

# Viewing the Evil Eye in the Scripture: Reclaiming the Magical Thinking in Modern Times<sup>\*</sup>

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*The eye is a complex anthropological term in the Old Testament theology. The eye represents insight, mindfulness, but also it is an entrance for malefic influences. This article will scrutinize the magical function of the eye in the Hebrew Bible, as well as the connection of the eye with evil. The Hebrew terms of the Masoretic Text will be compared to the Greek translation of the Septuagint and the Hellenistic mindset in order to perceive similarities and differences between both cultures.*

**Keywords:** *Evil Eye, Magic, Old Testament, Masoretic Text, Septuagint*

## Magical thinking

In antiquity, magic was part of everyday life and this ancient reality has been transmitted in religious thought to our time. For example, in a present Romanian liturgical book, the *Euchologion*, a special prayer concerns the evil eye (in Romanian *deochi*), which is identified – in a modernizing way of thinking – with headaches.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in the original Greek version, attested only in the *Small Euchologion*, the evil eye (Greek *baskania*)<sup>2</sup> appears *per se*. Its origin lies in a variety of situations: “it happened because of beauty or courage or by chance or by jealousy and envy”

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<sup>\*</sup> The following Bible editions are used in this article: New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS), New American Bible, revised edition 2010 (NAB), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), BJ (Bible de Jérusalem), Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible 2010 (TOB 2010), Einheitsübersetzung 1980 (EÜ 1980), Einheitsübersetzung 2016 (EÜ 2016), Lutherbibel 2017 (Luther 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> Molitfelnic, publicat cu aprobarea Sfântului Sinod și binecuvântarea Preafericitului Părinte Daniel, Patriarhul Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (București: Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> The etymology is uncertain. The word could derive from a Thraco-Illyrian term that means “to speak ill of somebody” (cf. Proto-Hellenic φασκαίνω) or from a Balkanic term that means “to bind (the victim)” (cf. Latin fascinus). See Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1999), 167.

(ἡ ὑπὸ ὠραιότητος ἢ ἀνδρείας ἢ εὐτυχίας ἢ ζήλου καὶ φθόνου ἢ βασκανίας συνέβη).<sup>3</sup>

This prayer, whose origin is uncertain, proves that the belief in the evil eye survived in the church, even if some of the patristic writers condemned the superstition. A fierce opponent to all kinds of pagan superstitions, St John Chrysostom comments on the term ἐβάσκανεν from Paul's Epistle to Galatians 3:1 (which will be discussed below) as follows:

And when you hear of jealousy in this place, and in the Gospel, of an evil eye, which means the same, you must not suppose that the glance of the eye has any natural power to injure those who look upon it. For the eye, that is, the organ itself, cannot be evil; but Christ in that place means jealousy by the term.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the evil eye is one of the most well-known magical practices and rituals which goes back to ancient times.<sup>5</sup> In Mesopotamia seventeen rituals and incantations concerning the “evil eye” (Sumerian *IGI HUL*, Akkadian *inu lemnutu*) are known<sup>6</sup> and it is interesting that a Sumerian incantation grants the eye the most dangerous magical force: “the eye is evil, the most evil thing” (YOS 11, 70.I.15'–23' and 71).<sup>7</sup> In ancient Egypt there are even personal names related to the “evil eye” (Egyptian

<sup>3</sup> Louis Arnaud, “La Baskania ou le «mauvais oeil» chez les Grecs modernes,” *Échos d'Orient* 15 (1912): 385–94, 510–24 (here p. 386).

<sup>4</sup> Philip Schaff, ed., *A Selected Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 13 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 24.

<sup>5</sup> John H. Elliott, *Beware the Evil Eye: The Evil Eye in Bible and the Ancient World*, 4 vol. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016); Thomas Rakoczy, *Böser Blick, Macht des Augens und Neid der Götter. Eine Untersuchung zur Kraft des Blickes in der griechischen Literatur*, coll. Classica Monacensia 13 (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1996); Rivka Ulmer, *The Evil Eye in the Bible and in Rabbinic Literature* (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1994); Siegfried Seligmann, *Der böse Blick und Verwandtes. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Aberglaubens aller Zeiten und Völker* (Berlin: Hermann Barsdorf Verlag, 1910); Marek Tuszewicki, *A Frog under the Tongue: Jewish Folk Medicine in Eastern Europe*, trans. Jessica Taylor-Kucia, Litman Library of Jewish Civilization (London: Liverpool University Press, 2021), 263–84.

