastern parallels.³⁰ Images of horned deities, deities with bovine characteristics, and deities wearing horned headwear are omnipresent at virtually every place and period in ancient Near Eastern history. For example, 'El is represented with horns affixed to the center of his head,³¹ Shamash and Ishtar are almost always represented with horned headdresses,³² and gods are often depicted standing atop bulls.³³

To be sure, YHWH is represented in the Hebrew Bible with an almost infinite number of characteristics and associated with many kinds of animals, but from the representations of YHWH as possessing bovine qualities and radiance, a clearer view of קרן begins to emerge. These qualities are further substantiated by ancient Near Eastern iconographical representations of deities associated with both radiance (*melammu*) and horns. So, if it is true that Moses's face-to-face experience with YHWH atop the mountain imparted some of the deity's physical characteristics onto the face of Moses, then both horns and radiance are equally likely candidates for this transference.

3.4 Double Entendre

To further illustrate how קרן in Exod 34 may be associated with the qualities of a horn and radiance, a final example from Psalms will be helpful. In Psalm 132:17,

²⁹ Jon D. Levenson, »The Jerusalem Temple in Devotional and Visionary Experience,« in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1987): 45.

³⁰ Pritchard, *ANEP*, 475, 489, 498, 505, 527, 538, 554, 654.

³¹ Pritchard, *ANEP*, 493.

³² Pritchard, *ANEP*, 514–515, 525–526.

³³ Pritchard, *ANEP*, 500–501.

we find קֶרֶן in parallel to נֵר.³⁴ On the surface, we can make the obvious connection between »horn« and »lamp«; the two words are in parallel and, given all the evidence discussed up to this point, it seems unlikely that they are functioning appositionally. However, the way קֶרֶן functions in Ps 132 is quite similar to Exod 34. Both are attributed to an intermediary between the divine and human realms (David and Moses respectively), both figures are apparently imbued with special qualities and positions, and both are given קֶרֶן from the deity as a sign of this status. Moreover, one can see how both a light (connoting guidance) and a horn (connoting power and strength) could be interpretive possibilities in Ps 132:17. Psalm 132 is critically important because it provides an additional example beyond Hab 3:4 wherein קֶרֶן functions as a double entendre. The inclusion of Ps 132 allows us to avoid the circular logic, discussed above, employed by scholars who want to read קֶרֶן in Hab 3:4 and Exod 34 as »light«, but use one text to prove the other.

Ultimately, though, I think Propp is correct in stating that the two interpretations—horned and radiance—are similar. He further argues that, »according to both, Moses descended Sinai with the actual or assumed countenance of a Near Eastern deity, whether beaming or horned.«³⁵ The mistake may actually be viewing these two phenomena as distinct. Concerning the distinction between the categories, Seth Sanders suggests:

The early first-millennium Mesopotamian astronomical and lexical sources attest to an ancient understanding of light as material which explains the crux of Moses' shining face. Moses' face could, quite literally, *radiate* horns, and the need to translate the term as *either* divine radiance *or* physical protuberance is merely a side-effect of our conceptual categories, irrelevant to ancient Israelite ideas.³⁶

While I think Sanders is correct in asserting that the need to make an *either-or* decision in the translation of קֶרֶן is a mistake, I would suggest that an image of »radiant horns« is not as compatible with ancient Near Eastern iconography as the simultaneous presence of horns and radiance.

³⁴ Some scholars have read נֵר as a variant of נִיר meaning »hereditary land.« Here though, I prefer the MT, appealing to the general principle of *lectio difficilior potior* which maintains the structural parallelism between v. 17a and 17b; cf., Stephen A. Geller, »The Dynamics of Parallel Verse: A Poetic Analysis of Deut 32:6–12,« *HTR* 75 (1982): 35–56.

³⁵ Propp, »The Shining Face of Moses«: 393.

³⁶ Sanders, »Old Light«: 405; italics in the original.

