

‘Inclination’ (*yaṣrā*) in the Syriac tradition

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The Syriac term *yaṣrā* (ܝܥܨܪܐ, ܝܥܨܪܐ), ‘inclination’, ‘urge’, ‘wilfulness’, and its use in Syriac texts, has not until recently been the subject of any detailed study,¹ and this is perhaps surprising not only because of its interest for an understanding of early Syriac Christian thought, but also for its potential contribution to discussions of the origins and development of Jewish concepts of the *yetzer* (יֵצֶר).

As will be evident, Syriac *yaṣrā* is a cognate of Hebrew *yetzer* (*yēṣer*).² But in Syriac, as in Aramaic more generally, there are no corresponding verbal forms from the root YṢR, which in Hebrew (Qal יֵצֶר) means ‘to form, fashion’. When the verbal root YṢR is used in the Hebrew Bible it is usually rendered in the Syriac Peshiṭta by GBL (‘to form, fashion’)³ or by BR’ (‘to create’),⁴ although other verbal roots are also occasionally used.⁵ This led Nöldeke to conclude, as long ago as 1886,⁶ that Syriac *yaṣrā* and the targumic Aramaic *yīṣrā* (ܝܥܨܪܐ) were both loan words from Hebrew, and Sokoloff’s various dictionaries of Aramaic and Syriac agree with this judgement.⁷ It is less clear, however, whether Syriac *yaṣrā* was a direct borrowing from Hebrew, or was introduced via a Jewish Aramaic dialect, as were various other examples of Jewish religious terminology such as *kāhnā* (Levitical priest), *kumrā* (non-Levitical priest), and *’orāytā* (Torah). The existence of a small number of Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic loan words in Syriac should not be surprising, because not only was the Syriac Peshiṭta Old Testament translated from Hebrew by multiple Hebrew-reading scholars who also incorporated various haggadic and halakhic elements,⁸ and who are thus likely to have been Jewish or of Jewish

¹ Since this paper was first delivered an excellent study of *yaṣrā* in the writings of Narsai has been published by Adam H. Becker, ‘The “Evil Inclination” of the Jews: The Syriac Yatsra in Narsai’s Metrical Homilies for Lent’, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 106.2 (2016), 179–207. The term was briefly first studied by Sebastian P. Brock, ‘Jewish Traditions in Syriac Sources’, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 30 (1979), 212–232, see 221.

² The Hebrew term is transliterated as *yetzer* in conformity with the rest of this volume and common usage, rather than the expected *yēṣer*.

³ For GBL rendering YṢR see: Gen 2.7, 8, 19; Isa 43.1, 7, (43.21 read GBL for GB’ ?), 44.2, 21, 24, 45.7, 18, 46.11, 49.5; Jer 40.2; Ps 93.20, 94.5.

⁴ For BR’ rendering YṢR see: Isa 43.10, 45.18; Zech 12.1; Ps 73.17, 93.9, 104.26.

⁵ For example: ‘TD (‘to prepare’) in 2 Kgs 19.25; Isa 37.26; ‘BD (‘to make’) in Isa 44.9, 10; GLP (‘to engrave, fashion’) in Isa 44.12; Hab 2.18; TQN (‘to construct, equip’) in Isa 54.17; ṢWR (‘to fashion, depict’) in Jer 1.5 (note *ketiv* and *qere* in the MT).

⁶ Nöldeke, T., review of F. Delitzsch, *Prolegomena eines neuen hebräisch-aramäischen Wörterbuchs zum Alten Testament*, in *ZDMG* 40 (1886), 718–743, see p. 722.

⁷ Sokoloff, M., *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 540; Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1990), 243; Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann’s Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns / Gorgias Press, 2009), 580. It might be noted that there is no surviving evidence that *yaṣrā* was used in Christian Palestinian Aramaic (which is, perhaps, unsurprising, given that the CPA Bible translations were made from Greek, and almost all surviving CPA literature is also translated from Greek originals). See Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Christian Palestinian Aramaic* (Leuven: Peeters, 2014).

⁸ Early Christian Hebraists were usually isolated individuals considered remarkable for their learning (as Origen, Jerome), rather than members of translation teams.

origin,⁹ but it is also evident that numerous Jewish exegetical traditions were early absorbed by Syriac-speaking Christianity in northern Mesopotamia, whether through conversion of Jewish individuals or communities to Christianity, or through intellectual contact.¹⁰ This raises the possibility, *prima facie*, that early Syriac Christian understanding of *yaṣrā* reflected contemporary Jewish use of the term in Mesopotamia.

