

A Syrian-Christian Perspective on the Supernatural

Whenever anyone looks with envy upon beautiful objects, the ambient air becomes charged with a malignant quality, and that person's breath, laden with bitterness, blows hard upon the person near him. This breath, made up of the finest particles, penetrates to the very bones and marrow, and engenders in many cases the disease of envy, which has received the appropriate name of the influence of the evil eye.¹

And so Heliodorus, in his novel *Aethiopica*, presents a perspective on the topic that will form the supernatural focus of this presentation – the evil eye. Providing a context for this supernatural focus is late-antique Syrian society, with a particular emphasis on the attitudes of Christian figures within that society (specifically John Chrysostom). Hence the investigation considers contemporary material and literary evidence including the comments of John Chrysostom (with the views of other non-Syrian church fathers also considered). Given the focus on the evil eye, the concept of envy in Greco-Roman society, and the related ideas of vulnerability and limited good, will be presented as notable, and relevant, concepts for our understanding of the evil eye, and the early church's discourse with it.

The subject of the evil eye and the responses of church fathers towards it, has already been the topic of previous scholarship. The most relevant of these studies has been Matthew Dickie's article "The Fathers of the Church and the Evil Eye" which highlights the ambiguities inherent in various church fathers' attitudes towards the evil eye.² Dickie writes that while the fathers do not accept that the eyes of envious people can actually harm, they do concede that "the virtuous and the fortunate" have reason to fear envious forces: "In essence they continue to believe in the evil eye, but qualify the

¹ *Les Éthiopiennes*, 3.7.3; tr. Lamb (Heliodorus, *Ethiopian Story*, tr. W. Lamb, London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd. [1961] 75-76).

² Particularly Basil, Jerome, Chrysostom, Tertullian and Eusebius of Alexandria. See M.W. Dickie, "The Fathers of the Church and the Evil Eye," in H. Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine Magic*, Dumbarton Oaks (1995) 9-34). On the evil eye in the New Testament, see Yamauchi's interesting discussion on the evil eye and Galatians (E.M. Yamauchi, "Magic in the Biblical World," *Tyndale Bulletin* 34 [1983: 169-200] 36); and Elliot's discussion on the evil eye in Galatians (J.H. Elliott, "Paul, Galatians, and the Evil Eye," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 17.4 [1990] 262-273).

expression of their belief to make it philosophically and theologically respectable”.³ Dickie proposes that the approaches of particular fathers of the church towards the evil eye can be linked with earlier ‘pagan’ philosophical discourse. This paper will offer an alternate thesis, namely that the ambiguities in the church fathers’ attitudes to the evil eye can be related to social conceptions of *baskania* and envy, and are thus not so much related to a ‘pagan’ past and present, but a broad Greco-Roman world-view evident throughout Mediterranean society, irrespective of the religious adherence of the members of that society.

The Evil Eye

Belief in the evil eye, usually called *baskania* or *phthonos*, prescribed that misfortune could result from envy.⁴ Thus those aspects of life which could induce envy were also those that were the most vulnerable, such as good fortune in the form of success, fame, wealth, beauty, pregnancy and youth.⁵ These were susceptible to the envy of humans or daimones, and this envy would result in the experience of misfortune (for the envied).

Consequently people sought to defend themselves, their communities⁶ and their livelihoods^{7,8} from this misfortune. Although methods for protection varied, apotropaic

³ Dickie, “The Fathers of the Church,” 11.

⁴ Belief in the evil eye is almost universal. It can be traced throughout most periods of recorded history, and apart from variation in the forms of protection, it pays little heed to religious affiliations.

⁵ On definition, see also Dickie, “Fathers of the Church,” 12-13, 30.

⁶ Consider for instance the Christian holy person (ascetic or monk), who Brown argues, “was supposed to replace the prophylactic spell to which anyone could have access; his blessing made amulets unnecessary”. (Brown, P., “The rise and function of the Holy man in late antiquity,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 [1971: 80-101] 100.) Indeed these popular, and potent, individuals were considered able to protect entire communities, in life and even in death (See e.g. Theodoret, HR, 26.28, 17.10. Also J. Leemans, W.Mayer, P. Allen, & B. Dehandschutter, *Let Us Die That We May Live*. *Greek homilies on Christian martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria, c.AD350-AD450*, London & New York: Routledge [2003] 127-128.).

