


# A case of the evil eye in Genesis 16:4-5: A social-scientific perspective

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Received: 17 Feb. 2017

Accepted: 06 May 2017

Published: 28 June 2017

**How to cite this article:**Kotze, Z., 2017, 'A case of the evil eye in Genesis 16:4-5: A social-scientific perspective', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(3), 4530. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4530>**Copyright:**© 2017. The Authors.  
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The nature and function of Evil Eye Belief and Practice (EEBP) in the world of the Old Testament has been understudied. The majority view has been that the belief was limited to the notion of largesse in this collection of literature. This article demonstrated that the idiom קלל בעניים in Genesis 16:4-5, routinely interpreted as a metaphor for scorn on the part of Hagar, could in fact be interpreted as a linguistic vehicle for the concept of the malevolent eye of Sarai. The author argued for an interpretation wherein Sarai, driven by envy, accused Hagar of casting the evil eye on her and used this alleged transgression as an excuse to abuse her slave. The evil eye in the Old Testament was not restricted to the idea of generosity, but was also closely associated with the concept of envy, as has been the case in the majority of ancient and modern cultures in which EEPB has featured. It further confirmed that the social function of the evil eye in the ancient world was not only constrained to the avoidance of envy-related violence but also served as an instrument of oppression in the hands of the rich and privileged. The key method utilised in this study was the social-scientific approach to the interpretation of biblical literature.

## Introduction

The belief in the destructive power of the human gaze has a long history. Ancient Sumerian spells sometimes present the evil eye as an independent entity that causes widespread devastation and misfortune. However, many deities and even humans are often described as causing death or destruction with their eyes (Elliott 2015:77–114). Similarly, in ancient Egypt, the belief in the potential damaging effect of the act of vision with respect to gods, goddesses and human beings was widespread (Borghouts 1973; Elliott 2015:115–150). The fact that this belief has survived the Enlightenment and remains widespread in modern societies in the circum-Mediterranean region and other parts of Africa and Asia suggests that Evil Eye Belief and Practice (EEBP) may serve important social functions in these societies. In the majority of communities where EEBP features, the evil eye is closely associated with envy. In contexts of economic inequality, EEBP seems to serve as a powerful deterrent for social comparison while encouraging submission and inaction among the poor members of society, who are routinely accused of possessing the evil eye. Suspected possessors are often ostracised and treated with contempt and disdain (Reminick 1974).

Elliott (2015:77) suggests that the belief system as it existed in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia formed the basis of similar theories of the power of the gaze in the worlds of the Old and New Testaments. Unfortunately, with the exception of Elliott's academic endeavour and a few isolated studies, EEBP as it exists in biblical literature has remained largely unexplored. Because the evil eye concept is commonly associated with envy in most cultures where it is encountered (cf. Elliott 2016a:83–113), it has been argued that it does not exist in the Old Testament, where עין הרע is limited to the notion of munificence and the lack thereof (Ulmer 1994:1–4). This paper will investigate the possibility that the evil eye is also associated with envy in the Old Testament. More specifically, the complex relationship between the barren Sarah and pregnant Hagar in Genesis 16:4–5 will be explored from the perspective of social sciences with specific reference to evil eye theory. The notorious medieval French and Jewish commentator Rashi suggested that the barren Sarai, upon finding that Hagar was pregnant, cast the evil eye on her slave (cf. Ulmer 1994:112). Elliott (2016b:70) agrees with this interpretation, but the case for this elucidation has not been sufficiently made. Although this construal of events will remain only an alternative to the majority view, this study has as its aim to provide additional support for this reading.

## Towards a social-scientific theory of the evil eye

Elliott (2011) has noted that interpreters of biblical material, although acknowledging social and cultural information, have tended to limit their attention to theological concepts and thought.

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He goes on to argue for a method that interprets beliefs in the context of their economic and social significance. Because all communication is socially and culturally determined, the approach of social-scientific criticism is ideally suited to supplement existing historical-critical methodologies by introducing common social-scientific tools, such as sociology and cultural anthropology. These supplementary perspectives are indispensable, because authors did not include information that they regarded to be common knowledge. Social-scientific studies therefore assist contemporary readers to infer cultural data that are not stated explicitly in the text. Elliott goes on to illustrate the value of this approach with reference to Paul's letter to the Galatians by demonstrating how cognisance of the ancient evil eye belief contributes to a more accurate translation of the text and an appreciation of its logic and the social dynamics at play.

