

AN INTERPRETATION OF כַּסוֹת עֵינַיִם IN GENESIS 20:16

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ABSTRACT

Near the end of the story of Sarah's adventure in the house of Abimelech in Genesis 20, Abimelech is said to give Abraham a thousand pieces of silver. Addressing Sarah, Abimelech claims that the silver will be a "covering of eyes" (כַּסוֹת עֵינַיִם) for her and all that is with her. The majority of interpreters have chosen a theological paradigm for the interpretation of Abimelech's actions and words. The gift is seen as an expiatory offering, absolving Sarah from the guilt of having been taken in as a concubine while she was in fact married to Abraham. This article attempts an alternative interpretation of the metaphor against the background of the ancient Near Eastern belief in the evil eye and the prophylactic qualities of silver. It is suggested that Abimelech may have believed the silver to have protective value against the baleful look of others.

INTRODUCTION

The "evil eye" refers to a widespread belief in the deleterious power of the eye (cf. Seligmann 1910; Budge 1930:359ff.; Gravel 1995). It is based on the primitive notion that the eye has agency – that it can project light, or, alternatively, when a person is envious or filled with hatred, a harmful substance that settles on the object seen. Historically, the belief is first encountered in ancient Mesopotamia, where it is thought to have originated (cf. Ebeling 1949; Thomsen 2002; Barjamovic & Larsen 2008).

Many scholars have pointed to the curious fact that the evil eye seems to be totally absent in the Old Testament (cf. Brav 1908; Yamauchi 1983:187-192; Ulmer 1994:1-4). The few instances where the evil eye (עֵין רָעָה) is specifically mentioned, it functions as a metaphor for envy and greed, rather than referring to the belief in the destructive powers of the eye (cf. Deut 15:9; 28:54, 56; Prov 23:6-8, 28:22 etc.). This is not surprising in view of the fact that biblical authors had the tendency to rationalise beliefs in magic, witchcraft, and spells. Such beliefs were systematically neutralised and replaced by monotheistic tendencies

to ascribe all supernatural powers to God (cf. Nicolsky 1927:2ff.). In the process, the practice of magic was “Canaanized” and banned, especially by the Deuteronomist (cf. Wazana 2007:689). While there may be no direct proof that the ancient Israelites shared the belief system of the evil eye with their ancient Near Eastern neighbours, Wazana (2007:686) correctly observes that:

Given the evidence for the existence of the belief in the evil eye in the surrounding cultures, the acknowledgement of it in rabbinic sources, and its strong and persistent hold in Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies, it would be odd indeed if this were not an integral part of the worldview of the ancient Israelites in biblical times, one of various forms of magical powers to be reckoned with.

Indeed, despite the efforts of biblical authors and editors to rid the Old Testament of superstitious beliefs in magic, several Old Testament passages refer to the evil eye implicitly. In this article, the evil eye belief will be used as a theoretical framework for an interpretation of the obscure **בַּסוֹת עֵינַיִם**, “cover of eyes”, in Genesis 20:16. Abimelech uses this metaphoric description with reference to the thousand pieces of silver that he gave to Abraham on behalf of Sarah. Commentators have been intrigued by this statement, but mostly agree that Abimelech offered the silver as a proprietary gift to Sarah, since he unwittingly took her to be his spouse while she was in fact Abraham’s wife (cf. Procksch 1916:296; Frey 1950:147; Von Rad 1952:195; Robinson 1977:569; Westermann 1981:401; Weinfeld 1985:431; Wenham 1994:74; Hamilton 1995:70; Mathews 2005:258). Before offering an alternative interpretation in terms of an anthropological model of the evil eye belief, a more detailed overview of the traditional theological elucidation of this expression will be provided.