⁷ The unseen force of the evil eye was capable of maiming livestock and blighting crops. Consequently herds and flocks were said to have had crosses marked on their heads in order to protect them from pests. See J. Russell, “The Archaeological Context of magic in the early Byzantine Period,” in H. Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine Magic*, Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection (1995: 35-50) 37; and R. MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press (1997) 143.

⁸ It is worth noting here Prentice’s assertion that people also protected their shops with inscriptions. Indeed protection of a trading premises may also have been achieved through other means, as we have a reference to a Roman practice of placing an image of saint Symeon in front of the building in order to protect the business. (See, for example, Theodoret, HR, 26.11.)

symbols and inscriptions can be found on amulets, clothing,⁹ lamps, household articles,¹⁰ decorative features,¹¹ and buildings¹² across the Greco-Roman world. In the eastern empire, for example, there were a few popular types of amulet designs, or inscriptions, used to protect people from the evil eye. These included: the seal of Solomon;¹³ the much-suffering eye;¹⁴ the rider saint;¹⁵ the Alexander medallions;¹⁶ formulaic phrases;¹⁷

⁹ See H. Maguire, "Magic and the Christian Image," in H. Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine Magic*, Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library (1995: 51-71) 61, 63-64; and *ibid.*, "Garments pleasing to God: The Significance of Domestic Textile Designs in the Early Byzantine Period," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990) 215-224.

¹⁰ See particularly Russell, "Archaeological Context of Magic," 45; also K.M.D. Dunabin, & M.W. Dickie, "Invidia Rumpantur Pectora," *JbAC* 26 (1983: 9-37) 21-2; J. Engemann, "Zur Verbreitung magischer Übelabwehr in der nichtchristlichen und christlichen Spätantike," *JbAC* 18 (1975: 22-48) 26, 29; C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press (1950) 99; and E.D. Maguire, H.P. Maguire, & M.J. Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House*, Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press (1989) 3-4, 194.

¹¹ D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, Vol. 1, Princeton: Princeton University Press, London: Oxford University Press, & The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff [1947], 28-34, 262-263, 321-323. See also K.M.D. Dunabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, esp. 169, 341; also F. Heintz, "Magic Tablets and the Games at Antioch," in C. Kondoleon (ed.), *Antioch. The Lost Ancient City*, Princeton: Princeton University Press & Worcester Art Museum (2000: 163-167) 163; and Maguire, "Garments pleasing to God", 216.

¹² See particularly G. Downey, *Antioch in the Age of Theodosius the Great*, Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press (1962) 133-134; and W.K. Prentice, "Magical Formulae on Lintels of the Christian Period in Syria," *American Journal of Archaeology* (Second Series. Journal of the Archaeological Institute of America) 10.2 (1906) 137-150. See also John Chrysostom, *On Matt. hom 54/55*, PG 58.537. On the evil eye note, as an example, an inscription accompanied by crosses that is clearly intended to repel the evil eye. It reads: "Of this house the Lord shall guard the entrance and the exit; for the cross being set before, no malignant eye shall prevail against it". (Downey, *Antioch in the Age of Theodosius*, 133. See also Prentice, "Magical Formulae", 141).

¹³ The Solomon gems usually involve Solomon depicted on horseback piercing an enemy (sometimes a female victim, possibly Lilith or a lion.), or more simply involve the inscription of the text of the trisagion – *σφραγ<ις> <ο>λομονος [ἐ]χι τευ βασκανιαν*. (See Bonner, *Magical Amulets*, 210; and J. Russell, "The Evil Eye in Early Byzantine Society," *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 32.3 (1982: 539-548) 541; also for an example from Syria, see SEG 7.232).

¹⁴ The assaults on the eye usually included: wounding from above by a spear, a trident, or by one or more daggers; an attack of animals such as dogs and lions; pecking by cranes and ibises; and stinging by scorpions and snakes (Bonner, *Magical Amulets*, 97). This image sought to discourage daimones by illustrating the endless torture which would be suffered. Russell proposes that through such a depiction the evil power embodied in the eye is cancelled by the 'magical' effect of the suffering it undergoes from the various hostile forces depicted as attacking it (Russell, "Archaeological Context of Magic," 41-42). For an example see Maguire et al., *Art and Holy Powers*, 216.

