ly riches. While avarice and luxury are universally denounced in apocalyptic critique, one can discern ambiguity about renunciation of wealth and Christian commercial activities; renunciation is held as an ideal but relativization of wealth is practiced through almsgiving. We have also seen how the Christian, eschatological hope offered an alternative reality and identity markers in Christian social contexts and how the eschatological discourses both encouraged and constructed Christian social ethics.

Wendy Mayer

5. The Audience(s) for Patristic Social Teaching

A Case Study

When we reflect on the audience of social teaching by the Fathers of the Church, it is not unnatural to look first to the most overt of patristic media for the delivery of moral instruction—the sermon. In a book titled *The Media Revolution of Early Christianity*, however, the author, Doron Mendels, challenges us to broaden our perspective. He proposes that *Eusebius's Ecclesiastical History*, an overtly nonethical text, nonetheless has at its core the message that the Catholic Church represents the right order in society. This message, he argues, permeates the stories recorded, and is demonstrated "in many ways, such as helping the sick and setting a moral example by maintaining purity within family life . . . and in embodying such virtues as honesty, peace, simplicity, love of neighbor, and love of God." By emphasizing that "in many fields of life Christians . . . provided an outstanding moral example," Eusebius, he concludes, shows how they "contributed by their pure behaviour to the welfare of society." Mendels identifies the audience at which this message is aimed as the broader gentile Graeco-Roman community, rather than Jews, reasoning that


the latter would have been uninterested, since they adhered to the same moral values. Similarly, Richard Finn, in his study of almsgiving in the later Roman empire, shows how not just sermons but texts such as the Acts of Peter and the Acts of Thomas give prominence to the practice of almsgiving, in this instance using it "as a marker of the doctrinal orthodoxy recognized by their authors and redactors." The Apostolic Constitutions is yet another type of non-homiletic text that constitutes a source of instruction concerning good ecclesiastical and social order. Like the apocryphal Acts just mentioned, this too has its own peculiar audience. It was compiled in the Syrian milieu as an alternative body of canonico-institutional material with its own (apostolic) claim to orthodoxy. Joseph Mueller, who has recently produced a monumental study of its Old Testament ecclesiology, proposes that the Apostolic Constitutions is not just a compendium of earlier sources, but has its own literary integrity and that it emerges in opposition to the pro-Nicene canonical material that was assembled by Meletius, bishop of Antioch, and promoted by the emperor Theodosius I. It is this anti-imperial and anti-Nicene stance, and its rapport with Bible and tradition, Mueller argues, that explains the text's particular reading of the Old Testament. It also explains why citations of the Old Testament are more frequent in the Apostolic Constitutions than in its sources. The point to be made here, firstly, is that not just sermons, but a wide variety of media were utilized by the early Christians to convey social ethical teaching. A second, more important point is that each medium and each text within that medium had their own specific interests in promoting social teaching, and that those interests were intimately connected both with the community within which it was produced and with its target audience.

Bearing those points in mind, the texts that allow us to scrutinize the community that produced them and the audience towards which they were directed in the greatest detail remain sermons. In the remainder of this article a focused study of patristic preaching, with particular attention to the homiletic oeuvre of John Chrysostom and the topics of the proper use of wealth and care for the poor, will be employed to illustrate particular points regarding the relationship of context, message, and audience. At the conclusion, reflection will be offered on the relevance of these issues more generally for contextualizing patristic social thought.

A point that Mendels makes in his discussion of the media strategy adopted by Eusebius is that he accommodates his message to the conceptual world within which his intended audience was raised. That is, Eusebius makes it easy for his audience to identify with his claim for the universal benefit to society of Christian virtues by normalizing it to the Greek literature and philosophical virtues familiar to an educated Greek-speaking audience. This same point can be made of the social teaching offered in the homilies of John Chrysostom. On the topic of slavery, for instance, John will on one occasion use a Stoic model to argue that slavery is an adaphoros, which has no bearing on the inner virtue of the Christian. On another occasion he construes slavery within a Platonic framework to argue that the slave is a model of a properly philosophical life that every Christian should emulate. On yet another occasion he invokes an Aristotelian view of slaves, when he argues that they are passionate, not open to impression, intractable, and not very apt to receive instruction in virtue. This

