

## Lenten Moral Reform, the “Evil Inclination” of the Jews, and the Anthropology of Envy in Late Antique Mesopotamia

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The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination (*yetzer*) of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil (*ra'*) continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. Gen 6:5-6 (NRSV)  
cf. Gen 8:21 and Dt 31:21

Hebrew *yetzer*, *yotzer*; Aramaic *yatzra*

### Timeline

c.150-200	Peshitta (Syriac translation of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament)
c.340s	Aphrahat
373	Ephrem
c. 350-428	Theodore of Mopsuestia
354-430	Augustine
c. 500	Translation of Neoplatonic literature into Syriac
c. 500	Narsai
c. 700	Isaac of Nineveh (exemplary of later monastic tradition)

### Narsai’s Homilies

Lenten Homily	Source	General Topics
First Sunday	Mingana 10 (I.167-181)	Moses, Elijah, Eve and Women; Deceit
Second Sunday	Not extant	Unknown
Third Sunday	Mingana 11 (I.181-194)	Elijah
Fourth Sunday	Mingana 12 (I.195-209)	The Rich; Eve and Women
Fifth Sunday	Mingana 14 (I.223-243)	Envy; Saul and David; Cain and Abel
Sixth Sunday	Mingana 15 (I.243-256)	Parable of the Ten Virgins (Mt 25:1-13)
Palm Sunday	Mingana 18 (I.299-312)	Anti-Jewish Themes; Envy

Narsai, *Homiliae et carmina*, vols. I-II, ed. A. Mingana (Mosul, 1905)

### Narsai’s Lenten Homilies (all translations are my own)

1. My mind advised me that I might make a lawsuit against my thoughts, /  
which loved error and hated the order set up by the word of life.  
My own *yatzra* entered the case against me, /  
rebuking (*makes*) me, “Why did you despise spiritual benefit?”  
My thoughts stood in defense on behalf of the truth /  
and they overcame me insomuch as I wrongfully rejected what was fitting. (I.167)
2. Come envious, whom foolish jealousy has mixed up,  
Pacify the wrath of the *yatzra* within you with the sweetness of the fast. (I.172)
3. Deceit is a snare hidden in the soul as if in a gulf, /

and it hunts humans like animals for the destruction of death.  
In the name of justice deceit leads astray as if by bait /  
and entices the *yatzra* to eat the bitterness of death.  
Let us expose then the deceit hidden in our mind /  
and then approach the labor of fasting with purity of soul. (I.175)

4. The soul of the human being is a treasure house of discernment /  
and it is authorized to rejoice in much and be sad in little.  
In the treasure of (the soul's) *yatzra* the constitutor of the all places (the soul's) wisdoms /  
that as a test of it (the soul) might distribute the treasure which is deposited in its hands.  
Thence it is revealed that he gave the two of them as a test of us, /  
that we might be witnesses in the case to the evil of our soul. (I.198)

5. Let everyone reckon it to the creator for whatever he possesses /  
except for the wrong, which is ours and is performed by (or: within) us.  
The wrong of our soul belongs to our *yatzra* and not to any other, /  
and although there is wrong, whenever it wants, it makes right its wrong.  
It attests about the authority of its own discernment, /  
that by its will it conquers or is vanquished by the things it possesses.  
Come, mortals, order the course of your wills, /  
for behold it has been revealed that it is our will that rules over everything. ...  
Let the *yatzra* be a judge for all our deeds, /  
and let us bring wrong and justice as a test of it.  
Everyone who is rational is indebted to know these things, /  
and if he does not pay it back his *yatzra* reproves (*makes*) his oppressive wrongdoing. (I.200)

6. Also, you Eve, hide your face with a chaste garment, /  
lest the chaste be hunted by the snares of your ugly appearance.  
Arrange the course of the *yatzra* of your soul and of your pupils, /  
lest travellers are tripped in the path of your eyes. (I.203-4)

7. Not out of evil did I slander you, Eve, as you thought, /  
And it is not you that I found fault with but with your *yatzra*, which sins and causes to sin.  
Moreover, I did not find fault with your *yatzra* as if it were evil; /  
Rather, although it does evil to itself and its companions all the time,  
your *yatzra* is not bound in nature, like silent (entities), /  
and you are not the only one to possess impulses toward enticements.  
Your discernment is proven equal to that of a man /  
and if it pleases you you do not fall short of his labor.  
One and the same is the *yatzra* of the discernment of men and women /  
and one is the capacity and freedom of the soul, (the capacity) which is either victorious or conquered.  
The order of women is not disdained by the omniscient one /  
but the shameless *yatzra* of the impudent is. (I.205)

8. Go along with the books of scripture / in company with the words of the spirit,  
And they will bring you to the haven / of whatever your thoughts sought.