¹⁵ See examples from Syria in SEG 36.1313-1318, 35.1558; also see Maguire et al., *Art and Holy Powers*, 217; and Bonner, *Magical Amulets*.

¹⁶ For the use of coins as apotropaic devices see H. Maguire, "Magic and Money in the Early Middle Ages," *Speculum* 72.4 (1997) 1037-1054. On the popularity and potency of coins with a depiction of Alexander the Great on them, see esp. p.1040. Regarding the potency of the image in late antiquity, and particularly its supposed popularity with charioteers, see also F.G.P. Heintz, *Agonistic Magic in the Late Antique Circus*, PhD Dissertation: Harvard University (1999) 178-182.

¹⁷ See especially Bonner and his collection of Syrian, and Palestinian amulets (*Magical Amulets*, 208-228. On the use of a few words of a verse or using abbreviations see MSF, 23.

and representations of certain animals.¹⁸ As an example of their method, the much suffering eye and rider saint depictions presented images of the eye itself suffering through various attacks on it, and hence repelled the evil eye by showing it its potential fate.

John Chrysostom makes reference to various apotropaic practices evident in the community. For instance, the preacher speaks about people in Antioch “who use charms and amulets, and encircle their heads and feet with copper coins of Alexander of Macedon”.¹⁹ Chrysostom does not praise this action, criticising people for placing hope in an image of a former Greek king. This was not to be the only instance in which he would observe and condemn the use of amulets, indeed he even finds himself having to address people’s retorts that their amulets did not constitute idolatry as they were simply charms.²⁰ What is striking about John’s retort, however, is his disbelief that amulet-users are unashamed to fear such things now that they had heard the Christian message. At first there may be an inclination to think that John is dismissing the fear of the harmful spirits repelled by these practices.²¹ Yet, it becomes clear that his concern lies not with people’s fear of daimones, but with the persistence of that fear despite the protection of the Christian God. Thus he urges them to say: “I leave your ranks, Satan, and your pomp, and your service, and I join the ranks of Christ. And never go forth without this word.”²² For John these words, accompanied by the sign of the cross on the forehead, shall provide an armour of weapons, that neither a person nor the devil shall be able to penetrate upon

¹⁸ For instance, the representations of large birds, such as wading birds, as well as attacking snakes and other reptiles, were “widely accepted as symbols of the victory of good over evil of every kind.” (Bonner, *Magical Amulets*, 214.)

¹⁹ John Chrysostom, *Ad illuminandos catechesis* 2.5; PG 49.240. Translations of Chrysostom here and throughout the thesis are based on the *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* (<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2>), unless otherwise cited). Many Alexander amulets have been found; see Wyss, “Johannes Chrysostomos,” 266. On the coins of Alexander see note above.

²⁰ *Hom. 8 on Col.*, PG 62.358. Also *Hom. 4 on 1 Cor.*, PG 61.38 14-20; and *Hom. 10 on 1 Tim.*, PG 62.552; and *Ad illuminandos Cat. 2*; PG 49.240 33-35.

Note also, it appears from Canon 36 of the council of Laodicea that the leaders of the wider church community, like John Chrysostom, were also keen to reduce the use of amulets. This ruling prohibited the clergy from themselves providing amulets.

²¹ It must be noted here that these amulets could have included a broader range of powers such as protection against other daimonic threats or even healing qualities.

