

“The Evil Eye” (by John H. Elliott, with modifications 10/18/2016)

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Introduction

Evil Eye Belief and Practice (EEBP) is a widespread folk concept that some persons are enabled by nature to injure others, cause illness and death, and destroy any person, animal or thing merely by a look. Also known as “fascination” (Greek: *baskania*; Latin: *fascinatio*), this belief holds that the eye is an active organ that emits destructive emanations charged by negative dispositions (especially envy, malevolence, miserliness, and withheld generosity). These emanations arise in the heart or soul, and are projected outward against both animate and inanimate objects. The Roman writer Plutarch compares these emanations to the destructive rays of the sun and to “poisoned arrows” shot from a bow, while gospel writers compare them to the light beams projected from a lamp. This Evil Eye can be repelled and warded off by a great variety of protective words, gestures, actions, and amulets.

Extensively attested in the ancient circum-Mediterranean regions (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Israel) and ancient Near Eastern religions (Mesopotamian religion, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and continuing in these regions into the present day, EEBP (which includes not only belief in the evil eye but also the numerous practices intended to avoid or repel it) can be found in all of the six major regions of the world and in sixty-seven of 186 societies across the globe, thirty-six percent of the total world sample. In antiquity, poets, tragedians, philosophers, historians, naturalists, artists, sages, and theologians all referred to the phenomenon. Direct reference to EEBP occurs in literary works, sacred texts, personal letters, papyri, inscriptions, philosophical and historical treatises, incantations and prayers, sermons, and theological commentaries from the 3rd millennium BCE through Late Antiquity (6th cent. CE).

This evidence is supplemented by thousands of anti-Evil Eye amulets uncovered in archaeological excavations and by anti-Evil Eye designs, formulas, and inscriptions on door plaques, stone engravings, mosaic thresholds, public buildings, and personal jewelry, along with statuary and art (frescos, funerary art, etc.) all displaying anti-evil eye imagery. The Bible contains some sixteen text segments explicitly referring to EEBP, though this is not apparent in most modern biblical translations. Many additional references occur in the para-biblical literature, the rabbinic writings, and the Christian church fathers. This evidence too is accompanied by a vast array of amulets and iconographic materials.

The logic, plausibility and power of EEBP rests on a complex of related ideas. First, the eye, deemed pre-eminent among the bodily organs for receiving information and conveying dispositions and feelings, is considered an *active*, not a passive, organ, a projector not receptor, of light and energy. The rays or particles of energy it projects are comparable to the sun and its rays, or to a household lamp, which projects beams of light. That the eye functions by active emission (called the *extramission theory* of vision) was how most ancient people thought the eye operated. It was not until the 1700s that the extramission theory was supplanted in scientific circles in the West by the *intromission theory* of vision, namely that the eye is a passive organ receiving external stimulation.

Secondly, the eye conveys and directs toward others the force of *emotions* that arise internally in the heart/soul. Among the negative emotions and dispositions, envy is paramount, and, among the biblical communities, also stinginess, lack of generosity, and begrudging of aid to those in need.

The third feature of the logic of EEBP is that the evil eye, with its intense ocular gaze or hostile stare, can be an instrument of aggression. The eye directs this energy, negative in the case of an evil eye, against persons, creatures, and objects, and can cause injury, illness, loss, decay, disintegration, and even death. While the evil eye can operate intentionally, however, it can also function inadvertently, that is one might not even realize that they themselves were feeling envy and thus casting the evil eye. This fact makes the evil eye that much more dangerous, for one might unconsciously feel envy and direct the evil eye at people one has no desire to harm (e.g., family).

Fourth, it was assumed that certain people naturally possessed the evil eye, and thus ought to be avoided: strangers, alien peoples, the physically deformed, blind persons and those with unusual ocular features (strabismus, double pupils, single eye, wandering eye, knit eyebrows) and social deviants. Likewise, it was assumed that some people were natural targets and especially vulnerable: the newly born, birthing mothers, children, and those who were handsome, beautiful, victorious, and successful (see **Envy**). All persons and living creatures were both potential “fascimators” (those emitting the evil eye) as well as potential targets or victims. Fascimators can even evil-eye themselves.

And finally, attack from an evil eye could be averted or thwarted through a variety of methods and means including words, physical gestures, actions, and amulets. Avoidance strategies included restricting expressions of admiration or praise (which could veil or convey envy) or accompanying them with formulaic statements of “no evil eye intended.”