Although the evil eye can almost be regarded as universal because of its widespread geographic distribution and long and seemingly unending history, it remains complex to the point that it defies simple description. It is historically first encountered in the Sumerian incantation literature, where it is described as an autonomous being navigating the land and causing extensive damage and misadventure (cf. Ebeling 1949). The evil eye is not limited to defensive spells, however, and is also commonly ascribed to various deities, humans and even animals in a wide range of genres, such as myths, hymns and tales. In the ancient Near East, EEBP seems to be closely associated with an extramission theory of vision, wherein the eye is conceptualised as a source of light and substance that can either burn and cause damage or heal and protect. Having such a long history and being so widespread, it becomes almost impossible to identify universal tenets of EEBP across the boundaries of time and space. Suspected possessors include humans, gods, animals and mythological beings whose powerful gaze can cause death and destruction. The casting of the evil eye is often described as a voluntary action, but in some cultures a person may not even know that he or she possesses the evil eye, which can operate independently from the volition and awareness of the possessor (cf. Elliott 2015:3). Any person or object, animate or inanimate, is a potential victim of baleful vision. However, because the malevolent eye is most commonly associated with the notion of envy, the beautiful, virile and successful are deemed most vulnerable to its action. Noting that the majority of papers on the subject of the evil eye provide but a fragmented view of the subject, Lykiardopoulos (1981) attempted to develop a structural frame of reference in order to facilitate the organisation of material. To this end, she adapts models for social action from sociological theory and communication science that attempt to identify the author of actions as well as the effects of such actions on the people affected by these actions. In short, the goal is to identify who does what, to whom, how and with what consequences. This approach seems to be ideally suited for any study interested in the social function and dynamics of EEBP, because it forces the investigator to identify the possessor, the victim and the supposed or real effects of the evil eye.

Recently, Gershman (2015) has argued that the evil eye belief originated and developed as a:

useful cultural heuristic prescribing sensible envy-avoidance behaviour under conditions in which destructive envy is a real threat, that is, when wealth inequality is high and formal institutions enforcing property rights are missing. (p. 137)

Accounting for variables, such as spatial and cross-cultural diffusion, socio-economic complexity and exposure to major world religions, Gershman (2015) has found that the incidence of the evil eye belief is substantially higher in societies with an elevated level of socio-economic inequality. The study further demonstrates that the evil eye belief is more prevalent in agro-pastoral societies that rely more heavily on visible and vulnerable material wealth relative to foragers and agriculturalists. Gershman (2015) concludes that:

It is plausible that in weakly institutionalized environments in which the belief emerged thousands of years ago its social benefits manifested in conflict reduction and avoidance of envy-motivated aggression were critical for a proper functioning of a community. However, the evil eye belief also creates a substantial social cost since it discourages wealth accumulation and mobility. From a long-run perspective, the development of strong institutions of private property protection is crucial for rendering this superstition obsolete and unleashing the incentives to invest and produce that are constrained by the fear of envy. (p. 137)

It stands to reason that the ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian societies in which the evil eye is historically first encountered were so weakly institutionalised. It also seems sanguine to expect that economic growth and private property protection should be able to eradicate a millennia old belief system that remains prevalent even in developed countries among people who are well educated and profess to be scientifically minded (Roussou 2014). It may well be true that the belief system served as an important deterrent against envy-motivated violence in the ancient world in view of the fact that envy was vilified in the ancient Near East. However, it may be more responsible to admit that the belief system may also at times have been used as a tool of discrimination in the hands of the rich and powerful against poor and disenfranchised members of society. This paper will explore the possibility that Sarah accused Hagar of possessing the evil eye to justify her harsh treatment of her slave in a bid to ultimately eliminate her from her household.

## Sarah's accusation of Hagar

The saga of Sarai's barrenness and her attempted solution as recounted in Genesis 16 are well known. Following ancient Near Eastern custom, Sarai presents her handmaid, Hagar, to her husband, Abram, in order to overcome the problem of generational continuity. When she finds herself pregnant, Hagar allegedly becomes insolent towards Sarai, from whose abusive treatment she flees into the desert. Here she encounters the Angel of Yahweh, who comforts her, discloses the destiny of the son she is to bear and commands her to return and submit to Sarai. Skinner (1910:284) notes that the editors carefully inserted this narrative between the promise