<sup>6</sup> Marie-Louise Thomsen, “The Evil Eye in Mesopotamia,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 51, no. 1 (1992): 19–32; Erich Ebeling, “Beschwörungen gegen den Feind und den bösen Blick aus dem Zweistomlande,” *Archiv Orientalní* 17, no. 1 (1949): 172–211.

<sup>7</sup> Jan Van Dijk, Albert Goetze and Mary I. Hussey, *Early Mesopotamian Incantation and Rituals*, Yale Oriental Series. Babylonian Texts 11 (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 1985), plates LXVIII–LXX. See Thomsen, “The Evil Eye”, 29–30.

*ir.t bin.t*).<sup>8</sup> So, the standard greeting by the end of the Hellenistic period became the formula: “May you not meet with the Evil Eye”.<sup>9</sup>

## Magical thinking in the Old Testament

But is the magical thinking really present in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)? Has not the monotheistic faith of Ancient Israel uprooted all superstitions? The survival of magical thinking in the biblical literature and the continuity of such a mindset have been covered in several monographs,<sup>10</sup> but can be proved by means of three conclusive examples.

First, in Genesis 30:37–42, Jacob managed to produce multicolored lambs, thus increasing his wealth compared with Laban’s flocks. The method followed by Jacob is to expose the monochrome rams to spotted images of fresh wooden rods peeled of the green. Wenham simply comments that “this seems an odd belief in the light of modern genetics”,<sup>11</sup> but he mentions Sarna, who suggests that this could be scientifically explained.<sup>12</sup> Some commentators, however, credit the idea that the text has to do with magical conception. Westermann recognized that “there are signs here of an earlier transition from magical to scientific thinking” and that the narrative “is scientific inasmuch as knowledge of animals” habits

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<sup>8</sup> Wilhelm Spiegelberg, “Der böse Blick im altägyptischen Glauben,” *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 59 (1924): 149–54; Siegfried Schott, “Ein Amulett gegen den bösen Blick,” *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 67, no.1 (1931): 106–10; Jean Capart, “Les yeux magiques,” *Chronique d’Égypte* 21, no. 41 (1941): 32–33; Joris Frans Borghouts, “The Evil Eye of Apopis,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 59 (1973): 114–50; Hans-Werner Fischer-Elfert, “Ein Spruch gegen den Bösen Blick in Meroë: Anmerkungen zur Bronzeschale Boston MFA 24.900 aus Grab S 155 der Süd-Nekropole,” *Orientalia* 83, no. 1 (2014): 31–49.

<sup>9</sup> Geraldine Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1994), 58.

<sup>10</sup> Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); idem, “Prolegomena to the Study of the Jewish Magical Tradition,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 8, no. 1 (2009): 107–50; Ann Jeffers, “Magic and Divination in Ancient Israel,” *Religion Compass* 1, no. 6 (2007), 628–42; Cristinel Iatan, “*Rogu-te, ghicește-mi chemând un mort*” (1 Rg 28, 8). *Magia, vrăjitoria și divinația din perspectivă biblică*, (București: Ed. Universității din București, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis* 16–50, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 256.

<sup>12</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 212: “Scientifically, the required results could be achieved by the successive interbreeding of the monochrome heterozygotes, or the singlecolored animals that carried recessive genes for spottedness. Such animals are detectable by the characteristic known as heterosis, or hybrid vigor”.

leads to “calculated subjection of such to one’s end”.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Hamilton wrote that “this interpretation borders on sympathetic magic”.<sup>14</sup>

The second example is the sacrifice or more exactly the ordeal of the suspected wife found in Numbers 5:11–31. Levine argues that “its phenomenology is truly distinctive among biblical rituals, combining as it does ingredients of a magical, cultic, and legal character”.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, for him, “utilization of a liquid substance more or less classifies the procedures of Num 5:11–31 as a «potion ordeal», a type of magical rite best known in Africa”.<sup>16</sup> Milgrom also tries to explain “how an ordeal – with its inherent magical and pagan elements – was allowed to enter the legislation of the Torah”.<sup>17</sup> Facing the evidence of the magical elements, these commentators simply attest the presence of magical mindset in the Mosaic Torah.