EEBP belonged to a constellation of beliefs serving to explain manifestations of personal and social distress and, through protective words, gestures and amulets to provide a sense of safety in an otherwise unpredictable and threatening universe. Socially, the belief helped to affirm key traits of group identity and demarcate natives from evil-eyed strangers and aliens (see **Collectivism**). Evil eye accusations were an effective informal mechanism for identifying and regulating social deviants and behavior inimical to the common good (see **Deviance**). The belief has reinforced with extraordinary sanction attitudes and actions fostering group cohesion and communal well-being. It has promoted the values of generosity and the sharing of possessions while discouraging envy and miserliness. It has encouraged values and patterns of social action and personal deportment underwritten by God or the gods.

Ancient Texts

The Eye as an Active Organ Causing Harm with an Ocular Glance

1. Plutarch, *Moralia* 680F-681A

Plutarch (46 – 120 CE) was an accomplished philosopher, biographer, historian, and essayist writing in Greek. The most extensive discussion of the evil eye in antiquity is

found in Plutarch's *Symposium* or *Table Talk*. In his work *Moralia* (680C-683B), Plutarch sums up prevailing thought on how the eye functions.

For odor, voice, and breathing are all various emanations from living bodies that produce sensation in other bodies whenever the sense organs are stimulated by their impact. . . In all probability, the most active stream of such emanations is that which passes out through the eyes. For vision, being very swift and borne by a substance that gives off a flame-like brilliance radiates a wondrous power.

2. Plutarch, *Moralia* 681D-E

Plutarch relates the extramission function of the eye to its destructive ability.

But as regards not only the physiological but also the negative psychological effects of ocular glances, which includes the casting of an evil eye, how, Patroculus asks, can a glance of the eye spread harm to the persons who are looked at? I answered, "Are you unaware that the body is sympathetically affected when the mind is subjected to external influences? For amorous thoughts arouse the sexual organs. . . pain, greed, and jealousy cause one's body to change color and one's health to waste away. . . Envy, ensconced by nature in the mind more than any other passion, also fills the body with evil. . . When, therefore, individuals under envy's sway direct their glance at others, their eyes, which are close to the mind and draw from it envy's evil, then attack these other persons as if with poisoned arrows."

3. Matthew 6:22-23

According to the gospels, Jesus also presumed an active eye and an extramission theory of vision, and like Plutarch he relates that to the evil eye. *Haplous* ("integral"), as in the *Testament of Issachar* (below, no. 6), conveys the sense of "generous" as an expression of moral integrity. "Evil eye" here connotes the antithesis to a disposition of generosity, as in several other biblical evil eye passages:

The eye is the lamp of the body. If, then, your eye is integral/generous, your whole body will be full of light. If, however, your eye is evil, your whole body will be full of darkness. If, then, the light in you is darkness, how great the darkness!

Hostile Dispositions and Emotions Conveyed by an Evil Eye

4. Deuteronomy 15:9-10

This is one of several biblical texts where looking at someone with an evil eye communicates a miserliness, stinginess, and a begrudging of aid to those in need. Giving generously is the best way to avoid the evil eye.

Be careful lest there be an evil thought in your heart and you say: ‘The seventh year, the year of remission of debts, is near,’ and you look with an evil eye upon your needy neighbor, you give nothing, and your neighbor cry to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sinning. Give liberally and do not grieve in your heart when you do so, for because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.

5. Tobit 4:7-8, 16

Tobit’s parting advice to his son Tobias twice refers to the evil eye. The full expression “evil eye” is not present, but the notion of an active eye conveying envy and begrudging points unmistakably to an evil eye, as does its proximity to Deut 15:7-11 (cf. Matt 6:22-23/Luke 11:34).

Give alms from your possessions to all who live uprightly, and do not begrudge with an evil eye the alms when you give them; do not turn your face away from any poor man, and the face of God will not be turned away from you. If you have many possessions, give alms from them in proportion to what you have; if you have few possessions, do not worry about giving according to the little you have. ... Give of your bread to the hungry, and of your clothing to the naked. Give all your surplus as alms, and do not begrudge with an evil eye the alms when you give them.

6. *Testament of Issachar* 3:3, 4, 8

The *Testament of Issachar* (c. 2nd cent. BCE- 1st cent. CE) presents Issachar, son of Jacob the patriarch and a brother of Joseph (who was enviously evil-eyed by his brothers at Gen 37:11), reviewing his life and claiming to have been free of envy, the evil eye and ungenerosity toward others.