The starting point for a study of Syriac usage of *yaṣrā* is the small collection of biblical passages in the Peshiṭta that use the word, namely Gen. 6.5, 8.21b, and Deut. 31.21a (for the full texts and translations of these see the Appendix). In each of these passages Syriac *yaṣrā* renders Hebrew *yetzer*. It is also found in three passages in Ben Sira, which was included in the Peshiṭta biblical canon, and was translated into Syriac from Hebrew (rather than Greek).¹¹ In the first of these, Sira 15.14, the Hebrew text is preserved, and includes the term *yetzer*. In the other two passages, Sira 17.31 and 21.11, the Hebrew is now lost. However, the presence of *yaṣrā* in these passages is strong evidence that the lost Hebrew verses also contained *yetzer*. This is significant, not just because it adds a few more references to our list of citations, but also because these verses provided early readers with further information about the *yaṣrā*. While the Genesis passages emphasise the habitual and protracted wickedness of the human *yaṣrā*, Sira 17.31 introduces the possibility that the *yaṣrā* can be subdued (*kbaš*)—and this I presume is also the origin of the rabbinic tradition that the *yetzer* can be subdued (כבש)—and Sira 21.11 states that the one who keeps the law restrains (‘*āleṣ*) his *yaṣrā*.

There are no passages where the Peshiṭta translates from Hebrew and uses *yaṣrā* without *yetzer* being found in the underlying Hebrew passage. However, there are several passages where the Hebrew biblical text has *yetzer*, but the Peshiṭta does not use *yaṣrā*. In Isa 26.3 the structure of the Hebrew proved problematic for the Peshiṭta and the Septuagint, and both took the opening words of the verse as a continuation of the previous verse, and made the necessary textual adjustments. In Isa 29.16, Hab 2.18, and Ps 103.14, *yetzer* is used in its primary sense as ‘fashioning, formation, makeup, thing fashioned’, and so the Syriac renders this in the first and last passage with the Syriac equivalent, *gbiltā* (from GBL), and in the second it paraphrases the Hebrew. Finally, in 1 Chr 28.9 and 1 Chr 29.18 *yetzer* is used in passages where the

⁹ See M.P. Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament: An Introduction* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), who argued that the translators were ‘non-rabbinic Jews’; Koster, M.D., ‘The Copernican Revolution in the Study of the Origins of the Peshitta’, in P.V.M. Fleisher, ed., *Targum Studies 2: Targum and Peshitta* (Scholars Press; Atlanta, 1998), 15-54; Y. Maori, תרגום הפשיטתא לתורה והפרשנות היהודית הקדומה [The Peshitta Version of the Pentateuch and Early Jewish Exegesis], (Jerusalem, 1995).

¹⁰ Brock, Sebastian P., ‘Jewish Traditions in Syriac Sources’, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 30 (1979), p. 212-232. Kronholm, Tryggve, *Motifs from Genesis 1-11 in the Genuine Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian, with Particular Reference to the Influence of Jewish Exegetical Tradition*, (Uppsala, 1978). Hidal, Sten, *Interpretatio Syriaca. Die Kommentare des heiligen Ephräm des Syrers zu Genesis und Exodus mit besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer auslegungs-geschichtlichen Stellung* (Coniectanea Biblica. O.T. Series 6; Lund, 1974). Funk, Salomon, *Die haggadischen Elemente in den Homilien des Aphraates, des persischen Weisen* (Vienna, 1891).

¹¹ The origins of the Syriac version of Ben Sira are still a topic of keen debate: M.D. Nelson, *The Syriac Version of the Wisdom of Ben Sira Compared to the Greek and Hebrew Materials* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); W.T. van Peursen, ‘The Peshitta of Ben Sira: Jewish and/or Christian?’, *Aramaic Studies* 2 (2004), 243-262; *idem*, ‘Ben Sira in the Syriac Tradition’, in J.-S. Rey and J. Joosten, (eds), *The Texts and Versions of the Book of Ben Sira: Transmission and Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 143-165; R.J. Owens, ‘Christian Features in the Peshitta Text of Ben Sira: The Question of Dependency on the Syriac New Testament’, in Rey and Joosten, *Texts and Versions of the Book of Ben Sira*, 177-196.

translation ‘inclination’ would be justifiable, and so one might have expected to see Syriac *yaṣrā*. Instead, despite the fact that Weitzman has argued that the Syriac translation of Chronicles is heavily influenced by Jewish religious thought, the translator has very freely paraphrased the verses, in a way that is typical of his work.¹²

