



*Who has bewitched you?  
Patronage, blessing and the Evil Eye*

## **Abstract**

Relationships and economics in every culture are based around issues of access to resources and their distribution through society . This paper suggests that these issues underlie the functioning of forces of failure such as the evil eye and of success such as blessing, as well as the social institution of patronage. The first half of the paper explores the working of positive and negative forces, understandings of reality and power, and the importance of reciprocity and its role in patronage relationships. The second half asks how these issues are redrawn in the Bible: the Bible's attitude to other forces in a monotheistic perspective, and patronage as a way to understand our relationship with God and grace. Blessing (baraka) and the evil eye in the Bible are also examined: before asking how the three themes inform each other, and in particular how as God's people we can respond to those who may be under-resourced, disempowered, or living in fear of the evil eye.

## **Introduction**

*A group of senior academics, many of them with doctorates from western universities, are discussing the recent death of a colleague. They have no doubt it was the result of the evil eye.*

*Walking along the road in a rural town, I smile at the baby on the lap of a woman sitting on the pavement, selling greens from her basket. The woman wipes her forehead with the back of her hand. It's a hot day, and it might be just a gesture to wipe the off the sweat and dust. But she is using the palm of her hand to ward off evil that might come from me noticing her child.*

*A multistorey office building has just gone up in a wealthy suburb of the expanding capital city. Above the imposing entrance door is the turquoise shape of an eye, a prophylactic device to repel envy, whether from competitors or passers-by.*

In societies where there are limited resources and not everyone has access to the resources that do exist, the problem of distribution becomes a key part of how the community negotiates social life and interaction. Who has access to commodities? How are those commodities are moved through the community from those who possess them to those who require them? In such a context, people seek access to blessing or power to negotiate life's inequities and hazards. And the same context of limited resources and issues of distribution undergirds both the operation of the 'evil eye', and the social mechanism of patronage.

## **Power**

In almost all societies there are rituals, objects or phrases that are used to manipulate power – to attract positive power or avert negative power. Whether it is the rituals or talismans adopted by top athletes before a competition, the ‘touch wood’ protective invocation and gesture, the caution around Friday 13<sup>th</sup> or the number ‘4’ in Chinese communities, the influence of *feng shui* in building designs, or the ubiquitous ‘blue bead’ that has spread from Mediterranean societies to countries around the world, people seek ways to protect themselves against evil and danger, and to attract success and well-being for life. Positive forces are those that are life-giving or life-enhancing, promoting productivity and success: powers of blessing. Negative forces are life-withering or life-diminishing, failure-inducing forces: powers of cursing or sorcery.<sup>67</sup> The powers may be exercised voluntarily, or be involuntary, occurring without a person’s deliberate intent.

We may compare these forces to something like electricity – invisible, but real and powerful. Its impact is felt when we come into direct contact with it! Electricity impacts our daily life, bringing benefits of heat, light and power for the devices we use for life and work: but when it is misused it can have deadly repercussions. So positive and negative forces can be experienced in people’s lives as real, with real-life consequences. And as unintended objects can become conductors of electricity, whether via lightening or the connection of live wires, so these forces may operate through people involuntarily, as well as being used with voluntary intent.

The lives of women can be deeply marked by fertility or barrenness, fundamental life-giving or life-withering forces. Rites of passage, including birth, weddings and also circumcision rituals, are crucial times to seek positive forces of blessing, and protection from negative forces of envy. Women are centrally involved in these times of transition: and often hold positions of

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<sup>67</sup> Douglas 1966/1996: 110-113.

power as practitioners, including midwives, exorcists, washers of the dead, reciters of the Qur'an and *shaykhas*.<sup>68</sup>

## **Failure-forces: Envy and the Evil Eye**

Failure-forces work against others to harm or diminish them, their power or success. Examples include curses and sorcery, using spells or magic to hurt others: and also the force of envy, or the evil eye.<sup>69</sup> The following discussion of the evil eye as a failure-force may offer a way to reflect on other failure-forces, including sorcery and curses.

George Foster originally developed the theory of the 'image of limited good' in the context of small communal closed system societies who view:

*their social, economic and natural universes – their total environment – as one in which all of the desirable things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply. .... If 'good' exists in limited amounts which cannot be expanded, and if the system is closed, it follows that an individual or a family can improve a position only at the expense of others.*

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This understanding of restricted resources is not limited to small peasant societies. A version of it is known as the 'zero-sum-game' in game theory and in economics. We can recognize the same worldview behind the competitive attitudes in companies and sometimes even Christian organisations, which talk of 'fishing in the same pond' for financial resources or

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<sup>68</sup> Musk 1989:118-9.

<sup>69</sup> In many languages the two are used in parallel: to 'envy' someone is actually to cast the evil eye on them. In this paper I will use envy and evil eye as synonyms.

<sup>70</sup> Foster, 1965: 296-8.

recruits. If there are limited funds or recruits or students, then the gain of ‘another’ society or college will mean loss for ‘ours’.<sup>71</sup>

In large societies, individuals or groups can freely compete with one another for limited resources. However in more restricted or more communal societies, such open competition is too destructive of relationships and devastating to the social fabric. In such a context, where one person’s good fortune is understood to mean that others will have less, failure-forces can have the social impact of leveling. Sorcery or envy acts against the success of others, so that one person will not prosper at the expense of others.