I was not envious and evil-eyed toward my neighbor ... I lived my life with integrity of eyes ... With integrity/generosity of heart I supplied to the poor and oppressed everything from the good things of the earth

7. Basil, Concerning Envy PG 372.32-376.7

Basil of Caesarea (4th century Christian theologian, c. 330-379 CE) in his famous homily on envy and the evil eye echoes Aristotle’s definition of envy, equates envying and wielding an evil eye, and enumerates several of their pernicious aspects.

No feeling more pernicious than envy is implanted in human souls.... As rust wears away iron, so envy corrodes the soul it inhabits. More than this, it consumes the soul that gives it birth, like vipers which are said to be born by eating their way through the womb that conceived them. Now, envy is pain caused by our neighbors’ prosperity. Hence, an evil-eyed

person is never without cause for grief and despondency. If his neighbor's land is fertile, if his neighbor's house abounds with all the goods of this life, if he, its master, enjoys continual gladness of heart—all these things aggravate the sickness and add to the pain of the evil-eyed person. ... What could be more fatal than this illness? It ruins our life, perverts our nature, arouses hatred of the good bestowed on us by God, and places us in a hostile relation toward Him.

8. Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians* PL 26, 416-417

The church father Jerome (c. 342-420 CE), in his Latin commentary on Paul's reference to the evil eye in Galatians 3:1 (see passage 13), recalls conventional wisdom on the subject, including the association of evil eye and envy. He even cites the Roman poet Virgil (1st century BCE) at the end.

By these examples we have shown either that the envious person is tormented by the happiness of another, or he in whom there are some good things as a victim suffers harm by one who casts an evil eye, that is, by one who envies. It is said that the evil-eying person is particularly harmful to infants and the young of age and to those who do not yet leave behind a firm footprint. Accordingly, one of the Gentiles stated, "I do not know what evil eye is evil-eyeing my tender lambs" [Virgil, *Eclogues* 3.103].

Possessors and Wielders of the Evil Eye

9. KTU² 1.96 [= RS 22.225=CAT 1.96=UDB 1.96]. Transliteration and translation by J.N.

Ford. "'Ninety-Nine by the Evil Eye and One from Natural Causes.' KTU 1.96 in its Near Eastern Context." *Ugarit-Forschungen* 30 (1998): 201-278. esp. 202.

This is an Ugaritic incantation from the site of Ras Shamra on the Syrian coast (c. 1400-1200 BCE). It mentions various types of people who wield the evil eye.

The eye, it roamed and darted;... It was the eye of an evil man that saw him, the eye of an evil woman; it was the eye of a merchant that saw him, the eye of a potter, the eye of a gatekeeper.

10. Pliny, *Natural History* 7.2.16-18

Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE), transmits in his *Natural History* reports concerning various foreign tribes possessing the evil eye, the damage they cause by their act of praising, their tell-tale ocular features, and even Roman women with two pupils—all evil eye features conferred by nature.

Isogonus and Nymphdorus report that there are families in the same part of Africa beyond the Nasamones with the power of the evil eye, whose praising causes meadows to dry up, trees to wither and infants to perish. Isogonus adds that there are people of the same kind among the Triballi and the Illyrians, who also injure by the evil eye and kill those at whom they stare for a longer time, especially with furious eyes, and that their evil eye is most felt by adults; and that what is more remarkable is that they have two pupils in each eye. Apollonides also reports women of this kind in Scythia, who are called the Bitiae, and Phylarchus mentions also the Thibii tribe and many others of the same nature in Pontus, whose distinguishing marks he records as being a double pupil in one eye and the likeness of a horse in the other. . . Also among ourselves, Cicero states that the glance of all women who have double pupils is injurious everywhere. In fact when nature implanted in man the wild beast's habit of devouring human flesh, she also thought fit to implant poisons in the whole of the body, and with some persons the eyes as well, so that there should be no evil anywhere that was not present in man.

11. *Sirach* 14:3-10 (LXX)

The Greek translation of the book of Jesus ben Sirach presents the most extensive comment on the evil eye in the Bible and highlights several significant features of evil-eyed persons.