The presence of *yaṣrā* in some Peshiṭta translations of Hebrew biblical books clearly raises the issue of the dating of these translations. The Peshiṭta versions of these books vary greatly in translation style, lexical choices, and competence, and close analysis led Michael Weitzman to argue persuasively that at least fifteen different translators were involved, and less persuasively that they all belonged to a single community or school.¹³ It is usually thought that the Pentateuch was translated first, and then the Prophets, and then the Writings, though the duration of this process is difficult to estimate. The earliest Peshiṭta manuscripts date to the fifth century, but all of the biblical books, including Ben Sira, are cited in their Peshiṭta form by Aphrahat, a bishop in the Iranian empire, who wrote his 23 treatises or “demonstrations” between 337 and 345 CE. This suggests that the Peshiṭta translations must have been completed by 300 CE at the latest. Michael Weitzman was himself persuaded by an article of Jan Joosten that the Gospel harmony of Tatian, usually dated to around 170 CE, and widely (but not universally) thought to have been composed in Syriac rather than Greek, quoted the Old Testament from the Peshiṭta version.¹⁴ Joosten’s arguments are problematic, however, since much of his evidence is drawn from the Persian and Arabic Gospel harmonies which are of much later date, and whose texts have been vulgatized,¹⁵ which leaves him only one Syriac Old Testament citation, Zech 9.9, which is extracted from the Diatessaron commentary of Ephrem (d. 373). Joosten’s evidence is far more convincing, however, when he argues that citations of the Old Testament in the Old Syriac Gospels (usually dated after 200 CE) are influenced by the Peshiṭta text, rather than following the underlying Greek.¹⁶ This suggests that the Peshiṭta translations of the Hebrew biblical books were produced in the late second or early third century, although we still lack the evidence necessary to provide greater accuracy.

¹² See Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament*, 111-121; *idem*, ‘Is the Peshitta of Chronicles a Targum?’, in P.V.M. Fleisher, (ed.), *Targum Studies. Vol. 2: Targum and Peshitta* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1998), 159-193; *idem*, ‘The Qaddish Prayer and the Peshitta of Chronicles’, in H. Ben-Shammai, (ed.), *Hebrew and Arabic Studies in Honour of Joshua Blau* (Tel Aviv: The Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies / Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1993), 261-290; P.B. Dirksen, ‘Some Aspects of the Translation Technique in P-Chronicles’, in P.B. Dirksen and A. van der Kooij, (eds), *The Peshitta as a Translation* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 17-23.

¹³ See Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament*, 164-205.

¹⁴ See Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament*, 248-258; J. Joosten, ‘The Old Testament Quotations in the Old Syriac and Peshitta Gospels: A Contribution to the Study of the Diatessaron’, *Textus* 15 (1990), 55–76.

¹⁵ See W.L. Petersen, *Tatian’s Diatessaron: Its Creation, Dissemination, Significance, and History in Scholarship* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 133-138, 259-263; N.P. Joosse, ‘An Introduction to the Arabic Diatessaron’, *Oriens Christianus* 83 (1999), 72-129; *idem*, ‘An Introduction to the so-called Persian Diatessaron of Iwānnīs ‘Izz al-Dīn of Tabrīz: The Testimony of John 2:1-11 (The Wedding at Cana)’, *Oriens Christianus* 86 (2002), 13-45.

¹⁶ J. Joosten, ‘The Old Testament Quotations in the Old Syriac and Peshitta Gospels: A Contribution to the Study of the Diatessaron’, *Textus* 15 (1990), 55–76; *idem*, ‘Tatian’s Diatessaron and the Old Testament Peshitta’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120 (2001), 501–523; *idem*, ‘The Old Testament in the New: The Syriac Versions of the New Testament as a Witness to the Text of the Old Testament Peshitta’, in Bas ter Haar Romeny, (ed.), *The Peshiṭta: Its Use in Literature and Liturgy* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 99–106.

One further Syriac biblical passage needs to be mentioned here, 4 Maccabees 3.4, since it too includes *yaṣrā*, in the form ܡܪܝܪܘܬܐ ܕܝܥܝܪܘܬܐ (*marirut yaṣrā*), ‘bitterness of *yaṣrā*’, which renders *κακοῦθειάν*, ‘bad character, malignity’ (see the Appendix for the texts). 4 Maccabees was translated from Greek into Syriac, perhaps by the early fourth century,¹⁷ and is included in the Syriac biblical canon in manuscripts such as 7a1.¹⁸ 4 Macc 3.4 observes that the *yaṣrā* cannot be removed, but the mind (*re’yānā*) can help prevent it from overpowering the individual.