Belief in the life-withering force of envy, or the evil eye, exists through much of the Muslim world and beyond – in the Middle East and North Africa, around the Mediterranean and up into Europe, into the Balkans, and it appears in some parts of Latin America.<sup>72</sup> Even where belief in the evil eye does not exist, envy (which underlies the evil eye) is linked with sorcery in countries around the world, among wealthy and poor, highly educated and illiterate. A discussion of the evil eye can be extended to the malignant failure-biased power of envy wherever it occurs.

The ‘evil eye’ is an eye that is believed to be capable of harming, or even killing, living beings by looking at them, whether or not harm is intended by the owner of the eye. Its malignant envious power may be consciously or unconsciously exercised. In many societies, young boys may be dressed as girls, with long hair, as a way of tricking and so protecting them from envious or evil spirits that could harm them. Admiring someone’s new car or their child can draw attention to it, and so attract the notice of malevolent forces. On one occasion as we joined in the seventh-day celebration for the new-born baby of our neighbour’s relatives, the aunt took a piece of paper and tore it into the rough shape of a person. She took a pin and

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<sup>71</sup> See further examples in Mark Wood’s discussion of limited good mindsets in Euro-American thinking: <http://honorshame.com/limited-good/>, posted 9/12/2015.

<sup>72</sup> Elliott notes that while belief in the evil eye is not universal, it occurs in all six major regions of the world: sub-Saharan Africa, Circum-Mediterranean, East Eurasia, insular-Pacific, North America, Central and South America. “In the ancient Near East and Circum-Mediterranean area, it appears to have been ubiquitous.” (Elliott, 2015:39-40) See also <https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/in-a-world-of-limited-good/>, <https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/fear-of-the-evil-eye/>, <https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/envy-and-blessing/> for further discussion of how the evil eye functions in the Muslim world.

began piercing the paper doll, “Against the eye of Ahmed; against the eye of Fatima; against the eye of Hamid...” and we heard our own names in the list. She was not ascribing evil intent to us, but rather protection for the baby from involuntary harm.

Discussion of these forces is linked to an understanding of cause. We often ask ‘*what*’ questions about things that happen - was an accident caused by over-worn tires or by a tired driver? What bacteria made someone sick? However questions about envy or sorcery are usually more ‘*why*’ questions, questions of ultimate cause - why did that passing bacteria get inhaled by this child and not another? Why did the tires blow as the bus was going around the corner? Or why did an oncoming car appear just at that moment?

Mediaeval English lists of herbs (and also contemporary wiccan ones!) include herbs such as anise for protection against the evil eye, or dried dill to be carried in a bag over the heart. Different societies have other means of protection: through the area once covered by the Persian Empire, burning a type of herb seed called *espond* or *esfand* on charcoal is seen as protective; and in south Asia people entering a home may be greeted with the acrid fumes of chili burned for protection. Sprinkling salt is sometimes used to keep envy away. People seek safety by invoking the name of God,<sup>73</sup> or reciting Qur’anic verses<sup>74</sup> or having them painted or displayed in a home or on a vehicle. In many places the colour blue (or red in some regions) is believed to offer protection from envy. Friends offered me blue beads to wear when I was pregnant, or to pin on the clothes of a newborn child (pregnancy and childhood are seen as times of increased vulnerability to evil forces). Other protective objects include the palm of a hand, known as the *khamsa* (five, from the five fingers), or an object in the shape of an eye. The

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<sup>73</sup> *Ma’shAllah* (what God wills) is a commonly-used protective invocation.

<sup>74</sup> *Al-Baqarah* 2:255 (known as the *Kursi* [Throne] verse) is believed to offer safeguard:

“God! There is no god but He, the Ever Living, the Sustainer-Protector. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and on the earth. Who is he that can intercede with Him except with His permission? He knows what happens to them in this world and in the hereafter. And they will never encompass anything of His knowledge except that which He wills. His footstool (*Kursi*) extends over the heavens and the earth, and he feels no fatigue in guarding them. And He is the Most High, the Most Great.” (Al-Hilali & Khan)

Faced with potential evil, Muslims will often use the invocation “I take refuge in God” (*A’udh billahi*), found in *Al-Nahl* 16:98, *Al-Falaq* 113:1 and *Al-Nas* 114:1: see also *Al-Mu’minun* 23:97-8.

print of a hand dipped in blood of a newly killed sheep can be used to safeguard a new car or house or pump.

In Islam the evil eye is referred to in the Qur'an (*Al-Falaq* 113:5) and discussed more extensively in the hadith.<sup>75</sup> John Elliott's recent four-volume study demonstrates that practices related to the evil eye were widespread in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia (Vol. 1) and in Greek and Roman society (Vol. 2): were referred to in the Bible (Vol. 3): and that belief in the evil eye continued to be active in the centuries following the establishment of the early Church (Vol. 4). Elliott summarises the constellation of beliefs around the evil eye, noting "the remarkable cross-cultural and cross-generational consistency in the ideas and motifs associated with the Evil Eye and its aversion – from 3000 BC to 600 CE", which has also continued "from the medieval period down to the modern era."<sup>76</sup> These are:

- ◆ The eye as active, able to project energy that can harm or destroy whatever its glance strikes.
- ◆ The evil eye activated by and conveying envy, miserliness, greed and other related negative emotions.
- ◆ It can be intentionally or unintentionally activated.
- ◆ Its victims include particularly children, birthing mothers, attractive youths, and those enjoying success in life, including in the domestic sphere, sport and battle.
- ◆ Those who are likely to possess the evil eye include widows, strangers, those with physical impairments or unusual eyes or features around the eyes.
- ◆ Defence against the impact of the evil eye can be through words, gestures, rituals and amulets.