Wealth is not fitting for a person of little account, and of what use is property to an evil-eyed person? Whoever accumulates by depriving himself accumulates for others, and others will live in luxury on his goods. If a man is evil to himself, to whom will he be good? He will not enjoy his own riches. No one is more evil than he who evil-eyes himself. And this is the retribution for his wickedness: even if he does something good, he does it unintentionally and betrays his wickedness in the end. Evil is one who looks with an evil eye, turning away his face and disregarding people. The evil eye of a greedy person is unsatisfied with a single portion; and an evil eye withers life. A person with an evil eye is begrudging concerning bread, and it is lacking from his table.

Victims of the Evil Eye

12. Plutarch, *Moralia* 680D and 1090C

Plutarch related that all persons, animals, and possessions are deemed vulnerable to evil eye attack, but particularly infants, the good-looking, and the successful.

We know, for instance, of persons who seriously hurt children by looking at them, influencing and impairing their susceptible, vulnerable constitutions. . . People believe that beautiful persons, when they are looked at, suffer injury through the evil eye and envy, because it is

precisely physical beauty of youth that most quickly suffers a reversal because of the instability of the body.

13. Galatians 3:1

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul implies that a competing group of Christians who followed the Jewish law, led by James, would have been jealous of the freedom Paul had given them in not being bound to Torah.

O uncomprehending Galatians, who has injured you with an evil eye, you before whose very eyes Jesus Christ was proclaimed as crucified?

Damage caused by the Evil Eye

14. BM 122691. Translation by B. R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 3rd ed. Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005: 176

An Akkadian anti-evil eye incantation (1830-1530 BCE) describes the threat of the evil eye to infants and mothers in childbirth and the damage it causes when breaking into a home:

It [the evil eye, *īnum*] has broken in, it is looking everywhere!
It is an enmeshing net, a closing bird snare.
It went by the babies' doorways and caused havoc among the babies,

It went by the door of mothers in childbirth and strangled their babies.

Then it went into the jar room and smashed the seal,
It demolished the secluded stove,
It turned the locked house into a shambles.
It even struck the chapel, the god of the house has gone out of it.
Slap it in the face! Make it turn around!
Fills its eyes with salt! Fill its mouth with ashes!
May the god of the house return!

15. Deuteronomy 28:54-57

Deuteronomy 28:47-57 elaborates on the divine curses to befall Israel because of its non-observance of the commandments and its failure to serve the Lord with joyfulness and gladness of heart (28:47). Judah, according to Moses's forecast, will be attacked and besieged by a merciless enemy (the neo-Babylonian invasion of 587 BCE in the reign of King Zedekiah), stripped of its cattle and food, and its population reduced to want and starvation (8:48-52). The besieged will finally resort to eating their own children (28:53). In this situation of extreme deprivation and desperation, cannibalism and the Evil Eye, family members will be subject to the depraved Evil Eye of their very own relatives-- the most extreme illustration of Evil Eye behavior in all of Scripture.

The man, who is tender among you and delicately bred, will look with an Evil Eye against his fellow Israelite (lit., “brother”), against his beloved wife, and against the last of his children who remain to him, begrudging them (for food) the flesh of his children that he is eating because he has nothing else left to him in the siege and in the distress with which your enemy shall distress you in all your towns.

The woman who is tender among you and delicately bred. . . will look with an Evil Eye against her beloved husband, against her son, and against her daughter, begrudging them (for food) the afterbirth that oozes from her genitals and the baby that she bears; for she shall eat them herself secretly for lack of anything else (to eat) in the siege and in the distress with which your enemy shall distress you in your towns.

16. Plutarch, *Moralia* 682B.

Persons can also evil-eye and injure themselves, illustrating how the evil eye was thought to operate automatically, unintentionally, as well as with malice aforethought. Plutarch introduces handsome Eutelidas by the river, and then reports the effects of accidental evil-eying of the self.

Handsome Eutelidas evil-eyed himself, that baneful man, beholding himself in the river’s water . . . Eutelidas, it is said, handsome in his own estimation, was struck by what he saw reflected in the water, fell ill and lost his beauty with his health.

Protection from the Evil Eye

17. W. Spiegelberg, “Der böse Blick in altägyptischen Glauben.” *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 59 [1924]: 149-154).

In Egypt, in addition to the myriad of Eye of Horus amulets that were used to protect against the Evil Eye, protection also was afforded from the Saitic period (663-525 BCE) onward by the use of formulas based in personal names, mostly of women:

Nut slays the Evil Eye
 Neith slays the Evil Eye
 Chons slays the Evil Eye
 Sekhmet slays the Evil Eye

18. Pliny, *Natural History* 28.7.39

Pliny the Elder reveals another protective strategy against the evil eye, namely spitting.