So *yaṣrā* is not used in the Peshiṭta as a mechanical translation equivalent for Hebrew *yetzer*, but is only used in passages which involve mental activity or moral inclination. The Syriac translators of the books of the Pentateuch and of Ben Sira had access to other vocabulary to express such concepts, but have instead borrowed a technical term from Jewish anthropology, whether from Hebrew or from Jewish Aramaic. This is in stark contrast to the Septuagint’s translation of the same passages, where there is no consistent rendering of *yetzer* (reflecting the fact, no doubt, that the concept had only developed into a technical term in Jewish thought during the years that separated the two translations). When writing of the Hebrew usage of *yetzer*, Piet van der Horst stated: ‘The concept of an evil inclination is typically rabbinic. This notion does not occur in the Bible, but the rabbis did derive it from biblical texts (esp. Gen 2:7; 6:5; 8:21)’.¹⁹ In the Syriac-speaking context, by contrast, the Jewish concept of *yetzer* does occur in their Bible, and its usage there will heavily influence subsequent interpretation by later Syriac Christian writers. We must be cautious, however, about asserting that *yaṣrā* in the Peshiṭta corresponds to a particular later stage of its development in rabbinic thought, since this cannot be discerned from the biblical passages under investigation.

As the usage in 4 Maccabees suggests, the term *yaṣrā* was rapidly taken up by Syriac translators and writers, and used in contexts other than the translation of Hebrew. The following table provides an overview of its usage in Syriac literature.²⁰

¹⁷ It appears to have influenced the wording of Ephrem in his *Sermon on Our Lord*, XLIV, which is cited below.

¹⁸ See R.L. Bensly and W.E. Barnes, *The Fourth Book of Maccabees and Kindred Documents in Syriac First Edited on Manuscript Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1895); R.J.V. Hiebert, ‘Preparing a Critical Edition of IV Maccabees: The Syriac Translation and *Passio Sanctorum Machabaeorum* as Witnesses to the Original Greek’, in F. García Martínez and M. Vervenne (eds), *Interpreting Translation: Studies on the LXX and Ezekiel in Honour of Johan Lust* (Leuven: Leuven University Press / Peeters, 2005), 193-216. Hiebert adopts Bensly and Barnes’ description of the manuscripts and their dates. Their dating is far from accurate, and should be updated by reference to the Peshiṭta Institute’s *List of Old Testament Peshiṭta Manuscripts (Preliminary Issue)* (Leiden: Brill, 1961) 110, 114.

¹⁹ P.W. van der Horst, ‘Evil Inclination הרע יצר’, in K. van der Toorn *et alii* (eds), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (2nd ed.; Leiden, 1999), 317–319. For an examination of pre-rabbinic development of the concept of *yetzer*, see Eibert Tigchelaar, ‘The Evil Inclination in the Dead Sea Scrolls, with a Re-edition of 4Q468i (4QSectorian Text?)’, in Alberdina Houtman, Albert de Jong, and Magda Misset-van de Weg (eds), *Empsychoi Logoi — Religious Innovations in Antiquity: Studies in Honour of Pieter Willem van der Horst* (AJEC 73; Leiden, 2008), 347-357.

²⁰ The ‘Church’ column indicates whether the text / author belonged to the ‘West Syriac’ Syrian Orthodox Church (W), or the ‘East Syriac’ Church of the East (E). The final column, ‘All?’, indicates whether the entire text / corpus has been searched, or not.

Table 1: Distribution of *yaṣrā* in Syriac sources:

