



Elliot, John H

Beware the Evil Eye: The Evil Eye in the Bible and the Ancient World. Postbiblical Israel and Early Christianity through Late Antiquity.

Volume 4

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The final volume of Dr John H. Elliott's magisterial work, *Beware the Evil Eye*, has been published. It ends his comprehensive investigation of more than 3 000 years of the Middle East and Mediterranean culture of the Evil Eye as it manifested itself in the daily life and activity of the different ethnicities that existed in antiquity. Determined by the cultural presupposition of the 'extramission theory of vision,' the eye was believed to be 'an active organ that emits destructive emanations charged by negative dispositions (especially malevolence, envy, miserliness and withheld generosity).' The Greek noun for this 'powerful noxious glance of the eye' is *baskania* and, like the Latin equivalent, *fascinatio*, may be translated as 'fascination.' Elliott's concluding study of the Evil Eye continues this fascinating journey into the socio-cultural territory of religion, language, literature, folklore, and art that was concentrated on averting or combating *baskania/fascinatio*, one of the most life-threatening forces in the ancient world.

As in the previous three volumes, his research required an engagement with a diversity of fields and disciplines: historical criticism, archaeology, linguistics, and the social sciences; and throughout he was confronted with the same questions. What kind of conditions elicited the Evil Eye? What dangers did it pose physically, socially and economically? Where and when would it strike? What type of persons would wield it? And what could individuals and communities do to protect themselves from it? By taking

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a contextualized approach that he adopted from anthropology, specifically its differentiation between the 'emic' perspective of the indigenous authors of the ancient cultural sources and the objective 'etic' perspective of historians and anthropologists, Elliott continued his investigation.

In volume 4 he begins his analysis of 'the literary evidence of the Evil Eye belief in Israel's post-second temple rabbinic period'. The rabbis acknowledged the frightful reality of the Evil Eye, the 'ayin ha-ra', and synonymously referred to it as 'the narrow eye'. Because it could be aroused in any circumstance, and because of its fatal consequences, it should be shunned at all costs by cleaving to 'the good way'. Rabbi Akiva disclosed its startling power by citing the simultaneous death of 12 000 of his disciples, an astonishing event that he attributed to their disposition toward each other 'because they were envious of each other in respect to the Torah'. Jacob gave Esau hundreds of sheep and goats and countless camels, cows, bulls and asses, to prevent envy and its effects arising from his brother's Evil Eye. Dispositions like greed, stinginess and miserliness could also arouse the Evil Eye and its frightful consequences. The dreaded disease of leprosy could be caused by the evil eye for refusing to lend things like vessels and tools to a friend. Abraham's wife cast an Evil Eye on Hagar, her co-wife, and caused her to suffer a miscarriage. Conditions of beauty, good health, high status as well as seed-bearing plants and expensive clothing were vulnerable to the Evil Eye. Immunity and protection, therefore, were indispensable. Certain people, like Joseph and Solomon, and creatures, like fish covered by sea water, were considered to be immune from the Evil Eye. Spoken words especially, blessings, formulas, and adjurations, were utilized to repel the Evil Eye and its effects. Protective objects, such as phylacteries, prayer shawls, forehead bands, necklaces, nose and finger rings (with or without a seal) served as magical means of defence. Horses were protected from the Evil Eye by hanging a foxtail between their eyes. Actions such as spitting, concealment from public places, and changing or substituting another name were regarded to be effective against the Evil Eye. Elliott draws these and many more exemplifications from multiple texts of the Old Testament, the pseudepigrapha, Josephus, and the rabbinic writings of the Mishnah, Talmud and Midrashim to elucidate the circumstances and consequences of the Evil Eye in postbiblical Israel.

To explicate the fear of the Evil Eye in early Christianity and the many forms of control and protection that were devised, Elliott cites extensive texts from the Apostolic Fathers and the Church Fathers and comments extensively on the pivotal words, formulas and illustrations that were used. The terminology remained the same. In Greek the paronyms of the *bask*-family of words were supplemented by *ophthalmos ponēros* (wicked eye); and the equivalents in Latin remained *fascinare* and its paronyms. ‘The most significant and influential development in the Christian communities is the association of the Evil Eye with the Devil, alias Satan, the prince of the demons.’