With the son of Amram (i.e. Moses) join up / and go with him to the beginning.  
And he will show you from where / the bitter bile of envy sprung forth. (I.226)

9. He split up the course of life of equals / and cut them one from the other.  
And he made kinsmen / alien, each one from his own friend.  
The evil one planted by envy / his own error in mortals.  
And he caused sin to sprout in their senses / and the flowers of the poison of death blossomed. (I.226)

10. (Envy) put out the eye of the light of the soul / and blinded the faculties of the mind.  
And all of the human being became dark / from the light of discernment.  
He made rationality / like reasonless (*d-la meltha*) reptiles  
And the discerning *yatzra* forgot / the wisdoms of its rationality. (I.229)

11. Of thy mercy, king of justice, / save our weak nature,  
which is made captive to its bitter *yatzra* / and makes itself subject. ...  
Spread your pleasant wings / and protect our race from our *yatzra*, /  
which seeks to tear us into pieces / by the harsh jaws of envy. ...  
Envy has sold our freedom / and we have become slaves to sin. ... (Rom 7)  
The bitter *yatzra* has enclosed us / within a prison of curses. (I.231-2)

12. My mind caused me to repent when I remembered / that your evil is not in your nature.  
The creator created you free / and made you master of your will.  
Yours are these two things / to discern, truth from falsehood.  
Don't hold me to account, Lord, for this, / that I rashly made accusation.  
I accused the evil *yatzra* / which causes bitter envy to sprout.  
There is no substance to envy / whose instigation I perhaps blamed correctly.  
It is our *yatzra* which envies all the time / the beautiful things of one another.  
Our *yatzra* begets envy / and raises it with wiles.  
And when its evil is matured / it muddles the world by means of its fruits.  
Nor also does our *yatzra* exist / substantially without the soul.  
It is the discernment in the soul / that takes effect in its various forms.  
The soul is the mistress of the human being, / which rules over the faculties and the senses,  
And it guides nature / according to how its will wants.  
In our soul is placed the two / good and evil equally.  
It chooses as a test of itself / to do this over that.  
The soul is mounted upon the body / like a charioteer upon a chariot. (I.236)

13. For behold the evil of our *yatzra* muddled / the sweetness of the peace which pacified all.  
Our *yatzra* slackened the bond / that put us at peace with the creator.  
It is ours if we will / to tighten that which we have slackened.  
Our *yatzra* blemished us with sin / and polluted the purity of our mind.  
But if it wants it is easy for it / to purify us by the remorse of our soul.  
Our *yatzra* muddled us with envy / and cast quarrel among us.  
But it belongs to it to pacify us / with one another and with the creator.  
I myself did not tear down our *yatzra* / and accuse it as evil,  
Because when it is discerning / it is rendered dumb through its own will. (I.241)

14. Oh *yatzra* how wise you are / and indeed crafty are your deeds!  
Oh how just you are if you want to be, / when you are favorable to your soul.  
You are crafty by all means / wherever you seek to do harm.  
There may be nothing more straightforward than you / when you want to help.  
I have wondered much at your wisdoms / and at the authority of your freedom.  
For how easy are difficult things / for your will whenever you want it to be.  
From you students learn, / and by you masters are wise.  
The poor run to your door, / and the rich to your treasury.  
Behold the *yatzra* of our soul has revealed to us / that two things are ours:  
To be fond of the love which has brought us to life / and to hate the envy which has killed us.  
Come then like discerning ones, / let us expose the deceit which is in our *yatzra*  
For behold the *yatzra* in us has shown us / that peace and wrath are ours.  
Come, let us call justly / our *yatzra* the master of our will. (I.242-3)

15. Oh how evil is the evil of the merciless *yatzra*, /  
which does works that will be like non-works on the day of recompense.  
Oh how ugly it is that a human being should not share his blessing with another; /  
although he has blessings for himself he is bereft of blessings.  
*Oh how foolish it is that a human being should have an excess for himself alone; /  
even if he acquires all the world he has nothing. (Mk. 8:36; Mt 16:26)*  
He has nothing who possesses for himself alone, /  
because his self (*qnomeh*) does not subsist without many.  
*The soul does not subsist in the body without limbs /  
nor does it take recompense of its deeds without them.  
The soul is in need of limbs inasmuch as it is a soul, /*  
So then the human being is all the more in need of (another) human being.  
Human by human completes the course of his righteousness /  
and if he is justified without (another) human he is not then a human being.  
A human is not able to be a human without (another) human /  
and also justice without (another) human is not justice.  
You seek to be just and good, oh human being, /  
do unto your friend that which you undertake to be unto yourself (cf. Mt 7:12; Lk 6:31).  
*You want to take a wage for your works on the day of recompense, /  
repay your colleague the debt of love and behold you will be recompensed.*  
You desire to encounter the heavenly bridegroom in garments of light, /  
illuminate your face before your friend and behold you have received him.  
You take pleasure in entering that wedding banquet with the wise, /  
make the fool wise and behold you will enter at the front of the wise.  
No one enters until he causes another to enter with him. /  
For thus that world demands of the one entering it. (I.255-6)