²² *Ad illuminandos Cat. 2*; PG 49.240 53-55.

seeing.²³ John encourages the same action to be used for children to protect them from the evil eye and other dangers.²⁴ In a world in which people utilised the apotropaic methods thought the most effective, regardless of religious affiliation, Chrysostom is promoting a ‘stronger’ form of protection that involves allegiance to the Christian God, the signing of the cross on the body, and the wearing of the cross as an amulet.²⁵

However, it was not just the Christian gesture, amulet, and incantation that John asserted as potent; the shield of baptism also attracted his attention. In the protection of babies or children, in particular, a number of traditional or local practices were used in Syria that concerned the church father. Amulets and bells were hung around babies for luck, inscriptions (*γραμματεία*) were put on their head immediately after birth, and children had red ribbon tied around them.²⁶ In addition women and nurses marked children’s faces with mud while bathing them in order to avert the evil eye, fascination, and envy.²⁷ For John Chrysostom the concern lay in this action compromising the sealing which was provided by the priest at the child’s baptism.²⁸ He states:

God has honoured you with spiritual anointing; and do you defile your child with mud? ... And when you should inscribe on its forehead the Cross which affords invincible security; do you forego this, and cast yourself into the madness of Satan?²⁹

Finally, John Chrysostom was also to address people’s practice of utilising the apotropaic power of ligatures (*legaturae*), texts, such as gospel texts, written on paper and kept in a sack worn around the neck. He comments on women and children

²³ John Chrysostom, *Ad illuminandos cat.* 2, PG 49.240 57-61. On the apotropaic features of the ritual language prescribed in baptismal instructions see Kalleres, *Exorcising the Devil*.

²⁴ *In ep 1 ad Cor. hom. 12*, PG 61.106.

²⁵ For other references to the use of the cross see: John Chrysostom, *Hom 8 in Col.*, PG 62.357-8; *Adv. Jud. Or.* 8, PG 48.940. Wilken raises an interesting point in relation to John’s promotion of the cross in the context of his homilies on the Judaisers. Wilken argues that for John Judaism posed a threat because it may have seemed more powerful to his congregation than Christianity and would thus have been able to swing people’s allegiance. John’s primary goal, in his view, was therefore to win back Judaisers to the Christian rites and to provide them with the power of the “sign of the cross” which could ward off daimones (R.L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and The Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1983) 87-8).

²⁶ John Chrysostom, *Hom. 12 on 1 Cor.*; PG 61.105, *Comm. on Galatians*; PG 61.623. See also MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism*, 143.

²⁷ *Hom. 12 on 1 Cor.*; PG 61.106 9-38. Salt, soot, and ash were also used (*On Col. hom.8*; PG 62.359).

²⁸ Maguire, “Magic and Christian Image,” 61. It should be noted here that the baptism of infants was probably minimal compared to adult and death-bed baptism.

²⁹ *On 1 Cor. Hom. 12*, PG 61, 106 9-38 (trans. Chambers).

suspending the Gospels from their necks for use as a powerful amulet, and urges them conversely to carry the Gospel with them in their mind as their guardian.³⁰ The power of the gospel is not here denied, merely the form in which it is used. As with the sign of the cross, John Chrysostom promotes an apotropaic power which is differentiating itself from traditional and popular methods, in this case assigning power to memory and learning and the language of scriptural texts. By dismissing tangible forms of protection, Chrysostom is asking people to shift their understanding and perception of communicating with, controlling, and repelling the daimonic, arming Christians with a ritualised language to protect them from the daimonic.³¹

Envy

But what of the more specific threat of the evil eye – the threat of envy? Once again I call upon John Chrysostom. In his commentary on a passage in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, Chrysostom interprets Paul’s reference to the envious eye to mean that the deeds of the Galatians, being praiseworthy, incited the envy and harm of a daimon.³² In so doing Chrysostom asserts that behaviour deemed praiseworthy could incite envy and bring about harm. John then proceeds to state that the human eye itself is not harmful, while not discrediting the idea that envy has a natural power to injure:

And when you hear of jealousy in this place, and in the Gospel, of an evil eye, which means the same, you must not suppose that the glance of the eye has any natural power to injure those who look upon it. For the eye, that is, the organ itself, cannot be evil; but Christ in that place means jealousy by the term.³³

Basil of Caesarea also discusses envy and the belief in the power of *baskania*. In his homily, *On Envy*, he comments on how envy and the evil eye are perceived and although he rejects some ideas as ‘popular fancies’ and ‘old wife’s tales’,³⁴ he does not dismiss the power of envy. Instead, he asserts that:

³⁰ John Chrysostom, *De statuis hom. 19*; PG 49.196 37-46.

