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**Recontextualizing the Yetzer:**  
**Rabbinical Struggles and Evagrian Demons**

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by

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## Abstract

In his monography about the *yetzer hara*, Ishay Rosen-Zvi argues that the *yetzer* should be recontextualized in the context of early monastic demonology and particularly relates it to the writings of Evagrius Ponticus. He makes an interesting argument, but uses only a few comparisons to the writings of Evagrius, which is insufficient to make such strong conclusions. My thesis aims to evaluate the argument of Rosen-Zvi by comparing the way in which the fight with both the *yetzer* in the rabbinical literature of late antiquity and the demons in the writings of Evagrius are described, both in the way the *yetzer* and the demons are described as attacking the human being as well as the way they are battled with.

## Introduction

One of the more obscure concepts found in classical rabbinical literature is that of the *yetzer hara*. As of now, only two monographs have been devoted to the subject of the *yetzer*.<sup>1</sup> The first one is a dissertation of the Dutch scholar dr. Cohen Stuart called ‘The Struggle in Man between Good and Evil: An inquiry into the origin of the Rabbinic concept of Yeşer Hara’, published in 1984.<sup>2</sup> The second one is the monograph of Ishay Rosen-Zvi called ‘Demonic Desires: *Yetzer Hara* and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity’.<sup>3</sup> The word *yetzer* – or *yetzer hara* – is most often rendered as ‘(evil) inclination’, but also as ‘desire’, ‘instinct’, ‘tendency’ or ‘disposition’ and is commonly understood to be a personal desire towards evil.<sup>4</sup> The word has often been discussed in comparison to other concepts, whereby the meaning given to it suits the context in which it is discussed.<sup>5</sup> This approach has led to partial explanations that focus only on a certain aspect of the word, leaving out the other aspects of the word.<sup>6</sup> Rosen-Zvi states that the *yetzer* has been compared to St. Paul’s idea of sin by New Testament scholars, placing the word within the realm of theology, while by others it has been interpreted not so much as sin, but as an internal desire that is to be tamed, thereby placing it within the realm of anthropology and psychology.<sup>7</sup> Those that interpret the concept of the *yetzer* as a anthropological matter have often contextualised it in a context of Hellenistic philosophy and Greek ascetic practices.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the *yetzer* has also been interpreted as a sexual instinct, which again associates the *yetzer* with the natural instincts.<sup>9</sup> However, in his monograph, Rosen-Zvi states that these contextualizations are misplaced, and argues that the *yetzer* should instead be understood in the context of a common Jewish-Christian development in demonology.<sup>10</sup>

For this recontextualization, Rosen-Zvi specifically points to the work of Evagrius Ponticus: “The closest parallels to the rabbinic account are found in Alexandrian monastic accounts on the struggle against demons. The similarity between the patristic demons and the rabbinic *yetzer*, especially the detailed and systematic demonology of Evagrius Ponticus, plays a crucial role in establishing the

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<sup>1</sup> Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires: Yetzer Hara and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity*, 1st ed, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 3–4.

<sup>2</sup> G. H. Cohen Stuart, *The Struggle in Man between Good and Evil: An Inquiry into the Origin of the Rabbinic Concept of Yeşer Hara* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*.

<sup>4</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 12; Cohen Stuart, *The Struggle in Man between Good and Evil*, 4–5.

<sup>5</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 4–5.

<sup>7</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 4–5.

<sup>8</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 12, 102.

<sup>10</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 9-11, 128.

demonic character of the latter.”<sup>11</sup> In this thesis I will further investigate whether the *yetzer* indeed ought to be recontextualized in a common Jewish and Christian demonological context, by comparing it to the demonology of Evagrius Ponticus.

Evagrius is one of the desert fathers that wrote extensively about demonology and, according to David Brakke, he even “crafted the most sophisticated demonology to emerge from early Christian monasticism and perhaps from ancient Christianity as a whole.”<sup>12</sup> One of the central concepts to Evagrius’s demonology is the concept of the ‘λογισμός’,<sup>13</sup> which in earlier scholarship has already been noticed to possibly be connected to the concept of the *yetzer*. It was Antoine Guillaumont who first began to look for the roots of the Evagrian *logismoi* in the rabbinical concept of the *yetzer*.<sup>14</sup> This was because he held the opinion that in Hellenistic thought the word *logismos* could only have a positive connotation, which does not correspond to the evil character of the *logismoi* of Evagrius.<sup>15</sup> He argued that the mostly negative connotation of the same word in Evagrius therefore had to have had a different background, which he pointed to the rabbinical concept of the evil *yetzer*.<sup>16</sup> The similarity was particularly seen in “the personal, and wicked, character of the *yetzer*.”<sup>17</sup>

More recently, in 2021, a volume of articles has been published on the subject of the *yetzer* in classical rabbinical Judaism and Christianity.<sup>18</sup> In one of these articles the argument of Guillaumont is discussed by Augustine Casiday, who disagrees with Guillaumont about the necessity of the positive character of *logismos* in Hellenistic thought, but still confirms the similarities between the *logismoi* and the *yetzer*.<sup>19</sup> However, he only notes that there are intriguing similarities, while at the same time, as of now, that there exists no clear evidence for a direct interaction between them, and that the similarities

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<sup>11</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Evagrius and David Brakke, *Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons*, Cistercian Studies Series, no. 229 (Trappist, KY; Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications; Liturgical Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>13</sup> The λογισμός, as shall be further explained later in this thesis, is most often used by Evagrius as something akin to a thought that a demon can enter into the mind of a monk, in order to bring him to sin. The concept is however not always used by Evagrius as being connected to the demonic, and isn’t necessarily evil in itself, see:

The plural of λογισμός is λογισμοί.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine Casiday, ‘Rabbinic Inclinations and Monastic Thoughts: Evagrius Ponticus’ Doctrine of Reasoning (*Logismoi*) and Its Antecedents’, in *The Evil Inclination in Early Judaism and Christianity*, by Ishay Rosen-Zvi, ed. James Aitken and Hector M. Patmore, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 248–56.

<sup>15</sup> “Évagre n’est plus dépendant de la tradition philosophique hellénique, pour laquelle le mot λογισμός ne peut avoir qu’une charge sémantique favorable, mais d’une conception traditionnelle juive, celle qu’exprime le mot hébreu *yêšér*, qui désigne, le plus souvent, le mauvais penchant qui est en l’homme,” Evagrius et al., *Sur les pensées*, Sources chrétiennes 438 (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1998), 27; also partly cited and translated in: Casiday, ‘Rabbinic Inclinations and Monastic Thoughts’, 249.

<sup>16</sup> Casiday, 249, 252–253.

<sup>17</sup> Casiday, 253.

<sup>18</sup> Hector M. Patmore, James K. Aitken, and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, eds., *The Evil Inclination in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Casiday, ‘Rabbinic Inclinations and Monastic Thoughts’.

could possibly also be explained by the use of shared religious texts.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in 2021, Leszek Misiarczyk notes that the concept of the *logismoi*, as it was used earlier by Origen, likely originates from the Biblical concept of יצר, but he unfortunately does not expound much further on it.<sup>21</sup>

Rosen-Zvi describes the main goal of his book in the following way: “Rather than claiming that the *yetzer* is *sui generis*, I am offering to recontextualize it— not within the context of platonic self-control and ascetic exercises, but as part of an ancient demonological discourse. More specifically, it should be seen as part of a larger move toward placing demons inside the human psyche.”<sup>22</sup> For this recontextualization of the *yetzer* he sees a good candidate in the early monastic context, and also specifically relates the concept to the writings of Evagrius.<sup>23</sup> He states that, even though Evagrius’s analysis of the demons is much more thorough than that of the rabbis on the *yetzer*, “the basic themes are similar.”<sup>24</sup> From here he argues for “the proximity between rabbinic and monastic antropologies,” and furthermore states that “[t]hese analogies for Athanasius’s and Evagrius’s fourth-century monastic demonologies cannot be explained away as mere accidents or even a shared *zeitgeist*, but point toward actual interconnections between the two traditions, which flourished in time and space.”<sup>25</sup> This leads him to conclude that the *yetzer* and monastic demons are a good place to look for ‘a shared Jewish Christian formation’.<sup>26</sup>

## Research, Methods and Theoretical Framework

The suggestion of Rosen-Zvi that the *yetzer* and the Evagrian demons point to a possible shared demonological context was the starting point of my research, in which I have compared the *yetzer* to Evagrian demonology, in order to further evaluate if the two should be considered to be “a shared formation.”<sup>27</sup> It is evident that strong statements are made by Rosen-Zvi on the relationship between the rabbinical *yetzer* and Evagrian demonology. However, his work – which is mostly concerned with the

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<sup>20</sup> Casiday, ‘Rabbinic Inclinations and Monastic Thoughts’, 261; The only (and quite indecisive) conclusion that Casiday draws on this matter is that both the dissimilarities and the similarities between the *yetzer* and the concept of the *logismoi* “introduce an important qualification to Guillaumont’s basic claim that the *yesarim* are meaningful antecedents to Evagrius’ λογισμοί.”

<sup>21</sup> On Misiarczyk’s opinion on the background of the *logismoi*, see: Leszek Misiarczyk, *Eight Logismoi in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, *Studia Traditionis Theologiae* 44 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 70–75.

<sup>22</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 128.

<sup>23</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 42.

<sup>25</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 41–42, 82.

<sup>26</sup> “Scholars have recently sought phenomena that might be considered shared Jewish Christian (or even Judeo-Christian) formations. The internalized demon/*yetzer* seems a good candidate for this title. True, the laconic and cryptic rabbinic homilies are not even close to the detailed and systematic accounts of war techniques in Evagrius and patristic literature in general, but this has to do more with the nature of rabbinic literature than with *yetzer* discourse per se. That this proximity was not acknowledged by scholars (unlike other phenomena in the areas of magic and demonology) is probably due to the deep psychologization of the rabbinic *yetzer* in contemporary research,” Rosen-Zvi, 82–83.

<sup>27</sup> This phrase comes from Rosen-Zvi himself, see: Rosen-Zvi, 129.

nature of the *yetzer* in rabbinical literature – only makes a few arguments on this subject with a couple comparisons between the two corpuses of literature and still lacks in an extensive comparison between both traditions.<sup>28</sup> In his chapter ‘Patristic Parallels’, where he makes a few comparisons in order to make his argument, Rosen-Zvi himself also states that the provided evidence is little.<sup>29</sup> The fact that the basis for his conclusions is meagre, is why in this thesis I will more thoroughly compare the concept of the evil *yetzer* in rabbinical Judaism of late antiquity to Evagrian demonology, focussing specifically on the ‘war techniques’ of the adversary and the counter techniques offered by both Evagrius and the early rabbis in their writings.

For my analysis, I have applied a comparative conceptual analysis to the writings of Evagrius and the early rabbinical corpus of literature, in more or less the same way as how Rosen-Zvi approaches his comparison of the *yetzer* to early monastic literature.<sup>30</sup> First, I have analysed all occurrences of the *yetzer* in the broader discussions they are found in.<sup>31</sup> Thereafter I have categorized the references to the *yetzer* thematically, centred particularly around themes that are essential for understand the struggle with the *yetzer*. These themes I have then compared to the way Evagrius writes about the fight with the demons in regard to these themes. The results of this comparison are shown in this thesis.

It is also important to note what I will *not* do in this thesis. The aim of my thesis is not, for example, to explain the relationship between the *yetzer* and the Evagrian demons or how these concepts might have interacted with each other. I will furthermore also not explain or give a psychology of the inner life of either the monks or the rabbis.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, I will not engage in textual criticism or redaction

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<sup>28</sup> Bruce Lincoln argues for the value of “weak comparisons” like this (which he defines as: “one that focuses sustained attention on a small number of examples and entertains the possibility that they share the features they have in common, not because of a historic connection involving diffusion, influence, or genetic descent, but because these features are the product of similar forces and conditions”), for the following reason: “Weak comparison has the advantage of letting one remain within the limits of one’s competence; it permits one to assemble the full range of relevant evidence, instead of cherry-picking examples that reinforce one’s preconceptions; it gives one the chance to study all the data in depth and detail, with appropriate emphasis on nuanced differences, as well as the points of continuity or resemblance; finally, it lets one frame plausible hypotheses, instead of grandiose theories. There are still a great many ways one can go wrong, but the risks of comparison are better acknowledged honestly than boldly and rashly ignored.” He furthermore states that such comparisons have the potential to be the starting point for further research, which is also where my research started from, see: Bruce Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges: Explorations in, on, and with Comparison* (Chicago, IL; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 11, 40, 109.

<sup>29</sup> “This very partial list of comparisons leaves little doubt that the *yetzer* is indeed conceptualized in rabbinic literature in demonological terms. It also serves as a reminder of the proximity between rabbinic and monastic anthropologies – over and above the differences in their attitudes toward sexual morality and ascetic practices – a proximity scholars tend too often to play down,” Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 42.

<sup>30</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 8–10, 36–43.

<sup>31</sup> The analysis of passages in their context is important in general, but all the more so because much of the rabbinical literature exists in discussions surrounding a subject, with many diverting and often conflicting opinions being brought forth.

<sup>32</sup> David Brakke states the following about the risk of (unconsciously) interpreting Evagrius’s demonology as a psychology: “Because Evagrius virtually identified the demons with such passions as sadness, anger and pride, his science of the demons looks to us very much like a psychology in the modern sense—that is a science of the inner self. But in fact, Evagrius’s gnostic monk kept his gaze resolutely outward, focussed

criticism, but use the texts in their final form. I will also not compare the concepts of the *yetzer* and the Evagrian demons with other possible influences from the broader context surrounding Evagrius and the early rabbis, neither will I try to explain historically how the concepts of *yetzer* and monastic demons came to be. All these questions are important, of course, if one wants to get a full picture of what the actual relationship between the *yetzer* and early monastic demons was, but I will leave this for further research.

The relevance of my thesis is first of all found in a further understanding of the *yetzer* in early rabbinical literature, as it expands the work of Rosen-Zvi on this subject. While the primary aim of this thesis is to add to a better understanding of the *yetzer*, the conclusions are also relevant for understanding the concept of demons in Evagrius's writings, and therefore of the broader early monastic context that he was a part of. Because this thesis evaluates Rosen-Zvi's statement on the possible connection between the *yetzer* and the Evagrian demons, it also (even though it doesn't contain historical criticism or socio-cultural analysis itself) attributes to a broader field of studies about the relationship between Jews and Christians in late antiquity and the discussion surrounding what is called 'the parting of the ways', which concerns itself with the question of whether the early Christian and Jewish communities during this time evolved mostly independent of each other, or if their development was much more interrelated, as scholars like Adam Becker, Annette Reed, Daniel Boyarin, Rosen-Zvi himself and others have proposed.<sup>33</sup>

As stated before, my research is a continuation of Rosen-Zvi's comparison, and is intended to evaluate the hypothesis made by Rosen-Zvi that the developments of the *yetzer* and Evagrian demons are part of a common Jewish-Christian shift in demonology in late antiquity. The comparison in this thesis is made by – in terms of Victoria Bonnell's dichotomy between the analytical and illustrative approach – using an analytical approach, in which different concepts are compared without using an existing explanatory theory or concept.<sup>34</sup> A cross-religious comparison brings with it the risk for both

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on his unseen enemies," David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), cited in: Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 86..

<sup>33</sup> See, for example: Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, *The Ways That Never Parted* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020); Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, Divinations (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Anders Runesson and Rebecca Runesson, *Judaism for Gentiles: Reading Paul beyond the Parting of the Ways Paradigm*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 494 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Goy: Israel's Multiple Others and the Birth of the Gentile*, 1th ed., Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018); Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, *Figurae: Reading Medieval Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Victoria E. Bonnell, 'The Uses of Theory, Concepts and Comparison in Historical Sociology', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 2 (April 1980): 156–73; Victoria Bonnell explains the difference between the 'analytical type' and the 'illustrative type' of comparison in the following way: "Generally speaking, comparison—or the juxtaposition of equivalent units—takes two forms in historical-sociological research. In the first or 'analytical' type, the main point of comparison is between or among equivalent units. The comparison involves an identification of independent variables that serve to explain common or contrasting patterns or occurrences. The investigator juxtaposes equivalent units with each other in order to discern regularities that might provide explanatory generalizations. In the second or 'illustrative'

me as the author as well as for the reader of this thesis to interpret one religious tradition in the terms of the other, or in terms of modern scientific concepts that conceal the meaning of a text in his own tradition. For this reason, I have embedded both the Evagrian literature and the rabbinical literature as much as possible in their own respective contexts, and – where possible – I have tried to stay close to the vocabulary of the discussed primary literature, albeit most often rendered to English.<sup>35</sup>

For my research on how the fight with the evil *yetzer* is described in early rabbinical literature, I have analysed all occurrences in the Talmuds and most of the Midrashic literature of the year 0 to 500 AC.<sup>36</sup> In order to find all occurrences of the *yetzer* (including the occurrences of the good *yetzer*) I have used the online database of rabbinical literature ‘*Maagerim*’.<sup>37</sup> The total occurrences of the root יצר with the relevant semantic meaning (desire, inclination or tendency) amounted to bit over one hundred fifty, which means I likely have used the same sources as Rosen-Zvi, who used the same database and came to “some hundred and fifty appearances.”<sup>38</sup> From the total number of occurrences, I made a selection of the cases in which something is said or implied about the way to overcome the *yetzer*, which I have analysed in the rabbinical discussions they were part of, and categorized them thematically. The other occurrences of the *yetzer* are only used to provide a proper understanding of the nature of the *yetzer*, but are – contrary to Rosen-Zvi’s book – not the primary focus of this thesis.

Even though the struggle with the *yetzer* is a relatively minor subject in the large corpus of early rabbinical literature, the same cannot be said of struggle with demons in Evagrius’s writings. As the scope for this thesis is limited, I have mostly relied on a selection of texts from Evagrius that are most relevant to the subject of fighting demons, namely those writings that are contained in the collection ‘Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus’ of Robert E. Sinkewicz and Evagrius’s book called *Antirrhetikos*, mostly relying on the translation of David Brakke.<sup>39</sup> My analysis of Evagrius’ work is

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type, the main point of comparison is between equivalent units on the one hand and a theory or concept on the other. This variant evaluates individual units not in relation to each other but in relation to a basic theory or concept applicable to all of them,” and: “‘Analytical’ comparison serves to identify independent variables that account for similar or contrasting patterns, whereas ‘illustrative’ comparison focusses on correspondences between a unit or units of analysis and a theory or concept,” Bonnell, 164-165, 171; These types of comparisons have been further discussed by David Frankfurter, see: David Frankfurter, ‘Comparison and the Study of Religions of Late Antiquity’, in *Comparer en histoire des religions antiques*, ed. Claude Calame and Bruce Lincoln (Presses universitaires de Liège, 2012), 83–98.

