



16. Why Does Moses Sometimes Have Horns?

One of our members asked why some little figures of Moses, which she saw when on holiday in Malta, had what looked like horns on their heads.

It isn't only little statuettes of Moses that have horns. If you go to the church of St Peter in Vincoli, in Rome, you will find the colossal statue of Moses, which Michelangelo carved for the tomb of Pope Julius II. The tomb was never completed, because Pope Paul III persuaded the artist to stop work on it and paint the Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel instead. Michelangelo's giant Moses has very clear horns indeed.

Apparently, in medieval times Moses was often portrayed as having horns, because of a mistranslation of a Hebrew word in Exodus 34, describing how Moses' face shone when he came down from Mount Sinai after speaking with God. The horns, in fact, should be beams of light. Michelangelo was well aware of the mistranslation, but people were so used to seeing Moses with horns that he carved them anyway.