The third example comes from the book of Psalms: “Their venom is like the venom of a snake, like that of a serpent stopping its ears, So as not to hear the voice of the charmer or the enchanter with cunning spells” (Ps 58:5–6). Hossfeld tries to avoid the magical explanation: “In taking up this topic Ps 58:6 is interested not in evaluating mantic practices, but in giving a metaphorical representation of the hopelessness of «binding/charming» the wicked and so turning back their poisonous threats”.<sup>18</sup> Hossfeld listed similar biblical passages that suggest the mantic practice of enchanting a snake (Jer 8:17; Eccl 10:11; Sir 12:13),<sup>19</sup> although the practice of casting spells is itself prohibited by the Law (Deut 18:10–11). Goldingay also argues: “Although there no doubts were charmers in Israel, in the context of this simile it would be allegorical to ask who the literal equivalents of the charmers are: there are there to emphasize the

<sup>13</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Continental Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 483.

<sup>14</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 284.

<sup>15</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 200.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 209.

<sup>17</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia – New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 350.

<sup>18</sup> Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, Hermeneia, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 81.

<sup>19</sup> In the Romanian Orthodox Synodal Bible 12:17.

mortal danger the snakes and the faithless bring.”<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, other commentators are much more open to the magical thinking expressed in this text. Kraus wrote: “The question might be asked whether the image in v. 5 reflects effective curses with which people in ancient times opposed a dangerous adversary. This view suggests itself because certain magical acts are variously recognizable in the individual laments”.<sup>21</sup> In the same direction, Birkeland emphasized the magical contexts, interpreting the references to the “evildoers” (Heb. *po‘ale ‘awen*), which have in the book of Psalms the most occurrences (13 in number), as a suggestion to identify the enemies with magicians who try to overcome the poor by casting spells (cf. Ps 7:12–17; 10:7–11).<sup>22</sup> Thus arguing, Birkeland acknowledged the mindset of the ancient world where the magic has a forefront position.

It should therefore come as no surprise that magical thinking, rooted in biblical texts, continues to be expressed more or less directly in Judaism.<sup>23</sup> The evil eye seems to be one of the most common magical practices. In the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Metzia 107b),

commenting the verse, “May the Lord remove from you all sickness” (Dt. 7:5), Rab said, “This refers to the evil eye.” Rab is consistent with views expressed elsewhere. For Rab went up to a cemetery, did what he did, [and] and said, “Ninety-nine people die of the evil eye, and one of natural causes”.<sup>24</sup>

There is even an attempt to accommodate official religiosity with the magical practice of the evil eye, in the sense that the children of Israel had inherently a kind of immunity towards the power of the evil eye. In Genesis 49:22, the tribe of Joseph is called “a wild colt” (NAB) or “a fruitful bough” (NRSV) “by a spring (Heb. *‘alê ‘ayin*, lit. «above the eye»”. In

<sup>20</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 2: Psalms 42–89*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 205.

<sup>21</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 536.

<sup>22</sup> Harris Birkeland, *Die Feinde des Individuums in der israelitischen Psalmenliteratur. Ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis der semitischen Literatur- und Religionsgeschichte* (Oslo: Grøndahl & Søn's Forlag, 1933).

<sup>23</sup> Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1939); Ludwig Blau, *Das altjüdische Zauberwesen*, Jahresbericht der Landes-Rabbinerschule in Budapest für das Schuljahr 1897–98 (Budapest, 1898).

<sup>24</sup> Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*, vol. 14 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 505.

the Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot 20a) this passage is interpreted in the sense that the sons of Joseph are immune to the evil eye:

Rabbis said to him [Rabbi Yohanan], “Does not the Master fear on account of the evil eye [of envy]?” He said to them, “I come from the seed of Joseph, over which the evil eye does not rule. For it is written, «Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine above the eye»” (Gen 49:22). And R. Abbahu said, “Do not read what is written, but rather, «superior to the evil eye.»” R. Yosé b. R. Hanina said, “Proof comes from here: «And let them multiply like fishes in the midst of the earth»” (Gen 48:16). Just as the fish of the sea are covered by water so that the evil eye cannot get at them, so the evil eye cannot get at the seed of Joseph. And if you wish, I shall say, “Over an eye [namely, Joseph’s,] which did not want to feast upon what did not belong to him the evil eye has no power”.<sup>25</sup>

### Old Testament texts about the Evil Eye

The evil eye has a literal counterpart in the Hebrew Bible in the term ‘*ayin ra’*. However, a strange phenomenon can be observed. Although in scholarly monographs, the evil eye is recognized as being mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, in the commentaries of the relevant passages, scholars prefer to come up with different explanations.