4 Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

Scholars often draw parallels between YHWH and Shamash for two reasons: first, because of Shamash's consistent depiction as a radiant deity, and second, because Shamash is the deity depicted giving the law to Hammurabi in the Hammurabi stele. On this parallel, Julian Morgenstern notes:

Yahwe came to be graphically conceived and represented as a divine, radiant being, emitting dazzling brilliance, just like the great gods of the Assyrian pantheon, and particularly Shamash, the sungod.³⁷

While one might take issue with Morgenstern's language here—it is difficult to argue a graphical conception of YHWH with the dearth of graphical representations—I think the overall sentiment is correct. Based on YHWH's representation in the biblical corpus, it seems fair to say that the deity was conceptualized in the Israelite imagination as bearing similar physical characteristics as the sun-god Shamash, especially owing to their divine radiance. In the Hammurabi stele, Shamash is depicted, as he almost always is, with a horned hat and radiance emanating up to the top of his head.³⁸

Shamash is represented in a similar fashion in several popular cylinder seal motifs. Piotr Steinkeller has treated the motif of »The sun-god in his boat« at length, arguing it is, »by far the most common mythological scene that is documented in Third millennium seals, of which no less than fifty attestations are extant«.³⁹ In the scene, Shamash is seated and holding an oar; he has horns protruding from his head and he has rays emanating from his arms to the top of his head.⁴⁰ Frankfort suggests the scene depicts the sun's nightly journey through the netherworld. If a connection between YHWH and Shamash is to be believed, the »sun-god in his boat« adds »horned« to the list of characteristics YHWH shares with Shamash, which already includes radiant and law giving.⁴¹ Moreover, if YHWH and Shamash are visually conceptualized in the Israelite imagination in

³⁷ Morgenstern, »Moses with the Shining Face«: 9.

³⁸ See fig. 7. I think it could be further argued that the rays imitating from Shamash are the Sargonic and pre-Sargonic precursor to the iconographical representations of *melammu*.

³⁹ Piotr Steinkeller, »Early Semitic Literature and Third Millennium Seals with Mythological Motifs,« in *Literature and Literary Languages at Ebla*, ed. P. Fronzaroli, QS 18 (Florence: Università di Firenze, 1992): 256.

⁴⁰ See fig. 8–10; cf. Amiet, *La glyptique mesopotamienne archaïque* (Paris, 1961), 1431 = Frankfort, SCS 354, Iraq Museum IM14659; and Amiet, *Glyptique*, 1506 = Frankfort, CS, pl. XIX fig. f, Iraq Museum IM 11497.

⁴¹ The goddess Ishtar is also represented with horns and radiance; see fig. 5 and 6 below.

similar ways, then it also stands to reason that YHWH would have been able to impart both his radiance and the physical characteristic of horns onto Moses.

5 Conclusion

While it might be sufficient to suggest that קרן functions in Exodus as a double entendre, I want to offer a few brief but somewhat controversial thoughts on what it might mean for Moses to be imbued with the facial characteristics of YHWH. For many years, it has been held to various degrees that Israel was an aniconic cult. While I do not wish to debate this point specifically, nor oversimplify this very complex debate, as Propp suggests, »Yahweh's face is a hypostasis, i. e. a part of the divine being that stands for the whole.«⁴² Although the motivation for the aniconism in ancient Israel is largely unknown, we can speculate that one possible explanation for the resistance to iconographic representations of YHWH is that it is somehow related to the degree to which cult members could or could not have possession over the deity vis-à-vis the deity's image.

So, if it was controversial to own an icon of YHWH, imagine, then, what it would mean to have YHWH's face superimposed onto that of his earthly representative. By transferring the physical characteristics of YHWH onto Moses's face, Moses became a physical manifestation of the deity in front of Israel. Or, as Morgenstern states:

Moses has developed into a being that transcends all the powers and bounds of ordinary mortality, who plans and achieves through his own wisdom and might ... This Moses is no longer a mere mortal; he has become almost a demi-god.⁴³

While I think it would be difficult to deify Moses in light of the larger biblical corpus, it is certainly fair to say that if any one characteristic were transferred from YHWH onto Moses's face, he would have become a truly frightening sight to behold; one that the Israelites were forbidden from seeing, and one that represented an entirely new status of Moses in the Israelite cult. Yet, interpreting קרן in Exod 34 as a double entendre means that not one, but *two* of the most visually prominent, and arguably the most intimidating, characteristics of YHWH were transferred to Moses, doubling the similarities between Moses and the physical characteristics of YHWH and amplifying the extent to which Moses's physi-

⁴² William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40: A New Translation with Commentary*, ABC (New York: Doubleday), 619.

