

THE EVIL EYE IN CANTICLES

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ABSTRACT

The belief in the evil eye has been closely associated with the emotion of envy in the folklore of numerous cultures of various periods in history. This paper explores this link in the book of Canticles, with specific reference to the notion of beauty. Firstly, it is demonstrated how, due to its susceptibility to envy, beauty is particularly vulnerable to the evil eye. It is further demonstrated how the theme of the evil eye is used to typify the transformation of the female lover from vulnerable beauty in earlier chapters into a frightening visual aggressor in later chapters of the book. Finally, the implications of the evil eye belief for theological interpretations of the book of Canticles are assessed.

INTRODUCTION

The evil eye, defined as the belief in the destructive power of the human gaze, remains largely unexplored in the Old Testament. This state of affairs is partly due to the fact that scholars usually limit their investigations to explicit references to עין רעה (“evil eye”), which, in Old Testament literature, refers to unethical and parsimonious behaviour (Ulmer 1994:1–4; Elliott 2016:14–77).¹ For an appreciation of the features of this belief in ancient Israel, one needs to extend the investigation to metaphorical descriptions of visual aggression in biblical Hebrew, understood against the background of ancient Israelite theories of vision. Although the Old Testament nowhere presents a clearly defined and exhaustive theory of vision, it is evident that the ancient Israelites, like other peoples of ancient Near Eastern and circum-Mediterranean world, believed that the eye emitted light and substance (Allison 1987:61–83). Health and joy is associated with brightness of the eyes, i.e., a strong

¹ Although not limiting their studies to overt references to the evil eye, Wazana (2008:685–702) and Tilford (2015:207–221) restrict their conceptualisation of the malevolent eye in the Old Testament to the notions of insatiability and greed.

“light of the eyes” (אור עינים), while weakness due to illness or old age leads to the dimming of ocular light (Prov 15:30; Ps 38:11, 69:24; Lam 5:17; Zech 11:17). This extramission theory of vision forms the basis of numerous metaphorical references to visual aggression in the Old Testament. The best apparatus for such an investigation is the cognitive linguistic approach to the interpretation of metaphor in biblical Hebrew, as proposed by Kotzé (2005:107–117). In short, the method requires the identification of the conceptual image, in addition to the focus of this mental construct as conveyed by the linguistic vehicle in question.

This paper will attempt to demonstrate that the evil eye in Old Testament literature is not limited to the concept of tight-fistedness and envy related to material goods, as usually assumed by scholars who have written on the subject. Of particular interest to this investigation is Canticles 1:5–6, where the vulnerability of the female lover’s (henceforth: “beloved”) beauty to the evil eye is emphasised. In chapter 4:9, however, she seems to overcome this vulnerability by becoming the ocular aggressor in relation to her lover. Chapter 6:4–10 also contrasts with the description of the beloved in chapter 1:5–6 as a defenceless beauty by likening her to radiant celestial bodies. The image of the beloved as a beautiful and fearsome visual aggressor is then used as a background for an interpretation of the celebrated chapter 8:6, which puts love and envy in parallel. With the exception of the latter, these texts are conceptually related due to their focus on the act of vision (cf. Schroer and Staubli 2005:87). Finally, the implications of descriptions of the beloved as visual aggressor for Loader’s (2011; 2012a; 2012b) theology and philosophy of beauty in the Old Testament will be noted.

THE VULNERABILITY OF BEAUTY

The self-description of the beloved in Canticles 1:5–6 serves as a striking illustration of the ancient Israelite folk theory of vision as visual fire and the harmful effects of ocular emissions infected by negative emotions, such as anger and envy:

6. Do not stare at me because I am dark,

For the sun looked on (רָשָׁף) me.

My mother's sons burned (חרה) against me.

It is commonly argued that, with these words, the beloved expresses embarrassment about her dark skin (cf. Krinetzki 1981:70; Garrett 1993:386; Hess 2005:56; Jenson 2005:20). It has been suggested that the ancient Israelites valued a light skin, since dark skin identified people as belonging to the labouring class (Krinetzki 1981:70; Jinbachian 1997:126; Ogden and Zogbo 1998:27; Jenson 2005:20). Longman (2001:95–96) explains:

Verse 6 makes it clear that the woman finds her scorched complexion unattractive. Again, her reaction has nothing to do with race or some transcultural statement on the aesthetics of skin pigmentation. The *sun* has burned her. She has been out in the fields working hard, with the result that her skin is deeply tanned or sun-burnt. We might speculate that her culture prized skin that did not show signs of the physical labors of the lower classes.

