

Review

Beware the Evil Eye: The Evil Eye in the Bible and the Ancient World. By John H. Elliott. Vol. 1, *Introduction, Mesopotamia, and Egypt*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015. xxii + 209 pp. Paper \$27.00. ISBN 9781620321478. Vol. 2, *Greece and Rome*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016. xxxvi + 334 pp. Paper \$43.00. ISBN 9781498204996. Vol. 3, *The Bible and Related Sources*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016. xxx + 348 pp. Paper \$42.00. ISBN 9781498205009. Vol. 4, *Postbiblical Israel and Early Christianity through Late Antiquity*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017. xxv + 216 pp. Paper \$29.00. ISBN 9781498230728.

Few contemporary readers of the Bible in North America or northern Europe have ever heard of the evil eye, know that there are at least two dozen references to it in Scripture, or realize that this belief complex was not only prevalent in the ancient Mediterranean world, but remains so in many cultures yet today. The same can be said for a significant number of otherwise well-informed biblical scholars. Moreover, the unfortunate fact is that most modern versions of the Bible completely obscure the issue with inappropriate translation, in some cases seriously distorting the concerns of the original authors.

The reasons for this are not hard to understand. Since belief in the evil eye has largely disappeared in North American and northern European cultures, neither readers, translators, nor (many? most?) scholars in those geographical areas have experience on which to draw that might aid in understanding the concepts or the vocabulary involved. It is important to acknowledge, therefore, that an important topic of biblical research has emerged that promises to fundamentally change our understanding of many biblical texts.

It would be a serious understatement to say that this four-volume work on the evil eye by John H. Elliott is a monumental scholarly achievement. The scope of the research, the massive bibliography, and the collection of literary and material evidence (including coins, charms, relief sculpture, and inscriptions) is unlike anything this reviewer has seen in decades. Elliott's work will quickly take its place as a classic of biblical scholarship.

That is not to say, however, that the topic has heretofore gone completely unrecognized. Going back as far as the fourteenth century, European treatises on the subject began to appear, though most were merely descriptive. More importantly, a series of works by classicists in the mid-nineteenth century marked the beginning of modern evil-eye scholarship and the attempt to offer explanatory theories about the belief and its associated practices. The introduction to volume one by Elliott offers a clear review of this work, along with acknowledgement of the few studies by biblical scholars that began to emerge in the 1980s, a significant number of which were by

Elliott himself. It would be accurate to say that this collection and review of previous scholarship is comprehensive.

Elliott then lays out the methods, aims, and procedures for his own study of the topic. His specific aim is to “present the *first monograph* treating all of the evil eye texts of the Bible within the context of Evil Eye belief and practice across the world of the Circum-Mediterranean and ancient Near East, from Sumeria (3000 BCE) to Roman late antiquity (600 CE)” (72). The focus of the study, indeed its basic motivation, is the important but typically obscured evil eye references in the Bible. But the very obscurity of these texts requires that they be set in the specific historical, social, and cultural context on which they relied for salience in the biblical world. Precisely that is essential if these biblical texts are to be understood by modern readers.

After the review of previous work in the introductory chapter of volume one, Elliott begins with a clear description of the evil eye phenomenon, its vocabulary, salient features, and the social/cultural conditions under which it thrives. He explains and documents its dependence on the widespread ancient belief that the eye is an active organ conveying dispositions and emotions (especially envy) that originate in the human heart. It thus assumes an “extramission” theory of vision in which the eye is believed to project particles of energy or light outward onto whatever is seen. It is therefore the opposite of our modern understanding (“intromission”) of the eye as a passive organ that receives light from outside.

As an active organ the eye was believed capable of transmitting either damage or benefit to humans, animals, crops, tribes, or nations. These damages or injuries were real, not imaginary, and therefore precautions or protection, especially in the form of amulets and other apotropaics, were essential. Possessors could be anyone, especially anyone prone to envy, though the deformed, the blind, barren women, and those less successful than their peers were always suspect. And conversely, likely victims were the successful, the beautiful, the fortunate and, especially, healthy children.

Along the way, Elliott carefully (and correctly) distinguishes evil eye belief from earlier attempts by scholars to classify it as a form of ancient “magic.” It is rather, given the state of scientific understanding in antiquity, what the ancients assumed to be a rational, logical phenomenon of nature. For readers unfamiliar with evil eye belief, this introductory chapter is therefore essential for understanding the rest of this enormous project.

The remainder of volume one collects and/or documents all the known evidence for the origins of evil eye belief (and associated practices) in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. It thus lays the groundwork for understanding its spread across the wider Mediterranean world of antiquity.

Volume two does the same for ancient Greece and Rome. This is especially important material for those trying to understand evil eye texts in the Bible because of its chronological and geographical proximity to these classical cultures. The evidence makes clear the astonishing degree to which the biblical texts breathe the classic cultural

air. That said, the volume ends with a brief discussion of the differences and distinctive emphases that will appear in the evil eye beliefs articulated in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

Volume three moves to the heart of Elliott's concern and offers a contribution to biblical scholarship that deserves the recognition it will get. There are twenty explicit references to the evil eye in the Old Testament. After a brief review of the concepts and vocabulary involved, Elliott carefully analyses all twenty. He then does the same for texts in "parabiblical" literature, including the Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, and Josephus. A description of anti-evil eye apotropaics in ancient Israel concludes the section.

The remainder of volume three addresses the five explicit references to the evil eye in the New Testament. Four of those are in the synoptic Gospels and one is in Paul's letter to the Galatians. While the analysis of each is significant, the extended discussion of the Pauline reference in Galatians is a gem worth careful reading by anyone interested in the New Testament. You can be sure it will change your understanding of Paul's interaction with the Galatian community. Volume three ends with comment about implicit references to the evil eye in the New Testament, of which there are a significant number, and a summary of the distinctives in evil eye belief among the biblical writers when compared to the wider cultural milieu in which they lived.

Finally, volume four continues the analysis of evil eye belief in both postbiblical Israel and early Christianity throughout the remainder of late antiquity. Both literary and material evidence is collected and reviewed. A long section on the Apostolic fathers, the Apocryphal Acts, the fourth-century Church fathers, and Christian personal letters ends with a description of the amulets, charms, inscriptions, gestures, objects, and liturgical practices used by Christians in this period for protection against the evil eye.

As the evidence collected in these four volumes makes clear, when it comes to evil eye belief and practice, the Bible is not a cultural exception. Obviously it has its own differences and distinctive emphases, but it is thoroughly rooted in the ancient environment out of which it came. And while not every reader will be interested in the entirety of this massive study, the attention it draws to a complex, pervasive and important belief in the biblical world is long overdue, especially among those who read, study, and translate the Bible. At the very least, it ought to expose the unfortunate modern biblical translations that cover up the deep concern of biblical authors who (pre-scientifically) believed that damaging emotions, intentions, and values in the human heart could be projected onto victims through the power of an evil eye. It is time to recognize that the concern is not the "health" of the eye, as the NRSV would have it, but the damage caused by malice that originates in the human heart.