<sup>35</sup> For describing both the *yetzer* and the Evagrian demons, I use words like ‘adversary’ and ‘enemy’ because it describes the enmity that both the *yetzer* and the demons have to the human person, while also being undefined enough as not to enforce a certain meaning from one context on another.

<sup>36</sup> For an introduction to Talmud and Midrash (and other early rabbinical literature), see: Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1991).

<sup>37</sup> [www.maagerim.hebrew-academy.org.il](http://www.maagerim.hebrew-academy.org.il), accessed on 10-08-2023

<sup>38</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); David Brakke, *Evagrius of Pontus: Talking Back. A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons. A Monastic Handbook For Combating Demons*. (Trappist, KY; Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications; Liturgical Press: 2009); Contrary to the texts of Sinkewicz’ collection, which were translated from the Greek, the translated of David Brakke is based on the Syriac text, as the Greek of *Antirrhetikos* has been lost to us, David Brakke, 42.

relatively less thorough than that of the *yetzer* in rabbinical literature, as the size of the Evagrius corpus – even with the selection that I made – together with the exceptionally frequent amount of references to the fight with the demons are simply too big to fall within the scope of this thesis. For this reason I have approached the writings of Evagrius by carefully reading through the selected literature and using the thematically most relevant passages for my comparison. For the Hebrew/Aramaic of the rabbinical literature, as well as for a general guideline for my translation, I have consulted the website [www.sefaria.com](http://www.sefaria.com), which contains all the relevant rabbinical literature as well as the Targumim. Translations from Rabbinical Literature both relied on the translations of Rosen-Zvi, as well as on my own. As the division of rabbinical texts can differ in different editions of these texts, I used the same divisions as those that are found on [www.sefaria.com](http://www.sefaria.com), so that the reader can easily find the Hebrew text in its proper context on one website. Citations from Scripture are taken from the New International Version (NIV).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> For the Hebrew of the Bible, the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* is used, see: Karl Elliger and Adrian Schenker, eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006); For the Greek the Nestle-Aland 28<sup>th</sup> ed. is used: Barbara Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th Revised Edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012); For the LXX, I have consulted Bibleworks.

## Chapter I: Background

Before presenting the results of my comparison, it is necessary to give some theoretical background to both Evagrius's spirituality and demonology and the concept of the *yetzer* in earlier biblical and rabbinical literature, which will be done in this chapter. First, I will give a compact description of Evagrius's thinking about the spiritual life and the way demons interact with it. Thereafter, I will discuss the occurrences of the *yetzer* in Biblical and earlier rabbinical literature, in which the *yetzer* often functions quite differently from the in the later use of the concept in the rabbinical literature that is relevant to this thesis, but that – given the nature of rabbinical literature – is referred back to often in rabbinical material of later times.

### Evagrius's Spirituality

In order to understand Evagrius's writings, it is first necessary to understand his broader view of the cosmos, of the uncreated, of demons and angels, and of man's place in it all. Columba Stewart argues that Evagrius was fascinated by understanding life with a 'unified theory of everything'.<sup>41</sup> On the cosmological level, Stewart explains, he understood the world to be created in such a way that all the created 'rational creatures' (λογικοί) – meaning humans and angelic beings – were in union with God, with their very purpose being the contemplation of God himself.<sup>42</sup> The effect of the contemplation of God is called 'essential knowledge'.<sup>43</sup> However, as the *logikoi* were created with a free will, they willingly diverted themselves from the contemplation of God, creating a movement from this essential knowledge towards a dispersed "wisdom full of varieties."<sup>44</sup> According to Evagrius, the aim of life is to return to one's original position in the world and to attain 'essential knowledge' through contemplation.<sup>45</sup> This is made ultimately possible by Christ who brought the "second creation" to the cosmos and – having all knowledge within Him – He enables all of humanity to participate in this knowledge.<sup>46</sup> It is through prayer that the mind comes to its natural state and (re)gains this knowledge.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Columba Stewart, 'Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2001): 181.

<sup>42</sup> Stewart, 176.

<sup>43</sup> Stewart, 176.

<sup>44</sup> Stewart, 176.

<sup>45</sup> Stewart, 176.

<sup>46</sup> Stewart, 176.

<sup>47</sup> Or in Evagrius's own words: "Prayer prepares the mind to exercise the activity that is proper to it. Prayer is an activity befitting the dignity of the mind, or indeed, the superior and pure activity and use of the mind," and: "If you practice pure prayer, you will find great assurance, and angels will escort you, as they did Daniel (Dan. 2:19), and they will illumine for you the reasons of beings," Evagrius, on Prayer, 80, 83b-84, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 201-202.

Gabriel Bunge explains that, according to Evagrius, a person's core is his 'intellect'<sup>48</sup> (νοῦς), which is the very image of God in which he is created.<sup>49</sup> Even after the fall, the human being still has the image of God within him.<sup>50</sup> Bunge furthermore explains that in order to return to his original state, a person has to be 'renewed' from 'the old man' into a 'new creation in Christ' through the sacrament of baptism.<sup>51</sup> Having become the 'new man', one can attain the knowledge of God.<sup>52</sup> On what it meant for Evagrius to be a monk, Bunge states: "For Evagrius, the 'monk' is simply the prototype of the 'new man': what turns a 'man' in this sense into a 'monk' is that he first turns away from all actual sins. His intellect becomes a 'monk' when it is free of all sins of thought, and 'perceives the lights of the Holy Trinity at the time of prayer.'" <sup>53</sup> While the *nous* is the immaterial centre of the human being, his body is the material 'instrument' (ὄργανον) by which he engages in the world, either for good or for bad.<sup>54</sup> A person's soul is made up out of different parts, or 'powers', which Bunge explains to be the rational (λογιστικόν), the irascible (θυματικόν) and the concupiscible (ἐπιθυμητικόν).<sup>55</sup>

All these three powers are to be in a natural harmony, with the intellect ruling over the irrational part, as the irrational (or: passionate) part (παθητικόν) is most vulnerable to the passions (πάθη) because of its closeness to the senses and thereby material reality.<sup>56</sup> Desire is the weakness of the concupiscible part of the soul, which is connected closer to the body.<sup>57</sup> Anger is the weakness of the irascible part, which is more connected to the heart, the same place where also the *nous* is located.<sup>58</sup> The irascible part is part of the irrational part of the soul as well as connected to the heart.<sup>59</sup> Because of this closeness to the heart, anger can easily blind the 'vision' of the *nous* and therefore is much more dangerous than "the passions of the body."<sup>60</sup> When passions enter the irrational part, they can spread out through the soul

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<sup>48</sup> Often rendered by others as 'mind'.

<sup>49</sup> Gabriel Bunge, *Dragon's Wine and Angel's Bread: The Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus on Anger and Meekness*, trans. Anthony Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), 13; Bunge describes the *nous* as follows: "At the center stands the 'intellect' (νοῦς), which is not to be equated with our ratio (reason) but – speaking biblically – designates the 'inner man' created 'in the image of God' and who also 'in Christ' through baptism has been 'renewed according to the image of his Creator.' For only this 'personal core' of man is capable of having an 'immediate' relationship with God," Bunge, 20–21 .

<sup>50</sup> Bunge, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Bunge, 13.

<sup>52</sup> Bunge, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Bunge, 14.

<sup>54</sup> Bunge, 15.

<sup>55</sup> "While the body—like the entire material world—consists of four elements, the spirit-soul is composed of three 'parts,' and more precisely, since these actually constitute a unity, of three 'powers' (δυνάμεις): the rational (λογιστικόν), the irascible (θυματικόν) and the concupiscible (ἐπιθυμητικόν). The last two powers mentioned, which like the body we have in common with the animals, are also summed up as the 'irrational part' of the soul, sometimes being called the 'soul' in general. The rational power, by contrast, is called the 'intellect' (νοῦς). Each of these three powers has its own natural field of operation," Bunge, 15.

<sup>56</sup> Luke Dysinger, 'Evagrius Ponticus, Exegete of the Soul', in *Evagrius and His Legacy*, ed. Joel Kalvesmaki and Robin Darling Young (University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 74; Bunge, *Dragon's Wine and Angel's Bread*, 16.

<sup>57</sup> Bunge, *Dragon's Wine and Angel's Bread*, 16-18.

<sup>58</sup> Bunge, 16-18.

<sup>59</sup> Bunge, 19.

<sup>60</sup> Bunge, 18–19.

and ‘darken the intellect’.<sup>61</sup> This vulnerability is precisely where the demons attack: they try to darken the eye of the intellect through stirring up the passionate part of the person and thereby preventing the harmony between the three powers of the soul.<sup>62</sup> Even though the monk withdraws himself from most of the material things that makes him vulnerable, he still has within him the mental representations (νοήματα) of those things.<sup>63</sup> The Greek words εικόνες, νοήματα, ὁμοιώματα, φαντασῖαι and λογισμοί are all used by Evagrius to refer to different kinds of mental representations with the latter two words usually referring to thoughts of demonic origin.<sup>64</sup>

The final aim of the spiritual life is to attain knowledge (γνῶσις) of God.<sup>65</sup> There are three steps necessary to attain this, the first of which is attaining so-called impassibility (ἀπάθεια) of the soul – which is the freedom from the passions – through the practical life (πρακτική).<sup>66</sup> Through this purification of the soul, the intellect is able to see the real meanings (λόγοι) of all created things, and this unveils all of creation to be a mediator of God’s grace and a temple of God.<sup>67</sup> These *logoi* refer to the world and everything in it as they have always existed – even ‘before’ creation – in the mind of God.<sup>68</sup> The state of perceiving these *logoi* is referred to by Evagrius as ψυχική.<sup>69</sup> The perception of the ‘real *logoi* of creation’ therefore means – in Konstantinovsky’s words – that “Matter and spirit reach a point where they become almost indistinguishable, with the material universe seen as God-filled and transfigured.”<sup>70</sup> However, Evagrius’s theology of God Himself is apophatic: God is beyond all sensible experience and the representations thereof and to truly know God is therefore to go beyond all concepts into what Evagrius calls ‘imageless’ or ‘pure’ prayer.<sup>71</sup> Stewart explains it in the following way: “the goal is that we ourselves go to God in prayer without any notion of form (ἄμορφία), immaterial and dispossessed, in surrender of all hope of sensory perception (ἀναισθησία).”<sup>72</sup> What follows naturally is, as Kevin Corrigan states, that “mental representations of sensible things, if they persist, destroy knowledge,” and Evagrius himself states: “You cannot practice pure prayer if you are interwoven with

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<sup>61</sup> Bunge, 16–17.

<sup>62</sup> Bunge, 21.

<sup>63</sup> Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, xxv.

<sup>64</sup> Julia Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus: The Making of a Gnostic*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2009), 35; Stewart, ‘Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus’, 186–87.

<sup>65</sup> Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, xxiv–xxxvii; Stewart, ‘Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus’, 176.

<sup>66</sup> Stewart, ‘Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus’, 178; Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 28–30; The concept of the πρακτική will be explained below.

<sup>67</sup> Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 53–58, 60, 65–66.

<sup>68</sup> Julia Konstantinovsky, ‘Evagrius Ponticus and Maximus the Confessor’, in *Evagrius and His Legacy*, ed. Joel Kalvesmaki and Robin Darling Young (University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 129.

<sup>69</sup> Dysinger, ‘Evagrius Ponticus, Exegete of the Soul’, 75.

<sup>70</sup> Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 66.

<sup>71</sup> Konstantinovsky, 60–64.

<sup>72</sup> Stewart, ‘Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus’, 192.

material things and agitated by continuous mental cares, for prayer is the putting aside of mental representations.”<sup>73</sup>

This then brings us to Evagrius’s (and his contemporaries’) view of spiritual life, about which – Konstantinovsky explains that it is supposed to bring one (back) to the original *telos* of humanity, namely existing in union with God.<sup>74</sup> This ‘new man’ is described by Konstantinovsky in the following way: “this higher self, which develops through *hesychia*, was God-oriented, manifesting some of the characteristics of goodness proper to God himself: unfailing moral uprightness, freedom from evil inclinations (*apatheia*), spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*), and the ability to create new realities, in imitation of the very creativity of God.”<sup>75</sup> Evagrius distinguishes spiritual life into three parts: the practical life (*πρακτική*), the contemplation of the natural world (*φυσική, θεωρία, or θεωρία ψυχική*) and knowledge of God (*θεολογία, or γνωστική*).<sup>76</sup> The *praktike* is the prerequisite to *theoria* and from this state the hope exists that one might – through pure prayer – participate in *theologia*, contemplating the reality that lies behind “all worlds and concepts.”<sup>77</sup> By advancing on this path, Luke Dysinger explains, the monk can become a *gnostikos*, which is “a contemplative and teacher who is able to perceive the divine *logoi*, the inner meanings and purposes of God within creation and history” and a contemplator of the divine reality that lies beyond it.<sup>78</sup> Misiarczyk explains that the *praktike* exists in the following: “the spiritual activity which includes keeping the commandments, practicing the virtues, fear of God, abstinence, perseverance and hope, devotion, asceticism and above all a struggle with thoughts of the concupiscible and irascible part of the soul.”<sup>79</sup> Part of the *praktike* is *διάκρισις* (discernment) in which the anchorite learns to recognize the contents of his mind (the *νοήματα*) and the discern which representations give rise to the passions, which Evagrius refers to as the *logismoi* and *phantasiai*.<sup>80</sup> The *logismoi* are used as tools by the demons, and the word *logismos* is often so much connected to the demonic, that he frequently uses the words ‘*logismos*’ and ‘demon’ interchangeably.<sup>81</sup>

These *logismoi* are important to this thesis, as they function as the most important interaction between the demons and humanity: they disturb a person’s inner self by means of *logismoi*, which “tend to attach themselves to the authentic powers of the soul,” thereby interfering with the harmony between

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<sup>73</sup> Kevin Corrigan, ‘Thoughts That Cut’, in *Evagrius and His Legacy*, ed. Joel Kalvesmaki and Robin Darling Young (University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 49; Evagrius, *on Prayer* 70, cited in: Kevin Corrigan, 49-50; Evagrius explains the same thing in *Peri Logismon* 22, see: Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 22.

<sup>74</sup> Konstantinovsky, ‘Evagrius Ponticus and Maximus the Confessor’, 130–31.

<sup>75</sup> Konstantinovsky, 131.

<sup>76</sup> Stewart, ‘Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus’, 178; Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, xxxvii; Brian E. Daley, ‘Evagrius and Cappadocian Orthodoxy’, in *Evagrius and His Legacy*, ed. Joel Kalvesmaki and Robin Darling Young (University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 35; Misiarczyk, *Eight Logismoi in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, 76; Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 30.

<sup>77</sup> Dysinger, ‘Evagrius Ponticus, Exegete of the Soul’, 75, 87.

<sup>78</sup> Dysinger, 75.

<sup>79</sup> Misiarczyk, *Eight Logismoi in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, 76.

<sup>80</sup> Dysinger, ‘Evagrius Ponticus, Exegete of the Soul’, 74–75.

<sup>81</sup> Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, xxv.

the powers of the soul.<sup>82</sup> Konstantinovsky defines the *logismoi* as follows: “These are misguided, irrational cognitive responses both to the outer and inner realities: to the neutral stimuli from the external world and to the original benign concepts within the mind.”<sup>83</sup> There are eight categories of *logismoi*, which were later transformed by Evagrius’s student St. John Cassian (who became of great influence to Western monasticism) into the well-known idea of the seven cardinal sins.<sup>84</sup> The eight categories of *logismoi* are “gluttony, fornication, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory and pride.”<sup>85</sup> These *logismoi* furthermore exists as a “chain of sin,” with one sin leading to the next, ultimately leading to ‘the death of the soul’.<sup>86</sup> Over against these *logismoi* is a chain of virtues, that results in the impassibility (*apatheia*) of the soul.<sup>87</sup>

## Early *Yetzer*

As already explained in the introduction, Rosen-Zvi argues that the rabbinical *yetzer* should not be contextualized in the context of classical Greek thought about self-control, but that it should instead be viewed from the context of Jewish and Christian thinking about sin and demons.<sup>88</sup> He argues that the rabbinical *yetzer* should generally be understood in the following way: “far from being a blind appetite, the rabbinic (evil) *yetzer* is a sophisticated antinomian enticer, struggling to trap humans.”<sup>89</sup> In his opinion, the *yetzer* is not an ‘inclination’ in the sense of a personal desire towards something in the world, but an antinomian adversary that pulls the human being away from God.<sup>90</sup> Even though the *yetzer* is placed inside every human being by God himself, it is evil by its very nature.<sup>91</sup> In a world where sin was often seen as either the result of uncontrollable cosmic powers or as the weakness of the will over the body, the *yetzer* developed as the rabbinical explanation of sin, resembling Christian monastic demonology.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Konstantinovsky, ‘Evagrius Ponticus and Maximus the Confessor’, 135–36.

<sup>83</sup> Konstantinovsky, 135.

<sup>84</sup> William Harmless S.J., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 363; Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 245–46; Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 37.

<sup>85</sup> George Tsakiridis, *Evagrius Ponticus and Cognitive Science: A Look at Moral Evil and the Thoughts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 15; For a further explanation of these eight *logismoi*, see: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, xxv–xxxi..

<sup>86</sup> Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 36.

<sup>87</sup> Konstantinovsky, 36.

<sup>88</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 128.

<sup>89</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 6.

<sup>90</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 18,52.

<sup>91</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 21–22, 35.

<sup>92</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 128–129.