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<sup>75</sup> For example: al-Bukhari Book 55 #590, Book 71 #634, 635, 636; Book 72 #784, 827; Sahih Muslim Book 001 #0425; Book 024 #5280; Abu-Dawud Book 1 #0036, Book 28 #3875, 3879; Malik's Muwatta Book 49 #49.12.39, Book 50 #50.1.1, 50.2.3, 50.2.4. <https://www.searchtruth.com/>

<sup>76</sup> Elliott 2017:157 (original capitalisation).

- ◆ The evil eye is claimed to be responsible for sickness, misfortune, defeat in battle or sport, accidents, property loss and death.<sup>77</sup>

### **Success-forces: Blessing**

The opposite of failure-biased powers such as envy is blessing (*baraka*), a success-biased power. Other examples of success-biased forces include *mana* in Polynesian culture, and *luck* (westerners often tend to use phrases such as “we’re blessed” or “we’re lucky” interchangeably). As a life-giving or life-enhancing force, *baraka* can be found throughout the Muslim world. It is believed to bring protection, healing, fertility and fruitfulness, success and well-being. Success-forces are for flourishing.

Blessing is most often acquired through direct contact, when the healing flow transfers from the source or conduit to the person seeking *baraka*. It is common through the Muslim world to see women and men at shrines, praying, touching the shrine, or leaving a piece of material which belongs to the person seeking blessing from the holy person buried there. Blessing can also be gained via imitation: through having a copy of the person or object of power, or through rituals that copy their actions.<sup>78</sup>

Other common sources of *baraka* in Islam can include **objects** like the Qur’an (written or recited), water from the spring of Zamzam at Mecca, or water or oil that has had verses from the Qur’an immersed in it or recited over it: special **times** such as Ramadan: and **places** or **people** who are associated with *baraka*, whether official religious places and practitioners; or sites (trees, rocks or springs) and people who are known to have power in the informal religious sphere.

Women often carry primary responsibility for health and harmony in both social (extended family) and also spiritual domains. Hence they seek *baraka* for healing, fertility, harmony or success in a business venture. I would sometimes sit with women in the extended

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<sup>77</sup> Elliott, 2017:159.

<sup>78</sup> See Taussig (1993) for an engaging discussion of contact, imitation and power across cultures: also Dale (2016:94-97) in this context.

family in my neighbourhood while they recited the Qur'an simultaneously (each one reciting one or two different portions), with the intent of bringing general blessing on the participants and the household where it was held, and on occasions for specific blessing for success in a new business venture, or for healing for someone in hospital.

### Where does reality and power lie?

Some of us come to the Muslim world from contexts characterised by the 'excluded middle' described by Paul Hiebert;<sup>79</sup> we understand the empirical visible world of science, and we believe in God: but we live with a functional agnosticism about other spiritual forces and beings.

	Personal Forces		Impersonal Forces	
Unseen / supernatural	<b>High / cosmic</b>	<i>Allah</i> (God) <i>Iblis</i> (Satan)	<i>Fate / Qadr</i>	Other worldly
	<b>Folk / magic</b>	<i>Jinn, Angels</i> <i>Saints,</i> <i>Other spirits</i>	<i>Evil eye</i> <i>Qur'an</i> <i>Baraka</i>	This worldly
Seen / empirical	<b>Natural</b>	Honour, Family relationships, reciprocity ( <i>wajib</i> )	Folk/herbal remedies, natural knowledge (crops, etc)	

A post-enlightenment worldview can be characterised by a dualism between material and spiritual, the seen and the unseen worlds - the left-hand column in Figure 1. So westerners commonly draw a division between the seen and unseen world, the empirical and the supernatural. Most of our daily life is based on interaction with the empirical world. Our understanding of the unseen world focuses on the high or cosmic level, concerned with God,

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<sup>79</sup> "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," 1994.

Satan, and questions related to the ultimate purpose of this life, and our destiny in the next. We are largely unaware or agnostic with regard to the middle level, unseen and this-worldly. Living with no conscious experience of the impact of these unseen powers, we may be at a loss to know how to understand people for whom the active presence of such forces is part of daily life.

However for many other peoples in the world, the division is between the forces of this world (both seen and unseen), and the other-worldly, cosmic forces, which are beyond our power to control or manipulate - the right-hand column. The this-worldly concerns of life need urgent attention: How can I keep my husband faithful to me? How can I become pregnant? How can I ensure this crop will flourish? Or my children succeed in school? Or a family member recover from illness? Particularly where so much of life is characterized by uncertainty or precariousness, these issues require engagement with the 'folk' unseen powers and principalities of this world which must be placated or manipulated, as much as with seen or empirical 'natural' factors.

### **Patronage and reciprocity**

Relationships offer another way to access power and resources. In societies around the world, reciprocity is the fundamental principle that undergirds the movement of material and social resources within societies: and reciprocity in giving and receiving is the foundation on which relationships are built and maintained. Initiative requires response. To be part of a relational network is to participate in the exchange of gifts: and conversely, to give or receive a gift is to enter into a relationship. This system of gift exchange is never completely balanced: if both want the relationship to continue, then someone owes and someone is owed.<sup>80</sup> And the system is maintained through mutual indebtedness, whether of symbolic, social or economic value.

This is an important dimension for women in many societies, who carry primary responsibility for maintaining harmony in communal relationships (both human and spiritual).

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<sup>80</sup> Rynkiewich 2011:109.

