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Abstract

The Evil Eye is a pervasive folkloric belief in the eye as an active organ. Historically the belief and its related protective practices have been much maligned by modern Western attitudes. Origins of the belief, as best as can be traced, are pinned to ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. From there, the belief radiated outwards until it was pervasive throughout the ancient Near East and Mediterranean world: including, as Elliott argues, ancient Judaism and early Christianity. Conceptualizations of the Evil Eye and related beliefs and protective practices have been found as far as Brazil, Tibet, and Australia and are still expressed in Western society. Elliott’s four-volume work on the Evil Eye in antiquity is a contextual reception history that draws together both textual sources and material culture of this fascinating belief across the ancient world.

Keywords: Evil Eye, envy, gluttony, greed, apotropaic, magic

Introduction

Once upon a time, the eye was capable of more than just “seeing” through the entrance of light upon the lens of an eye. If a mother displayed too much affection for her child, if disaster struck, if crops failed or livestock mysteriously died, if injury or illness befell you, the natural power of the eye could be to blame. However, beliefs and practices concerning the Evil Eye resist interpretation as magic or superstition. Rather, the cultural concept of the Evil Eye incorporates a complex world-view about disability, affection and envy, causes of disaster and harm, trauma, social tensions, and protection of the self in antiquity. One could unwittingly be a fascinator of the Evil Eye through a variety of factors, or one could activate it intentionally through envy or malice. John H. Elliott’s four-volume work on the Evil Eye in antiquity is a contextual reception history that draws together both textual sources and material culture of this “fascinating” belief across the ancient world. Today these beliefs and protective practices have been found as far as Brazil, Tibet, many parts of Africa, and Australia, and are communicated today in Western society particularly through phrases (like the Yiddish “kineahora” or “keyn ayin hara”), symbols, objects, and gestures.¹ Elliott’s study is equally suited for those within biblical, Jewish, or Christian studies. Elliott’s work would be also highly relevant for Christian pastoral leaders (ministers, missionaries, etc.), as the relevance for church communities in many parts of the world, both home and abroad, is clear. It would also be relevant for leaders and wardens in many Jewish communities, as well.

¹ Over a recent coffee with a colleague, the subject of the Evil Eye came up. A mathematician, originally from India, he showed me the apotropaic Evil Eye charm he wears around his neck together with a Christian cross. Although he grew up with Evil Eye practices and belief in India, he wears the charm mostly on account of his Lebanese wife. Personal encounters with the Evil Eye certainly are all around us as modern Evil Eye beliefs and practices thrive globally.
Overview

Elliott writes that his work is a “contextual analysis of the Evil Eye in the Bible shaped by the conviction that traces of biblical Evil Eye can only be understood in relation to ancient Evil Eye belief and practice in general” (1:2). In volume 1 (Introduction, Mesopotamia, and Egypt), Elliott explores the definition and description of the Evil Eye belief and practice, including its pervasiveness and appearances in popular culture, crafts and visual art (such as boat decoration), and gestures. Elliott explores terminology and common features, describing an “Evil Eye belief complex” that encompasses cultural notions, particularly the notion of the eye as an active organ, commonly held signs of Evil Eye injury/activity, precautions, and the Evil Eye being understood within such a cultural belief complex as being entirely a natural phenomenon, not a symptom of magic or witchcraft (1:18-27). Elliott analyses the social-cultural environments that tend to produce Evil Eye beliefs, arguing for initial prevalence of the belief within “agonistic societies,” where hierarchical and social tensions, scarcity of resources, and high mortality rates are present (1:41-44). Here Elliott draws upon anthropological and sociological studies, but it is difficult to wonder why, if the belief can be derived from social-economic factors, did similar beliefs not emerge in ancient China or premodern Central America. His introduction then surveys research on the Evil Eye from antique thought through to the present day. Such figures as Plutarch, Basil of Caesarea, Dante Aligheri, Martin Luther, and William Shakespeare offer glimpses into historical attitudes towards the Evil Eye (1:45-49).

To help explain why we overlook the presence of the Evil Eye in the Bible and antiquity, Elliott’s analysis encompasses a comprehensive survey of scholarship from late antiquity to more contemporary times. Elliott mentions the comprehensive anthropological work of a German ophthalmologist, Der böse Blick und Verwandtes (1:50). Seligman and his contemporaries in late nineteenth and early twentieth century thought encompasses well the orientalization of Evil Eye belief as a superstition (Aberglaube) in the modern era. A reader may be tempted to gloss the scholarship survey at this point, but it is sobering to see how the conversation shifts across time. After the nineteenth century, particularly in biblical scholarship, the assumption that the Evil Eye is a magical power and vulgar superstitious practice, unworthy of real Judaism and Christianity, is no longer questioned (1:58-72). Hence, an emic approach is crucial to resist capitulation of Evil Eye belief and practices to the realm of magic simply because of the presence of agency, amulets, and symbols. Although Evil Eye belief is folkloric, Elliott is careful to distinguish between the “naturalistic” folklore of the Evil Eye, which involves any divine, human, or animal agent or victim, and the supernaturalist folklore of magic (1:61-68).