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1. Ibid., 210.
3. Const. ap. 4.1–2, in particular deals with helping others in need, giving, the proper use of money and other social teachings. On the moral instruction contained in church orders in general see Finn, Almsgiving, 116.
5. Ibid., 210.
9. In 1 Cor. hom. 19 (PG 61, 157–57). John concludes (157): "Christianity is like this: in slavery it becomes the gift of freedom. Indeed, just as the body which is invulnerable demonstrates that it is invulnerable when it is struck by an arrow and suffers no harm, so the person who is strictly free is revealed when, even though he has masters, he is not enslaved. It is for this reason that Paul bids 'remain a slave': If it is impossible for a person who is a slave to be a Christian, as they ought, Greeks will condemn true religion as substantially weak, just as, if they learn that slavery in no way harms the true religion, they will marvel at its teaching." See also In Iobs. hom. 80 (PG 59, 416).
10. In 1 Tim. hom. 16 (PG 61, 389–90).
is through ill breeding and the fault of their masters, rather than nature, he allows, but nonetheless serves to underline his main point: that if Christianity can impose restraint upon a class inherently so self-willed, it makes the power of the true philosophy that has so reformed them all the more admirable. John's approach to teaching his audiences about the proper attitude towards poverty and the use of wealth is not dissimilar. On more than one occasion John used the Stoic idea of indifferents (adiaphora) to explain to his audience that poverty and wealth are in themselves neither good nor evil. Those values attach rather to how a person endures the one or uses the other. Wealth used for the benefit of others becomes a good; when directed towards appropriating what belongs to others, towards greed and violence, it is converted into the opposite. This same basic Stoic understanding of poverty and wealth, allied with one of the Cynic paradoxes—that poverty is wealth—is utilized by John in his second homily on the parable of Lazarus and the rich man to explain why one should not consider the rich blessed nor despise the poor. In the case of Lazarus, it is not the rich man who is truly rich, but the man who is to all intents and purposes utterly poor. The use of this paradox serves his message that it is not our lot here on earth that really matters but what happens when we face God's judgment after death. It is then that the masks are stripped away and the true nature of the rich person and the poor person are revealed. This approach of formulating the Christian message within the hearer's own framework of symbols and ideas, is one that had been adopted from the very beginning of Christianity.

This same basically Stoic framing of wealth and poverty is employed by John not just when he is preaching to a lay audience, but also in a lengthy letter that he writes to the deaconess Olympias and her ascetic community on the topic that no one can in reality be harmed except by their own self. There, as part of his broader message concerning the proper exercise of virtue, he seeks to teach that wealth is to be shunned and cast aside, while poverty in itself not harmful, if one endures it nobly and with true philosophy. In this instance the level of education and social standing of his immediate audience is clear. Olympias was raised at the highest level of society and a significant number of her companions were either members of her own family or women from families that were of senatorial status. Olympias is at this point in exile in Asia Minor. Since a large number of the women in Olympias's ascetic community at Constantinople were former servants—she is said to have brought fifty from her own household into the community with her—and since she is unlikely to have gone into exile without them, this raises an interesting question about the audience to which patristic ethical teaching was addressed. In general slaves would not have had the level of education expected of Olympias and her peers and therefore on the face of it were excluded from

11. In Titum hom. 4 (PG 62, 686). I am indebted to Noel Lenski (University of Colorado, Boulder), who is in the process of writing a book on slavery in late antiquity, for these observations on "John Chrysostom on Slavery," lecture, Center for the Study of Early Christianity, The Catholic University of America, March 9, 2006. Lenski makes the point that when he talks about slavery, John displays his own conformity to his cultural setting. He has no interest in teaching that an institution that is a normative element of Graeco-Roman society and integral to its economy is an injustice that should be overcome. His reflections on the topic assume that it is an immutable social structure that may be open to abuses that can be corrected, but on the whole slavery is more useful to him as a source of exemplo for promoting other ideas about the moral way to live one's life.