Marcel Mauss in his foundational essay 'The Gift' observes that gift exchange is often linked with rites of passage such as birth, circumcision, menarche, marriage and death:<sup>81</sup> and women are centrally involved at such rites. For this reason too, early rabbinical sources viewed a man preventing his wife from lending kitchen goods to a neighbour or from mourning with a bereaved friend, as grounds for divorce: because not being able to give deprived the woman of the social credit she needed for the future.<sup>82</sup>

Exchanging gifts does not constitute a 'paying off' of indebtedness. Rather, accepting a gift implies the commitment to return a gift, in what is a further 'investing into' the relationship. The aim of the exchange is not independence, but rather interdependence.<sup>83</sup> In this exchange, gifts do not have to be equal, either in substance or in amount. In hierarchical societies, relationship-exchanges are marked by unequal reciprocity. In collectivist hierarchical communities, this exchange of unequal reciprocity takes place through patronage. The patron offers access to resources such as material goods, protection, influence or employment: economic, political or spiritual benefit. And the client responds with public gratitude, loyalty (even when it is costly, for example if the patron is out of favour), and sometimes service, gifts, and visits.

In patronage relationships, the role of the intermediary or broker is important. David deSilva comments: "Sometimes the most important gift a patron could give was access to (and influence with) another patron who actually had power over the benefit being sought."<sup>84</sup> The patron broker incurs a debt, and increases her or his own honour through the indebtedness of the client. Brokerage is a highly valued benefit, where the broker is the *trusted intermediary* who opens the door to a group or individual to whom the client needs access.

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<sup>81</sup> Mauss 1925 / 2016:66.

<sup>82</sup> John Barclay, 2015:25, note 59, quoting S. Schwartz: 'Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society', 2010: p.14, n.26.

<sup>83</sup> John Barclay comments that "recipients of gifts *are* under a strong (though non-legal) obligation to make some return for a gift – even if only in gratitude.... it may be best to conclude more generally that the return of the gift represents the desire to reproduce social relations: each party to the gift-relation is in some sense 'produced' by the exchange between them, and social relations can only be maintained or reproduced in the continual motion of exchange. In this sense, the counter-gift is rarely the end of the relationship, replacing an inequality with a stable equilibrium: it is liable to constitute, rather, a form of 'giving-again,' adding to the gift-relationship a continuing forward momentum." (2015:18).

<sup>84</sup> deSilva, 2000:97.

As we enter other cultures, local people become our patrons in the new community. Whether it is our landlord or landlady, or the head of our sponsoring organisation, they are the ones who give us access to and acceptability in the society which we are entering. Others seek to make us their patrons. It may be by giving us a gift, or else people with whom we establish a relationship – the woman who is our domestic help, the beggar we give to at the door. Life and daily transactions flow along relational lines.

Neither is gift exchange only material. Non-material resources can be some of the most valuable commodities in a society, more important even than life: such as honour, reputation and prestige. Most of the resources described by Foster in a context of limited good are non-material: not just ‘land, wealth, health’ but also ‘friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety’.<sup>85</sup> Paul Hiebert describes the understanding of limited resources in patronage relationships:

*People jealously guard what they have, including relationships. They zealously guard and cultivate their relationships to powerful individuals and seek to reserve the attention of these patrons for themselves. They assume that the bounty of a generous patron is easily spread thin.*<sup>86</sup>

The patronage system is held in place by social sanctions of honour and shame. The honourable higher-status person is expected to act as patron for clients of lower social strata. And for the honourable beneficiary, behaviour such as not returning a kindness or gift, or repaying favour with insult or injury, is to be avoided at all costs.<sup>87</sup> Patronage becomes abusive or destructive when the mutual reciprocity is unbalanced. To give when the recipient is unable to respond - giving in order to control - is to establish relationships of *paternalism* and unhealthy dependency. The client becomes trapped in debt and is unable to balance the

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<sup>85</sup> See his earlier quote. Similarly, Martin Munyao writing on honour in an African context suggests that “honor itself (NOT factors that either maintain or diminish it) is a limited good from man’s (sic) perspective in most African cultures.” <http://honorshame.com/limited-good/>, comment posted November 6 2015.

<sup>86</sup> Hiebert 2008: 136. I am less convinced by his application of this to patterns of learning.

<sup>87</sup> Malina 2001:101.

relationship. And to extort exorbitant favours from the client is to build relationships of *exploitation*, leaving the client in a position of subservience, where the patron does not give in return.<sup>88</sup> A proper model of giving does not disempower the recipient, but enables both to make significant contributions to the relationship.<sup>89</sup>

Patronage relationships can cross gender (and ethnic) cultural restrictions; women patrons may exercise considerable social influence. Lyn Cohick describes how in the early centuries, “With the practice of public and private benefaction, women gained access to centres of influence and persons of power. As a patron, a woman received public honour; with that came the expectation of privilege and respect. ... Benefaction downplayed the gender of the giver.”<sup>90</sup> This is still true today in countries even with strong social divisions around gender, where women take positions of national leadership, often following family lines (for example, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia).

### **What does the Bible say?**

Spiritual powers as well as beings, envy and the evil eye, blessing, patronage – these may be part of life for many, but they are unfamiliar territory for many in the western world. How are we to think about them? And how does the Bible speak into these contexts?

### **Unseen Powers**

As we look at the cosmic view of seen and unseen forces (Figure 1), we note that the Biblical worldview does not let us relegate God only to an upper ‘other-worldly’ dimension, but shows God as present and involved with us. In the Lord’s Prayer we pray to our Father in the *heavens* (ο εν τοις ουρανοις *Ho en tois ouranois*). We address God intimately as a father, and this God

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<sup>88</sup> Chinchen1995.