The expression appears in Proverb 23:6. In his commentary, Fox omits any reference to the evil eye: “*stingy man* [*ra’ ‘ayin*]: Lit., “bad of eye” (also in 28:22), the opposite of “good eye” (22:9), that is, generous”.<sup>26</sup> Waltke also notes: “A *begrudging host* (lit. “evil eye” = “stingy”) is the opposite of the generous person (lit. «good eye», see 22:9; cf. Deut 15:9; Sir 14:10). According to 28:22 he is stingy because he is eager to get rich”.<sup>27</sup> According to such scholars, there is no connection to the magic evil eye here, because the context does not explicitly mention the magical sense. The evil eye is interpreted as a moral vice: greedy or stingy man. Nevertheless, in the Greek translation of the Septuagint “[the man of] evil eye” is rendered by the special term which denotes basically the

<sup>25</sup> Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 128.

<sup>26</sup> Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 18B (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2009), 726.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15:30–31:31*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Eerdmans (Grand Rapids – Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), 242.

magical work of the evil eye: “with a malicious man (ἀνδρὶ βασκάνῳ)” (Prov 23:6 NETS). On the other hand, Elliott lists the passage among the “instances in the Old Testament where the Evil Eye is expressly said to cause physical distress and illness”.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, in Proverbs 28:22 “a miserly man (Heb. *’iš ra’ ’ayin*) runs after wealth; he does not realize that loss will overtake it” (NJPS). The Septuagint translates “the man of evil eye” by ἀνὴρ βάσκανος, “an envious man” (NETS), but commentators restrict the interpretation to the moral level. Fox renders the term by “the greedy man”, adding that “stinginess is a particular manifestation of greed”.<sup>29</sup>

In Proverbs 16:30 it is said that: “Whoever winks an eye (Heb. *’oṣeh ’enaw*) plans perversity” (NAB). Eye winking is mentioned in other contexts with the Hebrew verb *qaraṣ*, translated into Greek by ἐννεύω and διανεύω “to make a sign” (Ps 35:10; Prov 6:13; 10:10; Sir 27:22). For Psalm 35:19, the Psalmist’ enemies hate him and fashion deceitful speech, winking the eye (Heb. *yiqreṣu ’ayin*). Generally, the commentators did not pay much attention to a parapsychological meaning of the eye winking, reducing it to the suggestion that it was the sign of a plot to which others were called.<sup>30</sup> In the UBS handbook for translators, the suggestion that this might have signaled “an evil spell they wish to cast on him” is only given as a possibility.<sup>31</sup>

A more complex description of such behavior appears in Proverbs 6:12–14: “A scoundrel and a villain goes around with crooked speech, winking the eyes (Heb. *qoreṣ be’enaw*), shuffling the feet, pointing the fingers, with perverted mind devising evil, continually sowing discord” (NRSV; see also Proverbs 10:10). Commenting on Proverbs 6:13, Fox argues that *qaraṣ ’ayin* means “pinch together” or “squint”, an action described in Job 16:9 as “sharpening the eye” (Heb. *yilṭoṣ ’enaw*). Ben Sira referred to this, saying:

One who winks an eye (διανεύων ὀφθαλμῷ) devises evil things, and he who knows him will turn away from him. Before your eyes his

<sup>28</sup> John H. Elliott, *Beware the Evil Eye: The Evil Eye in Bible and the Ancient World*, vol. 3: *The Bible and Related Sources* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016), 58.

<sup>29</sup> Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 830.

<sup>30</sup> Crawford Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1899), 126.

<sup>31</sup> Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reayburn, *A Handbook on Psalms*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 337.

mouth will be sweet, and at your words he will be amazed, but later he will distort his mouth, and with your words he will give offense (Sir 27:22–23 NETS).

But trying to understand what this feature could mean, Fox resorted to psychological explanations:

Even today, a certain type of squinting gaze is construed as hostile. Squinting is thought to indicate a dishonest personality, perhaps because the squinter is shifty-eyed and does not look at others in a straightforward way. [...] The Greek translators understood *qores* ‘*ayin* (and the other gestures in 6:13) to be a hint or signal to others, but this does not seem right. In v. 13, squinting or winking is not a conspiratorial sign, because there is no confederate in the present context and because the other movements are not signals. They are probably all symptoms of a personality disorder.<sup>32</sup>

Commenting Proverbs 10:10, Fox believes that eye winking “is one of the ticks and gesticulations that betray the scoundrel”, “a symptom or gesture of scheming”.<sup>33</sup>