³¹ Kalleres provides a strong argument for the potency of ritual language in emerging Christian baptismal discourse. (See D.S. Kalleres, *Exorcising the Devil to Silence Christ’s Enemies: Ritualized Speech Practices in Late Antique Christianity*, PhD Dissertation: Brown University (2002) esp. Introduction & Chapters 1-3, which relate to John Chrysostom).

³² *Commentary on Galatians*, PG 61, 647 55-648 32 (trans. Schaff).

³³ *Commentary on Galatians*, PG 61, 648 32-37(trans. Schaff).

³⁴ PG 31, 380 24-42 (trans. Wagner).

the devils, who are enemies of all that is good, use for their own ends such free acts as they find congenial to their wishes. In this way, they make even the eyes of the envious person serviceable to their own purposes.³⁵

Thus Basil does not dismiss the harm that can be caused through envy, indeed its daimonic or devilish association cannot but be seen as deleterious.³⁶

Chrysostom's teacher, the rhetor Libanius, provides further insight into contemporary concerns on envy. Libanius' references to envy often concern behaviour, including his own, and its appropriateness or modification so as not to attract the attention of misfortune. For example, the rhetor's words to a friend implying that envy, and daimonic or divine association with it, were linked with behaviour.³⁷ In addition the rhetor shows concern that the praise given to three boys would put them at risk from the gaze of the evil eye.³⁸ Praise, it seems, invoked the attention of the malevolent force. This is an idea which Libanius shared with two church figures; namely Tertullian and Eusebius of Alexandria.³⁹

The reason for envy's assigned potency will now be considered. That is, why was it considered such a threat? It is here proposed that vulnerability within a framework of the 'notion of limited good' can be seen as a significant influence in the prominence and associated threat of envy and the evil eye within late-antique society.

Let us look at an early twentieth-century passage from an essay on *Das Unheimlich* by Freud. He wrote:

One of the most uncanny and most universal forms of superstition is the fear of the evil eye. Apparently, man always knew the source of that fear. Whoever possesses something precious yet frail, fears the envy of others. He projects onto them the envy

³⁵ PG 31, 380 24-42 (trans. Wagner).

³⁶ See also Dickie, "Fathers of the Church", 21.

³⁷ *Ep.*127.1. It should be noted that his concern for envy often involved deliberate retaliations (utilising the supernatural) made against him by rivals considered to be envious of him. Thus these incidents are not clearly associated with the evil eye, however, they do demonstrate that envy was seen as a powerful force. See *Or.* 1.42-44, 1.62-63, 1.98-99, 1.159, 1.171-178, 1.194-196, 1.245-250, *Or.* 54.40, *Ep.* 844. For a discussion of these instances see also S. Trzcionka, *Relating to the Supernatural. A case study of fourth-century Syria and Palestine*, PhD Dissertation: University of Adelaide (2004) especially chapter 5 (sections 3.1 and 3.3).

³⁸ *Ep.* 1403.1-2; See Dickie, "The Fathers of the Church," 13.

³⁹ See Dickie, "Fathers of the Church", 27-29.

he himself would feel in their place. Such sentiments are betrayed by glances, even if we suppress their verbal expression.⁴⁰

Though this is a comment from the twentieth century, there are distinct similarities between the mindset portrayed here and that which is seen represented in the evidence above. It appears from the material and literary evidence that men, women, and children were all susceptible to the dangers of the evil eye and envy in Syrian society. What made them vulnerable can largely be associated with those things that were highly valued within that society. So children, wealth, good fortune, looks, honour, and health, were all valued aspects of life that could make an individual vulnerable to envy,⁴¹ and therefore ultimately to harm.⁴²

Here it is proposed that the susceptibility of the valuable and the fear of envy can be related to the notion of limited good (a concept already utilised by Phillip Esler in his work on New Testament communities).⁴³ Limited good is the belief that all goods are limited, both material and non-material; for example, food and honour. Therefore, given that these goods are all finite, there is only a particular amount of anything available, and one person gains something at the expense of another.⁴⁴ This idea of limited good means that something which is highly valued in a society, such as money or honour (the latter, though intangible, extremely valued in the Greco-Roman world), is especially valuable for not only is there not an infinite amount of it, someone else has missed out, and what is more, upon losing it, it is not so easy to regain. Thus, I would argue that that which is valuable and also limited is especially ‘vulnerable’, vulnerable in the sense of even

⁴⁰ Freud, “Das Unheimlich” (c.1917-20) in H. Schoeck, “The Evil Eye. Forms and Dynamics of a Universal Superstition,” in A. Dundes (ed.), *The Evil Eye. A Casebook*, Madison, Wis: The University of Wisconsin Press (1992: 192-200) 195.

