

I

INTRODUCTION

The earliest evidence of Evil Eye belief and practice in the ancient world comes from Mesopotamia and Egypt. We have examined that material, most prominently Evil Eye incantations and amuletic Eyes of Horus in chapter 2 of Volume 1. In the present volume we turn now to the most extensive sources of this belief in antiquity—the cultures of Greece and Rome, from Homer through Late Antiquity (800 BCE—600 CE). In this period, features of the belief found in Mesopotamian and Egyptian sources, such as the existence of an Evil Eye demon, are expanded to the point where an “Evil Eye belief complex” becomes apparent. This complex of features associated with the Evil Eye—human eye as key organ of information, eye as active not passive, eye as channel of emotions (especially envy) and dispositions, especially of envy, arising in the heart, possessors, victims, defensive strategies and amulets—generally is assumed rather than stated explicitly or at length, yet is essential to an understanding of the literary references to the Evil Eye, whether brief or extended, and the abundant amuletic evidence. This current volume, along with chapter 2 of Volume 1, set and illuminate the context for examining Evil Eye belief and practice in the Bible and the biblical communities, the focus of Volume 3.

In the Greek-speaking Hellenistic world, it was customary in personal letters to include the wish that the recipient and/or members of the family “remain unharmed by the Evil Eye,” or “be kept safe from the Evil Eye,” using a form of the adjective *abaskantos* or the related adverb *abaskantôs*. This is illustrated by various personal letters over several centuries and all from Egypt.

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In a first-century papyrus letter (c. 25 CE), a certain Theôn recommends his brother Herakleides to an official named Tyrannos. He concludes his letter with the wish:

Before all else, I pray that you have health and the best of success, *unharméd by the Evil Eye (abaskantôs)*. (P.Oxy. 2.292, c. 25 CE)¹

A late first-century letter of Indike “to her lady Thaisous” concludes:

Salute my lord Theon and Nikoboulos and Dioskopos and Theon and Hermokles—may they be *unharméd by the Evil Eye (tous abaskantous)*. (P.Oxy. 2.300)²

A papyrus letter from Egypt (98–103 CE) opens with the statement:

First of all, it is imperative through this letter to greet you and your children—may they be *unharméd by the Evil Eye*” (*se apasesthai kai ta abaskanta [s]ou [p]aidia*). (BGU 3.811)³

A second-century personal letter from Sempronius to Saturnila, his mother, opens with the wish:

Before everything, I pray for your health and that of my brothers, *unharméd by the Evil Eye (abaskantôn)* . . . (*Selected Papyri* 1 §121=Rev. Ég. [1919], p. 204)⁴

At the close of a personal letter of Apollonius of Lykopolis to the strategos Apollonius in Heptakomia on business matters (Hermopolis, Egypt, c. 116–120 CE), the writer concludes with a conventional wish concerning the Evil Eye:

I wish you good health, Lord Apollonius, along with your children kept safe from the Evil Eye (*ton abaskanton paidion*). (P.Brem. 20.18).⁵

A second-century private letter ends:

1. Hunt and Edgar, *Select Papyri* 1 (1932) 296–97, §106; White, *Ancient Letters* 1986:188–89, no. 79. On this epistolary convention and on the use of *abaskantos* as a personal name see also *Beware the Evil Eye*, Vol. 1, chap. 2 (Egypt) and below, p. 39. On the Papyri discovered in Oxyrynchus, Egypt, see Patterson 2011:60–68, esp. 66 on P.Oxy 2.292. On the site of Oxyrynchus and daily life there see Parsons 2007.

2. See White 1986:93, no. 94.

3. Moulton-Milligan 1930:106.

4. Hunt and Edgar, *Select Papyri* 1 (1932) 318–19, §121; White 1986:180–81, no. 113; Deissmann 1923:160–61.

5. Wilcken 1936:57.

[Greet] . . . his children—may they be *unharmed by the Evil Eye* (*ta abaskanta autou tekna*). (P.Oxy. 46.3312)⁶

A second-century personal letter regarding the marriage of a certain Sarapion concludes with the wish:

Greet most noble Alexandros and his Sarapion and Theon and Aristobleia—may they be *unharmed by the Evil Eye* (*tous abaskantous*)—and Aristobleia’s children.” (P.Oxy. 46.3313)⁷

A second-third-century CE personal letter to a schoolboy from his mother ends with the greeting:

Many salutations from your sisters and the children of Theonnis— may they be *unharmed by the Evil Eye* (*ta abaskanta paidia Theônidos*)—and from all our friends by name. (P.Oxy. 6.930)⁸

An early third century CE personal letter from a schoolboy to his father concludes with the wish:

Goodbye, my lord and father, and may you prosper, as I pray, for many years along with my brothers—may they be *unharmed by the Evil Eye* (*abaskantois*). (Rev. Ég., 1919, p. 201)⁹

Another third century personal letter from Pausanius to his brother Heraclides concludes with the greeting:

Many salutations to my lady mother and my sister and our children—may they be *unharmed by the Evil Eye* (*ta abaskanta hêmôn paidia*). (P.Oxy. 14.1666)¹⁰

Christian papyri letters reveal this same practice. Several examples dating from the third and fourth centuries CE are cited and discussed in Volume 4, chapter 2. These letters show that Christians and non-Christians took the Evil Eye threat quite seriously and used the same letter-writing convention for safeguarding loved ones from the harmful Evil Eye.