The reference to the evil eye can also be made through a verbal expression “the eye to be evil against” (Heb. *ra’ah ‘eno be-*, cf. Deut 15:9). In the final curses of the book of Deuteronomy, the evil eye will produce even cannibalism among the fellow Judaeans which will face the siege upon Jerusalem:

The most refined and fastidious man among you will begrudge (Heb. *tera’ eno*, lit. “shall look with an evil eye”, Gr. βασκανεῖ τῷ ὀφθαλμῷ) his brother and his beloved wife and his surviving children, any share in the flesh of his children that he himself is using for food because nothing else is left him – such the siege and distress to which your enemy will subject you in all your communities. The most fastidious woman among you, who would not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground, so refined and fastidious is she, will begrudge (Heb. *tera’ enah*, Gr. βασκανεῖ τῷ ὀφθαλμῷ) her beloved husband and her son and daughter, the afterbirth that issues from her womb and the infants she brings forth because she secretly eats them for want of anything else – such the siege and distress to which your enemy will subject you in your communities (Deut 28:54–57 NAB).

<sup>32</sup> Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 18A (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2000), 220–21.

<sup>33</sup> Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 517.

Driver<sup>34</sup> and Otto<sup>35</sup> concentrate upon the prophetic warning for cannibalism in the context of the siege of Jerusalem (cf. Jer 19:9), but without any reference to the magical power of the evil eye.

In Hellenistic times, Ben Sira (Sirach) deals with the theme of the evil eye in several passages. Sirach 14:3–10 “constitutes the most extensive statement on the Evil Eye in the entire Bible of both Old and New Testaments”.<sup>36</sup> In Sirach 14:3 he concludes: “For a petty man wealth is not good, and to a begrudging person (Gr. ἀνθρώπῳ βασκάνῳ, Heb. *’izra’* ‘*ayin*, lit. “man evil of eye”) – why is there money?” (NETS). Di Lella simply identifies here the “man evil of eye” with miser or greedy person,<sup>37</sup> without explicitly connecting it to magic. A few verses later, Ben Sira warns: “There is none worse than he who begrudges himself (Gr. βασκαίνοντος ἑαυτὸν), and this is repayment for his evil” (Sirach 14:6 NETS). What follows is the most detailed description of the man with the evil eye:

Wicked (πονηρός) is the one who is grudging with the eye (Gr. ὁ βασκαίνων ὀφθαλμῷ), when he turns away his face and overlooks souls.

The eye of the greedy is not satisfied with a portion, and wicked injustice withers the soul. An evil eye (Gr. ὀφθαλμὸς πονηρός) is envious over bread, and it is lacking on his table (Sirach 14:8–10 NETS).

Here the “bewitcher with the eye” (ὁ βασκαίνων ὀφθαλμῷ) became similar to the “greedy” (πλεονέκτης) and the man with “an evil eye” (ὀφθαλμὸς πονηρός) is assimilated with the “envious” (φθονερός). In Sirach 18:18 the man with an evil eye is identified with the fool: “A foolish person will upbraid ungraciously, and the giving of a grudging person (Gr. βασκάνου) melts eyes” (NETS).

In another passage, Ben Sira tends to regard the evil eye as the most maleficent thing. “Remember that a wicked eye (Gr. ὀφθαλμὸς πονηρός) is an evil thing (κακόν). What was created more wicked (πονηρότερον) than an eye? Therefore it sends tears from a whole face” (Sirach 31:13

<sup>34</sup> Samuel Rolles Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), 316.

<sup>35</sup> Eckart Otto, *Deuteronomium 12–34, Zweiter Teilband: 23,16 – 34,12*, Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament (Freiburg – Basel – Wien: Herder, 2017), 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Elliott, *Beware the Evil Eye*, vol. 3, 60.

<sup>37</sup> Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: A New Translation with Notes, Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 39 (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 259.

NETS). Other versions try to accommodate the expression “evil eye” or “wicked eye” to the moral meaning: “greedy eye” (NRSV, NAB), “oeil avide” (BJ, TOB 2011), “gieriges Auge” (EÜ; but see “schlechtes Auge” EÜ 2016), “neidisches Auge” (Luther 2017). Some commentators restrained to the identification of the “evil eye” here with gluttony.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, in Sirach 37:11 the wiseman warns:

Do not consult with him who views you with suspicion, and from those who are envious of you hide deliberation: with a woman about her rival and with a cowardly person about war, with a merchant about business and with one who buys about a sale, with a slanderer about gratitude and with an unmerciful person (Gr. μετὰ βασκάνου) about generosity of heart, with an idle person about any work and with an annual laborer about finishing, with an idle domestic about a large task. Do not pay heed to these for any advice (NETS).