The earliest references to the Evil Eye outside of the New Testament are encountered in the Apostolic Fathers, specifically in Ignatius’ *Letter to the Christians of Rome* and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. In the former, Ignatius, wanting the prayers and support of the Christians at Rome, compliments them with the words, ‘You have never Evil-Eyed (*ebaskanate*) anyone; you taught others.’ As Elliott observes, the verb is identical to the one Paul employed in Gal. 3:1, but it should not be construed to signify ‘envy.’ Ignatius fears that the Roman Christians will be miserly toward him by attempting to prevent him from being martyred and therefore dying and rising with Christ. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* emphasizes the role that the Devil played in the treatment of Polycarp’s charred corpse by not permitting that ‘his poor body should be carried away by us, though many desired to do this and to have a share in his holy flesh.’ Tertullian regarded the custom of women wearing veils to afford protection against the Evil Eye. Eusebius of Caesarea ascribed the persecution of Christians to the Evil-Eyed demon. All kinds of misfortunes, sorcery and sorcery accusations were considered to be the work of the Devil instead of human agency. To see God, according to Origen of Alexandria, required a pure heart that no longer arouses the Evil Eye. The apostle Judas Thomas in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas encounters a beautiful woman who has been tormented by the Devil for five years. He responds to her begging to be set free by addressing the demon that he exorcises as the ‘Evil-Eyeing One’ (*bascanos*).

What, then, is the kinship between the Evil Eye and the Devil? Are they both active agents of evil independent of each other, or is the one that is of human origin subservient to the power of the Devil? Elliott devotes extra

pages of analysis to specific texts of Basil of Caesarea, Jerome, the translator of the Vulgate, and John Chrysostom in order to clarify their efforts to determine the nature of the relationship between the two. Basil, especially is representative of this perplexity. On the one hand, 'envy and the Evil Eye are virtually synonymous'. But in his homily on envy, he professes that 'envy and the Evil eye are more than *human* vices.' Evil-Eyeing persons do exist, but in their projection of envy they are pawns of the Devil. Both, in fact, originate with the Devil. However, as Elliott observes, 'In linking envy and the Evil Eye with the prince of demons, Basil goes beyond what is stated in the biblical writings where both envy and the Evil Eye are solely *human* vices.' John Chrysostom, like Basil, appears ambivalent on the effects of the Evil Eye. 'Evil results from envy that is generated by demons and the Devil.' Yet his writings intimate that the eyes of envious human beings can inflict harm, and he used extensive paronyms of the *bask* family to make frequent references to the Evil Eye. Then again he linked them with envy and the malice of the Devil. Elliott finalizes the problem of the relation between the two by stating, 'Envy and the Evil Eye were ascribed to the malice of demons and the Devil, who worked on and through human beings. The issue of an active or passive eye and of a damaging Evil Eye was left unresolved.'

A very brief chapter is devoted to Evil Eye belief and practice in Islam because a more extensive treatment is required beyond the limitations of this book. As in Israel and Christianity, the 'extramission theory of vision' was presupposed and the eye was regarded to be an active organ whose glance could injure and destroy. There was a firm belief that the Evil Eye was not acquired by a human being but was an influence exercised by the soul of the person who has the Evil Eye. Circumstances aroused by 'children, nursing mothers, prized farm animals, fruitful fields, valuable possessions' could and would engender envy; and 'family members, friends, neighbours, passers-by, rivals and opponents' would all be potential possessors of the Evil Eye. Their malevolent glances could cause 'illness, accidents, the drying up of a mother's milk, the withering of crops, the failure of a business or the burning down of a home.' Amulets, fragments of parchments with written names of God or verses of the Koran as well as spells and formulas were considered to be protective against the Evil Eye. Orthodox Islam, however, disapproves of the concept of the Evil Eye

because it denies or ignores the absolute power of God. ‘But Evil Eye belief and practice have proved as impossible to eradicate in Islam as in Jewish and Christian circles. It persists today in Islamic folklore and on the fringes of religion and medicine.’

Elliott closes volume four with an epilogue that serves as a summation of his entire investigation that has constituted a journey of *fascinatio*, *baskanan* from the ancient past into the troubling and disquieting present:

‘From ancient time to the present, the Evil Eye, however manifest or latent its expression, remains a potent expression of malice and hostility. Evil Eye Fleegle and “The Sopranos” are but the most recent characters in an extended and colourful tale. Current research on the eye as a weapon, as well as a signal, of hostile intent persists unabated, assuring that the mystery of the Evil Eye remains for the foreseeable future a lively focus of fear and fascination.’