<sup>89</sup> For discussion of patronage as a model of discipleship, see Chinchen 1995, Hine 2017, and Tino 2008.

<sup>90</sup> Cohick 2009:323.

does not reside far away in the highest of all the heavens,<sup>91</sup> but fills them all, even to the lowest and closest to us. In God's spoken Word, ultimate Divinity is revealed fully in human form. God becomes incarnate and present as part of his own creation, walking among us as one of us. And God's own Spirit is sent now to indwell us. The trinitarian God is cosmic *and* immanent, all-powerful and also (not pantheistic, but) personal and present with each one of us.

For God's people in the Bible, spiritual beings and forces were known among the peoples surrounding them, and part of their encounter with their neighbours. The Bible does not deny the existence of these unseen realities; but neither does it accept their existence and power without question. Rather it reinterprets them according to the Biblical worldview of the all-powerful sovereign creator God who chooses to enter into a relationship of covenant faithfulness with his people. The Biblical writers re-envisage the presence and action of positive and negative powers on the basis of central assumptions about the nature of God that are consistent across the writings in Old and New Testament.

**God is one.** The Bible is monotheistic. There is One God, who is omnipotent; and this God is the Creator of all things, whether physical or spiritual. Some created beings may be rebellious against the One Creator, but this is not a dualistic universe: there is no power (including blessing and the evil eye) that exists outside God's control. God's oneness and omnipotence is also understood within Islam. Our Muslim friends will agree with stories that affirm the power of God (and God through Jesus) over creation, demons, sickness and even death. However the next two assumptions are not necessary corollaries of the understanding of God within Islam.

**God is always good.** From the first chapter on creation, the Bible teaches us that God is a God of order: he is not disorderly, nor is he arbitrary in his actions or in how he responds to his people. As the Biblical revelation continues, it affirms that God is a God of order and constancy; he is not capricious. And it also teaches us that this God chooses to call his people

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<sup>91</sup> The idea of multiple heavens is common across a number of religions. Seven is most often cited in both Jewish and Islamic cosmology. 1 Corinthians 12:2 refers to the third heaven.

into covenant relationship with him, a relationship where he reveals himself as the One who shows faithful love and loyalty (חסד *hesed*) to his people. If God is all-powerful but capricious, we cannot rely on his help against the hostile powers that surround us. But because he is both all-powerful *and* God who reveals himself in constant faithful love and loyalty, we can rest secure in his care in the face of all that threatens us.

**God's initiative requires our response.** Relationship and response go together. While God initiates the relationship through delivering his people (from the flood, slavery, sin), that initiative elicits our response of covenant obedience and faithfulness to God. We are to live in a way that reflects God's character.

This necessarily excludes attempts to manipulate God or make use of powers as though they are disassociated from him (magic is seeking to manipulate powers unrelated to their source). When powers or forces are treated independently from covenant obedience to God, they may be exploited and utilized, but the results can be erratic, unpredictable. Detached from God, they may be attached to or accessed through material objects, operated with intent: or sometimes operating involuntarily, beyond the plans or purposes of people. Disregard of God or disobedience to his covenant entails danger.

## **Patronage**

The covenants in the Bible between God and his people reflect traditional patronage agreements.<sup>92</sup> God invites his people into covenant association, hierarchical relationship with

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<sup>92</sup> Sometimes the obligations on the clients or recipients are laid out, as in the 'suzerain-vassal' covenant in Exodus 19:4-6. Others follow the 'royal grant' model, where God as patron gives a favour unconditionally, with his promise to never again destroy the earth by flood (Genesis 9:11). So too we see God in the New Testament as the generous God who gives rain to the just and the unjust alike (Matthew 5:45). This unconditional endowment to all was exemplified in Roman times in the patron who publicly endowed a city with a fountain or games or an amphitheater. But most often elements of both apply - God gives, and his people are expected to respond. Abraham is given God's blessing to have a great name and nation: but God also calls him to act, by leaving his country, kindred and family. David is given an unconditional promise of a throne (family) that would be established forever - and his descendants are expected to obey the covenant obligations or face God's discipline (2 Samuel 7).

reciprocal responsibilities. However in the Bible the patron-relationship is redrawn. It is not the client or beneficiary who initiates the relationship. Rather it is God, as the most Righteous Benefactor or Patron, who delivers his people, initiating calling them into a relationship where they are to live in a way that honours their Benefactor and reflects his nature. Jesus Messiah is both the most powerful and ultimately self-giving intermediary or broker, who is now at God's right hand, interceding on our behalf.

In social situations the positions of patron, client and broker are flexible and can change in relation to one another according to their needs. This is exemplified in Luke 7:1-10, where the centurion was patron of the local Jewish community, building them a synagogue. But when as a non-Jew he needed access to Jesus, seeking healing for his servant, the Jewish leaders in turn were brokers or intermediaries for him to obtain access to Jesus. In the letter to Philemon, Paul reminds Philemon of his indebtedness to Paul, and Philemon's own character as a benefactor of the early church - and the letter is read in public, invoking the force of honour and shame to increase the pressure on Philemon to accede to Paul's request to receive back his runaway slave without punishing him. And we see women also as patrons: including the widow of Zarephath with Elijah, the Shunammite woman and Elisha, and the women who supported Jesus and his disciples out of their resources.<sup>93</sup>

### **Understanding Grace**

Understanding patronage better gives us more insight into the use of grace in the Bible. The term 'grace' has its primary roots in economic relationships, patronage and reciprocity, the giving and receiving of benefits: and this was the context in which writers and readers of the New Testament understood it. Grace (*χάρις charis*) meant first of all the willing attitude of generosity of the benefactor. It also referred to the attitude of gratitude and loyalty from the recipient. And the secondary meaning of *charis* was the actual gift or favour that was the result of the benefactor's attitude.