THE INTERPRETATION OF **בַּסוֹת עֵינַיִם: AN OVERVIEW**

The story of Sarah’s adventure in the house of Abimelech in Genesis 20 constitutes one of the most complicated patriarchal narratives. The narrator

clearly made use of archaic material that had been reinterpreted from a theological perspective (cf. Von Rad 1952:196). The divine protection of Sarah as future mother of the promised heir is emphasised. This central tenet is almost overshadowed by the motif of Abimelech's guilt and fear of God, which is also a theme that had been introduced by a later reinterpretation (cf. Von Rad 1952:196). This dominant topic in the text in its final form has provided the framework for most contemporary interpretations of the significance of Abimelech's gift of silver, and by extension the sense of the idiomatic expression כסות עינים, lit. "cover of eyes," in Genesis 20:16. In this story, Abimelech escapes death through divine intervention as he is warned in a dream not to be with Sarah, since she is in fact Abraham's wife. In view of this, most commentators suggest that Abimelech's gifts to both Sarah and Abraham constitute expiatory offerings to right the wrong that he committed in ignorance.

Von Rad (1952:195) regards כסות עינים as legal terminology, explaining that "die Gabe bewirkt, dass die kritischen Augen der anderen bedeckt werden, dass sie nichts Missfälliges an Sara erblicken können". Robinson (1977:569) is more specific in his interpretation, suggesting that כסות עינים denotes concealment, signifying vindication from suspicion of harlotry. Accordingly, Abimelech's gift was meant to exonerate Sarah from the notion of sexual misconduct. Westermann (1981:401) agrees that the gift was intended to re-establish Sarah's honour and to prevent people from seeing displeasing elements in her life. Weinfeld (1985:431-6), too, views Abimelech's gift as an expiatory offering whereby he atones for his guilt with Sarah. Accordingly, he translates כסות עינים with "ransom". Wenham (1994:74) also favours the interpretation of the gift as a vindication of Sarah, covering people's eyes so they no longer view her as a compromised woman. Likewise, Hamilton (1995:70) suggests that "כסות" is used figuratively and is to be connected with the notion of concealing any kind of sexual impropriety. The eyes of any of Sarah's acquaintances will be blind to any sexual misconduct on her part." Finally, Mathews (2005:258) suggests that כסות עינים and the term נבחת ("vindicated") in the same verse, work together conveying the notion of Sarah's exoneration. The silver is supposed to hide Sarah's shame which had wrongly resulted from the king's actions.

Although the view of the silver as an expiatory gift accords with the theme of Abimelech's guilt, it is often overlooked that Abimelech calls Abraham Sarah's brother when addressing her in verse 16. This, naturally, precludes the notion of guilt on Abimelech's part. In view of this, Procksch (1913:296) regards the thousand shekels as Abimelech's regal dowry to Abraham. The כסות עינים therefore refers to the covering of the community's eyes for her previous status as concubine in Abimelech's harem. Similarly, Frey (1950:147) suggests that Abimelech initially took Sarah without regard for the ancient Near Eastern practice of compensating the bride's family for their loss. The silver serves as a "covering of eyes" for the community in that Abimelech and Sarah's relationship is no longer scandalous. In view of the fact that Abimelech regards Abraham and Sarah as siblings in verse 16, the theory of the gifts as dowry makes sense. However, if the donation to Abraham constituted dowry, it seems unlikely that the silver given to Sarah formed part of this, since Abimelech clearly distinguished between his gift to Abraham and the silver bequest to Sarah. Also, it remains unclear why he would send Sarah back to Abraham if he legitimately acquired her as spouse.

Breaking away from the traditional preoccupation with the moral and theological questions raised by the text in its final form, Gur-Klein (2003) interprets the story of Genesis 20 from an anthropological perspective. She (Gur-Klein 2003:10) correctly observes that lack of offspring constitutes a determining factor in this narrative. Sarah's infertility in Genesis 20 is counterbalanced by her conception in 20:1 after her barrenness was addressed by Abraham when he offered her to Abimelech. In turn, Abimelech rewards Abraham for his role as procurer of Sarah's sexual services after he returns Sarah. Unfortunately, Gur-Klein offers no interpretation of the silver as כסות עינים. Although Abimelech's donation may have served as payment for Sarah's hospitality, the possibility that it was intended as a remedy for Sarah's infertility needs further investigation. In the following section it will be demonstrated that the ancient Near Eastern belief in the evil eye as cause of infertility provides an ideal background for an interpretation of this obscure metaphoric expression.