Three personal letters even contained the wish that the recipient’s favorite horse be kept safe from the Evil Eye. In one letter (*O.Flor.* 15, Egypt, end of the second century CE), the writer, Publius, hopes that his son Atreides is in good health “with your horse kept safe from the Evil Eye” (*meta*

6. Horsley, *New Docs* 3 (1983) 7–9, §1.

7. *Ibid.*, 10–15, §2.

8. Hunt and Edgar, *Select Papyri* 1 (1932) 334–35, §130.

9. *Ibid.*, 338–39, §133.

10. *Ibid.*, 360–61, §149.

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tou abaskantou sou hippou, lines 2–3 and repeated in lines 8–9).¹¹ A second letter (*O.Flor.* 18, Egypt, end of the second century CE), similarly wishes its addressee, a certain Theon, good health, “with your horse kept safe from the Evil Eye” (*meta tou abaskantou sou hippou*, lines 3–4).¹² The phrase (partly restored) also occurs in a third letter (*O.Amst.* 18, Egypt, end of second century CE).¹³

This wish for safety from the Evil Eye, which is presumed to cause illness, misfortune, and death, is not only a feature appearing in ancient personal Greek correspondence, pagan and Christian. This epistolary custom is rooted in a prominent Circum-Mediterranean and Near Eastern belief with a wide dissemination and a long history. The Greek adjective *abaskantos* (“unharméd by, safe from, the Evil Eye”; lit. “not Evil-Eyed”) and its related adverb *abaskantôs*, found in these and other ancient Greek texts, belong to a broad family of terms of the Greek root *bask-*. Most of these terms concern the Evil Eye and malice that is thought to be projected from the eye and conveyed by ocular glance.¹⁴ The numerous occurrences of terms of this word family in literature, personal letters, and amulets that protect against the Evil Eye are a significant part of an array of evidence of Evil Eye belief and practice in the Greek and Roman worlds. While the earliest evidence of this belief in antiquity comes from Mesopotamia and Egypt, as examined previously in chapter 2 of Volume 1, it is the worlds of Greece and Rome where a relative trickle of earlier evidence becomes a torrent.

Dread of the Evil Eye, extensive evidence shows, pervaded the Greek and Roman worlds from the time of Homer (eighth century BCE) to Late Antiquity (sixth–seventh centuries CE) and beyond. “Naturalists, physicians, historians, philosophers, and poets,” Siegfried Seligmann notes, all “believed in the power of the (Evil-Eyeing) glance.”¹⁵ As was also the case in Mesopotamia and Egypt, when Greeks and Romans were not explicitly speaking of the Evil Eye in hushed tones, they were engaging in a diversity of stratagems devised for anti-Evil Eye protection. Extensive commerce and trade of the Greeks with Egyptian and Mesopotamian empires provided the conduit for exchange of cultures, worldviews, and beliefs, including that of the Evil Eye. The belief appears to have made its way to Greece from Mesopotamia at an early point. Walter Burkert, describing Near Eastern influence

11. See Youtie 1979; Horsley, *New Docs* 1 (1981) 70.

12. Youtie 1979; Horsley, *New Docs* 1 (1981) 70.

13. Youtie 1979; Horsley, *New Docs* 1 (1981) 70. Youtie translates, “your horse, which I pray may be preserved from the evil eye.”

14. On this terminology, including the word *abaskantos* used as both an adjective and a proper names see below, pp. 37–39.

15. Seligmann 1910 1:31.

on Greek culture in the early Archaic age, has proposed that figurines, curses, and healing rituals were introduced to Greece from Mesopotamia during or prior to the Archaic period (800–480 BCE).¹⁶ The Evil Eye belief also may have been among the many beliefs and customs that the Greeks, according to Herodotus,¹⁷ adopted from the Egyptians. From Alexander the Great (336–323 BCE) onward, a Greek and then subsequent Roman expansion eastward and westward, northward and southward across the Mediterranean Sea brought about an intersection and cross-fertilization of cultures in which Evil Eye belief and practice flourished as never before. Sustained contact with Egypt, especially from the period of the Ptolemies onward, assured the influence of Egypt upon Greece and Rome and, in turn, Greek influence in Egypt via the Macedonian dynasty of the Ptolemies. Rome, already influenced by Etruscan Evil Eye belief, then absorbed, and geographically extended, this cultural mix. Evil Eye belief and practice among Greeks and Romans exemplifies the syncretism of the Hellenistic Age and its amalgamation of cultural traditions.