to Abram of a bodily heir and the promise of a son through Sarah in chapters 18 and 17. Westermann (1981:282) suggests that the material in Genesis 16 should be attributed to the Yahwist (J), who made use of oral traditions dating to the time of the patriarchs. The chapter contains two scenes – one focusing on the rivalry between women and the second on the etymology of the well in the desert. These were expertly combined by an editor (R), making use of priestly (P) material (vv. 1a, 3, 15–16). He (Westermann 1981:280–281) observes that the main motif of the first scene is the enmity between Sarai and Hagar. At this point it may be interesting to note that in Genesis 17, Sarah's name is changed by divine command from Sarai, which can be taken to mean 'she who quarrels', to Sarah, which constitutes the feminine form of a common word for a ruler. Scharbert (1986:140) argues that Genesis 16 was edited making use of material from the Yahwist (J) or the Jehovist (Je) and the priestly writer (P). Levin (1993:147) also identifies a pre-Yahwistic source (J<sup>Q</sup>) and a Yahwistic editor (J<sup>R</sup>), the latter being responsible for the verses that constitute the central focus of this study. Genesis 16, generally attributed to the Yahwist (J), and 21:8–21, mostly containing Elohist material (E), are usually regarded as variants of one tradition – both focusing on enmity between two women (Gunkel 1900; Ruppert 2002:297–302).

Teubal (1990:73–86) laments the fact that the Yahwist, although succeeding in creating a story of intensity and mounting interest, omitted essential details that could have contributed to a clearer understanding of the account. Criticising scholars who focus on the friction and hostility between the two matriarchs, she suggests that the story criticises Abram for instigating disrespect on the part of Hagar, thereby causing Sarai to lose an heir. However, the only evidence that she lists for this theory is the fact that Sarai cursed Abram after Hagar's alleged insolence and the supposition that Sarai and Hagar lived together peacefully for many years after Hagar conceived – a notion that, as has been suggested, was never part of the Yahwistic account. The question remains, if only Abram was to blame, why did Sarai find it necessary to persecute Hagar to the point that she fled into the desert? It may well be that the original account had as its goal an explanation of the significance of Lahai Roi and to raise questions about the character of the patriarch, but the majority of interpreters value the story of Genesis 16 for the fact that it puts social issues, such as race, gender and economic exploitation on the table.

Embracing her African cultural and ethnic background, Weems (1991) chooses to interpret the narrative identifying with Hagar with a bias against Sarai and Abram. In her view, Genesis 16 is all about the social, economic and sexual exploitation suffered by Hagar, an Egyptian slave, at the hands of her Hebrew mistress. Weems (1991:33) emphasises the fact that Sarai, as the wife of a socially prominent and successful herdsman, enjoyed a high social and economic standing. By contrast, Hagar was poor, and because she was a slave, powerless. When given to Abram to produce an heir in Sarai's stead, she was not even asked an opinion or given an option (Gaiser 2014:275). Weems (1991:34) further suggests

that the story is told from Sarai's perspective and that it may well be that Hagar's contempt was imagined, rather than real. Resentful, jealous and paranoid, Sarai not only blamed Abram, but proceeded to punish her slave for allegedly humiliating her by treating her harshly. Noting the danger of a powerful woman who is resentful and jealous, Weems (1991:36) speculates that Sarai's abuse of Hagar included beatings, verbal insults, ridicule, strenuous work, degrading tasks and the like. Although conjectural, Weems's reading of Genesis 16 can hardly be faulted for drawing attention to social factors that may have been at play, although not explicitly mentioned in the text.

Several scholars have demonstrated how consciousness of the social customs and laws regarding marriage and concubinage in the ancient Near East may lead to a better understanding of the content of the Genesis 16 narrative and the relationship between Sarai and Hagar in particular. Steinberg (1994), for example, has demonstrated how the subjects of heirship, marriage and ownership of land influenced family dynamics in ancient Israel to ensure production and reproduction. Angel (2013:214) lists an example from Mesopotamia where a marriage contract from the 19th century BCE advocates that the wife, if she fails to provide offspring within 2 years, has to buy a slave for her husband. Subsequent to providing offspring, the slave could then be sold by the husband. Interestingly, the Code of Hammurabi prevents a slave who bore children in the place of her mistress to claim equality with her (Angel 2013:214). Citing Hagar as an example and quoting from Proverbs 30:23, which lists a slave getting the better of her mistress as one of the problems that causes chaos in the world, Stol (2016) suggests that this was a common situation in the ancient Near East. He goes on to explain that:

A slave-girl would take on a more elevated position if she bore children. Her status was sometimes recognised with a new contract. Old Babylonian marriage contracts state that such a girl would be a man's 'wife' and his wife's 'slave-girl', maintaining the higher position of the first wife. (p. 168)