THE EVIL EYE, INFERTILITY AND THE PROTECTIVE QUALITIES OF SILVER

In early Sumerian and Babylonian incantations against the evil eye, the eye is sometimes described as an independent roving entity, although it is also associated with humans and animals. Significantly, it is described as the cause of all kinds of misfortune, illness, and infertility (cf. Ebeling 1949:203-211). For example, a classical Sumerian incantation against the evil eye, dating from the first Babylonian dynasty, describes the deleterious effects of the evil eye on the weather, plants, animals, human fertility, and strength (cf. Genouillac 1930:12; Ebeling 1949:206-208). In his book on amulets and superstitions, Budge (1930:354) has suggested that the evil eye belief was the most important factor in the origins and development of magic. More recently, Thomsen (2002) has questioned the prevalence of the belief in ancient Mesopotamia and suggested that earlier scholars overestimated its significance in the ancient Near East. However, her review of literature seems to be limited to incantations that are specifically directed against the evil eye, while some Mesopotamian incantations refer to the evil eye only implicitly. For example, the supplicant may pray that his enemy's eyes be covered – presumably in a bid to protect himself against the baleful eye of his adversary (cf. Ebeling 1949:190-193, 197-199).

In the Old Testament, too, references to the evil eye belief are not always immediately noticeable. In her evaluation of the belief in ancient Israel, Wazana (2007:687) lists the story of Balaam as an example. The narrative connects the act of cursing with high places overlooking the people of Israel (Num 22:41; 23:28; 24:2). The theme of seeing and not seeing is also dominant in Balaam's confrontation with the ass (22:21-35). Further, Balaam is called "the man whose eyes are open" (הגבר שתם העין, Num 24:3, 15; cf. 24:4). Interestingly, the evil eye monster associated with the second amulet from Arslan Tash, dating to the seventh century B.C.E., is also called "open eye" in Phoenician (cf. Gaster 1973:21). Another example of a possible implicit reference to the evil eye can be found in Proverbs 10:10, where it is said that pinching the eye (קרץ עין) causes a wound (cf. Kotzé 2007b:476). This obscure idiom is also used in Psalm

35:19 to describe some harmful act on the part of the psalmist enemy (cf. Kotzé 2010). Similarly, the combination עצה עינים in Proverbs 16:30 most likely describe the casting of the evil eye as a witchcraft technique used by the enemy (cf. Kotzé 2007b:471-82; 2007a:141-9). In Job 16:9, Job declares that his enemy “sharpens his eyes” (לטש עינים) at him (cf. Kotzé 2007c:387-94). This, as well as the idiom רזם בעינים “to squint with the eye” in Job 15:12, may be interpreted as an implicit reference to the evil eye.

Wazana (2007:690) has suggested that the belief in the magical powers of the evil eye underlies the biblical metaphor of envy, greed, and stinginess. Utilizing the notion of the evil eye as a model, she interprets Ecclesiastes 4:5-6 as a warning against self-indulgence, which provokes envy, and the evil eye. Verse 5 constitutes a curious proverb: הכסיל חבק את ידיו ואכל את בשרו “The fool folds his arms together and eats his own flesh”. She proposes that the folding of arms is a metaphor for an attitude of aloofness represented by the act of self-embrace. The context also suggests that the fool removes himself from the social network and accumulates wealth. This is deemed foolish, since such an attitude leads to envy and violence. This is further explained by means of the metaphor of “eating flesh”, which is a well-documented motif characterising demonic behaviour and the evil eye (Wazana 2007:694-695).