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<sup>93</sup> 1 Kings 17, 2 Kings 4:8ff, Luke 8:2-3.

In 'The Gift', Marcel Mauss discusses the three obligations in gift exchange: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive and the obligation to reciprocate.<sup>94</sup> His description mirrors Seneca's much earlier identification of the three Graces of mythology (the Greek *Charites*, or Roman *Gratiae*) with the giving, the receiving, and the returning of the gift. As the Graces perform their dance, the links must be maintained. Seneca commented on their dance that, "the beauty of the whole is destroyed if the course is anywhere broken."<sup>95</sup> In a system of honour, grace must be requited by grace, a favour returned with favour, the gift with gratitude. To not respond to a gift or favour is to break the dance and dis-grace the dance or the relationship.

This reciprocity undergirds God's patronage relationship of grace with his people. In many of the New Testament epistles, Paul describes the gifts and promises that God, our patron, gives us, and then describes how we, as honourable clients or beneficiaries should respond, with gratitude, loyalty, and behaviour that is commensurate with honouring our Benefactor.<sup>96</sup> Initiative requires response: as recipients of God's freely-given grace, we are to live lives of loyalty and public praise, behaving in ways that reflect the honour, character and values of our divine Benefactor.

If in the Bible we see God as showing us what honourable patronage looks like, how does the Bible treat the forces of *baraka* and of the evil eye, also present in situations of limited access to resources?<sup>97</sup>

### **The Bible and blessing - baraka**

*Baraka* in the Bible is God's life-giving power, leading to fruitfulness and success. God blesses the earth to be fruitful, and blesses his people so that they will multiply and fill the earth. As Jesus blesses the loaves and fishes, they multiply to feed thousands.<sup>98</sup> And his blessing flows

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<sup>94</sup> 1925 / 2016:121-126.

<sup>95</sup> Cited in deSilva, 2000:106.

<sup>96</sup> So Ephesians 4:1ff, 1 Corinthians 1:3-10; Galatians 1:3-6. See also John Barclay (2015) for a comprehensive discussion of grace in Paul's writings, with a focus on Galatians and Romans.

<sup>97</sup> Bruce Malina (2001) discusses Limited Good in first-century Mediterranean society.

<sup>98</sup> Genesis 1:28; Psalm 67; Matthew 14:19-20.

out to bring healing and life to those he touches: to children, lepers, a bleeding woman, the paralysed and lame, the demonised and even the dead. Blessing can be linked in the Bible with **places** at different times (Shiloh, the Temple), with **people** (Melchizedek, Balaam, fathers blessing their sons, the priests: Jesus and his followers) and even **objects** (the ark of the tabernacle, Jesus' clothing). It can be passed on through the spoken word, through physical touch, and through anointing oil.

However in the Bible *baraka* is never something to be manipulated or used independently of God who is the source of blessing. Used inappropriately or carelessly it is deadly. Attempts to manipulate this power separate from covenant obedience to God could only lead to danger, defeat or even death.<sup>99</sup> As God's people, living now in obedience to the new covenant law of the Spirit, we are to be conduits of God's power, blessing, to others. Blessing can only be properly used in relationship to the One All-powerful God: and we are to live in obedience to God and reflect his nature in blessing others.

### **The Bible and the Evil Eye**

The Bible refers to the 'evil eye' in both Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament). Old Testament mention of the evil eye (רעה עין *ra'ah 'ayn*) includes Deuteronomy 15:9, 28:54, 56; and Proverbs 23:6, 28:22.<sup>100</sup> Explicit New Testament references to having an evil eye (οφθαλμος πονηρος *ofthalmos poneros*) include Matthew 6:22-23, 20:15; Mark 7:22 and Luke 11:34-35. The destructive impact of envy is also noted (for example, Acts 7:9 [Genesis 37:11]: also Galatians 5:19-21).<sup>101</sup> John Elliott offers a comprehensive discussion of these and related passages, and also of amulets and protective devices mentioned in the Bible, in his Vol. 3. These find their context in the extensive beliefs and practices involving the evil eye in the surrounding societies of the time. However in the Bible, the evil eye is not viewed as an

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<sup>99</sup> Leviticus 10; Deuteronomy 27-28; 1 Samuel 4-6; 2 Samuel 6: see also Acts 8:9-24: Acts 19:11-17.

<sup>100</sup> Other probable references to the evil eye include 1 Samuel 18:9; and Ecclesiastes 4:4-8 (Wazana 2007). See Elliott Vol.3 also for an examination of related passages in the deuterocanonical books.

<sup>101</sup> Further references to the pernicious force of envy can be found in lists in Mark 7:22, Romans 1:29, Philippians 1:15, James 4:2, 1 Peter 2:1. And the gospel writers mention it as the motive of the Jewish leaders in having Jesus arrested: Matthew 27:10, Mark 15:10.

independent force. It refers to people's attitudes of stinginess, meanness and unwillingness to share – the opposite of attitudes that reflect God's generosity.<sup>102</sup> While the 'evil eye' of Hebrew is usually translated into Greek in the Septuagint as 'evil eye' or sometimes as to 'bewitch' (βασκαίνω *baskaino*), English translations of both Hebrew and Greek often translate the phrase 'evil eye' with reference to attitudes of stinginess, meanness or envy.