It is important to note that the position of the slave-wife, even if she bore children, remained insecure. Apart from all the laws that protected the position of the first wife and society's sanction against slave-girls attempting to supplant their mistresses, the fact is that these women could easily be disinherited. According to the laws of Hammurabi, if a man did not recognise a slave-girl's children as his own, they would have no right to inheritance and the slave-girl and her children would be set free after his death (Stol 2016:205). In view of the severity of these social customs and laws, it is to be expected that female slaves in the ancient Near East in Hagar's position would have taken great care not to act carelessly or arrogantly in ways that might upset their husband or mistress. It seems more reasonable to expect that Sarai, upon noticing that Hagar was pregnant, became jealous at the thought of having to share her inheritance with her slave and her slave's children. Driven by her jealousy and greed, she then avoided this outcome by accusing Hagar of casting the evil eye on her, in other words, projecting her own

evil eye, or envy, on Hagar in order to get rid of her. It is not surprising that Jewish legend holds that Sarai cast the evil eye on Hagar (Ginzburg 1913:239; Ulmer 1994:112–113), because the text as recounted in Genesis 16 can, in fact, be read in this way. The first clue is provided by the idiom קלל בעינים, which is used twice in verses 4 and 5:

And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress (וַתִּקַּל גְּבִרְתָּהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ). And Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt (קלל בעינים). May the LORD judge between you and me!' (Gen 16:4–5; RSV)

The sense of this locution seems key to an understanding of the relationship between Hagar and Sarai subsequent to Hagar becoming enceinte. The majority of interpreters read it as a metaphor for derision or imperiousness. Gunkel (1900:324), for example, suggests that Hagar became arrogant. He goes on to say that 'the narrator makes plain that he strongly disapproves of such action on the part of the slave, emphasising the words: she despised her mistress'. Skinner (1910:286) also translates the turn of phrase with 'despise', which he suggests was a natural feeling on the part of Hagar under these circumstances and in the context of an ancient culture that regarded conception and birth to be directly influenced by divine action. Alter (1996:68) chooses to translate וַתִּקַּל גְּבִרְתָּהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ as 'her mistress seemed slight in her eyes' in order to retain the emphasis on sight and seeing which is encountered throughout the narrative. O'Connor (1997:26) argues that the verb קלל means simply 'to treat lightly', suggesting that Hagar treated Sarah as a lightweight, rather than with contempt. Brodie (2001:269) suggests translating the idiom with 'become less', referring to a fall in Sarai's status in the eyes of Hagar. Van Pelt Campbell (2006:283) follows the majority view that קלל should be translated with 'looked with contempt'. Fruchtenbaum (2008:315) correctly observes that קלל is most commonly encountered in the Old Testament in the context of cursing. He explains that 'Hagar displayed the common attitude toward barren women in that day, and she ended up cursing, by lightly esteeming, her mistress'.

Robinson (2013:203) notes that וַתִּקַּל could be construed either as *qal*, in which case it could be translated with 'and her mistress lost esteem in her eyes', or as *hiphil*, 'and she despised her mistress in her eyes'. He opts for the former on the basis of the fact that 'in his/her eyes' does not occur with other occurrences of the *hiphil* form of קלל (2 Sm 19:44; Is 23:9; Ezek 22:7). However, the *qal* form is not consistently accompanied by this extension either (cf. 1 Sm 2:30; Job 40:4). Moreover, it is unclear why he chooses to translate the verb in the *qal* form in the passive voice. Perhaps he just follows the majority of translations, including the LXX, which render the verb in the passive voice in order to identify Sarai as the object rather than the subject of the verb. However, there is no reason, from a grammatical and syntactical point of view, to argue that Sarai did not act as the subject of the verb with Hagar serving as the implied object. The phrase וַתִּקַּל גְּבִרְתָּהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ

could very well be translated with: 'Her mistress cursed [her] with her eyes'. Several objections may be raised against this translation of verse 4. Firstly, the act of cursing is commonly associated with the mouth, not the eyes, which may explain why most interpreters choose to translate קלל as a metaphor for scorn. However, in view of the nature of the evil eye belief in the ancient Near East, it may well be interpreted as a linguistic vehicle for the notion of harm effected through visual action. Indeed, the uttered curse and the mechanism of the evil eye seem to have a lot in common when considered in the context of the ancient Orient (Schottroff 2017):

As elsewhere in antiquity, so too in Israel the curse and its opposite (blessing) were understood primarily as words of power that were thought to take effect magically. The curse was a materialized, harmful force that flew across the earth, overtook the one against whom it was uttered, and brought about his or her destruction. (Zech 5:1–4)

The notion of violence associated with the verb קלל (cf. Ezek 22:7) makes it an ideal vehicle for the concept of the evil eye, which is also associated with misfortune and death in the ancient Near East. Further support for reading קלל בעינים as a metaphor for the concept of the evil eye is provided by the fact that Sarai qualifies this supposed act on the part of Hagar as an act of violence in verse 5: 'And Sarai said to Abram: Let my violence (חַקִּים) be on you'. Teubal (1990:79) may be correct in assuming that these words constitute a curse formula.