The difficulty with describing the rabbinical *yetzer* of late antiquity is that it was not a fixed concept but one that changed significantly.<sup>93</sup> Even though Rosen-Zvi proposes a specific understanding of the *yetzer*, he does acknowledge that there are different models present in classical rabbinical literature. First of all, there is the *yetzer* of the Bible, which he describes as ‘carrying a neutral meaning.’<sup>94</sup> Then there is the *yetzer* of the school of Rabbi Akiva, which “seems to indicate nothing more than the normal human tendency toward self-interest.”<sup>95</sup> The general message surrounding the Akivan *yetzer* is to overcome it, not because it is legally required, but because it is morally better.<sup>96</sup> Then there also is the *yetzer* of the school of Rabbi Ishmael, which is central to Rosen-Zvi’s argument. Rosen-Zvi argues that this *yetzer*, which is most prevalent both in tannaitic literature associated with the school of Rabbi Ishmael as well as in later amoraic literature, can best be described as demonic: it functions as an independent adversary in the heart of the human being that entices him to sin and leads him away from God.<sup>97</sup> Finally, there is the *yetzer* of the later strata of the Bavli, which is very much related to sexual desire. Even though this sexualized *yetzer* is very prevalent in scholarly discourse, the *yetzer* appears mostly in the later post-amoraic Babylonian strata of classical rabbinical literature.<sup>98</sup>

It must also be stated that the dating of rabbinical texts is difficult because the material is very much layered by redactions of material from different time periods.<sup>99</sup> Attempts have been made to do linguistic dating, or by looking at the earliest references at sources, but in general there is little certainty about the dating of specific passages.<sup>100</sup> Most often, dating is done on the basis of the names of the rabbis that are cited, which probably is quite accurate in the case of tannaitic literature.<sup>101</sup> This is not to say that the names of the cited rabbis are correct, but the time period is generally trustworthy.<sup>102</sup>

Prior to going into the development of the rabbinical understanding of the *yetzer*, it is important to have a clear view of the Biblical uses of the word, as verses from the Bible are often referred to in rabbinical literature, generally, but also specifically concerning the *yetzer*. The root יצר is used around seventy times in the Bible usually means something in the direction of forming, creating, and pottery,

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<sup>93</sup> The difference in meaning that is given to the *yetzer* in tannaitic traditions, and most importantly between those that go back to Rabbi Akiva and to that of Rabbi Ishmael, is thoroughly discussed in the first chapter of Rosen-Zvi’s monograph: Rosen-Zvi, 14–35.

<sup>94</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 16.

<sup>95</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 14–18.

<sup>96</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 16, 140.

<sup>97</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 18–26, 132; Rosen-Zvi explains about the Ishmaelian homilies: “The homilies of the school of Rabbi Ishmael, [in contrast to St. Augustine’s explanation of sin], do not turn to the inner dynamics of the psyche for an explanation. They use demonology instead: there is an entity in the heart that constantly incites its host to sin,” Rosen-Zvi, 26.

<sup>98</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 102–109.

<sup>99</sup> Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 46–48.

<sup>100</sup> For the problem of dating rabbinical text and a categorization of different groups of rabbis, see: Stemberger, 45–100.

<sup>101</sup> Stemberger, 47, 57–62.

<sup>102</sup> Stemberger, 57; For the assignment of specific texts to one of the specific schools, I follow the categorisation of Stemberger and/or Rosen-Zvi..

or nominal forms with similar meanings.<sup>103</sup> The root is however also used five times – that I know of – with the meaning of “of what is framed in the mind.”<sup>104</sup> In this use it is often connected to another noun that is related to the inner workings of a human being, like the heart or the mind. In Genesis, for example, it comes appears in the combination “כָּל־יֵצֵר מִחֻשְׁבַּת לְבוֹ” (Gen 6:5) and “יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם” (Gen 8:21). In this chapter I will also discuss the translations of the Septuagint and the Targums, as translations can further solidify our understanding of how texts were interpreted in the time the translation was made.

There are a only few references to this ‘inner’ *yetzer* in the Pentateuch, of which the abovementioned occurrences are the first two. In Genesis 6:5 it says: “The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart [כָּל־יֵצֵר מִחֻשְׁבַּת לְבוֹ רַק רַע כָּל־הַיּוֹם] was only evil all the time.” (NIV) The other occurrence of *yetzer* in Genesis is quite similar: “The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood [כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם רַע מִנְעֻרָיו]. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.” (Gen. 8:21 NIV) From these verses it is easy too see how a concept of *yetzer* in later times could be associated with both the human heart and with human morality. The Septuagint seems to interpret the verse as speaking of about thoughts, and renders it into “πᾶς τις διανοεῖται ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ” and “ἡ διάνοια τοῦ ἀνθρώπου” respectively. Another reference is found in Deuteronomy: “I know what they are disposed to do [כִּי יָדַעְתִּי אֶת־יֵצֵרוֹ אֲשֶׁר הוּא עֹשֶׂה הַיּוֹם], even before I bring them into the land I promised them on oath.” (Deut. 31:21b NIV) Here the Septuagint renders the as related – not to thoughts as in the earlier cases – but to practicing evil: “ἐγὼ γὰρ οἶδα τὴν πονηρίαν αὐτῶν ὅσα ποιοῦσιν ὧδε σήμερον”. This is a remarkable translation, which could indicate that the word *yetzer* already contained a connotation with evil at the time this part of the LXX was written. However, it is also important not to overstate the meaning of this specific rendering of the word in the Septuagint, as the context clearly demands a reading of the word as something evil. In the Targum Onkelos the same root יצר is used in its translation of all three verses.

Outside of the Pentateuch the word *yetzer* is used in a more positive way. In the book of Isaiah the word *yetzer* is referred to in the following way: “You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast [יֵצֵר כְּמוֹד], because they trust in you.” (Isa. 26:3 NIV) The Targum (Targum Jonathan) renders it with the word ‘heart’ (לֵב), which again confirms the close relationship between the word *yetzer* and the heart. In 1 Chronicles there are two more references to the noun ‘*yetzer*’. The first one is found in 2 Chron. 28:9: “כִּי כָל־לִבְבוֹת דּוֹרָשׁ יְהוָה וְכָל־יֵצֵר מִחֻשְׁבוֹת מִבֵּין”, which clearly resembles the

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<sup>103</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 3; Wilhelm Gesenius et al., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic Based on the Lexicon of William Gesenius as Translated by Edward Robinson* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1962), 427–428, יצר.

<sup>104</sup> According to Rosen-Zvi Psalm 103:14 contains another instance, but nothing in the verse seem to indicate that the word carries a meaning of something mental. Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 3, 135; Gesenius et al., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 427-428, יצר.

beforementioned the ‘כְּלִי-יֵצֶר מִחֶשְׁבֹת לְבוֹ’ of Genesis 6:5.<sup>105</sup> And also here the Septuagint renders it as ‘thought’: “ὅτι πάσας καρδίας ἐτάζει κύριος καὶ πᾶν ἐνθύμημα γιγνώσκει.” The Targum Rabbi Joseph translates the word, just as in the other cases, with the same root ‘יצר’. Finally, there is a second reference to the *yetzer* in 1 Chronicles: “LORD, the God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Israel, keep these desires and thoughts in the hearts of your people forever [שְׁמְרֵה-זֹאת לְעוֹלָם לְיֵצֶר מִחֶשְׁבוֹת לְבָב עַמְּךָ], and keep their hearts loyal to you.” (1 Chron. 29:18 NIV) Also here, the whole phrase לְיֵצֶר מִחֶשְׁבוֹת לְבָב is translated by the word ‘hearts’ in the Greek of the Septuagint: “καὶ κατεύθυνον τὰς καρδίας αὐτῶν πρὸς σέ.” In the Targum Rabbi Joseph the wording stays close to the Hebrew: יֵצֶר הַהֵוֵרִי לְבָבָא דְעַמְךָ. It is almost identical, and even more so because the meaning of the word ‘הַהֵוֵרִי’ (thoughts, meditations, plans) is very close – if not identical – to that of the word ‘מִחֶשְׁבוֹת’ (thoughts, plans).<sup>106</sup>

As explained above, one of the specific uses of the word יצר in the Bible is related to products of the human mind. In these cases the word is often also directly connected to the word for heart or mind and outside of the Pentateuch it seems to have a morally neutral meaning.<sup>107</sup> The connection of the *yetzer* to evil that would later become prominent in the rabbinical literature is unsurprising, as the Biblical occurrences of יצר in the Pentateuch are related to human evil. The translations of the Targums are almost identical to the original texts, and the Septuagint always stays in the same semantic field of יצר in the Bible: that of the mind and the heart and of evil.

In the Mishnah – which was completed around the year 200 – the *yetzer* is mentioned four times, which is remarkably few compared to the amount of occurrences in later rabbinical literature.<sup>108</sup> Three of these occurrences are found in tractate Pirkei Avot and one in tractate Berachot.<sup>109</sup> In two instances the *yetzer* is simply used to describe something akin to a bad character trait.<sup>110</sup> In Pirkei Avot 2:11 a saying of Rabbi Jehoshua is described as follows: “Rabbi Jehoshua says: “the eye of evil, the evil *yetzer* and the hate of men [עֵין הָרָע, וְיֵצֶר הָרָע, וְשִׂנְאֵת הַבְּרִיּוֹת] bring man out of the world.” The evil *yetzer* is named together with other bad traits, with nothing to indicate that it is any sort of entity.<sup>111</sup> In Pirkei Avot 4:1, the *yetzer* seems to refer to anger: “Who is strong? The one that conquers his *yetzer* [הַכּוֹבֵשׁ אֶת יְצֵרוֹ], as is said: it is better to be patient than strong and to control one’s mind than it is to capture a city (Proverbs 16:32).”<sup>112</sup> In Pirkei Avot 4:22 there is a saying that implies something resembling the Ishmaelian *yetzer*,

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<sup>105</sup> “And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every desire and every thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever,” 1 Chron. 29:18 NIV.

<sup>106</sup> Marcus Jastrow, ed., *A Dictionary of the Targumim: The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Pardes Publishing House, Inc., 1950), 366, הַהֵוֵרִי, 764, מִחֶשְׁבוֹת.

<sup>107</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 16.

<sup>108</sup> Stemmerger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 109; Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 29.

<sup>109</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 29.

<sup>110</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 29.

<sup>111</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 29.

<sup>112</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 29.

namely that the *yetzer* is arguing with men to pursue them to sin: “For in [Gods] presence is neither guile nor forgetfulness nor respect of persons nor taking of bribes; for all is His. And know that everything is according to the reckoning (ודע שהכל בחשבון). And let not your yetzer promise you that Sheol is a refuge [from divine retribution].”<sup>113</sup> The *yetzer* here is proposed as giving men a ‘pretext for sin’, namely that in death they will be save from God’s judgement.<sup>114</sup> The reference to the *yetzer* in Mishnah Berachot 9:5 actually refers to two *yetzarim*, which is rare in tannaitic literature, but is sometimes found in later literature.<sup>115</sup> It takes the verse “Love the LORD your God with all your heart (בְּכָל-לִבְךָ) and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:5 NIV) to mean “with both *yetzarim*, the good and the evil.<sup>116</sup> This model of two *yetzarim* in the heart exists of one *yetzer* that is good and one *yetzer* that is evil, creating a duality in the heart.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Translation by Rosen-Zvi: Rosen-Zvi, 91.

<sup>114</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 87–101; I will expound further on Rosen-Zvi’s explanation of the *yetzer* giving “pretexts of permission” below.

<sup>115</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 27.

<sup>116</sup> “וְאֵתְהַבֵּת אֵת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדֶךָ. בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ, בְּשֵׁנֶי יְצָרֶיךָ, בְּנִצָּר טוֹב וּבְנִצָּר רָע,” Mishnah Berachot 9:5.

<sup>117</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 26-29.

## Chapter II: The Battle for the Heart

In this chapter I will discuss the central place that the heart and the theme of circumcision have in the discourse concerning the *yetzer*, as well as the role that these themes have in the spirituality of Evagrius. In order to understand how the *yetzer* relates to the heart of a human being, it is particularly necessary to discuss the relationship of the *yetzer* to the so-called circumcision of the heart.<sup>118</sup> The circumcision of the heart is one of the most important themes to understand how the *yetzer* is connected to a human's life, and why it is important to fight it. As will be further explained in this chapter, the *yetzer* is described to be cut off from the heart in order to attain unity of heart, with which a person can worship God. However, in other passages, the focus not so much on the cutting off of the *yetzer*, but more on a continuous struggle with it. Also for Evagrius, the purity of the heart and especially the mind is essential to his anthropology and spirituality, as it is described as a prerequisite for the spiritual life, and – as shall be argued in this chapter – the ‘circumcision of the heart’ (even though this image play a minor role in his writings) is connected to the heart in a similar way as what we see with the *yetzer*.

In Sifra Shemini, the message is clear: if one wants to become ‘one’ (יחיד) and love God with his whole heart (בְּכָל־לֵבְךָ, Deut. 6:5), one needs to completely cut off the *yetzer* from his heart.<sup>119</sup> In Sifra Shemini 1, the call to love God with both *yetzarim* is transformed, as explicated earlier,<sup>120</sup> to a call to cut the evil *yetzer* and become wholehearted in that way (see [Appendix 2.1](#)).<sup>121</sup> As Rosen-Zvi argues, the message of this passage is the following: “the *yetzer* creates a duality within the human heart, preventing the singularity that is necessary for the service of God. One cannot serve the Lord ‘with *all* your heart’ when the *yetzer* resides in it. The *yetzer* thus must be extracted in order to attain the desired unity.”<sup>122</sup> As one cannot serve the Lord ‘with all his heart’ this way, the commandment to wholeheartedly love God becomes a commandment to root out the evil *yetzer* from one's heart completely.

The connection between the *yetzer* and circumcision is also found in Bavli Nedarim 32a-32b, where the subject of circumcision is discussed and is said to have been the way Abraham gained that control over his body. At the end of the discussion Rami bar Abba says that Abraham – through circumcision – gained control<sup>123</sup> over five more limbs, as his name changed from Abram with the numerical value of 243 to Abraham with the numerical value of 248. These five limbs are explained to be the eyes, the ears and the head of the penis. Then, on page 32b, the topic of the *yetzer* is brought up (see [Appendix 2.2](#))

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<sup>118</sup> The ‘circumcision of the heart’ is also (briefly) discussed by Rosen-Zvi, see: Rosen-Zvi, 27–29.

<sup>119</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 27.

<sup>120</sup> The passages that were discussed earlier are from Tosefta Berachot 6:11 and Sifrei Devarim 32:3

<sup>121</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 27–28.

<sup>122</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 27.

<sup>123</sup> A more literal rendering would be: ‘God enthroned him’ (המליכו).

The men in the city are interpreted as the limbs of a person and these limbs are the connection to the earlier part about circumcision. In combination with the preceding argument about Abraham, it appears to mean that it is wisdom – which is identified with repentance and good deeds – that can subjugate the limbs in order to protect the person against the evil *yetzer*, in the same way that God ‘enthroned’ (המליך) Abraham over his limbs.<sup>124</sup> What is also notable in this passage is that the evil *yetzer* is described as causing sin, while the good *yetzer* is responsible for repentance and good deeds.<sup>125</sup> Once the evil *yetzer* has taken over the body, the good *yetzer* – and thus repentance and good works – is forgotten. Rosen-Zvi emphasizes the unequal balance of power between both *yetzarim*, pointing to ‘the great king’ that is using brute force and ‘the poor man’ that has to plot its way unto victory.<sup>126</sup> However, it should also be noted that even though the evil *yetzer* is described to be a ‘mighty king’, and the good *yetzer* only ‘a poor man’, the good *yetzer* is still described as (potentially) being a powerful force, as he is seemingly capable of attaining victory. This means that, even though the story might not be optimistic about the outcome, the human being can still be ‘saved’ by the ‘wisdom’ of the good *yetzer*, namely repentance and good deeds. Here, the *yetzer* is not so much described as something that needs to be cut off, but more as an adversary to be battled with by repentance and good works. The focus of circumcision is therefore placed, not on the removal of the foreskin itself, but on the control over the body that Abraham gained by this act.

A very similar image to that of the human being as a besieged city we find in Evagrius’s *Exhortations*, 2.19-22 (see [Appendix 2.3](#)). This passage portrays (primarily in its meaning, but also in some of its imagery) a very similar picture to that of the besieged-city in Sifra Shemini. The heart is described as either upright and cleansed, making it an abode for Christ, or defiled and defenceless, making it an abode for demons. The ‘virtues of God’ cleanse the heart, arming the heart against the attacks of demons, which is an almost identical approach to that of the passage from Bavli Nederarim, where the good *yetzer* fights against the evil *yetzer* with “repentance and good works” in order to control “the city.”

What is also important to note in the passage from *Exhortations 2*, is that Evagrius describes the devotion to God with ‘an upright heart’ as a prerequisite to pure prayer. In the writings of Evagrius, the theme of the unity (or purity) of the heart and mind is of central importance. For Evagrius, the heart is closely connected with the *nous* and – together with the *nous* – described as the very centre of the human person.<sup>127</sup> Also in *Exhortations 2*, Evagrius explains the necessity of purifying the heart and soul in order for the intellect to “ponder sublime realities” and to “see the Lord” (see [Appendix 2.4](#)). Evagrius states

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<sup>124</sup> The only problem with this interpretation is the different in the number of limbs that are taken control of, five in the case of Abraham and ten in the story of city.

<sup>125</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 2.

<sup>126</sup> “[T]he two opposing powers in this struggle are not symmetrical. The evil *yetzer* is a ‘great king.’ The good *yetzer*, though ‘wise,’ is a ‘poor man,’ who despite his wisdom and tactical maneuvering cannot change the basic balance of power,” Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 2.

<sup>127</sup> Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 88-89.

in *Peri Logismon* that “[i]t is not possible for the mind strangled by such mental representations to stand before God and wear the crown of righteousness.”<sup>128</sup> A heart overcome by passions is directed towards the material objects of these passions, and therefore clouds one’s vision from seeing the ‘realm of the incorporeals’.<sup>129</sup> The heart is the place of both passion and impassibility, and therefore a place of warfare.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, true impassibility is only gained by continuous warfare (see [Appendix 2.5](#)). In his letter *on the Faith*, Evagrius also makes a connection between circumcision and the heart, describing some humans as ‘earthen vessels’ containing ‘the treasure of God’,<sup>131</sup> as opposed to “men with hearts of stone”<sup>132</sup> that are described as “uncircumcised men who have armed themselves with the arms of foolish wisdom” (see [Appendix 2.6](#)).<sup>133</sup>

Circumcision, just like many other cultic elements from the Hebrew Bible, is interpreted allegorically by Evagrius, who calls his allegorical interpretation of circumcision ‘the intelligible circumcision’, which refers to the cutting off of the passions from the intellect.<sup>134</sup> In *Kephalaia Gnostika* 4.12 he explains that this ‘intelligible circumcision’ is made possible through the knowledge of God.<sup>135</sup> In *on Vices* circumcision is described by Evagrius as an image of cutting away specifically *logismoi* from the mind (λογισμῶν περιτομή) (see [Appendix 2.7](#)). In his commentary on Matthew 10:34,<sup>136</sup> Evagrius furthermore refers to the practice of circumcision as an image of the monk’s practical life: “Just as the knife circumcises the sense-perceptible Jew, so does also the *praktikē* circumcise the intelligible Jew. Christ called it allegorically the sword that he has cast into the world.”<sup>137</sup> Here, the knife that performs physical circumcision is also allegorically identified with the *praktikē*. Furthermore, while

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<sup>128</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 22, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 168.

