

Good Eye/Bad Eye

You simply cannot decipher phrases like “beat around the bush,” “kick the bucket,” or “get someone’s goat” by breaking them down word by word. Your best guesses might lead you wildly astray. To “catch a person’s drift,” you need to know the culture. Understanding a few Jewish idioms can unlock Jesus’ strange saying about what kind of “eye” we should have: The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! (Matthew 6:22–23)

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We can crack this cryptic saying about the “eye” by hearing it within its Hebraic context and grasping the figures of speech Jesus was employing.⁴ The Hebrew language uses “eye” in many idioms that describe a person’s attitude toward others. Jesus was most likely comparing the idea of having a “good eye” with having a “bad eye,” two idioms that have been a part of the Hebrew language from biblical times until today.⁵ Having a “good eye” (ayin tovah) is to look out for the needs of others and be generous in giving to the poor. But to have a “bad eye” (ayin ra’ah) is to be greedy and self-centered, blind to the needs of those around you.⁶ You can find Jesus using the “bad eye” idiom to describe stinginess elsewhere, such as in his parable about a farmer who hires workers all day long and then pays all of them the same at day’s end. When the early workers grumble, the farmer responds, “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or is your eye bad because I am generous?” (Matthew 20:15, pers. trans.). Both expressions also appear in Proverbs: “The stingy are eager to get rich and are unaware that poverty awaits them” (Proverbs 28:22). In this line, “the stingy” is literally a “bad eye.” Or this: “The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor” (22:9). Here, “the generous” is literally a “good eye.”

The idea of having a “good eye” or “bad eye” comes from how Hebrew expands on the concept of “seeing,” using it to describe one’s attitude and response toward others. To “see” can even mean to respond to a need. Once again a Hebrew verb ties a mental activity to its expected physical outcome. When Abraham was on the verge of sacrificing Isaac, God provided a ram in his place. So Abraham named the mountain “The LORD Will Provide,” which is literally, “The LORD Will See” (Genesis 22:14).⁷ What Abraham meant was that when God sees our need, he will certainly respond—God has a very “good eye.” Jesus’ teachings about having a “good eye” or “bad eye” also show how perfectly he fit into first-century Jewish reality. Only a few decades after him, Rabbi Joshua declared that “a bad eye, an evil inclination, and the hatred of humanity drive a person from this world.” He too preached that selfishness and greed destroy our lives.⁸

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