In the book of Tobit, the connection of the evil eye with the envy is so self-evident, that the verb “to envy” is used as the predicate for the noun “eye”, so that the formulation is, technically speaking, an implicit rather than explicit reference to the Evil Eye.<sup>39</sup> In Tobit 4:7 it is said that:

To all those who practice righteousness give alms from your possessions, and do not let your eye begrudge (Gr. μὴ φθονεσάτω σου ὁ ὀφθαλμός) the gift when you make it. Do not turn your face away from anyone who is poor, and the face of God will not be turned away from you (NRS).

It is interesting that the commentator, Moore, observes that “here, as in 4:16, the «eye» refers to the magical «evil eye».”<sup>40</sup> The formulation occurs again in Tobit 4:16: “Give to the hungry some of your food, and to the naked some of your clothing. Whatever you have left over, give away as alms; and do not let your eye begrudge (Gr. μὴ φθονεσάτω σου ὁ ὀφθαλμός) the alms that you give” (NAB). As in Rabbinic sources found in the Talmud, here “eye” often means simply “evil eye”.

Finally, the Greek Old Testament attest the usage of the evil eye magic, *baskania*. In the book of Wisdom of Solomon, the *baskania* is related to the wickedness and “an intense desire for what belongs to another”<sup>41</sup>:

<sup>38</sup> Skehan and di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 388.

<sup>39</sup> Elliott, *Beware the Evil Eye*, vol. 3, 80.

<sup>40</sup> Carey A. Moore, *Tobit: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 40A (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 166.

<sup>41</sup> Elliott, *Beware the Evil Eye*, vol. 3, 92.

“For the fascination (βασκανία) of wickedness obscures the things that are good, and roving desire undermines an innocent mind” (Wisdom 4:12 NETS). Winston simply translates the term *baskania* by “witchery”,<sup>42</sup> without further comments and ignoring the technical term connected with the evil eye. In the apocryphon 4 Maccabees, preserved in some Septuagint manuscripts, a list of vices related to the soul: “In terms of the soul, it is expressed in boastfulness, love of money, love of honor, love of strife and envy (βασκανία)” (4 Maccabees 1:26 NETS). Only with wisdom it is possible to gain control over the soul and fight against the sins: “It is apparent that reason overcomes even the more aggressive passions: love of power, vainglory, boasting, arrogance and envy (βασκανίας)” (4 Mac 2:15 NETS). De Silva considers that here “βασκανία, which combines elements of envy and “exerting an evil influence through the eye” (BDAG 171a; see Elliott), provides a malicious form of pleasure as one contemplates the demise of another (and the thought that one’s malice can contribute to that downfall)”.<sup>43</sup>

### New Testament texts about the Evil Eye

In the New Testament, some references to the “evil eye” (Gr. ὀφθαλμός πονηρός, Syr. *ʿayna bišta*, which could go back to the original Aramaic expression from Jesus’ teaching) seem indeed to continue the old conception about the magic power of the look. In Mark 7:21–22, the “evil eye” is enumerated in a list of sins committed from within the man: “From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy (Gr. ὀφθαλμός πονηρός), blasphemy, arrogance, folly”. Referring to the passage, Marcus mentions the moral significance of the expression “evil eye”: “This term can denote stinginess, as in Deut 15:9; covetousness, as in Prov 28:22; or jealousy, as in Sir 14:8; Matt 20:15. In any case, [...] «an evil eye» is the opposite of generosity (cf. m. *ʿAbot* 5:13)”. However, Marcus refutes the magical meaning in the gospel: “Given the context in Mark 7:17–23, «evil eye» here probably does not suggest putting a hex on

<sup>42</sup> David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 43 (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 136, see also p. 141–42, where there is no reference to the term *baskania*.