The continuity of features of Evil Eye belief from Mesopotamia and Egypt to Greece and Rome is striking: the concept of an Evil Eye demon; the understanding of the eye as an active, rather than passive, organ; the certainty that an Evil Eye was capable of inflicting great harm, illness, and even death;¹⁸ the assumed vulnerability of all persons, but especially of children and birthing mothers; the use of anti-Evil Eye apotropaics (gestures, words, and devices that “turn away” [Greek *apotrepein*] evil forces),¹⁹ such as incantations, the plethora of Eyes of Horus (*udjat* eyes) and other amuletic eyes, and the protective colors of blue and red. Greek and Roman traditions expand the body of ancient Evil Eye lore. These traditions supply the richest source of information in the ancient world on the Evil Eye, its victims and possessors, descriptions of how it works, the damages it causes, and the myriad means for protecting against it and warding it off. The consistency of essential features of Evil Eye belief and practice throughout the regions and across the centuries of the ancient world is one of its most remarkable characteristics.

16. Burkert 1992:67–68, with concurrence by Stratton 2007:41 and 195 n10.

17. Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.51, 48–90, 123, 177.

18. The ancients believed that “evilly-disposed persons might harm their victims in one of three ways, namely, by look, voice, or touch; but the most to be feared was the look.” (Callisen 1937:453).

19. The term *apotropaic* derives from the Greek verb *apotropein* (“drive away,” “ward off”) and denotes any object, word or gesture employed to *avert or ward off* evil of any kind.

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The evidence of Evil Eye belief and practice in the Circum-Mediterranean region takes various forms: literary texts (poetry, tragedy, comedy, philosophic writings, table talks, geographical-cultural accounts), pottery, military shields and breastplates, papyri, inscriptions, mosaics, plaques affixed to the door frames of houses, statues, figurines, art, and thousands upon thousands of amulets for personal and public display. This evidence is of crucial importance for detecting and illuminating instances of Evil Eye belief and practice in the biblical writings and their implied social dynamics. In the following survey of evidence of Evil Eye belief and practice from the Greco-Roman world, we exclude in this volume references to the Evil Eye in the Greek biblical writings and the parabiblical literature (e.g., the Old Testament Pseudepigraphica, Qumran, Philo, and Josephus) and post-biblical Jewish and Christian sources. This material will be treated in Volumes 3 and 4. Our survey here ranges from the pioneering study of Otto Jahn in 1855²⁰ to Thomas Rakoczy's more extensive analysis of the Greek literature (1996). It treats all relevant literary, inscriptional, and epigraphic sources along with the abundant material evidence from Greece and Rome. We will also take into account all the relevant secondary literature now on hand.²¹

This volume on the Evil Eye in Greek and Roman sources joins chapter 2 of Volume 1 on the Evil Eye in Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures to provide the historical, social, and cultural matrix within which the biblical references to the Evil Eye—our primary focus of attention—are best understood and interpreted.

20. Jahn (1813–1869), German archaeologist, philologist, and historian, has given us the first modern critical study on the Evil Eye in Greco-Roman antiquity, with abundant citation of ancient sources. His assumption of an early existence of the belief recently has been challenged by Schlesier (1991). In his contribution to a retrospective volume on Jahn's work and influence, Schlesier claims that cogent evidence of the belief stems only from the Roman imperial period. Rakoczy (1996:4 and n8 and *passim*) and the present study present evidence proving this claim to be in error.

21. On the Evil Eye in Greek and Roman antiquity see Jahn 1855; Story 1877; portions of Elworthy 1895/1958; Seligmann 1910, 1922, 1927; "Malus oculus" in *Harper's Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities* 1896, s.v.; Perdrizet 1922; Budge 1930/1978:354–65; Geffcken 1930; Meisen 1950; Kötting 1954:476–79; Marcadé 1961; Engemann 1975; Moreau 1976/1977; Walcot 1978:77–90; Potts 1982; J. B. Russell 1982; Siebers 1983; Luck 1985:61–131, 176–225; Tupet 1986:2606–2610; Dickie 1987, 1990, 1991, 1993; Bernidaki-Aldous 1988; DeForest 1993; McCartney 1992; Rakoczy 1996; Ogden 2002:222–26; Greenfield 2006; Alvar Nuño 2006–2008, 2009–2010, 2012a, 2012b; Faraone 2013; Lovatt 2013:328–36 (Evil Eye as instance of the "assaultive gaze"). On the Evil Eye and witchcraft in the Zoroastrian literature see Frachtenberg 1918:419–24. On the penetrating gaze see also Barton 2002:216–235 and Bartsch 2006 (penetrating phallus against penetrating gaze). Also relevant are studies and theories on the eye and vision, on the linkage of the Evil Eye with envy and praise, on apotropaic images of male and female genitalia and apotropaic manual gestures, and analyses of anti-Evil Eye amulets. Studies on the Evil Eye in Israel and Christianity are listed in Volumes 3 and 4.