TEXT / AUTHOR	DATE	NUMBER OF USES NOTED	CHURCH	ALL?
Peshiṭta O.T.	c. II / III	7 (3 in Torah; 3 in Ben Sira; 1 in 4 Macc.)		✓
<i>Acts of Thomas</i>	c. III	2		✓
Aphrahat	fl. 337-345	7		✓
Ephrem	d. 373	16 (3 in C. Gen.) ²¹		✓
<i>Liber Graduum</i>	late c. IV	4		✓
Titus of Bostra (trans.)	pre 411	2		✓
Eusebius, <i>Martyrs of Palestine</i> (trans.)	pre 411	1		✓
Persian Martyr Acts	early c. V	3		✗
Isaac of Antioch	c. V	9		✗
<i>Life of Rabbula</i>	c. V	1	W	✓
Barsauma of Nisibis	c. V	1	E	✗
Narsai	d. 502	255	E	✓
Jacob of Sarug	d. 521	1	E	✗
Philoxenos of Mabbug	d. 523	1	W	✗
Nestorius (trans.)	c. VI	1	E	✗
<i>Kalila w-Dimna</i> (trans.)	c. VI	1	E	✗
Cyrus of Edessa	mid c. VI	3	E	✗
Ishoyahb III	d. 659	1	E	✗
Shemun d-Taybuteh	late c. VII	2	E	✗
Iohannan bar Penkayē	late c. VII	1	E	✗
Jacob of Edessa	d. 708	2	W	✗
Timothy I	d. 823	10	E	✗
Ishodadh of Merw	mid c. IX	8 (5 in C. Gen)	E	✓
Anton of Tagrit	c. IX	1	W	✗
Bar Salibi	d. 1171	10 (3 in C. Gen, 2 in C. Ben Sira)	W	✗
Michael the Syrian	d. 1199	2	W	✓
John of Mosul	d. 1281	2	E	✗
Barhebraeus	d. 1286	4	W	✗
Abdisho bar Berika	d. 1318	2	E	✗

I must emphasise that the figures provided in the column for the ‘number of uses noted’ are intended only to be indicative of the usage of *yaṣrā*, and are not absolute. In some cases I have been able to check through an entire text such as the Peshiṭta Old Testament or the *Liber Graduum*, or through the entire published corpus of a writer, such as Aphrahat, Ephrem, and Narsai.²² For other authors I have simply relied upon chance encounters in texts, or references in lexicæ which I have cross-checked with the critical editions. Some texts will have escaped my attention altogether.

The table also excludes other lexical forms which were produced as a result of the full integration of *yaṣrā* into Syriac. For example, an adjectival form ܢܝܣܪܐܢܐ, *yaṣrānā*, was produced and used as early as the fifth century CE by the East Syriac poet Narsai (c.399-c.502).²³ An

²¹ Occurrences in commentaries (‘C.’) on Genesis, Ben Sira, etc, are clearly generated by the biblical text, and so are noted in the table, though included in the totals for each author.

²² In the case of Narsai I have also examined a number of unpublished texts, still in manuscript.

²³ See A. Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina* (Mosul, 1905), vol. 2, 94.6. The mid-tenth-century lexicon of Bar Bahloul includes the adjectival form ܢܝܣܪܐܢܐ, *yaṣrāyā* (R. Duval, ed., *Lexicon syriacum auctore Hassano Bar-Bahlule* [Paris, 1888-1901] 849), but the apparatus of Duval reveals that other manuscripts of this

abstract noun ܝܫܪܐܢܘܬܐ, *yaṣrānuṭā*, was used in the acts of the Church of the East synod of the catholicos Mar Ezekiel, held in 576.²⁴ Again, in the thirteenth century, Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286) appears to have produced (or perhaps simply employed) a denominative verb, ܝܫܪܐܢܐ, *'etyaṣar*, ('to act wilfully', 'to be inclined to act badly').²⁵ Finally, I have also excluded terminology which may be thought to parallel or reflect the influence of *yaṣrā* / *yetzer*, such as ܡܫܬܠܝܢܘܬܐ, *meṣṭalyānuṭā*, 'inclination', which is particularly common in texts translated from Greek, since these terms deserve a separate study.

The table draws our attention to several noteworthy features of the use of *yaṣrā* in Syriac. First, there is continuous use of the term from the very beginnings of Syriac Christian literature, and the date of these texts is contemporaneous with the early Rabbinic texts that use *yetzer*. Second, although many scholars have argued convincingly that the ideology of *yetzer* lies behind various passages in the epistles of Paul, especially in his letter to the Romans,²⁶ no Syriac New Testament text, in any version, includes mention of the *yaṣrā*. Third, with a few rare exceptions such as the profoundly hellenised *Book of the Laws of the Countries* written by a pupil of Bardaisan (d. 222), it is found in almost all early Syriac writers. Fourth, from the fifth century on there is particular interest in the term in East Syriac authors, that is, authors of the Church of the East writing in the Sasanian Empire, rather than the West Syriac, Syrian Orthodox, authors of the Roman Empire. The poet Narsai's use of *yaṣrā* is particularly remarkable in its frequency, far outnumbering the use of the term in all other Syriac authors combined.²⁷ By contrast, Narsai's West Syriac contemporary Jacob of Sarug, who has a similarly voluminous poetic output, uses the term only once. I will argue below that this was for doctrinal reasons. Fifth, it should perhaps be mentioned, as will become self-evident in a moment, that only a small number of these occurrences are found in exegetical literature expounding the Biblical citations already mentioned. Sixth, as we have already seen with the citation in 4 Maccabees, the term is taken up and used in early Syriac translations of Greek texts such as the anti-Manichaean work of Titus of Bostra, and Eusebius of Caesarea's *Martyrs of Palestine*, both preserved in a manuscript of 411 CE.²⁸