<sup>129</sup> Evagrius, *Exhortations* 2.4-2.7, trans.: Sinkewicz, 219.

<sup>130</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 3, Sinkewicz, 30-31; One example of such a battle is given by Evagrius when he, while talking about conflict and resentment, advises monks that are in a conflict the following: “consider yourself as the one completely at fault, lest even in your stillness you discover a battle of thoughts in your heart: one thought reproaches you for the manner of the offences, another [...] in turn reproaches you for not having replied with terrible offences,” Evagrius, *Eulogios* 5, trans.: Sinkewicz, 32–33.

<sup>131</sup> 2 Cor. 4:7: But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (NIV).

<sup>132</sup> The background of this expression is to be found in Ez. 11:19: “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh” (NIV), Ez. 36:26: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (NIV), and/or 2 Cor. 3:3: “You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (NIV).

<sup>133</sup> Evagrius, *on the Faith* 26, trans.: Augustine Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (London: Routledge, 2006), 69, (ebook).

<sup>134</sup> Evagrius, *Kephalaia Gnostika* 4.12, trans.: Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *Evagrius’s Kephalaia Gnostika: A New Translation of the Unreformed Text from the Syriac* (SBL Press, 2015), 203; for other examples of and commentary on other allegorical interpretations of Old Testament cultic elements, see: 223, 228-229, 233-236.

<sup>135</sup> “The intelligible circumcision is a voluntary distancing from passions, which (takes place) thanks to the knowledge of God,” Evagrius, *Kephalaia Gnostika* 4.12, trans.: Ramelli, 203.

<sup>136</sup> “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10: 34 NIV).

<sup>137</sup> Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *Evagrius’s Kephalaia Gnostika: A New Translation of the Unreformed Text from the Syriac* (SBL Press, 2015), 319.



## Chapter III: A Thickening Thread

Just as the *praktikē* is a process gradual transformation of the person towards contemplating nature and God himself through means of asceticism and prayer, so also – as discussed earlier – the opposite is true: sin leads to more sin.<sup>143</sup> In the opening of *Peri Logismon*, Evagrius explains how specifically the sins of gluttony, avarice and vainglory, open the door for other sins (see [Appendix 3.1](#)), and states the following: “to put it briefly, no one can fall into a demon’s power, unless he has first been wounded by those in the front line.” In the same passage, he also argues that the sin of gluttony leads to fornication.<sup>144</sup> Another example is found in *Peri Logismon* 14, where Evagrius explains that the *logismos* of vainglory leads to the *logismos* of pride; and in *Praktikos* 14, where Evagrius explains that the demon of pride leads to anger, sadness and madness. In *Peri Logismon* 21 he states something similar, namely that the demon of avarice gives a person greedy thoughts, only to hand him over to the demon of vainglory. As shall be argued in this chapter, a similar increasing grip of sin can be concluded about the evil *yetzer*, what Rosen-Zvi refers to as ‘a slippery slope’ that leads to idolatry.<sup>145</sup> At the same time, the *yetzer* is also described in the opposite way, namely that it is a fiercer enemy to the righteous and Torah-students, as will also be explained below.<sup>146</sup>

There is a long *sugia* in Genesis Rabba 22, which is also extensively discussed by Rosen-Zvi, that describes how sin and the *yetzer* – most likely used synonymously here<sup>147</sup> – try to gain power over a person, especially when he is in a weak state (see [Appendix 3.2](#)). Passages a-c and g are related to the *yetzer* growing in power over a person.<sup>148</sup> At the same time, nothing is said about how it achieves this and about how it can be prevented. Passages d-f (and arguably passage g as well) relate the empowering of the *yetzer* to a weak state of the victim. In passages e, h and I (and according to Rosen-Zvi passage g as well, as it implies that not indulging one’s *yetzer* prevents the *yetzer* from becoming a ‘מנון’, i.e. a master) the struggle against the *yetzer* is brought forth. In passage e Abraham’s realization that the *yetzer* is actually weak was key in him overcoming the *yetzer*, while in passages h and i – the message of which is almost identical – the words of the Torah are described as a way to fight the enemy, thereby creating

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<sup>143</sup> Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 36.

<sup>144</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 1, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 153; how one sin leads to the other has among others also been discussed by George Tsakiridis, see: Tsakiridis, *Evagrius Ponticus and Cognitive Science*, 16–21.

<sup>145</sup> This increasing power of the *yetzer*, as well as its relationship to idolatry, is discussed in: Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 25, 29–32.

<sup>146</sup> Efraim Urbach already noted something similar, namely that as the *yetzer* is described to be growing on a person in order to conquer him later in his life, and that both wisdom and age apparently are apparently not sufficient to control the *yetzer*, see: Efraim Elimelech Urbach, *The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 476.

<sup>147</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 68.

<sup>148</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 69.

‘peace’.<sup>149</sup> In passages d and e the *yetzer* is described as a weak trickster, or as Rosen-Zvi describes it: “powerless (רובץ) but willy.”<sup>150</sup> This character of the *yetzer*, and especially seen together with Abraham’s way of exposing its weakness, compares strongly to how Evagrius describes demons as weak but tricky and as afraid to be exposed, as can for example be seen in *Peri Logismon* 9 (see [Appendix 3.3](#)) Passage f in the *sugia* is one of the passages where Rosen-Zvi makes a comparison to Evagrius’s demonology.<sup>151</sup> In this passage, Rosen-Zvi refers to is Evagrius’s *Letter 16*, in which he describes the demons<sup>152</sup> as lurking next to the road, each focusing on the weakness of their specific area of sin in people. The reason demons do this is to gather information on people because, as Rosen-Zvi also discusses in reference to *Peri Logismon* 37 and *Praktikos* 47, Evagrius is convinced that demons are not able to read minds (see [Appendix 3.4](#), [Appendix 3.5](#) and [Appendix 3.6](#)).<sup>153</sup> That the demons look for weak spots in humans is furthermore explained by Evagrius in *Eulogios* 21, where Evagrius explains that the *logismos* of lust is able to overcome an ascetic that loosens his ascetic practise (see [Appendix 3.7](#)). It is by pleasure that the *logismos* of lust settles in the heart of the monk and makes his hatred towards sin stop, thereby implying it is the beginning of more sin. Evagrius warns in the same paragraph that the habit of seeking pleasures has to be cut of from the heart completely, so that evil does not spread.<sup>154</sup>

Those that do however not weaken their ascetic endeavours can still be overcome by the demon of vainglory by the appearance of self-esteem that often comes with living ascetic life.<sup>155</sup> The same demon – as is described in *Praktikos* 13 – gives the monk vain fantasies (see [Appendix 3.8](#)). From this passage it becomes clear that the person who – through his ascetic efforts – was able to withstand the

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<sup>149</sup> Rosen-Zvi has a somewhat different categorisation, stating that it is passages g-i that relate to the way in which one can struggle with the *yetzer*, see: Rosen-Zvi, 69.

<sup>150</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 69.

<sup>151</sup> “The homilist asserts that the *yetzer* looks for arrogant people: “and when he sees a man rub his eyes, fix his hair, hang upon his heels, he says: this one is mine (רובץ ורובץ).” This recalls Evagrius’s claim that monks who fall for anger (θυμός) “are the demons’ playthings (ὕπὸ δαιμόνων ἐμπαίζονται).” In another text Evagrius uses an even closer imagery: “Each of the demons guards his own boundaries and observes the monk who passes by to see whether he inclines to the right or to the left or walks the Royal Road.” In Evagrius’s text it is humans rather than demons who walk in the middle of the road, but the picture is similar: *yetzer*/demons stroll in the streets and seize the right people according to their public behavior. The picture of the cunning dogs in Rome is yet another parallel to Evagrius’s demonology, since for him also “Demons are like animals with very acute senses,” Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 69; Rosen-Zvi also notes another striking parallel between passage e (about the *yetzer* as a ‘powerless highway robber’) and the seemingly identical description (‘useless robber’) of demons in the *Vita Antonii* of St. Athanasius, Rosen-Zvi, 70.

<sup>152</sup> Evagrius speaks about four demons specifically, namely of gluttony, fornication, avarice and vainglory, but this is best interpreted as examples of his general statement about demons, thereby not excluding the other four categories.

<sup>153</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 70.

<sup>154</sup> “It is a very serious matter [...] for the heart to be bound to a habit of pleasures, and much effort is needed to cut off completely the spread of evils,” Evagrius, *Eulogios* 21, trans.: Sinkewicz, 48.

<sup>155</sup> “The deceiver in vainglory, being addicted to popularity, surreptitiously lights upon the soul of those devoted to ascetic efforts, pursuing for himself the esteem which they earn through their ascetic labours,” Evagrius, *Eulogios* 21, trans.: Sinkewicz, 48.

demon of lust, can still be delivered over to this demon through the fantasies that he receives from the demon of vanity. This demon is furthermore described as overcoming the monk and thereafter delivering him over to other demons, including the demon of lust that at first did not have an entrance to the monk's heart because of his ascetic practice. Evagrius advises to defeat both demons by fasting and humbling oneself (see [Appendix 3.9](#)).

The similarity that was noted by Rosen-Zvi between specifically passage f of the *sugia* from Genesis Rabba 22 (see [Appendix 3.2](#)) and the passage from Evagrius *Letter 16*, namely that both the *yetzer* and the demons are watching people closely for their weaknesses, is striking. It is also clear that both passages d and f of the *sugia* ascribe a very similar nature to the *yetzer* and Evagrius does to the demons, as exemplified by the other examples given above. The demons and the *yetzer* are both described as lurking adversaries that look for weaknesses in a person in order to overpower him. The general argument of Rosen-Zvi that this comparison is part of is that these parallels “point toward actual interconnections between the two traditions” concerning demonology, based on both the nature of the adversary as well as the imagery that is used around it, and his argument is convincing.

In Bavli Sukkah 51b-52a we see something that is seemingly opposite to a worsening ‘chain of sin’, namely that the *yetzer* appears to be stronger to the righteous. Before explaining how this increasing power of the *yetzer* to the righteous works, I will first paraphrase the whole passage in order to further understand the relationship between the *yetzer* and the righteous. The discussion that is described in Sukkah 51b-52a is about the seclusion of women to a separate space, and there is spoken of a ‘great repair’ done to women’s court of the Temple. To prevent improper interaction between men and women, the Levites built a balcony for the women to further separate both sexes, even though it went against the instructions of God for the building of the temple in the Torah (1 Chron. 28:19). The opinion is brought in that such a seclusion is necessary because the evil *yetzer* rules the people, which in this context can only refer to lust being stirred up because of the mingling of men and women. A prophetic verse from Zechariah is brought up to further argue for the separation: “The land will mourn, each clan by itself, with their wives by themselves: the clan of the house of David and their wives, the clan of the house of Nathan and their wives” (Zech. 12:12 NIV). The argument is strengthened by arguing that in the war at the end of times that this verse speaks of, the *yetzer* will be destroyed by God, and if then men and women are separated, than they should even more be separated now, when they are ruled by the evil *yetzer*. However – so the discussion continues – in Zecharia 12:10 it is written that they shall mourn his death: “and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son” (Zech. 12:10 NIV). Then, in light of this verse, the question arises as for what reason Israel mourns the death of the *yetzer*. A saying of Rabbi Yehuda is given as an explanation, who says that at the end of time the *yetzer* will be slain, and both the wicked and the righteous will lament his death: the wicked because the *yetzer* appears to them as a hair they were not able to overcome, the righteous because to them the *yetzer* appears as a high mountain and they are wondering how it is that they could overcome such a high mountain (see: [Appendix 3.10](#)).

The word ‘righteous one’ (צדיק), as Urbach explains, is related to the evil *yetzer*: “struggle against and defeat of the Evil Inclination make a man righteous.”<sup>156</sup> What seems to be the case in the passage above is that the struggle against the *yetzer* makes it like a ‘high mountain’, while those that do its bidding are confronted by the fact that they have not performed any effort to overcome something as small as ‘a threat of hair’. The ‘lamenting’ of the righteous is probably best explained as crying over one’s own greatness, in a sense of pride over one’s struggle with the *yetzer*. Later in Sukkah 52a the *yetzer* is described as aiming at the Jewish people above all other nations and also specifically attacks Torah-students above all others.<sup>157</sup> In light of the citation of Urbach before that it is the struggle against the *yetzer* that makes a human being righteous, it becomes clear that a powerful *yetzer* is a marker of righteousness.

Evagrius similarly describes in *Praktikos* 48 that being a monk, by the very act of withdrawing from the world and its objects, makes the fight with demons harder. He however gives a more natural explanation, namely that it is harder to control one’s mind than it is to control one’s actions (see [Appendix 3.11](#)).<sup>158</sup> He furthermore explains in *Praktikos* 34 that by withdrawing from material objects that earlier in life stirred up passion, the monk is left with “impassioned memories of certain things,” and he states that “the immaterial warfare is more difficult than the material.”<sup>159</sup> However, besides this explanation, Evagrius also states that fighting the demons make their attacks stronger, as can be seen in *Peri Logismon* 34, where he describes how the monk, after he defeats the *logismoi* of a certain demon, a stronger demon is often coming in his place (see [Appendix 3.12](#)). In this passage he makes clear that the more one fights off the *logismoi* of a specific demon, after some time, a stronger one will take its place. This means that, as a monk grows in his spiritual life, the demons that attack the him are replaced by other stronger demons.

Further on in Bavli Sukkah 51b-52a, on page 52a, the following statement of Rav Asi is brought in: “Rav Asi had said: the evil *yetzer* is like the thread of a spider’s web in the beginning, but in the end it is like the rope of a wagon, as is written: Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit, and wickedness as with cart ropes” (Is. 5:18 NIV).<sup>160</sup> Then, it is said of rabbi Abaye he saw a man and a woman going on a walk together in the early morning. Afterwards they departed from each other without having sinned, after which rabbi Abaye realized that he would not have been able to resist to sin in such an event himself. Because of this he felt regret until an old man came by and told him that “[t]he greater the man the greater his (Evil) Inclination [i.e. *yetzer*]”.<sup>161</sup> These sayings describe the *yetzer* as becoming

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<sup>156</sup> Urbach, *The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs*, 483.

<sup>157</sup> The latter is also discussed by Urbach, see: Urbach, 476.

<sup>158</sup> Rosen-Zvi also discusses this passage in arguing that with Evagrius sin becomes internalized, see: Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 197, n.59.

<sup>159</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 34, trans.: Sinkewicz, 103-104.

<sup>160</sup> The same saying of Rabbi Asi is found in Bavli Sandhedrin 99b

<sup>161</sup> The translation of Ephraim Urbach has been used here: Urbach, *The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs*, 476.

greater (but not necessarily as having more control) the more righteous a person is, which also confirms the earlier statement that a strong *yetzer* is a marker of righteousness. Then in Bavli Sukkah 52a-52b rabbi Isaak and rabbi Shimon ben Laqish respond in the following way: “Rabbi Isaak said: every day a human being’s *yetzer* prevails over him, as is said: only evil all day (Gen. 6:5).” The discussion continues as follows: “R. Shimon ben Lakish said: “Man’s *yetzer* overpowers him every day and attempts to kill him, as it is said: *the wicked watches for the righteous seeking to put him to death* ([...] Ps 37:32).”<sup>162</sup>

On page 52b, the *yetzer* is again described as using one’s indulgence and lawlessness to gain more control over a person: “Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani said that Rabbi Yohanan had said: the evil *yetzer* incites man in this world (בעולם הזה) but it testifies against him in the coming world (לעולם הבא), as it said: the one who pampers his slave in his youth, in the end he will be a master (Proverbs 29:21). Rav Huna then points to a contradiction in the book of Hosea, where it is said that a spirit of fornication led people astray, but later it is said that this spirit is inside of them. The solution that he proposes to this passage is the following: “In the beginning, it leads them astray, and in the end it is inside them.” Afterwards, a saying of Rava is brought in, that argues on the basis of the following verse from 2 Sam. 12:4: “Now a traveller came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the guest who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him” (2 Sam. 12:4 NIV). Rava argues that the ‘traveller’, the ‘guest’ and the ‘man’ are referring to different stages of the *yetzer*, indicating that the *yetzer* gradually grows in power.<sup>163</sup> Finally, in the same discussion about the *yetzer*, the following saying of Rabbi Yohanan is brought in: “man has a small organ: if he starves it, it is satisfied. If he satisfies it, it is hungry.” Given the frequent connection between the *yetzer* and sexuality in the Bavli, the ‘small organ’ likely refers to the penis.<sup>164</sup> In this context, what seems to be implied is that the more one gives in to his *yetzer*’s (sexual) suggestions, the more it will demand. In these passages the *yetzer* is described in a very similar way to the Evagrian demons, namely that it gains more and more control over a person through his weaknesses.

As is also briefly noted by Rosen-Zvi, the gradual increase of the power of the *yetzer* over a person is similar to the “chains of demonic thoughts” that are found in Evagrius’s writings.<sup>165</sup> According to Evagrius, one suggestion of one *logismos* leads to the vulnerability to the next, until the final stage which is pride and ‘the death of the soul’.<sup>166</sup> However, where the chain of *logismoi* ultimately leads to pride, the *yetzer* – as Rosen-Zvi discusses in the fifth chapter of his book – ultimately leads to idolatry.<sup>167</sup> A clear example of this is found in Bavli Niddah 13b: “Rav said: ‘the one who makes his body hard for

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<sup>162</sup> I have used the translation of Rosen-Zvi here, see: Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 131.

<sup>163</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 66–71.

<sup>164</sup> For a further explanation of the sexual nature of the *yetzer* of the later strata of the Bavli, see Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, chapter 6.

<sup>165</sup> Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 36; Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 30, 42.

<sup>166</sup> Konstantinovsky, 36.