In the rest of volume 1, Elliott covers Mesopotamia and Egypt textual and material culture related to the Evil Eye belief complex (1:77-155). Beginning with belief probably originating the Fertile Crescent around 5,000 years ago (1:78), the Evil Eye is articulated in Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Aramaic texts and culture—mostly inscriptions and protective incantations, medical texts, “eye idols,” votives, engravings, amulets, noise clappers, symbols such as the Eye of Horus and hands, incantation bowls, and both documentary and literary sources from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. Elliott notes that the practice of having public and secret names in Pharaonic Egypt may be to do with Evil Eye beliefs (1:155).

Volume 2 (Greece and Rome) covers classical to late antiquity (up to 600 CE). The terminology in Greek and Latin (2:23-46) is useful for comparison with Greco-Roman Judaism and early Christianity. The vast collection of primary sources presents a vivid picture of Greco-Roman Evil Eye beliefs and practices, not as vulgar superstition but, as accepted by sophisticated elites: envy and zeal are a human (or divine) feelings, but the Evil Eye is the natural “physical mechanism” of such emotions (2:113). This volume brings new meaning to Greek and Roman practices of self-discipline and moderation in behaviour (2:134ff.).

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Volume 3 (The Bible and Related Sources) collects numerous textual sources: HB/OT (e.g. Deut 15:9; Prov 23:6), 12 Patriarchs, Joseph and Asenath, 2 Enoch, Dead Sea Scrolls, apocrypha (Ben Sira, Tobit, Wisdom, 4 Maccabees), Philo, Josephus, and the New Testament. The discussions of terminology (Hebrew, Greek, Latin, vernacular) and how modern vernacular translations have obscured Evil Eye references in the above texts are revealing (3:9-78). There is a marked focus in volume 3 more on textual sources than in vols 1, 2, and 4, which balance textual and material data, but there is a lot of textual ground to cover in the biblical and cognate sources.

Lastly, Volume 4 (Postbiblical Israel and Early Christianity through Late Antiquity) comprises rabbinic and patristic texts and related material culture (such as amulets, art, bowls in 4:31-46), as well as some early Islamic sources. Here the sources include 2 Maccabees, the Mishnah (including Pirqe Avot), Pesiqta de Rab Kahana, the Babylonian Talmud, and the Jerusalem Talmud. Rabbinic apotropaic interpretations of the tefillin, mezuzot, and (izitiz are interesting (4:28-31, cf. 3:98-103). The Christian sources include: The Acts of Thomas, Tertullian, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Syriac texts, and early Christian apotropaics and iconography (4:100-150). It would not be recommended for a reader to consult only vols 3-4 and ignore vols 1-2, since Elliott’s build-up of contextual material from across the ancient world is what helps make sense of the data presented in vols 3-4, especially the Evil Eye terminology and symbolism.

Elliott demonstrates Evil Eye belief distinctions between cultures, such as a tendency towards mostly human fascinators in Israelite and early Jewish culture. Elliott also discusses the relationship of the Evil Eye to envy and jealousy throughout his work, giving new meaning to the contexts of these emotions throughout biblical and postbiblical texts.

Analysis and Reflections

Taking a modern Western perspective to the Evil Eye is akin to thinking that Egyptian embalmers removed the brains during mummification because they wanted everyone to be equally stupid in the afterlife. In fact, we know the brain was removed because Egyptians believed the heart, not the brain, was the seat of knowledge and spirit. Why, then, should we not look at the eye firstly as the ancients understood it to function, rather than assume that it was (is) a superstitious anomaly in otherwise pious and monotheistic patterns of thought in early Judaism and Christianity?

Upon reflection, readers of the Bible and cognate texts seem to overlook or misinterpret the Evil Eye partly because of cultural presuppositions based upon an indelibly modern outlook on the nature of the human body and its physical limits. This erasure then exacerbates cultural misrepresentation of the nature of the Evil Eye itself, overplaying the phenomenon as magical power or vulgar superstition, and thus modifying critical understandings of the presence/absence of Evil Eye belief in early Jewish and Christian worlds—overplaying the distance between the concept of the Evil Eye and “mainstream” or normative Jewish and Christian beliefs.