In some of the earliest Syriac uses of *yaṣrā*, the 'inclination' seems to be understood as being morally neutral. For example, the fourth-century writer Aphrahat seems to regard the *yaṣrā* as being subject to human control and self-discipline, and thus capable of being directed

lexicon, and the earlier lexicon of Bar 'Ali (see G. Hoffmann, *Syrisch-Arabische Glossen* [Kiel, 1874], 171, #4492), read *yaṣrānā*. It seems likely that *yaṣrāyā* is simply a scribal error.

²⁴ See J.B. Chabot, *Synodicon orientale, ou recueil de synodes nestoriens* (Paris, 1902), 122.8.

²⁵ See R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1868), 1620. A citation is given (from the 1619 manuscript lexicon of the Maronite George Karmsedinoyo) to one of Bar Hebraeus' poems on the soul, but I have been unable to identify the source text in any of the editions available to me.

²⁶ See, for example, W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (London: S.P.C.K., 1962) ch. 2.

²⁷ See now Adam H. Becker, 'The "Evil Inclination" of the Jews: The Syriac *Yatsra* in Narsai's Metrical Homilies for Lent', *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 106.2 (2016), 179–207.

²⁸ BL Add. 12,150.

towards the good through righteous behaviour. In his Demonstration 14 he describes an ideal wise and just individual:²⁹

<p> ܣܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ </p>	<p> [Understanding] depicts wonderful things in his heart, and the eyes of his senses see across the oceans, and all creatures are enclosed within his thought, and his <i>yaṣrā</i> is wide open to receive, and he is the great temple of his Maker, and the King on High enters and dwells in him. </p>
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Again, in his demonstration on fasting (Dem. 3), he writes:³⁰

<p> ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ </p>	<p> And one fasts from meat and wine and certain foods; and one fasts so as to make a fence for his mouth, so as not to speak hateful words; and one fasts from anger, and subdues his <i>yaṣrā</i> so as not to be defeated. </p>
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Here there is clear influence from Ben Sira 17.31. And in Demonstration 9, on humility, he echoes Sira 21.11:³¹

<p> ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ </p>	<p> And all their thoughts are set on their Lord and they travel and journey on the way that is narrow and strait, and they enter the strait gate of the kingdom, they restrain their <i>yaṣrā</i> to keep the Law. </p>
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Ephrem too (d. 373) is clearly aware of the Ben Sira passages. In the Nisibene hymns (HNis 21.15) he writes:³²

<p> ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ </p>	<p> There is one who finds an opportunity and acts presumptuously, and there is another who resists and restrains his <i>yaṣrā</i>, one considers that judgement will be preserved, and another that it will not even happen. </p>
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Further influence from Ben Sira can be found in the anonymous late-fourth-century *Liber Graduum*:³³

<p> ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ </p>	<p> And everyone, to the extent that he seeks you, so he will find you. </p>
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²⁹ J. Parisot, (ed.), *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes (Patrologia Syriaca 1.1; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1894), 661.13.*

³⁰ Parisot, *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes*, 100.1.

³¹ Parisot, *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes*, 416.17.

³² E. Beck, (ed.), *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena, I (CSCO 218; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1961), 57.21.* See also E. Beck, (ed.), *Nachträge zu Ephraem Syrus (CSCO 363; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1975), IV.305, 58.22.*

³³ M. Kmosko, *Liber Graduum (Patrologia Syriaca 1.3; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1926), 333.4.*

- ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ
 And to the extent that he restrains his *yaṣrā* to keep the Law, so he will grow great.
- ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ
 And as much as he increasingly humbles himself, so he will be glorified.

And again:³⁴

- ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ
 But if you restrain your *yaṣrā*, and pray for the one who strikes you, and make peace with him, you suffer with our Lord, and you will be glorified with him.