<sup>167</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 30.

intercourse (המקשה עצמו לדעת) shall be banished.’ Shouldn’t he say it is forbidden? (ולימא אסור).<sup>168</sup> The reason why self-arousal is so severely punished – so the text continues to explain – is that by this act someone brings the evil *yetzer* upon himself. Rav then says about such a person: “he is an renegade (עברייין), because this is the work of the evil *yetzer* (אומנתו של יצר הרע). Today he says to him: do this. And the day after he tells him: do that. And the day after that he tells him: Go, worship the stars. And he goes, and worships.”<sup>169</sup> The chain of sin of the *yetzer* is so much related to the final end of idolatry, that it itself treated as such by the rabbis: “just as a person who throws a stone to Mercurius is liable for death (מתחייב בנפשו), so is one who uses (משתמש) his *yetzer* is liable for death. (t. Av. Zar. 6:17 [ed. Zuckerman, 471]).”<sup>170</sup> In Bavli Shabbat 105b rabbi Yohanan ben Nuri also directly connects giving in to the *yetzer* to idolatry (see [Appendix 3.13](#)).<sup>171</sup> Here, the *yetzer* is presented as an idol residing within the body, while also being an external entity in the sense that it is not part of the body, but a ‘strange god’.<sup>172</sup> In this passage, giving in to anger is identified with the worship of the ‘strange idol’ inside oneself, namely the *yetzer*.<sup>173</sup> The understanding of the *yetzer* as an idol means that listening to the *yetzer* is therefore not only leading to idol worship, but an act of idol-worship in itself.<sup>174</sup>

There exists another elaborate homily in Bavli Sanhedrin 106a that exemplifies both the chain of sin and the relationship between the *yetzer* and idolatry even more vividly (see [Appendix 3.14](#)). It should however be noted that the word *yetzer* itself is not found consistently in the MSS of this passage from Bavli Sanhedrin which weakens this passage’s importance in this discussion.<sup>175</sup> In this example, it begins with a story about a group of Jewish men that were joyful and satisfied by eating, drinking and strolling the marketplace. Even though it is not said explicitly, it is implied to be a state of weakness. One man is then lured into a cunning plan, initially centred around his (and the Jews) desire for linen. Two prostitutes offer him a good price for linen, and after they bring him inside, he drinks their wine and suddenly his *yetzer* is stirred up. This then makes him have intercourse with one of the harlots, after which he is

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<sup>168</sup> This passage is also referred to by Rosen-Zvi in his discussion about the relationship between the *yetzer* and idolatry: Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 30.

<sup>169</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 30, Rosen-Zvi refers to Bavli Niddah 13b in his explanation about a similar text from Tosefta Bavah Kamma 9:31 (which speaks about anger instead of self-arousal), and deducts from this how the work of the *yetzer* acts as a "slippery slope from anger to idolatry" and furthermore calls this 'slippery slope' "another devious scheme of the *yetzer* to lead people to sin." He concludes that: "The *yetzer*'s craft (אמנות) is its ability to lead people astray, step by step," Rosen-Zvi, 30.

<sup>170</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 25, 29-33.

<sup>171</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 30.

<sup>172</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 29–33.

<sup>173</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 31–33.

<sup>174</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 31.

<sup>175</sup> The word *yetzer* is not consistently found in all manuscripts of this passage, and I have only found it in the Munich Manuscript 95, see: *Babylonian Talmud: Codex Munich (95): The Only Manuscript in Existence Containing the Complete Text of the Talmud* (Jerusalem: Sefer Publishing, 1971); MS Munich 95 is the only complete manuscript of the Bavli (even though also in this MS some pages are missing), dated to the year 1343 and produced in Paris, see: Stemmerger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 209; For an image of page 106a of Bavli Sanhedrin in the Munich Manuscript 95, see: <https://manuscripts.sefaria.org/munich-manuscript/munich-manuscript-95Cod.hebr.95pg.0713.jpg>.

(unconsciously) seduced to worship an idol and – in this narrative there is apparently described another step that appears to go even beyond idolatry – to deny the Torah.

Both the rabbinical *yetzer* and the Evagrian demons are described as shrewd seducers, who are weak at first, but step by step takes over the person in order to bring him to idolatry or to destroy one's impassibility respectively. At the same time, both the *yetzer* and the Evagrian demons are also described as getting more powerful when one grows in one's religious practice. It is not clear from the rabbinical material if the rabbis consider the *yetzer* to be more powerful to Torah-students because of the *yetzer*'s adversity to them specifically, or – in a similar way to Evagrius – because their way of life creates more tension with the *yetzer*, but the former appears to be a more natural reading, as no further explanation is given to it. Apart from that, with regard to how they attack the person and how they get stronger when a person grows in his religious practice, the role of the *yetzer* and the Evagrian demons in relation to human beings is strikingly similar.

## Chapter IV: Scripture

One of the specific strategies of fighting the *yetzer* and *logismoi* is – as this chapter will show – by using the Scriptures against their attacks. The use of the Bible in the battle against the *yetzer* and the demons exists in several different strategies. This chapter will first discuss the use of specific Scriptural verses against the opponent. Also, the way the *yetzer* tries to find loopholes around the Law will be explained here.<sup>176</sup> Then, I will go into the strategy of studying Scripture to protect oneself from the *yetzer* and relate this to the similar function that prayer has in the evagrian literature. The last part will go into how the *yetzer* and the demons use sleep to keep one from studying the Scriptures.

In Bavli Yoma 35b it is said that when someone does not study Torah and explains himself by saying “I was handsome and busy with my *yetzer*,” one is to respond with the question whether he is more handsome than Joseph, who continuously denied sexual relations with Potifar’s wife. To all threats coming from the woman, Joseph is described in this passage as responding with an appropriate verse from the Bible: when she threatens to imprison him, he responds with “The LORD sets prisoners free” (Ps. 146:7 NIV). When she then threatens to ‘bend’ him and blind him, he responds with “the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down” and “the LORD gives sight to the blind” respectively. (Ps. 146:8 NIV) If she finally tries to bribe him to “to go to bed with her or even be with her” (Gen. 39:10 NIV), he refuses because “to go to bed with her in this world (בעולם הזה) [is] to be with her in the coming world (לעולם הבא).” Even though the seducer in the argument is Potifar’s wife and not the *yetzer*, the context of the story being an answer to the remark “I was handsome and busy with my *yetzer*” makes it clear that the story is used here as an allegory to man’s dealing with the *yetzer*. What is noteworthy is that Joseph’s answers are all citations from the Psalms.

Combatting the evil *yetzer* with words from Scripture is not unique to the passage about Joseph. A similar approach is found in Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael 20:4,<sup>177</sup> where the permissibility of graven images is discussed. The text is structured with the repeated phrase ‘you shall not make X’, followed by ‘but he makes Y’, as a statement that even though the former is forbidden, there is a way to go around the commandment.<sup>178</sup> At the end we find the phrase “the Holy One – Blessed be He – chased the evil

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<sup>176</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 88.

<sup>177</sup> Also named as: Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Bachodesh 6:15-16, Rosen-Zvi, 17.

<sup>178</sup> For example: “לא יעשה לו שלאבן, אבל יעשה לו שלכסף ושלזהב” (he does not make himself [an idol] of stone, but he makes himself a [an idol] of silver and gold), meaning that even though the former is forbidden, the latter is allowed. Every time a different type of image or an image of a different kind of material is proposed, this is countered by a verse from the Bible that refutes this suggestion; Hebrew text is from: Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael Tractate Bachodesh 6, Sefaria, [https://www.sefaria.org/Mekhilta\\_DeRabbi\\_Yishmael%2C\\_Tractate\\_Bachodesh.6.15?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=he](https://www.sefaria.org/Mekhilta_DeRabbi_Yishmael%2C_Tractate_Bachodesh.6.15?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=he), last accessed on 30-06-2024.

*yetzer* so much as to give it no pretext of permission<sup>179</sup> (מתלא החר).”<sup>180</sup> Rosen-Zvi argues that the rabbis used the *yetzer* to mark halachic grey zones – the so-called ‘pretexts of permission’ – as the territory of the *yetzer*, and thereby marking them as dangerous, so that people would not enter into these territories.<sup>181</sup> The danger of the evil *yetzer* is not so much that it denies the instruction of the Torah, but that it tries to find loopholes around it.<sup>182</sup> A passage that Rosen-Zvi uses to argue for his case comes from the Ishmaelian Mekhilta de Arayot.<sup>183</sup> The homily discusses that one should not aspire the way of life of the gentiles: “In order that you will not say, they have laws and we have no laws, it is taught: ‘you must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God’” (Lev. 18:4 NIV). The reason that is given here is (simply) that God decreed it, and that He is the Lord. It continues as follows: “But the evil *yetzer* still has hope to come up with a plan (להרהר) and says that those [laws] of them (i.e. the foreigners) are more fitting than ours. It is taught: ‘Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding’” (Deut. 4:6 NIV). Then the following conclusion is made:

*My rules (משפטי) shall you observe* (Lev 18:4)—this refers to matters [*sic*] that are written in the Torah but if they had not been written, it would have been logical to write them....*And faithfully follow my statutes (חוקותי)*—these are matters that are written in the Torah against which the *yetzer* argues and the nations of the world argue....In this regard scripture says, *I am the Lord* (Lev 18:4)—I have made these statutes and you have no right to argue (להשיב) against them. (Sifra Aharei Mot 9:13, ed. Weiss, 86a)<sup>184</sup>

First the suggestions of the *yetzer* are refuted two times with verses from Scripture that imply that was cannot argue against what God has decreed, (simply) because he is the Lord. And also in the conclusion the authority of God and the Torah are reinforced. As Rosen-Zvi also notes, the *yetzer* is not refuted with any form of halachic argument, but simply with a commandment to obey God’s Law.<sup>185</sup> Rosen-Zvi argues that the reason the *yetzer* is not to be negotiated with is not so much that what he says is wrong, but that there is an evil agenda behind his words.<sup>186</sup> He furthermore says that the *yetzer* does not deny the rules of the Torah itself, but tries to trap people in sin by convincing them of loopholes (what Rosen-Zvi also calls ‘pretexts of permission’) around these rules in order to bring people to sin.<sup>187</sup> It is therefore

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<sup>179</sup> For the phrase ‘pretext of permission’, I have used the translation of Rosen-Zvi: Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 17.

<sup>180</sup> This passage is discussed by Rosen-Zvi, in: Rosen-Zvi, 17.

<sup>181</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 20, 87-90.

<sup>182</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 88.

<sup>183</sup> This Mekhilta is found in the Akivan Sifra Acharei Mot 13, see: Shemuel Safrai and Peter J. Tomson, eds., *The Literature of the Sages*, Compendia Rerum Judaicarum Ad Novum Testamentum, Section 2, Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud; v. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 86.

<sup>184</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 89.

<sup>185</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 87-90.

<sup>186</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 89.

<sup>187</sup> “The *yetzer* seeks to trap humans through the acts of negation regarding “pretexts of permission.” One can only lose by confronting it, and so it is better to avoid it completely, ignoring its provocations altogether.” Rosen-Zvi, 88-89.

better to avoid engaging with the *yetzer*'s suggestions, and Rosen-Zvi goes as far as to say that “[t]he *yetzer* [...] is unique in that the sources never present a straightforward dialogue with it.”<sup>188</sup> Even though his argument that the *yetzer* marks areas in which one should not enter into dialogue with difficult halachic questions is convincing, the passages from Bavli Yoma 35b and Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael 20:4 at the same time do present us with halachic dialogues that are related to the *yetzer*, albeit only consisting exclusively of answers from the Scriptures.

The encouraged disengagement with the *yetzer* in rabbinical literature seems to stand in sharp contrast to the engagement with the *logismoi* found in Evagrius literature. Evagrius even devoted a whole book on it, called *Antirrhethikos*, literally meaning ‘talking back’.<sup>189</sup> In his prologue, Evagrius himself states in the prologue to this work that the strategy of talking back is inspired by the confrontation of Christ with the Satan in the desert, where Christ refutes every suggestion of the Satan with words from the Bible.<sup>190</sup> It is furthermore likely that Evagrius took inspiration from St. Anthony the Great, who also repelled demons with words from Scripture, most often citing verses from the Psalms.<sup>191</sup> While there exists caution about engaging with suggestions of the *yetzer*, there are – as we have seen above – some rabbinical texts that actually do describe halachic dialogues with the *yetzer*, but only by using the words of Scripture. By exclusively responding with parts of Scripture, the discussion does not happen on the *yetzer*'s terms, but on those of the Scriptures.

This very much resembles the strategy of *antirrhesis*, which is clearly described in the second paragraph of the prologue to *Antirrhethikos* (see [Appendix 4.1](#)). The verse from Proverbs on which Evagrius bases his approach summarizes best what both Evagrius and the rabbis were doing: “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.” (Prov. 26:4-5 NIV). In this way, as argued above, the discussion is not held on the terms provided by the adversary, but on the terms of Scripture. In the last sentence of his prologue to *Antirrhethikos* Evagrius states the aim of his book as follows: “I have written and quoted for each of the thoughts an answer from the Holy Scriptures that is able to cut it off.”<sup>192</sup> The primary concern of the book *Antirrhethikos* is precisely this: to give the monks a Biblical answer against all

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<sup>188</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 87-90.

<sup>189</sup> Brakke, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 1.

<sup>190</sup> William Harmless S.J., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 320; Evagrius, *Antirrhethikos*, Prologue, see: David Brakke, *Evagrius of Pontus: Talking Back*, 49; Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 97.

<sup>191</sup> Brakke, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 19-21; Brakke argues that the use of Scripture against demons might have arisen as an accepted way of fighting demons, instead of magical spells often used by exorcists, see: Brakke, 12-14. For this he uses the example of St. Athanasius who stated that people had abandoned Scripture and “composed for themselves plausible words from external sources, and with these have called themselves exorcists,” Athanasius, *Epistle to Marcellinus* 33, cited in: Brakke, 13. Interestingly, Brakke states that Athanasius furthermore said that the “[i]n ancient Israel [...] people drove demons away and refuted the plots they directed against human beings merely by reading the Scriptures,” Brakke, 13. Brakke also rightfully notes here that this might be anachronistic, but this is all the more interesting for this thesis as it would mean that Athanasius probably knew off similar techniques among the Jews of his time.

<sup>192</sup> Evagrius, *Antirrhethikos*, Prologue, trans.: Brakke, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 52.

demons and to ‘cut off’ their suggestions (see [Appendix 4.2](#)).<sup>193</sup> This passage shows that the words of Scripture are an important weapon to fight off the ‘Philistines’ (i.e. the demons) and that one needs to have the appropriate words for the specific attack at hand.

Even though the use of the Bible against the adversary is common in both traditions, there is one area where there is a significant divergence: even though the rabbis and Evagrius use Scripture against the *yetzer* and the *logismoi*, contrary to the rabbis, Evagrius does also leave space for some kind of non-Biblical argumentation with the demons, namely to expose them by showing the demons their ways after thorough analysis (see [Appendix 3.3](#)). In both traditions, the adversary works in the same way: to convince a person to sin by giving him thoughts or arguments concerning his relationship to his environment, and both traditions believe the adversary is essentially evil and their advances are always to be rejected. However, contrary to Evagrius – the rabbis generally advice not to engage with the *yetzer* in any way, but – among other methods that will explained below – to focus oneself on the Scriptures. For Evagrius, the same approach of using citations from Scripture is prescribed, while at the same time not advising against other forms of interaction with demons.

Besides the use of verses from the Scriptures, the practise of reading Scripture that is referred to above is in itself also described as a way of keeping the *yetzer* at bay. In *Sifrei Devarim* 45 the activity of studying the Torah is described as a protection against the *yetzer*, that only works as long as one studies (see [Appendix 4.3](#)).<sup>194</sup> The study of Torah is here described as a bandage that keeps one’s wound (i.e. his *yetzer*) from festering, which means that the act of studying Torah – which is referred to as ‘the elixer of life’ in this passage – is therefore described as a solution to the *yetzer*.<sup>195</sup> What is also notable is that the passage implies that God willfully placed the evil *yetzer* in the hearts of human beings, so that they would need to study Torah unceasingly. If one is to remove the ‘bandage’ – referring to the study of Torah – the ‘wound’ (i.e. the *yetzer*) will immediately fester, which means that constant study is required to keep the *yetzer* – which “crouches at the door” – at bay.<sup>196</sup>

Even though the advise to study Scripture does exist in Evagrius’s writing as part of the *praktikē*, it is of relatively minor importance. It is prescribed only sparsely, and usually exists as part of general ascetic advices and exhortations to pray, as can for example be seen in an advice given by Evagrius in *Peri Logismon* 43 (see [Appendix 4.4](#)). Interaction with the words of Scripture is mentioned in this exemplary passage as a means to fend off dialogue with the *logismoi*, but it must be noted that it is only mentioned as one part of a set of general advices that have to aim to come to the impassibility that is necessary for pure prayer. Also in *Eulogios* 19, Evagrius advices to read and listen to the Scriptures, but

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<sup>193</sup> Brakke, 2; According to Brakke, 63,3% of the ‘answers’ in *Antirrhethikos* are directed towards demons and their suggestions, see: Brakke, 15.

<sup>194</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 21–24, 28, 65-66.

<sup>195</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 21–24.

<sup>196</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 21-24; Rosen-Zvi also rightfully concludes that the effect of Torah study against the *yetzer* works like a protective amulet.

here it appears not to be the practice of studying itself that helps to fight *logismoi*, but the knowledge that is gained by it (see [Appendix 4.5](#)). As we can see in this passage, it is by the ‘association’ with the words of Scripture that one can “drive away converse with thoughts,” because of the ‘treasuring of the divine scriptures in the heart.’<sup>197</sup> What seems to differ from the rabbinical strategy is that here it seems to be not only the studying itself which keep the *logimoi* at bay, but as the result of the study, namely the ‘treasuring of the divine scriptures in the heart’. So even though both traditions advice to study Scripture as a way to fight the enemy, there is a significant difference between the two traditions: where the activity of studying Torah is protective in the rabbinical passage, in Evagrius’s advise it appears to be the familiarity with the content of the study of Scripture that creates a defense against the suggestions of the *logismoi*. That would mean that unceasing meditation on the Bible is not necessary, but the knowledge of Scripture that one gains in his heart is. This can also explain why Evagrius prescribes to meditate on the Scriptures, not unceasingly, but “on a daily basis.”

The difference between the two traditions in this regard can be explained by the final aim of both spiritual traditions: within Judaism the highest goal was the study of the Torah, while for Evagrius it knowledge of God through prayer.<sup>198</sup> Even though the practice of unceasing study is not prescribed by Evagrius, prayer *is* – in a similar fashion to the study of Torah in rabbinical Judaism – prescribed to do unceasingly: “those who have been tempted by it understand what I am saying—and at the time of this temptation what is excellent is fasting, reading of the Scriptures, and unceasing prayers offered with tears.”<sup>199</sup> In *Eulogios 2*, Evagrius also advices to give unceasing thanksgiving to God (see [Appendix 4.6](#)).