12. For a detailed study on the philosophical underpinnings of his discourse on these topics see G. Vassilios, "Aspetti dell'opera di Giovanni Crisostomo," Koinonia 23 (2001): 157–204.

13. See, e.g., De poverta fratriam non erudenda (PG 51, 155–56); De Lazaro conc. 1 (PG 48, 981); Iudaeas: Ego dominus deus fanc lumen (PG 56, 147–48); CE, De Lazaro conc. 1 (PG 48, 1002), where the same idea underlies the argument that not even wealth can benefit the person who is lazy, while not even poverty can harm the person who is alert. It is neither poverty nor sickness that compels a person to curse God, but rather disposition or dejection of virtue.


17. On the strong Platonic, Cynic, and Stoic resonances in this letter, which is in effect a treatise, see A. Malapart, Lettres d'Alex (SC 107; Paris, 1964), 19–26.

18. Quod nonnisi ludiam sed aetipos 10 (SC 101, 106–8).


20. In families of this status had tutors is suggested by the fact that the empress Eudoxia was tutored by Panephius, who was later consecrated bishop of Nicomedia (Soz., HE 8.6.6). At that stage she was being raised as a foster child in the household of Propius, military commander for the eastern empire. See also, "Aelia Eudoxia (wife of Arcadius)," in De Imperatoribus Romanorum: An Online Encyclopedia of Roman Emperors, available at www.roman-emperors.org (accessed 2002).

21. On the date of the letter (winter 406/407 CE), see Ad Olym., ep. 174-46 (SC 131b, 84), where John in his final surviving letter to Olympias says that he has sent what he recently wrote on the topic that no one can be harmed except by oneself. On the date of that letter (spring 407), see R. Delmaire, Les lettres d'Olympe de Jean Chrysostome: Études de chronologie et de prosopographie, Recherches Asiatiques 15 (1903): 148; on the date Olympias went into exile (405), see ibid., 85.

22. Vita Olym., 6 (SC 131b, 418).
the message that the letter conveyed. They may well have been intended, however, to be a secondary audience, not through hearing the written message, with which they would not readily have identified, but through seeing the message exemplified in the behaviour of the women within their ascetic community to whom the message was directed. This possibility is raised by Mendels, who argues that, if we see the bulk of patristic texts prior to Constantine’s conversion as mission-oriented, then for the gentiles who could not read or who were not interested in “listening to the Christian ‘charter,’ the personal moral stance radiated by the Christian organization became an important media asset.” Decades after the conversion of Constantine, we see this same point made by John Chrysostom. For a preacher, the imprinting of right moral behaviour upon the Christian community served an important secondary purpose. It was to their behaviour, he constantly told his audience, that non-Christians looked when they assessed the effectiveness of Christian teaching and the value of Christianity as a religion. Through their behaviour Christians communicated a significant moral and social message to the wider community. When we assess John’s social ethical teaching on the giving of alms, on voluntary poverty, usury, and similar topics we should always keep this secondary audience in mind.