*What about the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment: You shall not covet what belongs to your neighbour?<sup>103</sup> Is it another reference to the evil eye and prohibiting envy? While there is certainly a relationship between the concepts, they seem to be different. The evil eye is destructive of good that another person possesses. Coveting is more acquisitive, seeking to possess for oneself that which is owned by another person.<sup>104</sup> The second five commandments concern human attitudes and actions, destructive of community: but in a different dimension to the forces of baraka and envy. Again, when we look at the contrasting pole of each, we see that the opposite of envy is generosity. The opposite of coveting is being content with what one has.*

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<sup>102</sup> The description of a 'good eye' is linked to the attitude of generosity (Proverbs 22:9; also Sirach 35:8,10). The Matthew 6 and Luke 11 passages indicate the eye, not as a source of good or evil power in itself, but an indicator of heart attitude to God and others.

<sup>103</sup> Exodus 20:17

<sup>104</sup> "Coveting aims at *gain for oneself*. Envy and an Evil Eye, by contrast, seek *loss for others*." (Elliott Vol.1 3: p.73.) Original italics.

*When the other desiring person, who Girard describes as the mediator of our desire, is at a similar level to us, then rivalry develops, which can quickly escalate into violence.<sup>105</sup> The Exodus command is to not covet, to not enter the cycle of desire, rivalry and violence. The terms are different to those linked with envy and the evil eye. The word in the Exodus passage for covet (חמד hamad) is linked to the word for Eve's desire for the forbidden fruit.<sup>106</sup> The Greek form (epithumeo) is taken up into the discussion of the Law in Romans 7:7ff, Romans 13:9 and James 4:2, with the latter describing the consequent escalation of conflict.*

### **Is your Eye Evil?**

How do these themes of the evil eye, blessing and patronage/grace draw together? Can patronage illuminate the Biblical response to the action of the evil eye in society?

We know that there is no power (including the evil eye) that can operate independently of the One Omnipotent God. And it is this God who calls us into relationship with Him, whereby we can depend on his protection and love from all that might threaten us (Romans 8:35-39). The evil eye functions in a world of limited good, of restricted resources: but God as our Benefactor offers us access to blessing as his promise and power for fruitfulness and flourishing.<sup>107</sup>

Matthew 20:1-16 recounts the parable of the workers in the vineyard. When the time comes to give wages, the landowner, in prodigal generosity, gives everyone a full day's earnings regardless of the amount of time they've worked. When those who were first hired grumble, the landowner asks them, "Is your eye evil (*ofthalmos poneros*) because I am

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<sup>105</sup> For further discussion of the rest of Girard's theory, including conflict and its resolution through the scapegoat, with reference to literature, religions, and the alternative perspective of Christianity, see Girard 1978, 1989, 1996.

<sup>106</sup> Genesis 3:6.

<sup>107</sup> Mark Wood points out that the book of Job shows us God limiting evil, not good. <http://honorshame.com/limited-good/>, posted 9/12/2015.

generous?” In our own attitudes, we are not to harbor envy, but rather to reflect the generosity of our Divine patron.<sup>108</sup>

God gives extravagantly to the vineyard workers who have only worked half a day or even only an hour. And God’s extraordinary generosity that goes beyond what is needed is again demonstrated abundantly in feeding the five thousand men, plus women and children, where the handful of bread and fish blessed by Jesus is not only adequate, but extends to twelve baskets full of leftovers (Matthew 14:13-21). We see God’s expansive provision similarly after feeding the four thousand men plus women and children (this time in non-Jewish territory), with seven baskets full of leftovers (Matthew 15:32-39).

The Bible tells us that this world is not characterized by limited good, but by God’s blessing shown in lavish, overflowing goodness and provision. The omnipotent God is for us as, our patron; and our covenant relationship with him is binding, confirmed by God’s own promise and God’s own Son. We are to respond to his generous blessing with public praise, telling who God is and what he offers those who are his: grace reciprocated by grace, generosity by honour and praise.

However in many of the contexts in which we work, people face limited opportunities and access to education, work and material needs. Their daily experience is of a world of limited good, limited access to resources. How does God’s promise of generous abundance reach their lives? The book of Galatians is one of the places where the Bible suggests the way.

### **Who has bewitched you?**

The epistle to the Galatians is rich with the language of gift and grace, the language of patronage relationship.<sup>109</sup> So Elliott’s suggestion that it also contains a cluster of references to the evil eye should be no surprise.

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<sup>108</sup> The description of a ‘good eye’ in the Bible is linked to the attitude of generosity (Proverbs 22:9; also Sirach 35:8,10). Matthew 6:22-23 and Luke 11:34-35 indicate the eye, not as a source of good or evil power in itself, but an indicator of heart attitude to God and others.

<sup>109</sup> Galatians 1:3-4, 6, 15; 2:20-21; 3:2, 14, 18, 22; 5:4; 6:18.