Although this view can hardly be questioned as the surface meaning of the text, the self-description acquires a new tenor when read against the background of the ancient Israelite folk theory of vision as fire and the related evil eye belief. Although her dark skin complexion, which is poetically described in verse five with reference to Bedouin tents, is clearly a result of the sun who “looked” (שזף) at her while she was working in the vineyards of her family (v. 6), her angry (and envious?) brothers probably added to her darkened skin by “burning against” (חרה ב) her. The repetition of the *sh* sound in both the Hebrew word for the sun (שמש), and the verb “to see” (ששזפתני), which occurs only here and in Job (20:9; 28:7), to describe the sharp vision of a bird of prey, clearly emphasise the notion of burning as a result of the sun’s “vision” (Hess 2005:57). The image of the burning rays of the sun therefore combines with the fire of her brothers’ anger or envy to produce her dark skin. In addition, the sun’s stare and her brothers’ burning combine with the envious gaze of her companions to complete the picture of a vulnerable beauty. This would explain the beloved’s urgent request not to be looked at by the fair daughters of Jerusalem, who may well have had reason to envy her exotic beauty. It seems significant that the girl begins her apology with a bold reference to

her own beauty in verse five, since beauty is especially vulnerable to the evil eye, due to its propensity to arouse envy in others. Seligmann (1910:189) begins his chapter on susceptibility to the evil eye by stating that:

Der Wirkung des bösen Blickes entgeht nichts Lebendes, und nichts Lebloses. Am meisten ist ihm aber alles Schöne und Vortreffliche ausgestellt, so stattliche und schöne Jünglinge, die mit allen Gaben des Körpers und des Geistes geschmückt sind, anmutige Frauen, wohlgenährtes Vieh, herrliche Pferde, blühende Saaten, fruchtbare Bäume. Gesundheit, Schönheit, Kraft, Zuneigung, Reichtum, schöne Kleidung, kostbarer Schmuck, hohe Stellung, Ruhm, Ehre und dergleichen ziehen den Neid der Götter und das böse Auge der Menschen auf sich.

In summary, the concept conveyed by the language in 1:5–6 could be summarised with ENVIOUS VISION CAUSES DAMAGE. This interpretation is supported by various Mesopotamian incantations against the evil eye, which list beautiful young women as those most affected by the evil eye (cf. Ebeling 1949:172–211). Consider the following example from a well-known Akkadian incantation (Maqlu III:8–12):

As for the handsome young man, she robbed him of his virility,
 As for the beautiful maiden, she took away her attractiveness,
 With her evil glare, she took her sexual charm;
 She looked upon the young man and robbed him of his manliness,
 She looked upon the maiden and took away her attractiveness.²

Similarly, beauty figures prominently in a Ugaritic incantation (KTU² 1.96) that speaks of a roaming evil eye:

The Evil Eye roves about,
 and disfigures the beauty of its brother
 and the grace of its brother,
 even though (the other eye be) in perfect health.

² Translation by Ford (1999:228).

It eats (the other's) flesh without a knife,
 it drinks (the other's) blood without a cup.
 The eye of the wicked man,
 the eye of the wicked woman,
 they approach.
 They approach the eye of the tax collector,
 the eye of the potter,
 the eye of the gatekeeper.³

The evil eye is also commonly associated with envy in Arabic, Mandaic, and Syriac literature (Einszler 1889:216; Canaan 1914:29; Ford 1999:224). Interestingly, as will be demonstrated below, beautiful women are not only vulnerable to the evil eye; they are also frequently encountered as possessors of the evil eye in ancient Near Eastern literature.

THE BEWITCHING BEAUTY

The beautiful beloved quickly overcomes her spiritual insecurity in Canticles 1 by becoming the ocular aggressor in chapter 4:9:

You have captivated (לבב) my heart, my sister, my bride;
 you have captivated (לבב) my heart with one glance of your eyes,
 with one jewel of your necklace.

The use of the Hebrew form of the verb לבב “captivated” in this verse is unique and ambiguous. It is usually interpreted as an allusion to the aesthetic fascination of the women's eyes causing the male to fall in love with her (Spence-Jones 1909:94; Garret 1993:406; Jamieson et. al. 1997:422; Ogden and Zogbo 1998:124; Hess 2005:143). In this view, the sense of the verb would correspond to the common English idiom of stealing someone's heart. Another notable interpretation is that the verb denotes sexual excitation. Pope's (1977:479–480) argument for this interpretation is primarily based

³ Translation by Wyatt (2003:376).

on the use of etymological counterparts in Mesopotamian ritual incantations against impotence. Waldman (1970:215–217) argues that לָבַב, just like its Assyrian etymological counterpart, means “to rage” and thus “to arouse sexually” on the analogy of the Greek development ὀραν “wrath” ὀ“wra “to arouse.” Fox (1985:136) rejects this interpretation on the grounds that the man of Canticles shows no concern about his virility. This rebuttal does not seem convincing, although it has to be conceded that the text focuses on the disarming, and even damaging, effect of the woman’s eye. Keil and Delitzsch (1996:557) list evidence that the intensive form of verbs in Hebrew (*piel*) referring to corporeal members usually signifies the wounding and violent affection of such body parts. The conceptual metaphor conveyed by this turn of phrase could therefore be précised with GLARING CAUSES INJURY. The notion that the man may have experienced the woman’s ocular attention as damaging to his health is further supported by the fact that he asks her to avert her gaze from him in the context of a description that qualifies her beauty as dreadful (אימה) in chapter 6:4–5:⁴

4: You are beautiful, my love, as Tirzah, fair as Jerusalem, terrible (אימה) as the constellations. 5: Turn away your eyes from me, for they assault (רהב) me.