<sup>43</sup> David de Silva, *4 Maccabees: Introduction and Commentary on the Greek Text in Codex Sinaiticus*, Septuagint Commentary Series (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2006), 90.

someone, as in ancient and modern superstitions”.<sup>44</sup> Collins follows the same direction of interpretation:

The phrase ὀφθαλμὸς πονηρὸς could be translated either “unhealthy eye” or “evil eye”. In the context of a list of vices, the latter must be intended here. The expression “evil eye” refers to an attitude of envy, jealousy, or stinginess. [...] The phrase “evil eye” sometimes has the connotation of types of black magic connected with envy. The interpretation of the phrase here as “envy” is supported by the statement in 15:10 that Pilate knew that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him out of envy (φθόνος).<sup>45</sup>

In Matthew 6:22–23 the evil eye is opposed to the simple or innocent eye: “The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is sound (ἀπλοῦς, lit. “simple”, “sincere”, “honest”, “innocent”), your whole body will be filled with light; but if your eye (ὀφθαλμός) is bad (πονηρὸς), your whole body will be in darkness. And if the light in you is darkness, how great will the darkness be” (NAB). With some variations, the same passage appears in Luke 11:34. The term “evil eye” appears also in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:15: “[Or] am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious (Gr. ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου πονηρὸς ἐστίν) because I am generous (ἀγαθός)?” (NAB). Luz comments on the Matthean passage 6:22–23, insisting on the moral metaphor and reluctantly ignoring the magic aspect:

The text is not speaking of a healthy or a sick eye, or of the eye of a living person or a dead person whose “candle” has been extinguished; it speaks of an eye being “single, sincere”, or “evil”. Thus “eye” is a metaphor; one is speaking of something moral. The hearers are completely startled when they realize that the eye mentioned in vv. 22b–23b shines not outwardly but inwardly, into the “body”.<sup>46</sup>

Discussing the opposite terms ἀπλοῦς and πονηρὸς, Nolland took into account the medical and the moral sense: “The medical use of the balancing

<sup>44</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 27A (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 456.

<sup>45</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 360–61.

<sup>46</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary on Matthew 1–7*, Hermeneia, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

πονηρός in v. 23 is well documented: «diseased». But the moral sense «evil» or «wicked» may well be lurking not far beneath.”<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, for some authors, the magical thinking should be taken into account, besides the physical and moral aspects. Thus Betz comments:

The adjective πονηρός can mean “sick” as well as “evil”. Moreover, the “evil eye” had a very pronounced meaning in the ancient world. It includes all shades from the begrudging look of jealousy and envy to the magic evil eye. The meaning of the expression, therefore, goes beyond the merely physiological and extends to the moral field of meaning. Whatever may be the case, whether physically sick or morally evil, such an eye cannot do its job of illuminating the body, which therefore remains dark throughout.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, for Hagner:

The ἀπλοῦς eye and the πονηρός eye are not to be understood physically as a healthy and a diseased eye [...]. The eye is referred to metaphorically in this passage. The πονηρός eye is the “evil eye” of Near Eastern cultures – an eye that enviously covets what belongs to another, a greedy or avaricious eye. [...] The ἀπλοῦς eye, given the symmetrical structure of the passage, is probably the opposite of the evil eye, namely, a generous eye, as in the cognate adverb ἀπλῶς, “generously”, in Jas 1:5 (cf. Rom 12:8; 2 Cor 8:2; 9:11, 13) – an eye that is not attached to wealth but is ready to part with it. It is easier to understand ἀπλοῦς as a synonym for the expected ἀγαθός, “good”, in the ethical sense argued above, than to understand πονηρός in the physiological sense of “unusual [...]”. On the other hand, ἀπλοῦς can also mean “single” [...] in the sense of devotion to one purpose, a meaning consonant with the point made by the following verse (v 24). Cf. too “singleness [ἀπλότης] of heart” in Eph 6:5.<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, in the New Testament the technical term used in Greek for the magic of evil eye could be found. In the Epistle to the Galatians 3:1, Paul warns against the magical power used by some preachers in order to gain public recognition: “O stupid Galatians! Who has

<sup>47</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 301.

<sup>48</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3–7:27 and Luke 6:20–49)*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995), 451.

<sup>49</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, Word Biblical Commentary 33A (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 158.

bewitched (ἐβάσκανεν) you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?” (NAB). Commenting this verse, Burton notes:

the preaching of the judaisers tends to blind them as by malicious magic. The verb βάσκαίνω is doubtless used tropically with the meaning “lead astray”, and the question, which is, of course, rhetorical, refers to the same persons who in 1:7 are spoken of as troubling them and seeking to pervert the gospel of the Christ.<sup>50</sup>

But is here Apostle Paul support the ancient belief in the effectiveness of the evil eye? Burton continues:

It would be over-pressing the facts to infer from Paul’s use of this word that he necessarily believed in the reality of magical powers, and still more so to assume that he supposed the state of mind of the Galatians to be the result of such arts. It is more probable that the word, while carrying a reference to magical arts, was used by him tropically, as we ourselves use the word “bewitch”, meaning “to pervert”, “to confuse the mind.”<sup>51</sup>