Christians who demonstrated through their actions the type of social ethical behaviour that John was trying to inculcate could as readily become an effective teaching tool not just for the non-Christian community but for other Christians. In his first sermon on Genesius John states that he wanted to add some arguments about charitable giving, but deems it pointless when there is a far more persuasive example present in the church in the form of their bishop, Flavian. Once again, his actions are more powerful than any word. This is a man, he tells his audience, who has taken the house he inherited from his family and devoted it to the care of strangers to such a degree that it can scarcely be said to belong to him. Yet precisely because it is almost literally theirs, it is to be thought of as his possession more than ever. The lesson this teaches is that what we possess is especially ours, when we use it not for our own benefit, but for the benefit of the poor. By exploiting the convenience of being able to point to a living example the message is communicated in multiple ways. John communicates it to his immediate audience through his sermon; Flavian communicates it to the rest of the audience and to the wider Christian community through his actions; Flavian’s actions and the altered behaviour of the audience are then expected to communicate the message to the wider, non-Christian community. There may in fact be another dimension here. John is careful to add that the actions he holds up for emulation are not indiscriminate. The strangers towards whom the bishop extends his charity are people who have been driven to Antioch from elsewhere on account of the true, that is, Nicene faith. This reminds us that at Antioch at the time that this sermon was preached there were at least three separately worshipping Christian communities: an Arian or Anomoean community, a Nicene community led by Bishop Evagrius, and a larger Nicene community into which John had been baptized and in which he served as a priest. It was this latter community, of which Flavian was bishop, within which John preached. When we talk, then, of the Christian community to whom the message was directed or by whose actions it was further disseminated, we need to take care to discriminate. It may be that one of the secondary target audiences of social ethical teaching was not just the wider non-Christian community, but heterodox Christian groups.

There is also a tertiary audience that needs to be brought into consideration. John’s success as an instructor of social ethical behaviour and as an exegete of the Gospels of Matthew and John and of the Pauline epistles, whose

24. E.g., In Col. hom. 10 (PG 64, 568); “For what if he (your master) is a Greek, while you are a Christian? It is not the mask (role), but the actions that are examined”; In Titam hom. 4 (PG 64, 568); “If a Greek master were to see his slave who had been instructed in the virtuous way of life in Christ but playing a greater self-control than their own philosophers... he would in every respect admire the power of the Gospel. For it is not from doctrines that Greeks assess doctrine, but from a person’s actions and their way of life.” The same thought underlies John’s instructions on the correct way to return to the city after celebrating the festival of a martyr (Hom. in martyros; PG 50, 661–66): “the person returning from viewing martyrs should be recognizable to all—through their gate, their appearance, their gate, their compunction, and their composed thoughts.”

content often prompted John's ethical instruction, was so great that texts that had been intended primarily for the specific communities of Antioch and Constantinople were transmitted to other geographic areas. They were also translated into other languages. We find them, too, re-used in their original or in other forms by Greek- and other language-speaking communities in later centuries. The most extreme example of this latter practice are the forty-eight Elogues, each of which is a pastiche of genuine Chrysostomic exegesis and teaching derived from multiple homilies, treatises, and letters, reshaped to suit the needs of a Greek-speaking community in what appears to have been the tenth century. In regard to the broad transmission of John's genuine works, which contain social teaching, an early example is the translation into Latin by Anianus of Celeda of the series of homilies which comprise his commentary on Matthew and which contain a great deal of material about almsgiving, voluntary poverty, and the proper use of wealth. The translation was completed by c. 420 CE. The translator, Anianus, was closely engaged in the Pelagian controversy. Pelagius in turn held strong views against the holding of wealth. This raises the issue of how John's social teaching was received when it was read aloud in communities beyond those for which it had originally been intended.

The transmission of John's social teaching into other languages and language communities also reminds us that both in Antioch and Constantinople, John on occasion preached to congregations who were either bilingual or who comprised a mixed audience of whom only a portion spoke and understood Greek, while another portion spoke and understood only Gothic or Syrian. 32

At Constantinople, which in the late fourth century as the capital of the eastern half of the Roman empire, attracted visitors from various regions of the western half of the empire as well as from all over the east and Egypt, Latin-speakers, Syrian-speakers, Gothic-speakers, and Greek-speakers could all be present on the same occasion. Regardless of the composition of his audience John never deviated from teaching in Greek. This raises the possibility that the non-Greek-speaking sectors of the audience either failed to receive his message altogether, because they could not understand it or that for their benefit there was provided simultaneous translation. Even if they had access via simultaneous translation, since his preaching was accommodated to the symbols, ideas and cultural norms of a Greek-speaking and Greek-thinking audience, we must ask to what degree a Latin-, Syrian- or Gothic-thinking and speaking group would readily have identified with or accepted his social message.