⁴³ Morgenstern, »Shining Face«: 27.

cal appearance had come to embody the attributes of YHWH. It is well attested that the splendor, power, and presence of a deity were fearsome throughout the ancient Near Eastern, and the קרן of Moses was a physical manifestation of all three. It is no wonder that the Israelites were terrified.

Abstract: This article argues the קרן of Moses is best understood as a double entendre depicting a horned *and* radiant Moses. It reviews the biblical instances of קרן identifying lexicographical evidence to suggest that קרן should be interpreted as »horns« and also appeals to ancient Near Eastern iconography, in particular noting the popular »sun-god in his boat« motif of Shamash. The combined evidence suggests a double entendre used specifically for its ability to represent *two* prominent physical characteristics of YHWH that are imposed onto the face of Moses when he speaks face-to-face with YHWH.

Keywords: Moses, Horns, Exodus 34, iconography, Shamash

Résumé: Cet article défend que les קרן de Moïse sont mieux comprises comme un double sens représentant Moïse avec des cornes et rayonnant. Il passe en revue les occurrences bibliques de קרן et trouve des indices lexicographiques suggérant que קרן devrait être interprétée comme »cornes«. Il recourt également à l'iconographie du Proche-Orient ancien, en particulier au motif populaire de Shamash »dieu-soleil dans son bateau«. Ces deux analyses suggèrent qu'un double sens a été utilisé spécifiquement pour son aptitude à représenter deux caractéristiques physiques importantes de YHWH qui se retrouvent sur le visage de Moïse lorsqu'il parle face à face avec YHWH.

Mots-clés: Corne, Exode 34, Iconographie; Shamash

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel argumentiert, dass das קרן bei Moses am besten als ein doppelter Ausdruck verstanden werden kann, der einen gehörnten und strahlenden Moses darstellt. Es besieht die biblischen Belege von קרן, die lexigrafische als »Hörner« interpretiert werden, und bezieht auch die altorientalische Ikonografie mit ein, wobei insbesondere das beliebte Motiv »Sonnengott in seinem Boot« von Shamash erwähnt wird. Die kombinierten Hinweise legen nahe, dass es sich um einen doppelten Ausdruck handelt, der speziell für seine Fähigkeit verwendet wird, zwei herausragende körperliche Eigenschaften YHWHs darzustellen, die sich auf Mose übertragen, wenn er mit YHWH von Angesicht zu Angesicht spricht.

Schlagwörter: Mose; Hörner; Exodus 34; Iconographie; Shamash



Fig. 1: Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal, goddess with star-topped, flaring, feathered and horned headdress, c. 729–700 BCE
British Museum, BM 89810



Fig. 2: Neo-Babylonian Cylinder seal, c. 625–539 BCE
Boston Museum of Fine Arts, BMFA 65.1357



Fig. 3: Cylinder Seal, Aragonite, Abu Habba c. 2700 BCE

British Museum, BM 89538



Fig. 4: Pritchard, *ANEP*, 493
Syrian Museum Aleppo



Figs. 5: Ishtar Statue with worshippers

New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, Met 1989.361.1



Fig 6: Pritchard ANEP 526
OIM A27903



Fig. 7: Hamurappi (standing) receives the royal insignia from Shamash (seated).
Cast from Oriental Museum University of Chicago, D.20521



Fig. 8: = Scan from SCS

As.33:191

Amiet Glyptique 1430 = Frankfort SCS 499 = Hempelmann Gottschiff Nr. 11
Iraqi Museum IM 19857



Fig. 9: As.32:50

Amiet Glyptique 1500 = Frankfort SCS 516 = Hempelmann Gottschiff Nr. 69
Iraqi Museum IM 15627



Fig. 10: Amiet Glyptique 1505 = Frankfort SCS 621 As.32:600 OIM A11396