This is not to suggest that the early Syriac writers underestimated the tendency of the human *yaṣrā* to incline towards evil. Ephrem, who wrote a commentary on Genesis and discussed the references to *yaṣrā* there,³⁵ also regularly describes the ‘bitter *yaṣrā*’,³⁶ or, using the wording of 4 Macc 3.4, the ‘bitterness of the *yaṣrā*’. In the *Sermon on Our Lord*, for example, he wrote:³⁷

- ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ
 Although our Lord knew that that Pharisee had purposed evil against him, he refuted him gently and not harshly. For sweetness descended from on high to diminish the bitterness of our evil *yaṣrā*.

Ephrem could even describe the *yaṣrā* as being like a serpent, coiled within each human being:³⁸

- ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ
 His *yaṣrā* is coiled up within, his jealousy hisses constantly like a serpent

And yet for Ephrem this *yaṣrā*, which tended towards evil, and could be exploited by Satan, was not in itself evil. As he wrote in his commentary on Gen 6.7 and God’s statement concerning all living beings that ‘I am sorry that I have made them’:³⁹

- ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ ܕܘܫܘܦܝܢ
 For if there had been any blemish in the beings made by God, He would have created a new creation, and He would not have kept within the ark any work which had caused remorse for its Maker.

It should not perhaps be a surprise that such classic and influential representatives of early Syrian asceticism as Aphrahat, Ephrem, and the *Liber Graduum* should have enthusiastically taken up the passages of Ben Sira that encourage self-restraint, discipline, and the subduing of

³⁴ Kmosko, *Liber Graduum*, 420.11.

³⁵ R.M. Tonneau, (ed.), *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum commentarii* (CSCO 152; Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1955), VI.6, 57.21-31; VI.13, 62.9-12.

³⁶ See, for example: E. Beck, (ed.), *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones, I* (CSCO 305; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1970), III.45, 50.8; E. Beck, (ed.), *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones, III* (CSCO 320; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1972), IV.549, 46.21.

³⁷ E. Beck, (ed.), *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermo de Domino Nostro* (CSCO 270; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1966), XLIV, 42.26.

³⁸ E. Beck, (ed.), *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena, II* (CSCO 240; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1963), XL.4, 30.20.

³⁹ Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum commentarii*, VI.7, 58.12.

hand with a Christian polemic which claimed that the Jews wilfully refused to acknowledge that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God, an act which was itself seen as just one episode in a long history of continuous rebellion against God. The earliest example of this in Syriac is to be found in the third-century *Acts of Thomas*:⁶²

And Israel was not persuaded because of their evil *yaṣrā*.

And it appears again in the following century in Aphrahat (Dem. 19):⁶³

And because God knew their evil *yaṣrā* he did not compel them to go up from Babylon.

This rather depressing use of *yaṣrā* in anti-Jewish polemic clearly became such a standard trope that it could lend itself to whimsical satire. The learned Church of the East catholicos Timothy I (d. 823) made unexpected play with the concept of ‘the bitterness of the *yaṣrā* of the Jews’ (a phrase that again clearly derives from 4 Macc 3.4) in one of his letters:⁶⁴

If authority over heaven and earth is due to the cross, yet the cross is due to the bitterness of the *yaṣrā* of the Jews, then the authority of Christ over all was born from the bitterness of the *yaṣrā* of the Jews. And if the bitterness of the *yaṣrā* of the Jews is the cause of the cross, and the cross is the cause of death, and death is the cause of the resurrection, and the resurrection is the cause of the kingdom of heaven, and the kingdom of heaven is a good thing that is exalted and raised up above all, so then the bitterness of the *yaṣrā* of the Jews is the cause of a good thing that is most glorious. The bitterness of the *yaṣrā* then is an evil, and one to be praised!

Occasionally, as in the acts of the Persian Martyrs, this hostile sense is played with by Christian authors, so that Christian martyrs, such as Martha daughter of Pusai,⁶⁵ are reproached by their Iranian judges for their stubborn and wilful *yaṣrā*:⁶⁶

And now you [Martha], do not persist in your *yaṣrā* like your father, but do the will of Shapur the King of Kings and Lord of all the quarters [of the earth].

⁶² W. Wright, (ed.), *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, Edited from Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum and Other Libraries* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1871), 240.
⁶³ Parisot, *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes*, 848.21.
⁶⁴ O. Braun, (ed.), *Timothei patriarchae I epistulae* (CSCO 74; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1914), Letter 2.7, 70.21.
⁶⁵ The martyrdom of Martha occurred in the late fourth century, and was known in Greek to the historian Sozomen (d. ca. 450). The oldest surviving Syriac manuscripts to contain the text date to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. See Sebastian Brock, ‘A Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts’, in his *The History of the Holy Mar Ma’in* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2008), 77-125.
⁶⁶ P. Bedjan, (ed.), *Acta martyrum et sanctorum*, vol. 2 (Paris / Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1891), 235.4.