Unceasing prayer is furthermore prescribed by Evagrius in his prologue to *Antirrhetikos* specially as a means to resist the demons (see [Appendix 4.7](#)). In *Praktikos 49* Evagrius explains that the commandment to pray without ceasing is considered to be superior to all the other monastic practices because it was ‘handed down to us’ (see [Appendix 4.8](#)), most likely referring to the commandment of St. Paul to “pray continually.”<sup>200</sup> This means that prayer, by its power to purify one’s mind and to bring it to its natural state, is the best way to fight the demons. Evagrius explains that, even though the monks are not commanded to do their other spiritual practices unceasingly, they are commanded to pray unceasingly. In both traditions, the highest practice of the spiritual life – even though it refers to a different practice in both traditions – is also described as the best antidote to the adversary.

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<sup>197</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios 46*, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 46.

<sup>198</sup> Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, xxiv-xxxvii; For an explanation about the ultimate value of the Torah and the study thereof, see: Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, Paperbacks ed (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 31-35; Konstantinovskiy, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 28-31.

<sup>199</sup> Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos 8.21*, trans.: Brakke, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 164.

<sup>200</sup> 1 Thess. 5:16-18: “Rejoice always, pray continually [ἀδιαλείπτως προσεύχεσθε], give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (NIV), the Greek is from: Barbara Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th Revised ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012); this reference was also noted by Sinkewicz, as he placed the reference to 1 Thess. 5:17 in the text of his translation, see: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 106.

One of the strategies that both the *yetzer* and the demons use sleep to convince someone to stop engaging in studying Scripture is sleepiness. In *Peri Logismon* 33, reading the Scriptures is described by Evagrius as a possible danger zone which makes the monk vulnerably to the demons and their *logismoi* (see [Appendix 4.9](#)).<sup>201</sup> The attack of the demons is here described as consisting of both “taking pretexts from the divine scripture themselves and ending in evil thoughts”<sup>202</sup> and giving certain bodily sensations of demonic sleepiness.<sup>203</sup> Evagrius also explains in the same passage that these things can happen to someone because “we are not vigilantly attentive to the reading and we do not remember that we are reading the holy words of the living God.”<sup>204</sup> In the passage from *Eulogios* 20 (see [Appendix 4.5](#)) that was discussed earlier, the danger of both ‘the captivity of thoughts’ and sleepiness interfering with one’s study of Scripture is also warned of.<sup>205</sup>

There is only one passage that I know of where the *yetzer* uses sleep to attack someone in early rabbinical literature, which is a passage about a vigil of king David in Yerushalmi Berachot 1:1 (see [Appendix 4.10](#)).<sup>206</sup> Two verses from Psalms that are attributed to David are discussed in this passage:

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<sup>201</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 33, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 176; Evagrius describes these attacks in a very vivid way, with demons making ones head and eyelids cold, creating the feeling of ones head being sucked by a cupping glass, creating yawns and they even “make themselves small enough to touch the interior of the mouth,” see: *Peri Logismon* 33, trans.: Sinkewicz, 176.

<sup>202</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 33, trans.: Sinkewicz, 176; Rosen-Zvi also connects this passage to the ‘pretexts of permission’ with which the *yetzer* tries to bring the human being to lawlessness, see: Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 41–42.

<sup>203</sup> Rosen-Zvi also connects this passage to the ‘pretexts of permission’ that the *yetzer* tries to create, Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 42; Evagrius explicitly describes the difference in experience between natural and demonic sleepiness in *Peri Logismon* 33. The demonic sleepiness is described to have multiple specific characteristics, one of them being that “[the demons] instill a very deep sleep quite different from usual sleep.” He also explain that demonic sleepiness does not feel warm like normal sleepiness, but very cold. He furthermore says that he learned about an old tradition from St. Makarios himself, namely that this kind of demonic sleepiness is why monks cross their mouths when they yawn. See: Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 33, Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 176; The other characteristic of demonic sleepiness are also mentioned here.

<sup>204</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 33, trans.: Sinkewicz, 176.

<sup>205</sup> See: Evagrius, *Eulogios* 19, trans.: Sinkewicz, 46, “In listening to the divine scriptures in the night-time reading at vigils, let us not render our hearing moribund by sleep, nor hand over our soul to the captivity of thoughts.” Brakke states, based on the *Coptic Life of Evagrius* of Palladius, that these dangers let Evagrius to both keep walking around in order to stay awake and to carefully attend to his thoughts during his own vigils “He slept no more than a third of the night, devoting the rest of his time to prayer, contemplation and study of Scripture. To keep himself awake, he was in the habit of walking in the courtyard of his cell. He scrupulously attended to his thoughts and, based on these observations, prepared a dossier of verses from Scripture to be cast in the face of attacking demons,” Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 25–26 (ebook); It is not clear if the implied sleepiness in this passage refers demonic or natural sleep here, but the latter seems to be most natural reading in this passage. This could also explain why the used strategy here is so simple, as it is not a fight against demons, but just against natural human sleepiness that comes with keeping vigil.

<sup>206</sup> This passage is found in a broader discussion concerning an incongruity between Psalm 119:62 “At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws” (NIV), and Psalm 119:147-148: “I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in your word. My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises” (NIV). The question that is discussed is whether David had arisen at midnight, or already before dawn; also: some further information about David’s vigil is given in Bavli Berachot 3b, where it is said that king David had a harp that would start playing at mid-night because of a wind, awaking him to study Torah until the next morning. The connection with Bavli Berachot 3b came to my attention through an online article of Yehuda Shurpin: Yehuda Shurpin “What Is the Significance of

“Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn” (Psalms 57:8 NIV), and: “At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws” (Psalms 119:62). As described in the passage above, the *yetzer* tries to convince David to sleep, but David refutes him with appealing to God’s laws and began making music, which, given the reaction of the Torah-students, apparently refers to the study of Torah. This then motivates the other Torah students to also study Torah at night. The important connection here is not so much the vigil that was performed by King David (vigils seem to be rare among the rabbis), but that the *yetzer* uses sleep to keep David away from studying Torah. The struggle of David with his *yetzer* becomes even more vivid when one reads the cited verse from Psalms 119:62 together with the verse that precedes it: “Though the wicked bind me with ropes, I will not forget your law. At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws” (Ps. 119:61-62 NIV). Clearly, the rabbis interpreted the ‘wicked’ that ‘binds with ropes’ in this Psalm as the *yetzer* that was attacking David. The passage describes David as quoting Scripture in defense against the antinomian intention of the *yetzer*, that apparently wanted David to neglect the study of the Torah. In this way, the verses from 119:61-62 are interpreted in this passage as an intense battle between David and his *yetzer*.

When we compare this to the battle with Evagrius’s demons, the difference is notable: the attack of the *yetzer* is verbal and argumentative and that of the demons consists of both thoughts and bodily sensations. Furthermore, the defense is somewhat similar, but not nearly enough to imply any connection between the two traditions: David refers to God’s righteous laws, while Evagrius, implies that one should realize that the words of Scripture that he is reading really are the words of God himself. However, behind all these things lies something that is very similar in both traditions, namely that in both traditions the desire to sleep is used by the adversary against the one that is reading Scripture. In these cases, sleepiness is therefore not morally neutral, but a tool of the adversary that is used to keep someone from conversing with the scriptures. Even though the strategies used against the adversaries seem to differ significantly in this context, the fact that they use the desire to sleep to try to pull the attention away from the one engaging in studying Scripture is remarkable. However, while the similarity of the adversary using sleep to distract rabbis and monks from their spiritual practice is remarkable, it could at the same time also be explained by the simple fact that sleepiness is a natural enemy to prolonged concentration.

From the comparisons above, some clear conclusions can be drawn about the role of Scripture in both Evagrius’s writings and the rabbinical tradition. Concerning the use of words from Scripture, the similarities are strong. Both traditions clearly describe the use of Biblical verses as a response to the suggestions of the enemy. At the same time, there are differences on two areas, the first of which is that the rabbis generally tend to dissuade Torah-students from arguing with the *yetzer* altogether, while Evagrius gives detailed advice on how to counter demonic suggestions, even writing a collection of Biblical verses for monks to use against the demons when they attack them. The other difference is that

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King David’s Harp?,” Chabad.org, [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/5175330/jewish/What-Is-the-Significance-of-King-Davids-Harp.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/5175330/jewish/What-Is-the-Significance-of-King-Davids-Harp.htm), last accessed on 30-06-2024.

Evagrius also prescribes an argumentative approach against the demonic suggestions that is non-Biblical, namely by exposing demons by showing them their own tricks. The way the rabbis describe the unceasing study of the Torah as a protection against the *yetzer* does not have a clear parallel in Evagrius's writings, at least not in those that fall in the scope of this thesis. However, Evagrius does describe prayer – particularly unceasing prayer – as a shield to the attacks from the demons in very similar way to how the rabbis describe the use of unceasing study of the Torah. Furthermore, both the *yetzer* and the demons are described as using sleepiness to prevent human beings from their spiritual practice – particularly their study of the Scriptures.

## Chapter V: Prayer and Supplication

The previous chapter already touched on the strategy that is prescribed by Evagrius of using prayer against the demons. In this chapter I will further elaborate on this subject, first by explaining the place that contemplative prayer has in fighting the demons, thereafter by focussing on the role of prayers of supplication in both the Evagrian corpus and the early rabbinical literature. As is argued in the previous chapter, even though the Scriptures play an important part in combatting the demons, the practice of studying Scripture in itself is not explicitly described by Evagrius as keeping the demons at bay. It is even described as an area of danger: the demons are constantly lurking to attack the person that is engaged in study. For Evagrius, the most important strategy against the demons is prayer. It is in as well as for the sake of prayer that the mind becomes impassible, and therefore prayer is prescribed by Evagrius, not only as a means to a goal, but as a state that is the very aim of the spiritual life itself.

In a similar fashion to how the *yetzer* prevents people from studying and living according to the Torah – which is the highest aim of the rabbis – so also the *logismoi* of the demons stand in the way of pure prayer by troubling the human mind, as can for example be seen in *on Prayer* 49-50a (see [Appendix 5.1](#)). As this passage shows, the very aim of the demons – and the reason they attack with the different *logismoi* – is to prevent the monk from progressing on his path to obtain his own goal: the attainment of impassibility, through which one can attain spiritual prayer. Attaining pure prayer through the practical life is not a guarantee, however. Evagrius explains in *on Prayer* 55-57 that through impassibility one can gain the knowledge of the *logoi*, but that this is not the same as attain pure prayer (see [Appendix 5.2](#)). Perceiving the *logoi*, so Evagrius explains, can even distract a person from God. He furthermore explains in *Eulogios* 30 that sometimes after much effort, pure prayer does not come, while at other times it comes without any effort (see [Appendix 5.3](#)). Even though effort is essential to attain pure prayer, it is ultimately described by Evagrius to be a gift from God, that He can bestow on human beings through his grace. The advice that Evagrius gives when pure prayer does not come is supplication: “Whenever then we make an effort to have our prayer purified and are unable, [...] let us beseech God for the night of warfare to be brought to an end and for the radiance of the soul to be illumined” (see [Appendix 5.3](#)).

The path of prayer is not without danger, as the enemy is plotting to overcome the monk in his efforts. In *on Prayer* 46 Evagrius explains the reason why the path towards prayer attracts demonic attacks, namely because the demons are jealous of the prayer: “The demon is very jealous of the person at prayer and uses every trick to frustrate his purpose. Thus he does not cease setting in motion mental representations of objects through the memory and prising loose all the passions through the flesh, so that he can impede his excellent course and his setting out towards God (cf. 2 Cor. 5: 8-9).”<sup>207</sup> It is clear

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<sup>207</sup> Evagrius, *on Prayer* 46, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 197.

therefore, that, even though the state of pure prayer is salvific (and probably precisely because of that), the road towards it also attracts demonic attacks.

Prayer is also one of the strategies that was used to fight the *yetzer* in rabbinical literature, but it is not the contemplative kind of prayer that Evagrius speaks of. The rabbinical literature contains different (personal) supplicatory prayers for protection against the *yetzer*, all of which are found in tractate Berachot of both Talmuds.<sup>208</sup> A prayer of Rabbi Tanhum is found in Yerushalmi Berachot 4.2, as part of a sugia that describes regular fixed prayers of different rabbis, in which he is described as praying: “may it be Your will, o Lord my God and God of my forefathers, that You crush and put an end the yoke of the evil *yetzer* from our hearts, as You have created us to do Your will. [...] May it be your will [...] that you remove him from us and subject him so that we will wholeheartedly do Your will as our will.” The prayer implies that God is the one that can contain the *yetzer* and the repetitive use of these kind of prayers implies that it is necessary to ask God for protection on a daily (or at least regular) basis. Cohen Stuart comments on these prayers that: “[these prayers emphasize] that only by God’s grace one can endure and withstand the permanent threat of an essential human life.”<sup>209</sup> Similar to the study of Torah, regular prayers for protection against the *yetzer* are used as fighting it or – more accurately stated – letting God fight it. The *yetzer* in the prayer mentioned above is dealt with as a moral threat, however, in Bavli Berachot 16b a prayer of Rabbi is found in which the *yetzer* is placed in list of dangers and bad events that can come over one’s personal life instead of over one’s moral life. This prayer refers to the *yetzer* in a list of adversaries, which implies that, just as people that sue a person or mistreat him, so also the *yetzer* is approached: as an adversary that strives for a person’s downfall, in a similar way to how human enemies do. A very similar prayer attributed to rabbi Mar son of Ravina in Bavli Berachot 17a includes both a request for protection against personal sins as well as against danger and enemies, and the *yetzer* is associated here – not so much with one’s personal evil – but with the second category.

There also exists prayers to ask God for the good *yetzer*, for example in Bavli Berachot 16b: “Give us our share in the Garden of Eden, and arrange us a good friend, and a good *yetzer* in Your world, so that we may get up early and find the hope of our hearts to revere Your name. May come before you the pleasure of our soul, for prosperity.”<sup>210</sup> It is not entirely clear if the good *yetzer* in this prayer also has a personal nature, but it seems to be primarily connected to the coming world (העולם הבא). Similarly, in Bavli Berachot 60b, a fixed prayer that is to be prayed before sleep is found concerning both the good and the evil *yetzer*. The prayer contains (among other requests) the request that the good instead of the evil *yetzer* may rule over the person. This implied that the understanding existed that the good *yetzer* could be empowered by God to overcome the evil *yetzer* in a person. From all the prayers above, it

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<sup>208</sup> For the all fixed prayers relating to the *yetzer*, see: Yerushalmi Berachot 4:2:4, 4:2:6, 9:5:1, Bavli Berachot 5a:2, 16b:18, 16b:23, 17a:4, 60b:3-6

<sup>209</sup> Cohen Stuart, *The Struggle in Man between Good and Evil*, 68.

<sup>210</sup> Bavli Berachot 16b

becomes evident that fixed morning and evening prayers were used (at least by some) to either distance the evil *yetzer* from oneself, or bring the good *yetzer* closer, by God's power.

As explained earlier, the main focus of Evagrius is on contemplative prayer, but there are references to prayers of supplication against the demons in his writings. Evagrius defines it in the following way: "Petition is a converse of the mind with God accompanied by supplication: it comprises assistance or request for good things."<sup>211</sup> In his book *On Prayer* Evagrius prescribes prayer as a remedy against demonic apparitions (see [Appendix 5.5](#)). This form of prayer is similar to the Talmudic prayers that are discussed above: it does not describe the beforementioned 'pure prayer', but a request for help from God against demonic apparitions. The two aims of this kind of prayer are also the same as we have seen in the rabbinical prayers against the *yetzer*: to enlighten the prayer and to drive away the adversary. It also implies that God can and can be persuaded with prayer to help the one that prays by reducing the power of the adversary.

Evagrius explains the relationship that supplication has to pure prayer in *Eulogios* 30, saying that supplication is essential in achieving pure prayer, as – in the end – pure prayer is not something a person can achieve by his own efforts, but is a 'gift' of God (see [Appendix 5.3](#)). In *on Prayer* 37, he tells his readers that there is a certain order in which certain things should be requested from God: "Pray first to be purified from the passions, second to be delivered from ignorance and forgetfulness, and third from all temptation and abandonment."<sup>212</sup> As is noted by Sinkewicz, these three consecutive forms of prayer seem to correspond to the three phases of the spiritual life.<sup>213</sup>

In *Foundations* 11, Evagrius explains that just as what has been argued before about that reading Scripture attracts demonic attacks, so also the time of prayer becomes a battlefield of demons trying everything to prevent the person from praying (see [Appendix 5.4](#)). He also stresses that the attitude that one has in praying to God is important, thereby focussing not only on the words of the prayer, but also in the inner state of the one that prays. Concerning one's attitude during prayer, Evagrius furthermore says the following in *on Prayer* 42 and 39: "Prayer with perception involves the engagement of the mind accompanied by reverence, compunction and suffering of the soul, along with confession of failings with unspoken groanings," and: "It is right to pray not only for your own purification, but also for your entire race, so as to imitate the way of the angels."<sup>214</sup> It therefore becomes very clear from the evagrian literature that supplication is more than a formal request to God, existing just in words alone: it is a heartfelt cry for God's help, not only for oneself, but also for humanity as a whole.

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<sup>211</sup> Evagrius, *Reflections* 28, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 214.

<sup>212</sup> Evagrius, *on Prayer* 37, trans.: Sinkewicz, 196.

<sup>213</sup> "At each of the three stages of progress, the monk makes the appropriate supplication: in the practical life he prays for the purification of the passions; in the first stage of the gnostic life, as he enters into natural contemplation, he prays for deliverance from ignorance; in the advanced stage of the gnostic life, all can still be lost through temptation (especially pride) and the gnostic may have to endure abandonment," Sinkewicz, 278, n.26.

<sup>214</sup> Evagrius, *on Prayer* 39, 42, trans.: Sinkewicz, 196–97.

