

Deuteronomy 33:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns: with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth: and they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh.

Analysis

His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns: with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth: and they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh. Moses employs powerful zoological imagery. Bekhor shôrô (בָּכֹר שׂוֹרֶן, "firstling of his bullock") denotes a firstborn ox—prime strength and vigor. Hadar (הָדָר, "glory/majesty") suggests impressive, awe-inspiring presence. The firstborn ox represented maximum vitality and value, thus fitting Joseph's double portion through Ephraim and Manasseh.

His horns are like the horns of unicorns references re'êm (רֵאֵם), probably the wild ox or aurochs (extinct since 1627), not the mythical one-horned creature. These massive bovines were legendary for strength and untamability (Job 39:9-12). The dual horns represent Ephraim and Manasseh—both powerful, both dangerous to enemies. **With them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth** uses yenagach (נְגַח, "gore/push/thrust"), violent imagery of an ox goring enemies. The scope "to the ends of the earth" suggests extensive conquest and influence.

The numerical distinction—**ten thousands of Ephraim** (rivevôth Ephrayim, רֵבֶתּוֹת אֶפְרַיִם)

versus **thousands of Manasseh** (alphê Menasheh, אלף מנשה)—prophesies Ephraim's greater prominence, fulfilled when Ephraim became the dominant Northern tribe, often synonymous with the entire kingdom. This ranking fulfilled Jacob's blessing, placing the younger Ephraim before Manasseh despite Joseph's protest (Genesis 48:13-20).

Historical Context

The prophecy of military might and territorial expansion accurately describes Joseph's tribes' history. Joshua was an Ephraimite (Numbers 13:8), leading the conquest that subdued Canaan "to the ends of the earth" from Israel's perspective. Manasseh's conquest included both Cisjordan and Transjordan territories (Numbers 32:39-42, Joshua 17:1-6), making it the most territorially extensive tribe.

Ephraim's numerical and political supremacy over Manasseh manifested throughout Israel's history. The tabernacle was established at Shiloh in Ephraim (Joshua 18:1), making it the religious center during the judges period. All Northern Kingdom capitals—Shechem, Tirzah, and Samaria—were in Ephraimite territory. Prophets routinely called the Northern Kingdom "Ephraim" (Isaiah 7:2, 5, 8-9, 17; Hosea 4:17, 5:3).

The "unicorn" (wild ox) imagery proved apt for describing Ephraim's untamed power but also their rebellious independence. Hosea 10:11 uses different bovine imagery, calling Ephraim a "heifer that is taught," suggesting domestication was needed. Ephraim's strength, not submitted to God's yoke, became destructive pride leading to apostasy. This demonstrates that blessing—strength, numbers, territory—becomes curse when divorced from covenant obedience. Power without righteousness produces tyranny, not justice.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. How does the imagery of powerful but untamed animals illustrate the potential for blessed strength to become destructive pride?
2. What's the relationship between God-given strength/success and the responsibility to use it for righteous purposes?
3. In what ways can numerical or political dominance tempt believers toward self-reliance rather than continued dependence on God?
4. How does Ephraim's trajectory from blessed strength to rebellious apostasy warn modern churches against presuming upon past blessing?
5. What does it mean to have our 'horns' (strength, resources, influence) submitted to God's purposes rather than self-directed ambition?

Interlinear Text

רָאֵם קָרְבָּן יְהִי בְּכָרֶב שָׂוֹר וְלֹא בְּקָרֶב רְאֵם
is like the firstling of his bullock His glory and his horns of unicorns
H1060 H7794 H1926 H7161 H7214

אַפְסִי יְחִזְקֵל יְגַע חַדְבָּה עַמּוּם בְּקָרֶב קָרְבָּן יְהִי
and his horns the people with them he shall push together to the ends
H7161 H5971 H5055 H3162 H657

וְהַמְּאַפְרִים אֶת־כָּל־הָרָבָב וְתִהְיֶה וְהַמְּאַפְרִים אֶת־
of the earth and they are the ten thousands of Ephraim H1992
H776 H1992 H7233 H669

מְנַשֶּׁה: אֶלְפָטָן
and they are the thousands of Manasseh
H505 H4519

Additional Cross-References

Numbers 23:22 (Parallel theme): God brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn.

Psalms 44:5 (Parallel theme): Through thee will we push down our enemies: through thy name will we tread them under that rise up against us.

1 Kings 22:11 (Parallel theme): And Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah made him horns of iron: and he said, Thus saith the LORD, With these shalt thou push the Syrians, until thou have consumed them.

Psalms 92:10 (Parallel theme): But my horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of an unicorn: I shall be anointed with fresh oil.

1 Chronicles 5:1 (Parallel theme): Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel, (for he was the firstborn; but, forasmuch as he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given unto the sons of Joseph the son of Israel: and the genealogy is not to be reckoned after the birthright.

Genesis 48:19 (Parallel theme): And his father refused, and said, I know it, my son, I know it: he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great: but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations.

Numbers 24:8 (Parallel theme): God brought him forth out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn: he shall eat up the nations his enemies, and shall break their bones, and pierce them through with his arrows.