For example, in the Book of Ben Sira there is a saying related to dining etiquette (Sir 31:13). The Hebrew of this passage reads, זכרון, גלוטוניה היא העין של הרע, זכרון, עין הרע הוא עין שונא את אדנתו (MS B IV r.).3 Skehan and Di Lella translate, “Remember, gluttony is a bad thing. God hates the eye’s greed; was ever any creature greedier?”4 The saying comes embedded in a package of table manners advice, of which Emily Post might be proud, for rustic readers who might be apt to gorging themselves or reaching for things at the wrong moment among nice company (Sir 31:16-19). Yet, philologically it is not necessary to translate עין הרע as greed in Sir 31:13, nor does the preceding line’s occurrence of the phrase עין הרע mean gluttony. Elliott offers a simpler reading among the contents of his preface pages, “Remember that an Evil Eye is a wicked thing. What has been created more evil than an Evil Eye?” (1:xi).

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3 There is a circular dot above עין and marginal text ה is after עין.
If Ben Sira speaks about the Evil Eye, Elliott argues, it is because greed and gluttony were states of mind that activated an Evil Eye either voluntarily (moral causes) or involuntarily (natural causes) (1:25, 26). Not only envious or sour emotions activated the “Evil Eye” attribute of an eye. Having blue eyes, physical deformity, or prominent bulging eyes might also inadvertently cause the eye to *fascinate* unwittingly. The use of ritual, practices, and apotropaic objects and symbols employed to protect one’s self, or one’s property, by their existence confirm this normative belief in the eye’s active power as it was understood in antiquity. Constant precaution and protection were needed to guard from a phenomenon that occurred naturally and therefore unpredictably. Elliott mentions Plutarch’s *Table Talk* (100 CE), where the Evil Eye is discussed seriously as a nature characteristic of the eye, both human and animal (2:48-56). Ben Sira did not want rustic Judeans to accidentally cast, or be accused of casting, an Evil Eye upon their generous hosts. By implication, the gluttonous are envious and thus real/potential fascinators of the Evil Eye—they do not get repeat invitations to those nice dinners that Ben Sira is talking about.

The modern scientific interpretation of the eye as passive lens seems to be the main culprit for why biblical scholars and bible translators have felt uneasy translating, and interpreting, occurrences of the Evil Eye plainly. The shared spaces between magic and medicine also blind us with respective to our understandings of the Evil Eye as articulated in the Bible (1:62). However, as Elliott points out, even protective precautions and apotropaics do not connote either medical or magical practice. Recent studies in Mesopotamian and Babylonian medicine, as well as the divine causes of illness in Greco-Roman medicine, would be relevant here. Within some of the analysis of evidence, such as Aramaic incantation bowls and magical-medical practices, the secondary scholarship seems at times a little sparse but can be attributed to its stated focus on the exploration of primary sources. Future studies in this area, however, would be able to consult Elliott as a comprehensive collation of primary data.

Elliott’s demonstration of the “purge” of the Evil Eye from biblical texts over time by translators is revealing. Elliott shows an increasing tendency towards avoidance of translating plainly any references to the Evil Eye in biblical texts for theological reasons distancing the orthodox beliefs from those deemed superstitious (vol 3). Several chief recipients of such sanitisation are Ben Sira, Jesus (Mt 6:22-23, 20:1-15/16; Mk 7:22; Lk 11:33-36), and Paul the Apostle (Gal 1-4). Elliott remains judicial when he surveys studies that tend to overlook or misinterpret the historical and sociocultural context of the Evil Eye. For example, he cites the 1950 work of Karl Meisen, who allows ancient Israelites to be familiar on a vague folkloric level with the concept of the Evil Eye, but does not permit such a belief to have been positively articulated in the Bible itself, despite citing Deut 28:54, 46; Prov 23:6, 28:22; Isa 13:8, et al. Overall, modern studies of the Jewish and Christian sources turn from theological avoidance towards inexplicable reticence about the Evil Eye. Contemporary scholarly hesitance to comment upon such magical, medical, or scientific beliefs in ancient Judaism and Christianity, however, cannot be attributed to a lack of explicit textual data or material culture. Rather, the silence seems to be due to a cultural misreading of the sources at hand. Historical context and material culture are therefore crucial to recognize the presence of beliefs and practices concerning the Evil Eye in biblical and cognate literature.

Elliott’s study is a resource in itself as well as a contribution to critical knowledge of the Evil Eye. The work contains countless illustrations, overviews of scholarship and reception, and bibliographies for primary sources and further reading. In all four of his volumes, Elliott provides the relevant primary texts in full English translation with recourse to the original languages where

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pertinent. The study also gives new meanings to certain traditions, colours, symbols, gestures, and animals (such as peacocks, snakes, and dogs) that are encountered in daily life today. Finally, this work is also valuable as a contribution to wider debates on the intersecting natures of belief, medicine, magic, mysticism, and science in ancient and early Judaism and Christianity—and the hermeneutical lenses used to interpret these concepts within their historical contexts. More specifically, Elliott’s research is valuable as an example of why it is still easy to overlook (or overplay) ancient and traditional presuppositions about the body and its relationship to nature and the cosmos. As Elliott convincingly argues, the necessary step then is to take an emic perspective and “see” with more ancient eyes.