The role of contemplative prayer in fighting the adversary is only found in the Evagrian literature, where it is not only described as a tool to fight the demons with, but the very aim of spiritual practice itself. Something similar is found in the rabbinical corpus in the study of Scripture, while at the same time there exists no role for contemplative prayer in fighting the evil *yetzer* in the early rabbinical literature. There is, however, a very different form of prayer that is described as a tool against the *yetzer*, namely prayers of supplication, that exist in fixed prayers that are prayed on a daily basis. The existence of these kind of prayers mean that the rabbis understood it to be the power of God that removes the *yetzer* after supplication. Evagrius knew of something similar, namely that a person is able to ask God to protect him against the attacks of the demons. So even though there is no connection in the category of contemplative prayer, both traditions did know of prayers of supplication to drive away the adversary by God's power. This means that in the struggle with both the *yetzer* and the demons, God is willing to reduce the power of the enemy if one asks Him for it. The use of prayers against the adversary is common to both traditions, but at the same time there exists a clear difference in how Evagrius and the rabbis write about it: for Evagrius the inner state and attitude of the one that prays is essential, while in the rabbinical literature there is nothing that indicates something similar.

## Chapter VI: Asceticism

Asceticism is a theme that for Evagrius forms the basis of the spiritual life. It is no surprise therefore that monks were generally characterized by precisely that: they withdrew from (the pleasures of) the world, in order to create a state within themselves allows them to know God. As this chapter shall explain, the rabbinical situation was very different and arguably even hostile against ascetic practises. At the same time, in different forms, asceticism is found to be described as a (contested) way to fight the evil *yetzer*. In this chapter, after I've introduced the role of asceticism in the fight with demons in Evagrius's writings, I will explain the different ways ascetic practices are described to have been used against the *yetzer* and compare it to Evagrius's writings. The ascetic practises that are found in rabbinical literature exists mostly in combination with taking vows and oaths, to which the first part of the comparison is dedicated. After the discussion about vows and oaths, the other ascetic practices that are presented in rabbinical literature will be discussed. In the final part, the other forms of ascetic practices that are found in the rabbinical literature will be discussed.

### Monastic Asceticism

As an anchorite, abstinence from pleasures and very strict fasting were part of Evagrius's daily routine. He is known to have eaten so little that his health seriously deteriorated, and his student Palladius gives an example that he would even stand in cold water during the night in order to withstand the temptation of lust.<sup>215</sup> The monastic were ascetics, and it is therefore unsurprising that much of the advice Evagrius gives is concerned with ascetic practices. It is however not the case that asceticism was a goal in itself, it was always a means of attaining impassibility, or as Kevin Corrigan explains: "For Evagrius, the aim of the ascetic life is 'to purify the part of the soul which is the seat of the passions.'"<sup>216</sup> All ascetic elements of monastic life are meant as "suitable remedies" against demonic attacks.<sup>217</sup> Evagrius warns that too much asceticism can even be demonic (see [Appendix 6.1](#)). This passage shows that, even though asceticism is very important to the life in the monk, and even though he went through a severe ascetic practice himself, Evagrius saw ascetic practices only as a means towards impassibility. When necessary,

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<sup>215</sup> "The demon of fornication bothered him so oppressively, as he himself told us, that he stood naked throughout the night in a well. It was winter ... and his flesh froze," Kevin Corrigan, *Evagrius and Gregory: Mind, Soul and Body in the 4th Century*, Ashgate Studies in Philosophy & Theology in Late Antiquity (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2009), 6; Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, xix-xx; For the original Greek text, see: Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 38, in: *Historia Lausiaca: Geschichten aus dem frühen Mönchtum*, trans. Adelheid Hübner, Fontes Christiani, Band 67 (Freiburg Basel Wien: Herder, 2016), 248.

<sup>216</sup> Corrigan, *Evagrius and Gregory*, 67.

<sup>217</sup> James E. Goehring and David W. Johnson, eds., *The World of Early Egyptian Christianity: Language, Literature, and Social Context*, CUA Studies in Early Christianity (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 135.

it should even be set aside, as can be seen in *Foundations* 10 where Evagrius advises monks to set aside their rule of eating only once a day if a guest arrives, to be able to eat with them (see [Appendix 6.2](#)).<sup>218</sup> By acting in this way, one ‘fulfills the law of love’. Sickness of the body is also described in this passage as a reason for a monk to loosen his fast.<sup>219</sup> The passage makes clear how for Evagrius – similarly to how he prescribes supplication to God – ascetic practices are always to be performed with the right attitude. The practice itself can even be demonic, when it is undertaken with the wrong attitude. Evagrius gives an example of this, how demons can use exceedingly strict asceticism to make the ascetic fall to vanity (see [Appendix 6.3](#)). This shows that fasting with a wrong attitude gives space for the demons to gain influence on the ascetic.

It is the demon of vanity that makes someone boast in his own efforts: “The deceiver in vainglory, being addicted to popularity, surreptitiously lights upon the soul of those devoted to ascetic efforts, pursuing for himself the esteem which they earn through their ascetic labours.”<sup>220</sup> The demons can give the monks comparative thoughts about the severe ascetic practices of famous ascetics, stirring up the desire for a similar status in the monk, thereby creating vanity and jealousy in the anchorite (see.<sup>221</sup> Similarly, the demons sometimes (temporarily) lessen their attacks on the area of lust, in order to create self-esteem in a person (see [Appendix 6.4](#)). Through this demonic deception, the monk is handed over either again to fornication (as explained earlier in Chapter III) or to pride, as can for example be seen in *Praktikos* 14 (see [Appendix 6.5](#)). Evagrius furthermore explains that once fallen to the *logismos* of pride, one’s mental faculties will deteriorate, creating madness and making the monks see deceptive demonic visions.<sup>222</sup> So even though asceticism is essential to the spiritual life of the monk, it also puts him at enormous risk if it is not combined with humility. In this way, the demons attack the monk by making him (unconsciously) boast in his own efforts and making him lose his dependence on God.

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<sup>218</sup> This passage is also discussed by Misiarczyk, see: Misiarczyk, *Eight Logismoi in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, 141.

<sup>219</sup> This is not to negate the importance of asceticism, as Misiarczyk comments on this passage: “Therefore, it is more important to carry out the will of God, who sends a monk to visit his brothers or sends him a physical weakness rather than a soulless adherence to established rules at the expense of loving one’s neighbor or one’s own health. Faithfulness to the set extent of fasting and abstinence is absolutely necessary in the fight against the demon of gluttony, but not as a goal in itself or as just a tool for self-improvement. The love of neighbor and the prudent care of one’s health is more important than the preservation of the measure,” Misiarczyk, *Eight Logismoi in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, 141.

<sup>220</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 21, trans.: Sinkewicz, 48; Misiarczyk also states that asceticism can, by receiving appreciation from others for his strict ascetic practices, bring a person to a downwards spiral of vanity: “The passionate thought of vainglory also emerges when one intensifies the severity of asceticism and multiplies physical exercises. If the payment for asceticism is the glory and admiration of people, a more severe asceticism becomes the source of greater recognition,” from: Misiarczyk, *Eight Logismoi in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, 259.”

<sup>221</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 33, Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 58.

<sup>222</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 34, trans.: Sinkewicz, 58–59.

## Vows and Oaths

While the importance of asceticism was self-evident in monastic circles, this is not the case within rabbinical Judaism, and most scholars even consider Judaism to be anti-ascetic.<sup>223</sup> However, even though asceticism was not popular in rabbinical Judaism, there were (a few) practises that could be arguably be considered ascetic.<sup>224</sup> Forms of abstinence were sometimes also part of vows and oaths with a certain goal, for example fasting until one finished a certain amount of reading, or to fight sin.<sup>225</sup> As shall be explained in this chapter, vows and oaths were also specifically used against the evil *yetzer*. About two tannaim, rabbi Joshua and rabbi Azariah, it is known that they would fast so much that their teeth became black.<sup>226</sup> However, occurrences like this faced strong opposition among other rabbis, and should therefore not be considered to an accepted part of rabbinical culture.<sup>227</sup> This nonetheless makes it even more interesting to look at these practises, as they could very well have been influenced by their context.

An example of using an oath against the *yetzer* that is discussed extensively by Rosen-Zvi is that of the tannaitic homily in Sifre Numbers on the story on the encounter of Boaz and Ruth.<sup>228</sup> In the centre of the Biblical story, after Ruth appears to Boaz, he says the following to her:

Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to do his duty as your guardian-redeemer, good; let him redeem you. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning." So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized; and he said, "No one must know that a woman came to the threshing floor" (Ruth 3:13-14 NIV).

In Sifre Numbers 88, this encounter between Ruth and Boaz is told much more elaborate:

“As the Lord lives! Lie down until morning” (Ruth 3:13) – Because his evil *yeşer* sat and importuned him the entire night. It said to him: You are unmarried and you want a woman, and she is unmarried and she wants a man (teaching that a wife is acquired by sexual intercourse). So go and have intercourse with her, and she will be your wife. He took an oath against his evil *yeşer*: “As the Lord lives!” – I shall not touch her; and to the woman he said: “Lie down until morning.”<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> David Halivni, ‘On the Supposed Anti-Asceticism or Anti-Nazritism of Simon the Just’, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 58, no. 3 (January 1968): 243.

<sup>224</sup> . As Urbach states: “There were Sages who [...] performed acts of self-affliction and mortification. In conformity with the teaching R. Akiba that ‘vows are a fence for abstinence’ they made vows to restrain themselves and withdraw from the pleasures of the world, and spur themselves to observe the precepts,” Urbach, *The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs*, 447.

<sup>225</sup> Urbach, 447.

<sup>226</sup> Urbach, 447.

<sup>227</sup> Urbach, 447–48.

<sup>228</sup> Ishay Rosen-Zvi, ‘The Evil Inclination (*Yeşer Ha-Ra*) in Tannaitic Literature: Demonic Desires and Beyond’, in *The Evil Inclination in Early Judaism and Christianity*, by Ishay Rosen-Zvi, ed. James Aitken and Hector M. Patmore, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 115–25; Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 18–19, 26-27, 33-36, 87-88, 90-91, 102, 131.

<sup>229</sup> Ishay Rosen-Zvi, ‘The Evil Inclination (*Yeşer Ha-Ra*) in Tannaitic Literature, 115–16.

In the second version of the story, we can see an important change in the story: whereas in the Bible Boaz swears to God and tells Ruth to lie down until the morning, here he is interpreted as saying a part of it to his own *yetzer*.<sup>230</sup> The trickery of the *yetzer*, so Rosen-Zvi explains, is that it “does not simply entice Boaz to sexual sin, [but] it makes a persuasive legal argument.”<sup>231</sup> Boaz does not argue with his *yetzer*, but nullifies its suggestions by taking an oath: “As the Lord lives! – I shall not touch her.”<sup>232</sup>

A similar story is described in Bavli Qiddushin 81a, which contains a story tells about rabbi Amram climbing a ladder to visit some women, which was hindered by a fire (see Appendix 6.6). When the other rabbis said that they were put to shame by his acts, it is said that “[h]e then adjured<sup>233</sup> [the evil yetzer] that he would go out of him, and it issued from him in the shape of a fiery column. He said to it: See, you are fire and I am flesh, yet I am stronger than you.”<sup>234</sup> The word ‘adjuring’ is what Rosen-Zvi chose to translate the root שבע with, but it comes from the same root as Boaz ‘taking an oath’ (נשבע ליצירו). It must be noted that the word *yetzer* itself is – apart from one manuscript – not found in the text, but given the context of the passage – which speaks about the evil *yetzer* – as well as the relationship to

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<sup>230</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 115.

<sup>231</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 116.

<sup>232</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 115–17.

<sup>233</sup> אשבעיה דינפק מיניה, another possible translation would be: “he administered an oath that he would go out of him.”

<sup>234</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 112; Rosen-Zvi compares this story to two stories with a very similar structure, in which the *yetzer* is not described to be the adversary, but Satan, see: Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 112-113.

the coming world (לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא) – to which the *yetzer* is associated<sup>235</sup> – strongly apply that it is the *yetzer* that is the object of the ‘adjuring’ described in this passage.<sup>236</sup>

Something else that has often been seen as part of ascetic practice within Judaism is the Nazirite vow. The validity of the Nazirite vow, even though it originates from the Bible itself, was – as shall be explained below – also not contested. The nature of its asceticism is clearly different from that of the early monks and while it has been questioned whether the vow should truly be considered ascetic, the practice has been critiqued in the rabbinical literature precisely because of its ascetical elements.<sup>237</sup>

The amora Abaye states in Bavli Nedarim 10a that the tannaim Simeon the Just (the high priest), Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar Ha-Qappar all held the opinion that the Nazirite vow was inherently sinful, for the very reason that by refusing to drink wine the Nazirite deprived himself of something, after which the following statement of Rabbi Elazar is brought into the discussion: “if this one that deprived himself only of wine is called a sinner, all the more so is anyone who deprives himself of

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<sup>235</sup> The relationship between the two *yetzarim* and the coming world (לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא) has been discussed earlier in this thesis, first off all in a discussion in Chapter III about the following passage: “Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani said that Rabbi Yohanan had said: the evil *yetzer* incites man in this world (בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה) but it testifies against him in the coming world (לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא), as it said: the one who pampers his slave in his youth, in the end he will be a master” (Proverbs 29:21); it has also been discussed in Chapter IV in the discussion about Joseph’s struggle with Potifar’s wife, where he says: “to go to bed with her in this world (בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה) [is] to be with her in the coming world (לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא).” The relationship between the two *yetzarim* and the coming world is clarified by a discussion about the double *yud* that is found in the word יִצָּר in Genesis 2:7. In Bavli Berachot 61a-62b, there exists a discussion about why the verb יִצָּר in Genesis 2:7 is written with two yuds, which in this passage are connected to both the evil and the good *yetzer*. These two *yetzarim* are then associated with the wicked and the righteous, as well as this world (הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה) and the coming world (הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא) respectively. The opinion of Rav Nahman b. Rav Hisda is brought in, who says that it refers to God creating both the good and the evil *yetzer*. After a discussion of divergent opinions, the discussion is brought back to the explanation of the two *yetzarim*. First, it is said that a human being has organs which all should function according to its own role to support someone’s wellbeing. The role of the kidneys is to advise: the left one advises evil things to him, and the right one good things. Then the two *yetzarim* are brought into the discussion, and are described as both ruling different kinds of people: “Rabbi Yose the Galilean taught: the good *yetzer* rules over the righteous ones, as is said: my heart is pierced within me (Ps.109:22). The evil *yetzer* rules over those that are evil [...]. Those that are in the middle are ruled by both, as is said: he stands at the right side of the poor, to spare them from the rulers of his soul.” It then continues with a saying from Raba, who said that even though he is one of those in the middle, the world is created not for those in the middle but only for the wicked and the righteous: this world (הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה) for wicked and the coming world (הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא) for the righteous; In Ruth Rabbah 3, the story of Ruth and Boaz is also connected the ‘coming world’, in which it is said that even though in this world it is possible for someone ‘small’ to become ‘great’, in the life to come this is not possible anymore. The one that obeys his Former/Creator (יוֹצֵר), also provokes his *yetzer* (יִצָּר) and will be free in coming world. This shows that one’s struggle against the *yetzer* influences one’s state of being after death.

<sup>236</sup> According to Rosen-Zvi, the word *yetzer* is only found in MS Vatican (Biblioteca Apostolica Heb 111), see: Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 202, n.46.

<sup>237</sup> The issue of whether the Nazirite vow is to be considered as an ascetic practice has been discussed extensively by Aharon Shemesh, whose article “Did the Rabbis Consider Nazirhood an Ascetic Practice?” I have extensively used for the following discussion, see: Aharon Shemesh argues the Mishnaic rabbis did not consider Nazirhood an ascetic practice, see: Aharon Shemesh, ‘Did the Rabbis Consider Nazirhood an Ascetic Practice?’, in *Talmudic Transgressions*, ed. Charlotte Fonrobert et al. (BRILL, 2017), 109–122; the question is also discussed by Halivni, see: David Halivni, ‘On the Supposed Anti-Asceticism or Anti-Nazirism of Simon the Just’, 143-152.

anything? From here [we learn that] anyone who fasts [כל היושב בתענית] is called a sinner.”<sup>238</sup> So according to Abaye, the Nazirite vow is sinful and therefore stricter fasting is all the more so sinful. These statements are followed by a statement that nuances this condemnation of Nazirhood: “but this verse is written about an impure Nazirite!”<sup>239</sup> Then it is followed by: “[it is] because he continued in sin (שנה בחטא).” What this discussion shows is that the issue of the validity of the Nazirite vow was not settled in the time of the formation of the Talmud.

The discourse above surrounding the Nazirite vow is a reaction to a homily that is found in many places in the rabbinical literature about Simeon the Just accepting a Nazirite’s guilt-offering from (just) one man, after this man was overcome by his *yetzer* (see [Appendix 6.7](#)).<sup>240</sup> This homily is often considered to confirm high priest Simeon’s rejection of the practice of Nazirhood, already in the time of the tannaim. Two interpretations are given in the Bavli on the apparent refusal of Simeon to partake in guilt-offerings of Nazirites.<sup>241</sup> The first one is that of Rabbi Abaye that is discussed above, namely that the refusal to drink wine is simply sinful in itself.<sup>242</sup> The second one is Rabbi Mana and Rabbi Yannai who argued that Rabbi Simeon rejected Nazirite guilt offerings, because they were often contracted in a state of fear or anger, and later regretted.<sup>243</sup> Rabbi Yannai gives an explanation in Yerushalmi Nedarim 1:1:13: “Rabbi Yannai said: it is a human trap to wildly talk [about] holiness and then enter into vows (Prov. 20:25). If one has started to take vow, his register (פִּינְקֶסֶתוֹ, from the Greek: πίναξ)<sup>244</sup> is opened.” The meaning of this seems to be that it is unwise to overconfidently take a vow, as one can only be judged by it later.

Aharon Shemesh argues that the apparent general refusal of Simeon the Just to eat a Nazirite’s offering should not be read as a disapproval of the ascetic practise of refraining from wine, and not even as any refusal at all: “Simon’s statement about never eating a Nazirite’s guilt-offering is merely a statement of fact: he is saying that he had never met a Nazirite who offered the guilt-offering except this one, and this is why he remembered it so well.”<sup>245</sup> He goes on to explain that a guilt-offering was only required if one became ritually impure by contact with a dead body, which rarely happened.<sup>246</sup> David Halivni proposes an interpretation closer to the second of the Talmudic interpretations described above, namely that Simeon the Just refused to take the guilt-offerings because people that took the Nazirite vow

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<sup>238</sup> Bavli Nedarim 10a; Shemesh, 110-111.

<sup>239</sup> Nedarim 10a, cited from: Shemesh, 118.