Paul's letter climaxes at the end of chapter two in his description of the self-giving of the Son, the grace of God (Galatians 2:21-22). It is this grace which opens up the gift of the Spirit, and participating in the blessing of Abraham to the nations: the opposite of that blessing is cursing.<sup>110</sup>

Then Paul goes straight on to ask the Galatians, "Who has bewitched you?" (*tis umas ebaskanen*) (Galatians 3:1). Elliott translates it, "Who has injured you with an envious Evil Eye?" noting that *baskaino* was the traditional Greek expression for harming with the evil eye.<sup>111</sup> He suggests that this allusion highlights a cluster of other references in Galatians 4:12-20 to beliefs and practices associated with the evil eye. Spitting (4:14: *εξεπτυσσατε exeptusate* is to spit, but it is usually translated into English bibles as 'despise' or 'reject') was practised to ward off evil spirits or evil eye. People suspected of having an evil eye included strangers, people with ailments, and those who were blind or had some abnormal feature to do with their eyes. When Paul arrived in Galatia, he had some kind of ailment (4:13), and verse 15 suggests that it may have had to do with his eyes. Elliott suggests that it could have been an aftereffect of when Paul was struck blind.<sup>112</sup> He also mentions an early tradition describing Paul as having conjoined eyebrows,<sup>113</sup> which was also sometimes linked with possessors of the evil eye). Zeal (4:17-18) can also be translated as 'envy'. And the language of children and childbirth highlights times of risk and vulnerability to the evil eye (4:19-20).<sup>114</sup>

How is God's abundant beneficence to be evident in this newly-emerging Christ-community, still under threat from the beliefs and practices of the surrounding societies? Paul calls the Galatians as God's people, to live in a way that honours their divine Benefactor, by reflecting his own self-giving character. Rather than displaying community-destroying, competitive attitudes and actions, they are to be formed into new communities; communities

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<sup>110</sup> Galatians 1:8-8; 3:7-14. And of course Genesis 12:1-4; Deuteronomy 28.

<sup>111</sup> Elliott, Vol. 3: 218ff and 259. This is the traditional expression in the Greek world for injuring with an evil eye (see the LXX translation of Deuteronomy 28:54, 56). Jerome translates it in the Vulgate as *fascinavit*, which is the Latin equivalent for the malice of envy and the evil eye.

<sup>112</sup> This is described three times in Acts (9:3-19; 22:4-16; 26:9-18).

<sup>113</sup> Paul is described as "a man of small stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness." (Acts of Paul & Thecla, c.185-195 CE). Elliott Vol.3:247.

<sup>114</sup> Here we see reflected many of the earlier list of motifs associated with the evil eye.

which demonstrate non-competitive, pro-social behaviour, community-building attitudes and actions (5:19-24). Instead of competing and envying (5:26) they are to reciprocally and sacrificially serve and help one another (6:2, 6). Where people face limited good, limited access to resources, God's promise of blessing and provision is also to be shown through the ungrudging open-handed generosity of his people caring for those in need.<sup>115</sup>

### **Against the Evil Eye**

How may we take this re-reading of the Bible back into contexts where people live with fear of the evil eye? If God is understood as remote, in the cosmic distant dimension, then people will seek the help of amulets and rituals, using power against power, to protect themselves against the evil eye. Stories of God's power may confirm their understanding in his omnipotence, but not challenge a belief in his nature as arbitrary.

So we may instead choose to tell stories of how God is both omnipotent and also personal, who binds himself to us in a relationship of covenant love. The Jesus who raised Lazarus from death is the one who himself is deeply moved to tears by our grief, who cares for two sisters who have lost their protector, and who asks us to completely trust him and his word: "Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see God's glory?" Again he asks his disciples where their trust in him is, as he calms the storm. And he shows his care for a bereaved widow in returning her only son to her alive.<sup>116</sup> As people place their trust in Jesus he heals, even forgives sins.<sup>117</sup> And God's relationship of covenant love with us is utterly secure, even beyond death itself. In response to God's generous blessing in our lives, he also empowers us to speak of him, and to act with generosity in ways that reflect his honour and glory.

The Bible calls us to oppose the evil eye by acting in ways which reflect God's generosity. And we are also empowered to speak blessing, as recipients of God's blessing,

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<sup>115</sup> For other examples, Acts 9:36; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15.

<sup>116</sup> John 11:1-43, Luke 8:22-25, 7:11-16.

<sup>117</sup> Luke 8:48, 50; 5:20; 7:50

particularly through the powerful indwelling Spirit of Christ. Admiring babies or new possessions may expose them to the malignant power of the evil eye. Rather than words of admiration, we can speak words of blessing, of God's power for protection and healing over babies, and those who are vulnerable. We are not called to admire: but as God's people we are empowered to bless with the power / *baraka* of God.

## **Conclusion**

In societies of limited good, where there is restricted access to social and material resources, the evil eye acts as a life-diminishing power. The opposite, *baraka*, or blessing, is a life-enhancing power. Patronage relationships of unequal reciprocity and mutuality allows patrons to receive honour and loyalty in return for giving their clients or beneficiaries access to needed material or sometimes relational provisions.

The Bible does not dismiss or deny the evil eye. It describes the evil eye in terms of meanness and lack of generosity. God as our divine Benefactor calls us into relationship with Him, offering us his blessing and power. And He calls us into relationship with one another, to live in ways that honour God by reflecting his character through generous giving and sacrificially building each other up. Grace, gifts of blessing, are not given for the sake of the individual recipient, but to build up God's people, the body of Christ.

People need not fear the malevolent power of the evil eye not only because of God's power, but also his faithful covenant commitment to us in loving loyalty. God's unlimited generosity and power in blessing is the opposite of limited good and restricted access to resources. And this bountiful blessing is mediated by God's people, as they live lives of sacrificial and extravagant generosity to those in need, and which transmit God's power and protection to the vulnerable or weak.

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