In attempting this introductory survey to the concept and use of *yaṣrā* in Syriac literature, including numerous authors and texts spread over a thousand years, there is clearly a danger of overlooking key passages and themes, and regional or temporal variations. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to draw several provisional conclusions from the material presented.

1. *Yaṣrā* is a loan word in Syriac that ultimately derives from Hebrew, and was first introduced into Syriac by biblical translators of Jewish origin, for whom this was a key concept that could not be expressed in native Syriac vocabulary.

2. In addition to Gen 6.5, 8.21, and Deut 31.21, the Syriac translation of the Hebrew of Ben Sira 15.14, 17.31, 21.11, and of the Greek of 4 Macc 3.4, also played a key role in establishing the early Syriac understanding of *yaṣrā*, including the possibility that it could be restrained or subdued through righteous behaviour.

3. The prolonged contact of Syriac Christian scholars with Jewish exegetes, and the occasional conversion of Jews to Christianity in Mesopotamia, leaves open the possibility that Syriac Christian understanding of *yaṣrā* did not develop in total isolation from the developing Jewish ideology of *yetzer*, but evidence for this specific influence is limited (perhaps to one passage in Narsai). Nevertheless, within Syriac texts *yaṣrā* has its own distinctive development within the context of Christian exegesis and theology.

4. There is no evidence in Syriac sources that Syriac writers knew of the possibility of there being two *yetzarim*, a good *yetzer* and an evil *yetzer*.⁶⁷ Only a single *yaṣrā* is ever mentioned, and no passage has yet been found in Syriac which mentions a ‘good *yaṣrā*’, although the *yaṣrā* is sometimes said to be capable of effecting good behaviour.

5. The earliest Syriac texts regard this *yaṣrā* as being morally neutral, capable of inspiring good or bad behaviour, and subject to restraint. This appears to have been combined with the belief that most commonly the *yaṣrā* provoked bad behaviour. By the medieval period the *yaṣrā* was normally treated as a source of evil.

6. There is no evidence that Syriac sources particularly linked the *yaṣrā* to sexual misbehaviour.⁶⁸

7. Ironically, the Jewish concept of *yetzer* was later frequently used by Syriac Christians in polemical contexts to explain the wilfulness of the Jews in not accepting Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God.

8. Syriac Christians believed strongly in the negative role played in the world by Satan and a great variety of demons, with no attempt to demythologize them, and so it is perhaps

⁶⁷ See Ishay Rosen-Zvi, ‘Two Rabbinic Inclinations? Rethinking a Scholarly Dogma’, *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 39 (2008), 513-539.

⁶⁸ Although Narsai’s negative attitude towards women leads him close to this: see Becker, ‘The “Evil Inclination” of the Jews’, 189. But compare Pieter W. van der Horst, ‘A Note on the Evil Inclination and Sexual Desire in Talmudic Literature’, in his *Jews and Christians in their Graeco-Roman Context: Selected Essays on Early Judaism, Samaritanism, Hellenism, and Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 59-65; Ishay Rosen-Zvi, ‘Sexualising the Evil Inclination: Rabbinic ‘Yetzer’ and Modern Scholarship’, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 50 (2009), 264-281.

unsurprising that there seems to have been no attempt to personify the *yaṣrā* as in some Jewish texts.⁶⁹

9. From the fifth century on *yaṣrā* was far more popular in East Syriac writers than in West Syriac writers. Particularly notable in the former group is Narsai, for whom *yaṣrā* was a key anthropological and philosophical concept which helped to explain humanity's tendency from the beginning to do that which was forbidden, and to explain why this tendency could not be overcome except with the aid of divine grace. By contrast, West Syriac writers such as Jacob of Sarug rejected any concept which undermined the autonomy of human free will and divine justice, or which suggested that in God's creation of humanity He inbuilt a tendency for humans to sin. Jacob, and others in his tradition, thus prefer to talk of human will, *ṣebyānā*, rather than *yaṣrā*.

⁶⁹ In poetic texts Ephrem, for example, was perfectly happy to personify Sin and Death for rhetorical purposes (see HNis 41, 53), and Narsai could portray his own *yaṣrā* speaking against him in a lawsuit: see A. Mingana, (ed.), *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina*, vol. 1, 167.10; and for an English translation of the opening passage, see Becker, 'The "Evil Inclination" of the Jews', 184.

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