Thus far we have defined John's primary target audience as Greek by language and education and, at Antioch at least, as belonging to the larger of two separately worshipping Nicene Christian communities. Those communities were in competition with, in turn, a separately worshipping Arian community and a vibrant Jewish community. 34 While the notoriety of his career at Constantinople may give the impression that there John presided over a city that was uniformly Nicene, caution too must be exercised in this instance. In one of the first sermons that he preached in that city he indicates that the Nicene community was as yet quite small, comparing it unfavourably to the size of the community to whom he had preached in Antioch. 35 He in fact states that the church building in which he preaches is surrounded by heretics. 36 This is not unsurprising when we consider that until 381 the churches of Constantinople had for some fifty years been in the possession of the Arian community, that Anomoean monks had long been working in the city, that a large portion of the military command infrastructure and troops stationed near the city whom the lesson had been read and a sermon preached in Gothic. Since John preached his own sermon in Greek, either the congregation was bilingual or the sermon was translated simultaneously.

36. See Cat. II (SC 501b, 247–65), De statuis hon. 10 (PG 49, 187–98), and Hon. habita postquam proclamat Gathus (PG 63, 499–510). In the first two instances less well-educated Syrian-speakers from rural areas of Syria were present; in the third the congregation was comprised largely of Nicene Gothic to
were Arian, because as Goths that was the version of Christianity under which they had been converted, and that the Novatian community, a rigorist sect of Christianity, continued to possess churches in the city and enjoy the patronage of the eastern emperors even after Theodosius I had declared Nicene Christianity the approved religion. One other primary target audience we identified were the educated women who belonged, even in exile from Constantinople, to Olympia’s ascetic community. We identified a secondary audience in the form of the wider non-Christian community and perhaps also one or more of the local heterodox Christian communities. A number of tertiary audiences were also identified in the form of Christian communities elsewhere in the world to whom John’s social teachings were transmitted, often in translation, or communities who centuries later extracted what they deemed valuable from his teachings and reformulated it to suit their own purposes. Having pursued the question of audience in ever broadening circles, we now reverse direction to narrow down the focus and to turn to a more minute examination of John’s audiences in each city and to explore further how this impacted on his social teaching.

Of his extant sermons the most direct that John ever preached at Constantinople on the topic of wealth is unarguably the homily that he delivered while the most powerful and feared public official in the eastern empire, the consul-eunuch Eutropius, cowered at the altar of the episcopal church, in fear of being handed over to the emperor’s troops for execution. Because of the presence of the fugitive and the shock of his deposition, the church was full to overflowing. On the day following this newsworthy event, people from every sector of society jostled to be present. He likens the breadth and size of the crowd to the attendance at Easter. Men who would normally forego church to conduct business, and women who might otherwise have been engaged in running the household are among those present. The exception to his audience is the imperial household (he carefully invokes the absence of the emperor, who remains not too far away from the church in the palace). Also absent is the army, who is baying for Eutropius’s blood.39 In these circumstances, when John has the entire city as it were hanging on his word, we find the same techniques employed in the service of his message that we observed in his first sermon on Genesis. Initially he addresses his lesson solely to Eutropius. Wealth and power are empty and fleeting, as he has so frequently tried to teach him.40 Only this time there is no need to take John’s word for it. By his very circumstances Eutropius can no longer avoid the truth of the message that wealth is not just difficult to hold on to, but that it can even become the death of the person who possesses it. From this single, almost literally captive member of his audience, John then turns to everyone else who is present. Eutropius at this point becomes John’s co-teacher in his message concerning poverty and wealth.41 His fate, his presence, the consequences of his actions are woven into John’s instruction as a powerful demonstration of the truth of his words and an effective medium for communicating his message. Simply from seeing this most powerful and rich of all men brought so low, a rich person would have their arrogance and conceit knocked out of them and would depart reflecting on human affairs in the philosophical way that they ought. A poor person would be comforted, no longer despising their state, realizing that their poverty affords them security. Slaves would, presumably, reflect on their own situation in a similar way.42 These are in essence the same messages that poverty and wealth are masks and that in poverty there is true wealth that we have seen transmitted in other sermons.