Also, Betz notes: “The term βάσκαίνω is used figuratively («bewitch someone»), a usage common at least since Plato. Its purpose was to characterize opponents and their sophistic strategies.”<sup>52</sup> Longenecker defends the same rhetorical interpretation of the reference to *baskania*: “The verb βάσκαίνω, which appears in the NT only here, was commonly used in the Greek world in a figurative sense to mean «fascinate by casting an evil eye» or «bewitch» [...]. It was part of the rhetoric of the day for characterizing opponents and their strategies”.<sup>53</sup> Referring back to Burton, Longenecker argues: “Burton, however, recognizing the term as a rhetorical expression, is undoubtedly more to be believed”.<sup>54</sup> Bruce comments in the same direction, insisting upon the metaphorical understanding:

βάσκαίνω (here only in the NT) means “fascinate” (from the cognate Lat. *fascino*) or “bewitch” (originally by means of the evil eye). The other meaning, “envy” (cf. Dt. 28:56 LXX), is not relevant here. Translate: “who has hypnotized you?” Their new behaviour was so

<sup>50</sup> Ernest de Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (London – New York: T&T Clark International, 1920), 143.

<sup>51</sup> Burton, *Galatians*, 144.

<sup>52</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 131.

<sup>53</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary 41 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 100.

<sup>54</sup> Longenecker, *Galatians*, p. 100.

strange, so completely at odds with the liberating message which they had previously accepted, that it appeared as if someone had put a spell on them.<sup>55</sup>

But there are some scholars which took into account the magical context. Commenting Galatians 3:1, Schlier wrote:

Βασκαίνω ist Terminus für eine Bezauberung, die ohne besondere Manipulationen mit Wort oder Blick geschieht. Im Zusammenhang ist wohl an die Bezauberung durch den Blick gedacht, da Paulus voraussetzt, daß eben der Blick der Galater durch den gekreuzigten Christus gebannt sein sollte. [...] Die Galater sind in die Hände eines fremden Zauberers gefallen. Hinter der Predigt des Gesetzes durch jene Zerstörer des Evangeliums und der Gemeinden steht ein dämonischer Zwang. Die Galater sind nicht menschlich überredet worden, sondern sie sind in einen Bann geschlagen. Sie haben nicht einfach ihre Ansichten gewechselt, sondern sie sind fasziniert durch eine Macht und sind im Begriff, ihr zuzufallen.<sup>56</sup>

Even if Schlier's position is speculative about the Judaizers who bewitched the Galatians, considering the reference to the evil eye in the ancient mental context remains an important observation. Paul's reference to *baskania* is not a rhetorical device, but a concrete mention related to the mindset of ancient man.

## Conclusions

These examples make it very clear that the monographs dealing with the problem of the evil eye do not see a problem in identifying the biblical passages on the subject. In contrast, commentators specializing in the philological and theological research of the books of the Old and New Testament are much more reluctant to find in the text of Scripture confirmation of the belief in superstitions such as the evil eye. But this is a modern imposition, from a modern scientific perspective, on ancient conceptions. Being considered a superstition, the belief in the magical power of the gaze is in fact removed from the pages of the Bible. That is why main scholars in the field of biblical theology avoid placing in

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<sup>55</sup> Frederick F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1982), 148.

<sup>56</sup> Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater*, Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 119.

the ancient context the biblical passages that speak of the evil eye and *baskania*.

But the few examples given from the Old Testament showed that the ancients had a more complex worldview than today, with religion commonly having elements that we would now consider magical. In fact, they represent a form of the precritical mindset, in which evil can have several ways of entering a person: the well-known physical way through direct body contact (such as physical brutalities), but also the one at an invisible level, through influences of the soul on another soul from a distance (evil eye). Ancient man lived in a world riddled with magical practices and there are many levels of magical thinking. Observing the biblical occurrences about the evil eye, it can be argued that religion and magic are much more interconnected than it seems today at the level of current academic theology.

This observed characteristic of modern commentaries may call into question the general orientation of academic Bible study. It could be the often tacitly assumed modern mentality or even a confessional conditioning of the Western world that had already faced the challenges of the Enlightenment and rationalism in the previous centuries. The result is that the biblical text is no longer treated properly, as an ancient text, originating in Eastern thought, which had its own cultural and mental conditioning.