A second objection to the above translation of Genesis 16:4 may be that it is explicitly stated by Sarai in verse 5 that Hagar was the subject of this action. However, when one considers that the story is told from the perspective of Hagar (Brodie 2001:286), this need not be the case. In fact, if the locution is read as a metaphor for the evil eye, it is to be expected that Sarai was the author of this action, because the evil eye is most commonly associated with older, barren women (Seligmann 1910:97–99), while the most common victims are pregnant women and young, or even unborn, children (Abu-Rabia 2005:247; Dundes 1981:264). With this in mind, the fact that Sarai accuses Hagar of casting the evil eye on her in verse 5 casts a further shadow over Sarai's character and actions. Not only does she become envious of Hagar but she also, driven by her malicious envy, projects her own evil eye onto her vulnerable slave in the sense that she accuses Hagar of casting the evil eye on her.

A further possible objection to the above interpretation and translation relates to the grammar of the phrase. If Sarai acts as the subject of the action, why is no direct object mentioned in the phrase? In view of the long and complex editorial history of the Sarah and Abraham narratives, as evidenced by source criticism and even the Dead Sea Scrolls, it is possible that an editor, embarrassed by the immoral and conniving nature of his matriarch, simply omitted the personal pronoun identifying Hagar as the direct object, thereby leaving the text to be interpreted backwards in view of Sarai's accusation in verse 5. However, as it has already been mentioned, it is common knowledge in cultures in which the evil eye features that pregnant women and their

unborn children are among the most vulnerable of victims, while older, barren women are frequently expected to possess the evil eye. In fact, because both Hagar and her unborn child were at risk, the narrator may have regarded it as undesirable to mention only Hagar as the explicit victim. In this regard, it is interesting to note that Jewish legend has it that Hagar in fact had a miscarriage as a result of Sarai's baleful eye (Ulmer 1994:112–113). Be that as it may, there is good reason to believe that the original readers of this verse, acquainted with the tenets of the evil eye belief system, read the idiom קלל בעינים within the framework of envy and the evil eye and, more importantly, interpreted Sarai as the subject of this action while Hagar and the unborn child of Abram were the obvious potential victims of her baleful eye. In this perspective, Sarai's actions as described in verses 5 and 6 are motivated by jealousy and envy, rather than righteous indignation as a result of some real transgression on the part of Hagar, as most commentators would have it. Her accusation of Hagar in verse 5 in fact constitutes a projection of her own malice.

To summarise, it would seem that the narrator had the following scene in mind: Sarai, noticing that Hagar is pregnant, becomes envious and casts the evil eye on her. Seeing that her evil eye has no effect, Sarai projects her own evil eye on Hagar, which in the ancient Near East and in the Old Testament is often closely associated with witchcraft (Kotzé 2007; 2013), and puts pressure on Abram to get rid of her by transferring Hagar's alleged violence to him by means of a curse formula. Abram, keeping cool and using a play on words, tells Sarai to do with Hagar what is 'good in your eyes', probably hinting at the fact that she is jealous and possesses the evil eye herself. Sarai then proceeds to persecute Hagar to the point that she flees from her mistress.

## Conclusion

The idiom קלל בעינים, which can literally be translated with 'to curse with the eyes', in Genesis 16:4 is routinely interpreted as a metaphor for scorn and derision – usually described as an action on the part of Hagar directed against Sarai after she became pregnant. However, when read against the background of the ancient Near Eastern belief in the evil eye, the locution is best viewed as a linguistic vehicle for the envy, commonly associated with the malevolent eye, experienced by Sarai upon learning that Hagar conceived. Driven by her envy and to avoid having to share her wealth with her slave and her offspring, Sarai then accused Hagar of casting the evil eye on her, declaring to Abram that Hagar 'cursed' her with her eyes. She proceeded to transfer this alleged curse to Abram to put pressure on him. When Abram refuses to take action by setting his pregnant second wife free, Sarai starts to persecute her to the point that she has no choice but to flee into the desert. Read in this way, this narrative serves as a striking example of how the belief in the malevolent power of vision is utilised in the hands of the rich and powerful to oppress the poor and disadvantaged. The social function of the evil eye belief system was therefore not limited to

preventing envy-related violence by encouraging wealth redistribution in the ancient world, as has been suggested, but could also have been used as a tool for discrimination against and oppression of the underprivileged.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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