What is more significant here is that John draws an even more powerful message from action about forgiveness of one’s enemies and about social justice. The church, which has so generously and compassionately given Eutropius sanctuary, is the same church of which Eutropius had long been an enemy and from whom he had by legislation taken away the right of sanctuary.43 Eutropius, John makes a point of saying, is the first person to break his own law.44 By his actions he shows that he has learnt the lesson that Christians forgive

40. PG 51, 192: “Haven’t I said to you constantly that wealth is a runaway slave? But you wouldn’t put up with us. Didn’t I say that it’s an ungrateful servant? But you didn’t want to be convinced.”
41. PG 51, 193–95.
42. PG 51, 394.60–395.22.
43. PG 51, 394.29–30.
44. PG 51, 394.29–30.
their enemies. It is the audience, who are angry towards their bishop for giving so despised a public figure sanctuary, who have failed to learn to put into action the precept that they pray regularly in the Lord's prayer. By standing up to the anger of the government, the military, and popular rage, the church demonstrates the truth of Jesus’ own command concerning forgiveness. As the Gospel of John shows, when Jesus welcomed the prostitute who touched his feet, he was in no way harmed, but on the contrary transmitted his own purity to her. The time he has finished the sermon, the audience has been moved to tears. By exhibiting forgiveness and begging the emperor to let Eutropius, whom they hated, live, John argues, the audience will have taught an important lesson about compassion not just to the emperor, but to the entire population of Constantinople and ultimately, as news of their behaviour spreads, to the entire Graeco-Roman world. In this homily thus, while John begins by addressing his message to a single person, Eutropius, the audience he targets keeps expanding. Through the actions of Eutropius his message about the proper way to regard wealth is directed towards the full range of people in his audience; to that same audience, through his own actions he, as representative of the church and their bishop, teaches them about forgiving their enemies; by adopting his teaching, together he and the audience can then focus their message on the government, via the emperor; and through the success of that Christian social action they will then persuade the entire known world of the effectiveness of Christian ethical teaching. The ripple effect of just this one Christian precept (forgiveness of one’s enemies), he argues in this sermon, can be powerful indeed. This is an exceptional primary audience and an exceptional occasion, but it serves to show that John knew how to exploit the parameters of his audience and the circumstances available to him to their fullest extent in the service of communicating important Christian ethical concepts.

A different point is illustrated when we look more minutely at his audience at Antioch. Here it is interesting to observe that in promoting the Christian ethic of using one’s possessions not for oneself, but for the care of others in need, John was aware that the Christian ethos he was trying to inculcate often conflicted with social views prevalent in the Graeco-Roman empire and more locally at Antioch. As I have argued elsewhere, in a world in which the notion of “limited good” permeated the way in which people viewed their own possessions in relation to the possessions of others, any person who could not support themselves and needed assistance from others to survive was treated with considerable suspicion. At the same time the apostolic teaching that it was the duty of the lay Christian community to care for widows and orphans had by the late fourth century become institutionalized to the point that the Christian community at Antioch believed that it was the duty of the church and its clergy to care for the poor in society, rather than being their own personal responsibility. John was obliged to negotiate his way delicately between these two systems of belief in order to communicate his message. We see one example of how John tackled this issue in his twenty-first homily on 1 Corinthians. There once again the message is that one’s beliefs are clearly expressed in one’s actions. In relation to the dominical command expressed in Matthew 19:11 (“If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor”), John argues that Christ left the choice open, giving us the opportunity to do even more than he commanded. Yet what does his audience do? Not only don’t they aspire to do more, but they fall far short of Christ’s instruction. What they effectively say is: “Let moths eat what we’ve stored away, but let the poor person not eat; let time destroy our possessions, but don’t let Christ be fed, even though he is hungry.” To the imagined objection that no one in his audience would say that, John points out that the serious thing is that these sentiments aren’t expressed in words, but are communicated clearly in how his audience behaves.