⁴¹ For an interesting and relevant investigation into the Evil Eye and envy in India, see D.F. Pocock, “The Evil Eye – Envy and Greed Among the Patidar of Central Gujerat,” in A. Dundes (ed.), *The Evil Eye. A Casebook*, Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press (1992) 201-210.

⁴² Interestingly for John, and his contemporary Basil of Caesarea, the envious are also victims of their own jealousy. Chrysostom, *On 2nd Cor. hom. 27*, PG 61.586-588; *On Gen. hom. 46*, PG 54.427-428; *On I Cor. hom. 31*, PG 61.262-264; *On Rom. hom. 7*, PG 60.447-452. In addition Basil, *Hom. 11, On Envy*, PG 31.371-386.

⁴³ Esler applies this theory to antique Mediterranean society and I believe demonstrates its applicability to the Greco-Roman world (P.F. Esler, *The First Christians in their Social Worlds. Socio-scientific approaches to New Testament interpretation*, London & New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁴⁴ Esler, *First Christians*, 35.

having it, but also vulnerable to the ‘eyes’ of those who do not have it . That is, it is vulnerable to envy.⁴⁵

The danger of envy is that it manifests itself in supernatural force. Thus it is provided with the potency necessary to bring about misfortune for the envied. Recall, for instance, Basil of Caesarea’s comments on the devil’s use of the eyes of the envious for its own ends,⁴⁶ and also the literary sources and the material evidence that assert its malevolent force. This supernatural potency and association is not, however, singular. The world-view of the late-antique Syrian included supernatural forces within it, often with no religious alignment, intent or association. Indeed the supernatural was seen as a part of the everyday world, a force that could impact life either negatively or positively and under the direction of, or independent of, human machinations.⁴⁷ It is within this understanding and situating of the supernatural that envy and its potency exists.

I propose then that the ambiguities identified by Dickie in his work on the church fathers and the evil eye can actually be read through the social context of those church figures. Dickie identified ‘ambiguity’ in the church fathers’ attitudes, because although the fathers rejected popular ideas on the transition of misfortune, namely the human eye, they accepted the idea that envy was harmful. I suggest that this apparent ambiguity can be explained as social compliance. Firstly through conforming to the social belief in the threat of envy and its supernatural potency. That is, members of late-antique society operated within a mind-set in which all things were limited and thus ultimately vulnerable to envy. Figures of the church, as members of that society, were not divorced from this mind-set. They also acknowledged how vulnerable things were and how malevolent envy was not just to the envious but to the envied. This was not a hangover of a ‘pagan’ past, it was a social reality, operating within the late-antique ‘social framework’. Secondly, the consequent discourse on the method of its harmful transition, that is, the actual human eye or the devil, (and subsequently methods of protection), represents the transference of Christian power into the social framework of envy and the

⁴⁵ See also A. Dundes, “Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye: An essay in Indo-European and Semitic Worldview,” in A. Dundes (ed.), *The Evil Eye. A Casebook*, Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, (1992:257-312) 266.

⁴⁶ *Hom. 11, On Envy*; PG 31.380 24-42.

⁴⁷ I elaborate on this point in Trzcionka, *Relating to the Supernatural*, esp. the conclusion (Chapter 11).

evil eye. Thus Christian discourse demonised or satanised the threat of envy and then presented Christian divinity, symbols and language as the most potent form of protection against this threat. Furthermore, it promoted this potent protection for operation within the wider social context in which the threat of envy existed; for envy, and hence the evil eye, was ultimately social.

In conclusion then, I would argue that in reading on the evil eye, for example, it is not feasible to read for a purely religious discourse simply because supernatural forces are involved. Indeed we must be aware of the influential social context which frames the opinions of the fathers and therefore, if not taken into consideration, also ultimately frames our interpretation of their extant words.

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