When a stranger enters the house, or when a person looks at an infant while asleep, it is usual for the nurse to spit three times even though infants are under

the divine protection of the god Fascinus.

19. Persius, *Satires* 2.31-34

Like the elder Pliny, the first-century Roman poet and satirist Persius (34-62 CE) refers to spit as a protection against the evil eye, but also refers to an important gesture.

Behold, how the grandmother or older aunt
removes the boy from the crib and his forehead and moist lips
first purifies with the notorious middle finger and atoning spittle
knowledgeable thereby about warding off burning eyes

20. *b. Berakhot* 55b

For protection when encountering an unknown place, the rabbis advised reciting Gen 49:22 (a reference to Joseph who survived the envious evil eye of his brothers, Gen 37:11) and making a manual gesture.

If, when entering a city, a man fears the evil eye of some inhabitant, let him take the thumb of his right hand in his left hand and the thumb of his left hand in his right hand, and say: "I, so-and-so, am of the seed of Joseph over which the evil eye has no power, as it is written: 'Joseph spared by God from the envy of his brothers is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well'" (Gen 49:22). If he is afraid of his own evil eye, he should look at the side of his left nostril.

Vocabulary of the Evil Eye

ayin hara: evil-eye (Hebrew)

fascinatio (and related words): to cast the evil eye (Latin)

baskania: evil eye (Greek)

baskainō: to cast the evil eye (Greek)

baskanos: evil eyed (Greek)

oculus malus: evil eye (Latin)

oculus nequam: evil eye (Latin)

oculus obliquus: evil eye (Latin)

oculus malignus: evil eye (Latin)

ophthalmos ponêros: evil eye (Greek)

phthonos: envy

ra ' ayin: evil-eyed (Hebrew)

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Additional Texts

The Eye as an active organ causing harm with an ocular glance

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 946-947
 Aristotle, *de Insomnis* 459b27-32
 Heliodorus, *Aethiopica* 3.7-9
 Luke 11:34-36
 Proverbs 23:6
 Pseudo-Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Problemata physica* 2.53

Hostile dispositions and emotions conveyed by an Evil Eye

Deuteronomy 15:7-11; 28:54-57
 4 Maccabees 1:25-26; 2:15-16
 Matthew 20:15
 Mark 7:22
m. Avot 5.13
 Proverbs 28:22
 1 Samuel 2:29; 2:32; 18:9
 Sirach 37:10-1

Possessors and wielders of the Evil Eye (fascinator)

Acts of Thomas 5.44
 Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonauts* 4 1635-1690
 Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 9.4.7-8.
 Homer, *Iliad* 11.36-37
 Ignatius, *Romans* 7.2
Martyrdom of Polycarp 17.1
m. Avot 2:9, 5.19
 Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7.366-367
 Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 7.42
 Sumerian anti-Evil Eye incantation (c. 1830-1530 BCE) YOS 11.71
 1 Samuel 18:8-9
 Theocritus, *Idyl* 6.39
 4Q424, frag. 1, cols. 2.2, 2.3, 4, 7

Victims of the Evil Eye

Acts of John 20
b. Baba Batra 118a, 141a
b. Baba Metzia 107b
 Catullus, *Poems/Carmina* 5.9-12
 Vigil, *Eclogues* 3.103

Damage caused by the Evil Eye

Acts of Thomas 9.100
m. Avot 2:11
 Plato, *Phaedo* 95b
 Prov 23:6; 28:22
Sirach 18:18; 31:12-13
Wisdom 4:12

Protection from the Evil Eye

b. Berakhot 20a;
b. Bava Mezia 84a.
 Chrysostom, *Homily* 12.13 on *1 Corinthians* 4:10 (PG 61.106).
 Epistle of Jeremiah 69/70
 Julius Pollux, *Onomastikon* 7.108
 Ovid, *Fasti* 5.433-434
 Pliny, *Natural History* 19.19.50
 Plutarch, *Quaest. Conv.* 5.7; *Mor.* 681F-682A
 Personal letters (1-3. cent. CE): P. Oxy. 930; P. Oxy. 3313; P. Oxy. 2.292; POxy 2.300
 Pseudo-Aristotle, *Problemata Physica* 20.34
 Plautus, *Asinaria* 2.4.84
 Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis* 15.1-3
 Testament of Solomon 18:39
 Varro, *De lingua latina* 7.107