The classical model associated with the evil eye, namely, the observation of beauty or wealth, leading to envy and culminating in violence, can also be observed in the stories of the patriarchs. In the story of Jacob fleeing from Laban, Jacob first consults his wives, informing them that he noticed a change in his father-in-law’s attitude towards him (Gen 32:2, 5). This change of “face” (פנים) is implicitly linked to Jacob’s increasing wealth (cf. Gen 31:43), and should be read as envy. Jacob clearly associates this envy with evil (רעע, 31:7) and explains to his wives that it had been God who protected him against Laban’s malevolence (Kotzé 2006). When the family decides to flee, Rachel steals her father’s teraphim (תרפים), which probably had apotropaic qualities. A further hint to the interpretation of Laban’s envy as an evil eye is provided by Rachel’s words when addressed by Laban in Genesis 31:35: אל יחר בעיני אדני “let it not burn in the eyes of my lord” (cf. Kotzé 2006). Being a beautiful woman,

Rachel was especially vulnerable to the evil eye (cf. Renne 2002:559-561; Abu-Rabia 2005:241, 247). Also, her initial inability to conceive may have been associated with the evil eye (cf. Abu-Rabia 2005:246).

The motifs of beauty and the inability to conceive are also characteristic of the stories relating to Sarah. It may well be that Abimelech ascribed Sarah's infertility to the evil eye. This interpretation finds support in his choice of words in Genesis 20:16. Calling the silver pieces a "covering of eyes" (כסות עינים) seems to suggest that he believed the silver to have apotropaic qualities, magically protecting Sarah against the harmful gaze of envious people. It is well-known that the ancient Israelites and their neighbours commonly made use of amulets to protect themselves and their belongings against demons, witches, and all kinds of evil forces. This superstition among the ancient Israelites is typically associated with the wearing of various ornaments and jewellery referred to in the Old Testament (Blau 1906:546-547; Budge 1930:213-215). However, it is likely that the ancient Israelites also believed pieces of metal to have apotropaic qualities. Two examples will suffice. The inscribed silver amulets found in a burial site in Ketef Hinnom in Jerusalem, dating to the end of the First Temple period (ca. sixth century B.C.E.), clearly had a protective function (cf. Berlejung 2008). This is not surprising, since silver has always been widely believed to have apotropaic qualities (cf. Finneran 2003:430; Budge 1930:20). Further, the French commentator on the Bible and Talmud, Rashi, claimed that the census of Israel which was carried out with the payment of half shekels to avoid pestilence alluded to the danger of the evil eye (2 Sam 24:1-10; cf. Wazana 2007:686-687). The required imbursement served to protect the people against the evil eye which controlled the census (cf. Rashi on Ex 30:12).

Although Abimelech's claim that his gift will be a כסות עינים seems to suggest that the silver was supposed to protect against the evil eye, it is not clear whether he intended it as protection for Sarah against the evil eye, or against the evil eye of Sarah. The fact that Sarah conceives shortly after this incident suggests that the gift effectively cured Sarah (cf. Gen 21:1). However, Abimelech may also have suspected Sarah of possessing the evil eye, since he

and his wives lost their fertility as soon as Sarah joined his household (cf. Gen 20:17-18). Seen from this perspective, he may have intended the silver to protect himself and his family against her. This alternative finds support in the story of the rencontre between Jacob and Esau in Genesis 32. Hamilton (1995:70) has noted that an equivalent for *בסות עינים* is utilized in Genesis 32:20. Jacob, fearful of meeting his brother Esau, sends gifts ahead in the hope that these will cover Esau's face (*כפר פנים*). This enigmatic expression has to be interpreted against the background of Esau's homicidal rage when Isaac was deceived into blessing Jacob instead of Esau (cf. chapter 27). In addition to his anger, Esau conceivably was envious of Jacob's blessing and acquired riches. The envoy with gifts was probably intended not only to appease Esau's anger, but also to avert his envious evil eye, i.e., to cover his face. Similarly, Abimelech's gift of silver may have been intended to avert the evil eye of Sarah.

CONCLUSION

The ancient Near Eastern belief in the evil eye provides an ideal framework for an interpretation of Abimelech's gift to Sarah in Genesis 20:16. The ancient Israelites, like their neighbours, commonly ascribed infertility to the envious look of others. Also, like many cultures today, the inhabitants of the ancient Near East believed in the protective qualities of metal, especially silver. It seems reasonable to conclude that Abimelech's donation of a thousand pieces of silver was intended to have an apotropaic function as suggested by his explanation that it will be a "cover of eyes" *בסות עינים*. It remains unclear, however, whether he intended it as a protective gift for, or against, Sarah.

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