As the homily progresses he leads his audience carefully through the inhumanity behind their reasons for not giving. The first is the common social belief that the indigent poor are not really as pitiful as they appear, but exaggerate their appearance to induce giving. Even if this is a genuine strategy

50. In 1 Cor. hom. 21 (Field 1847: 151).
employed by beggars, John argues, it says more about the hardheartedness of those who won’t help them out, and so force them into this shameful practice. Contrary to their belief, disgrace and shame attach to those who refuse to give, rather than to the beggars who are obliged to go to extremes to excite pity in those whom they solicit. 51 Even more pathetic is the fact that beggars are driven to entertain passersby by mutilating themselves and performing ever more extreme acts and that it is this rather than their indigent state that induces a willingness to give that is proportionate to their entertainment value. 52 Here we observe John attempting to address the incompatibility between the Christian ethic and the concept of “limited good.” In a world where the person who is approached by a beggar believes that both what they possess and what is available within their society is limited, it follows that the act of giving without return dangerously diminishes the giver’s own resources. Since reciprocity is a key concept within this framework, the person who needs to take from others to survive is accorded the same social value as a thief and their actions are conceived of as socially destabilizing. This explains why beggars who entertain were not perceived in this way, since they provided a service in return for the money, clothing or food that they received from their audience. This same belief, that those who take without return consume finite resources, underlies the widespread suspicion of refugees who had been driven to Antioch in a time of regional crisis, which John addresses in a different homily on almsgiving. 53 In the case of his homily on 1 Corinthians John’s recourse to countering this belief and to the complaints of his audience that the church provides for the poor in any case—the argument that personal giving to the poor mitigates a person’s sins—may well have fallen on deaf ears. 54 In other sermons at Antioch he worked more explicitly within the framework of “limited good,” exploiting Luke 12:33 to argue, perhaps more persuasively, that almsgiving is a “commercial transaction” whereby goods deposited with the Lord here in the person of the poor are secured as treasure in heaven. 55

To sum up, in the course of exploring the context in which patristic social teaching occurred by asking questions about its audience, a number of issues have come to our attention. In the first instance, setting patristic teaching within its own particular context can be seen to be essential, giving greater depth to our understanding of the injunction in question. In this respect understanding the agenda of the author, the specific community that gave birth to the text, and the particular nature of the target audience are all important for understanding the framing of the social message. So, too, is an understanding of the social concepts prevalent among the audience to which it was directed. Equally important has been the recognition that the reception of the message was almost certainly intended to function at a number of levels. The immediate target audience is usually not the one, just as the message itself could be mediated not only via the text, but also via behavior that exemplified the social teaching or the behavior that the social teaching subsequently modified. For John Chrysostom, above all, social teaching and action go hand in hand and it is through the behavior that results that we effectively communicate the power of the Christian gospel. One wonders if in this respect Mendels’s analysis cannot be more broadly applied—that is, that, whatever the primary audience of patristic social teaching, one of its secondary aims is misiological. 56 While there is inevitably a vast gap between the patristic world and the world in which CST is situated, there are also points, one suspects, that remain in common. 57

51 Field 1847: 152–53.
52 De elemosyna (PG 51, 370).
53 E.g., De elemosyna (PG 51, 366); De statuis hom. 16 (PG 49, 170). Cf. In Job, hom. 77 (PG 58, 418). In Rom, hom. 7 (PG 60, 452).
54 De elemosyna (PG 51, 235–243).
55 In 1 Cor, hom. 21 (Field 1847: 235–243).
56 That is, from the apostolic period to at least the mid-fifth century, social ethical teaching served to establish identity within Christian communities as well as to define their identity in relation to other forms of Christianity and other religions. Within such a context it was important to convert those outside a particular Christian community to belief in the rightness and superiority of one’s doctrine.
57 A significant difference lies in the emphasis in the Graeco-Roman context on personal rather than civic virtue, which is independent of the circumstances in which a human being finds themselves, as opposed to contemporary concern with the dignity of the human being and the right of each human being to live in a free and just society.