In this case the verb רהב (“act stormily against, rage, pierce, assault”) is less ambiguous and adds to the notion of the beloved’s injurious sight. This is not surprising, since the evil eye is a well-known element of the terrifying beauty topos in ancient Near Eastern literature (Gerleman 1965:182). For example, one finds repeated references to the beautiful, yet destructive, eye of the goddess Inanna in Sumerian literature. In one hymn of praise composed in her honour, the word for “eye” (*igi*)

⁴ The curious parallel use of אימה, “terrible” with “beautiful” and “fair” have led a number of commentators to translate it with “splendid” (cf. Goitein 1965:220–221). This rendering seems unnatural when one considers that the adjective is used elsewhere only once to describe the terrifying might of the Babylonian army (Hab 1:7). In addition, the cognate noun is common in the Old Testament and always designates something terrifying, horrifying, awe-inspiring, a theophany, divine or royal majesty, a monster’s teeth, etc. (cf. Pope 1977:560).

combines with the verb “to be reddish” (חַוּם) to describe her burning and terrifying vision, which makes the Anunna gods flee like bats (Black et al. 1998–2006:n.p.):

My lady, the great Anuna gods fly from you to the ruin mounds like scudding bats. They dare not stand before your terrible gaze (igi huš). They dare not confront your terrible countenance.

This association of beauty with dread has important implications for the Old Testament philosophy of aesthetics. Loader (2011:654), for example, limits female beauty in Canticles to the “pleasing” category in philosophical aesthetics. In his view the effect of the female lover’s beauty is limited to the erotic stimulation of the male observer. Glossing over the terrifying beauty of the female lover as described in the poem of chapter 6:4–10, Loader (2011:661–664) limits the “awesome,” or “sublime” category of human aesthetics in philosophy to male agents only, such as kings and other “VIP’s” in the Psalms. Moreover, in his study on the dark side of beauty, Loader confines his evaluation to the few *femmes fatales* of Old Testament and Apocryphal literature, who cleverly used their beauty to seduce men in power (Loader 2012b:337–343). However, the dark side of female beauty in ancient Israel seems to extend beyond a mere erotic effect to also include the “awesome” and “sublime” categories. Consider, for example Canticles 6:10:

Who is she who burns (שָׂקָה) like the dawn, fair as the moon (לְבַנָּה), clear as the sun (חַמָּה), terrible (אִימָה) as the constellations?

In contrast to the black and burnt beauty of chapter one, the beloved is now likened to the sun, moon, and stars. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for the full moon (לְבַנָּה) is derived from the word for “white” (לָבָן), which contrasts with the “black” (שָׁחָר) used to describe her in chapter one. Where she was looked upon (שָׂרָה) by the sun (שָׁמֶשׁ) and burned by her brothers in chapter one, she is now compared to the dawn (שָׁחָר) and the burning sun (חַמָּה), who looks down on (שָׂקָה) her lover (cf. verses 4–5). Significantly, the harmful potential of visual action is no longer located in the context of envy or anger, but in the context of love. Perhaps this provides the key to an understanding of the most celebrated text in Canticles, which puts love and envy in parallel. In

Canticles 8:6, both love and envy are typified with fire and burning arrows, clearly echoing the burning visual rays of the beloved's evil eye in 4:9 and 6:5, as well as the destructive rays of the envious solar deity and brothers in 1:6:

Set me as an amulet on your heart, as a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, jealousy is as cruel as the grave; their arrows are arrows of fire, a burning flame of God.

CONCLUSION

Researchers have tended to limit the evil eye in the Old Testament to the notions of miserliness and envy in the context of material goods (cf. Tilford 2015:215; Elliott 2016:14–77). Making use of a cognitive linguistic approach to the interpretation of Hebrew idioms, this study has demonstrated that the evil eye was also associated with envy in relation to aesthetics in the minds of the ancient Israelites. Although there are no specific references to the “evil eye” (עין רעה) in Canticles, the specific request of the beloved not to be looked at in chapter 1:6 is best understood against the background of the evil eye belief, which in the ancient and modern world has always been closely associated with envy. Further, the male lover's declarations that the beloved's eye's violently affect (לבב) and assault (רהב) him may also be interpreted against the background of the evil eye motif, which figured prominently in ancient Near Eastern praise literature.

The multifaceted relationship between beauty and the evil eye in Canticles has several implications for the philosophy and theology of beauty in the Old Testament. Loader (2012a:163–179) has emphasised the notion that beauty often served as the cause of blessing and salvation in the Old Testament. However, due to its invitation to envy and its perceived vulnerability to the accompanying evil eye, the association of beauty with misfortune in the Old Testament should not be overlooked.⁵

⁵ Compliance with ethical standards: The author declares that he has no conflict of interest. Ethical approval: This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the author.

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