<sup>240</sup> The story in the appendix is a translation of Tosefta Nazir 4:6 by Rosen-Zvi, but the story is also present in Yerushalmi Nedarim 1:1:14, Yerushalmi Nazir 1:5:4, Bavli Nedarim 9b:5-7, Bavli Nazir 4b:14-16 and Sifrei Bamidbar 22; Rosen-Zvi notes that the version in Sifrei Bamidbar 22 doesn’t contain the word *yetzer*, but used ‘heart’ instead, see: Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 32-33.

<sup>241</sup> Halivni, ‘On the Supposed Anti-Asceticism or Anti-Naziritism of Simon the Just’, 246–247.

<sup>242</sup> Shemesh, ‘Did the Rabbis Consider Nazirhood an Ascetic Practice?’, 110, 117-118; Halivni, 246.

<sup>243</sup> Halivni, ‘On the Supposed Anti-Asceticism or Anti-Naziritism of Simon the Just’, 246-248; PT Nedarim 1:13-14; .

<sup>244</sup> Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim*, 1165, פִּינְקֶסֶת, פִּינְקֶסֶת.

<sup>245</sup> Shemesh, ‘Did the Rabbis Consider Nazirhood an Ascetic Practice?’, 115.

<sup>246</sup> Shemesh, 115.

often did it for trivial non-religious reasons like impressing friends or ‘proving an argument’, and that it was rare that a Nazirite took the vow for its true intention, namely to devote oneself to God.<sup>247</sup> The refusal is therefore not a condemnation of Nazirhood, but a rejection of “the use of holy vows for unholy purposes.”<sup>248</sup> This also explains why Simeon, after seeing this sincere Nazirite, seems to accept him so gladly.

One of the things we see in the story, is that the handsome man cuts his hair, and thereby ends his period of Naziritehood, because he fell to pride.<sup>249</sup> It is not entirely clear if he admired his hair as a sign of his achievement of being a Nazirite, or simply because he admired his own beauty, but Shemesh argues the former.<sup>250</sup> If this is the case, then it is very similar to the danger of vainglory for monks that are progressing in the ascetic life, about which Misiarczyk states the following: “The passionate thought of vainglory also emerges when one intensifies the severity of asceticism and multiplies physical exercises. If the payment for asceticism is the glory and admiration of people, a more severe asceticism becomes the source of greater recognition.”<sup>251</sup>

Another way that people engaged in ascetic practices was to vow to abstain from something specific.<sup>252</sup> This kind of vow was however also not uncontested, and is for example very clearly rejected in the Yerushalmi Nedarim 9:1. Here, a discussion is described about the opinion of Rabbi Elazar that there should be no vows, which contradicts the chapter in the Torah which speaks about the validity of vows (Num. 30). The argument is made by Rabbi Yannai that anyone that ‘anyone that listens to his *yetzer* is committing idolatry,’ based on the following verse from the Psalms: “You shall have no foreign god among you; you shall not worship any god other than me” (Ps. 81:9 NIV). Taking a vow is then described by Rabbi Shimon ben Laqish as a person seeing a guard (קסטור׳יה) (with prisoners) and putting a chain (קולר) around one’s own neck.<sup>253</sup> Thereafter, a saying of Rabbi Jonathan is added to the discussion, stating that taking a vow is like building an altar for idols, and offering on it. Then, it is asked whether the interpretation of Rabbi Yannai on Psalms 81:19 is sufficient to support such a severe statement, thereby again connecting the taking of vows to listening to one’s *yetzer*. Thereafter, a further explanation of the trap of the taking of vows is given: “To one that took a vow against [eating] a loaf: woe to him if he eats and woe to him if he does not eat. If he does eat, he transgresses against his vow. If he does not eat, he transgresses against himself. What does he do?” A fitting saying from Rabbi Isaak

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<sup>247</sup> Halivni, ‘On the Supposed Anti-Asceticism or Anti-Naziritism of Simon the Just’, 248–49.

<sup>248</sup> Halivni, 252.

<sup>249</sup> Shemesh, ‘Did the Rabbis Consider Nazirhood an Ascetic Practice?’, 112–13.

<sup>250</sup> Shemesh, 113.

<sup>251</sup> Misiarczyk, *Eight Logismoi in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, 259.

<sup>252</sup> Urbach, *The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs*, 447.

<sup>253</sup> I follow the interpretation of Jastrow here, who interprets ‘קסטור׳יה’ in PT Nedarim 9:1 as ‘קוסטודיא’ (*custodia*), with the assumption that the guard is accompanied with prisoners, see: Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim*, 1395, קסטור׳יא; 1336, קוסטודיא; 1329, קולר.

is brought in shortly after: “is what the Torah prohibited not enough for you that you want to prohibit for yourself other things?”

In Bavli Nedarim 8, another discussion is held whether the taking of oaths is a legitimate practice: “From where does it come that people can take an oath to undertake a commandment? It is said: ‘I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws’” (Ps. 119:106 NIV). However – so the discussion continues – is anyone not already obligated to keep the laws? The opinion is brought in that, even though one is always under the obligation to keep the commandment of the Torah, an oath may be used to motivate oneself.

There is nothing in Evagrius that clearly resembles the strategy of taking an oath against the adversary. One saying does advocate it, but this saying is found – not in the words of Evagrius self – but in a citation from Scripture that is prescribed to be used against a *logismos*, and therefore it is more likely coincidental: “Against the thought that seeks, through filthy desire, to approach the demon of fornication: ‘You shall fear the Lord your God, and serve only him, and cleave to him, and swear by his name’ (Deut 6:13).”<sup>254</sup> Evagrius did take oaths himself, one time he swore on the Gospel that he would leave Constantinople, and another time he took an oath to become a monk on the request of Melania the Elder.<sup>255</sup> In his writings, however, Evagrius clearly takes a stance against taking oaths: “avoid any deceit and any oath, if you long to pray as a monk, otherwise, one may make a vain show of what is unfitting.”<sup>256</sup> In his book *Foundations*, Evagrius similarly lists taking an oath together with things that harm the soul, like disputes and perjury.<sup>257</sup> So even though Evagrius himself made important oaths that positively changed his life, his general perspective towards it is that people abuse it in dishonesty – an opinion that closely resembles the explanation of Halivni of the opinion of Simeon the Just about the vow of Nazirhood.

There exists however also one saying in his book *Definitions* where he does say something positive about taking a vow: “A vow is the promise of good things being brought to God by people in keeping with a promise.”<sup>258</sup> In ‘Notes on Ecclesiastes’ 5, Evagrius warns that one should be hasty in fulfilling his vows to God, as it could very well be that one will not fulfil it: “If then you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it: for there is no will among the senseless, so for your part fulfil such things as you have vowed. Better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfil it.”<sup>259</sup> About why one should fulfil his vows, Evagrius says the following: “In what way it is ‘better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfil it’, we shall explain with recourse to the passage from the Gospel that says a servant who does not know and does not perform will receive few [beatings],

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<sup>254</sup> Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos* 2.7, trans: Brakke, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 70.

<sup>255</sup> Augustine Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus: Beyond Heresy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 28, 30.

<sup>256</sup> Evagrius, *on Prayer* 127, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 206.

<sup>257</sup> Evagrius, *Foundations* 8, trans.: Sinkewicz, 9.

<sup>258</sup> Evagrius, *Definitions* 8, trans.: Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 205 (ebook).

<sup>259</sup> Evagrius, *Notes on Ecclesiastes* 35, Casiday, 158 (ebook).

whereas a servant who does know and does not perform will receive many [cf. Lk 12.47–48].”<sup>260</sup> This implies that taking a vow brings on more responsibility, and that therefore the punishment will be harsher on someone that has taken a vow, similar to what is said in Yerushalmi Nedarim 1:1:13, that the taking of a vow is like opening one’s register.

In one saying in *Antirrhethikos* Evagrius takes a stance against oaths that again is strikingly similar to Halivni’s interpretation of the opinion of Rabbi Simeon the Just about vows, also referring to the same Scriptural verse from Proverbs as Rabbi Yannai: “Against the thought that seizes our intellect so that we bind ourselves to our fast and our ascetic practice by our oaths, something that is foreign to the monastic way of life: ‘It is a trap for a man hastily to consecrate some of his possessions, for regret comes after the making of the vow’ (Prov. 20:25).”<sup>261</sup> Evagrius appears to reject the use of oaths in one’s ascetic practise as something foreign to monasticism and cites a verse in which the reason is given that it is the regret that comes after the taking of the vow that makes it a trap. Here, the very idea of taking an oath is described by Evagrius as a demonic *logismos* seizing the mind. What is also interesting is that Evagrius interprets the Nazirite’s abstinence from wine allegorically, as an obligation to refrain from anger:

“Wine is an unruly thing and inebriation is brazen”: If the “anger of dragons is their wine,” but “wine makes is an unruly thing that makes people unruly, and rage is “brazen.” This inebriation is wont to come about through the boiling of the irascible power. Yet if the Nazirites refrain from wine according to the Law, then the Nazirites are also required to be free of anger.<sup>262</sup>

In this way, even though the Nazirite’s vow is found in the Scriptures, it does not legitimize the taking of vows for Evagrius.

Both in the rabbinical culture and in the writings of Evagrius, even though there does not seem to have been a clear consensus about the validity of taking vows and oaths, it is usually described in a negative light. Important to note is that the very fact that the taking of oaths was so explicitly denounced at certain places in the discussed writings, does imply that it was something that the intended audience engaged in. Generally, the practice of taking vows and oaths seemed to exist in both traditions and also faced opposition in both traditions, as it was considered by the rabbis to be both sinful and connected to the *yetzer* and potentially demonic by Evagrius.

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<sup>260</sup> Evagrius, *Notes on Ecclesiastes 36*, Casiday, 159 (ebook).

<sup>261</sup> Evagrius, *Antirrhethikos* 1.27, trans.: Brakke, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 58.

<sup>262</sup> Evagrius, in *Proverbia* 20 :1, trans.: Evagrius and Paul Géhin, *Scholies aux Proverbes, Sources chrétiennes*, no 340 (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1987), cited in: Bunge, *Dragon’s Wine and Angel’s Bread*, 26.

## Rabbinical Asceticism and the *Yetzer*

There exist a few places in early rabbinical literature where ascetic practices are used specifically to fight the *yetzer*. A fascinating story where this happens is told in Qiddushin 81b, where Rabbi Hiyya bar Ashi is said to have abstained from sexual relations with his wife for years in order to combat his evil *yetzer* (see [Appendix 6.8](#)). All his life, Rabbi Hiyya abstained from sexual relations with his wife until his wife tricks him and makes him give in to his sexual desire. Realizing he lost the battle, Rabbi Hiyya sits down in the oven in order to die. In this story, it seems highly likely that Rabbi Hiyya's wife fulfills the will of the *yetzer*, that – as we have seen earlier – is described by Rabbi Shimon ben Laqish as: “Man's *yetzer* overpowers him every day and attempts to kill him, as it is said: *the wicked watches for the righteous seeking to put him to death* ([...] Ps 37:32).”<sup>263</sup> Interesting is that Rabbi Hiyya is described to have used both daily prayer and abstention from sex to fight his *yetzer*, and the *yetzer* apparently still had the power to overcome him. A similar (and more optimistic) story to that of Rabbi Hiyya is found in Bavli Gittin 57a, where two Jewish slaves were married off to each other by Gentiles, and the wife requested the man not to touch her as they were not married with a marriage contract, which he did until he died. Then the wife said to the rabbis: “mourn this one who argued more with his *yetzer* than Joseph,” arguing that what Joseph did for he short while, this man had done every day of his life.

Fasting is also specifically described as a means to conquer the *yetzer*, as can be read in Bavli Yoma 69b: “They settled for a fast of three days and nights, and He handed him (the evil *yetzer*) over to them. He (the *yetzer*) came out of the Holy of Holies [appearing] as a young lion of fire. The prophet said to Israel: it is he, the evil *yetzer* of idol worship, as is written: and he said, this is the wicked one (Zech. 5:8).” Afterwards, they proposed to pray for the *yetzer* of transgression, and God “handed [him] over into their hands.” What is first of all remarkable is that the text speaks of ‘the *yetzer* of idol worship’ and ‘the *yetzer* of transgression’ as two different entities, in the same fashion as Evagrius, who ascribed to the *logismoi* different passions like ‘the *logismos* of greed’, ‘the *logismos* of pride’, and all of the other eight *logismoi*. Furthermore, in the passage from Bavli Yoma both prayer and fasting are described as means to subdue the *yetzer*, with fasting being the very reason that God handed them over the evil *yetzer* of idol worship and the *yetzer* of transgression.

These passages above are all references to the *yetzer* in early rabbinical literature that are related to asceticism that are known to me. Two of them are related to sexual abstinence, while the other one is related to fasting. Even though, as Rosen-Zvi explains, some more recent scholarship has attempted to place the *yetzer* in the context of *askesis*, the scarcity of passages that are related to this subject is remarkable.<sup>264</sup> It should be noted, however, that precisely because asceticism is not a major part of the

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<sup>263</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 131.

<sup>264</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 5.

rabbinical culture of late antiquity, and even more so because some rabbis strongly advocated against it, the anomalies could very well be a monastic influence, though other contexts should also be considered.

In this chapter the role of ascetism in relationship to fighting the *yetzer* and demons in both the rabbinical and Evagrian tradition have been discussed. In the rabbinical literature, asceticism is mostly associated with the taking of vows and oaths, a practice that was very much contested in the time of the Talmud. Both traditions have a certain ambivalence in making use of vows and oaths against the adversary, but usually reject their use as either sinful, a trap, connected to the *yetzer* or demonic. Interestingly, both traditions seem to be specifically concerned with the taking of a vow as a trap that a person puts himself into, in which the verse from Proverbs 20:25 is central. In general, the taking of vows and oaths seems to be something that both traditions tried to argue against, while at times they are described in a positive light. As is also argued by Halivni, in the rabbinical tradition there also exists an interpretation of Simeon the Just's refusal of accepting a Nazirite's offering that does legitimize the taking of the Nazirite's vow. Moreover, vows, oaths fasting and sexual abstinence are all clearly described as a strategy against the evil *yetzer*. Asceticism is therefore clearly described to have been used in a positive and effective tool in the fight against the *yetzer*. That it is precisely in the fight against the *yetzer* that ascetic practices have been used by the rabbis is interesting – to say the least – and fits well to an interpretation that the development of the *yetzer* was influenced by a broader context in which a shift in demonological thinking was taking place.

## Conclusion

The starting point of my research was the statement by Rosen-Zvi that the development of the *yetzer* in the rabbinical literature of late antiquity was part of a broader Jewish Christian development in demonology, for which he points explicitly to the monastic tradition within early Christianity, and also specifically to the writings of Evagrius Ponticus. While the rabbinical tradition and early monastic world of Evagrius clearly were two distinct traditions with their own distinct religious practices and their own ways of reading Scripture, the parallels between the way they describe the fight against the *yetzer* and the demons are striking. The resemblance of the evil *yetzer* to the Evagrian demons is even the more remarkable when it is compared to the earlier Biblical, Mishnaic and Akivan version of the *yetzer*, which lacks all the seemingly demonic characteristics that – as has been put forth in this thesis – would later be attributed to the *yetzer*. In both traditions, the adversary is an agent of moral evil that is working on the human heart in order to prevent him from worshipping God with a pure heart. Both the demons and the *yetzer* are unceasingly trying to bring the human being to sin, thereby preventing him from attaining his spiritual goal. In both traditions, the *yetzer* and the demons are both described as a strong force that tries to keep a person from performing his religious duties. They furthermore both try to get a foothold in the heart of the human being by carefully analyzing his weaknesses and attacking at the spot where success is most likely, and – once they have gained a foothold – they try to gain further control of him. Also, both the *yetzer* and the demons are both known to increase the strength of their attacks, the more someone successfully fights them.

In the rabbinical tradition, the final aim of the *yetzer* is somewhat different than that of the Evagrian demons, namely to bring a person to idolatry, to which obedience to the *yetzer* itself is even equated. In Evagrius's writings, the demons ultimately try to bring the person to the worst *logismos*, namely that of pride. Once the monk is fallen to pride, he does not acknowledge God as his Helper anymore, and becomes a playball of the demons, which strike him with madness, illusions and visions. In general, the Evagrian descriptions of the workings of demons and the effect on the soul are much more elaborate and more focused on the internal state of the monk, while in the rabbinical tradition the fight is more concerned with actions and is less focused on the internal state of the person. However, even though the internal state of the Torah-student is not described so elaborately as the internal state of the monk is in Evagrius's writings, also in the rabbinical literature the *yetzer* is described as working on the internal state of the person, with the aim of creating an impurity of the heart which prevents the person from the worship of God and bringing him to idolatry. The *yetzer* and the demons are described as smart tricksters, that use different kinds of misleading thoughts and arguments to make a person fall and be controlled by them. This means that even if one is making progress on the spiritual path (and even more so the more progress he makes), he at all times has to be on his watch not to naively fall to the tricks of the deceiver.

An important difference between the traditions is that the demons are described as a plurality of forces, while the evil *yetzer* is generally described as a single force. However, also in the Evagrius writings, the demons never appear to oppose each other, but they are described as working together, united in intention and effort. Another important difference is that Evagrius advises and makes great effort to provide his monks with the means to argue against the demons. In the rabbinical literature, the rabbis generally appear to prohibit people from engaging with the suggestions of the *yetzer* altogether, apart from responding with verses from Scripture itself. But even though Rosen-Zvi argues that “the sources never present a straightforward dialogue with [the *yetzer*],” this thesis shows that exceptions to this rule do exist.<sup>265</sup>

Concerning the strategies against the enemy that are found in the discussed literature, there exist both clear parallels as well as notable differences. For both Evagrius and the rabbis, Scripture is described as fulfilling an essential role in fighting the enemy. The most important parallel is found in the practice of using Biblical verses to deny the suggestions from the adversary. In the rabbinical tradition, the study of the Torah functions as a constant protection against the *yetzer*. For Evagrius, the opposite is true: studying Scripture makes the demons try to intervene, putting the monk at risk. In Evagrius’s writings it is therefore not so much the study of Scripture that protects against the demons, but the knowledge that is gained by it, as it can be used against the demonic suggestions. Something similar is however found in the practice of unceasing prayer, which is described to fight off the demonic attacks. This incongruity between the two traditions can be explained by the most important difference between them, namely the aim of the spiritual life itself: for Evagrius the aim of the practical life is to attain the impassibility that creates the state in which the monk can (if God gives it) attain pure prayer and knowledge of God, while for the rabbis, the study and practice of the Torah was the very aim of their lives. The *yetzer* tries both to turn human beings away from the Torah, as well as to disrupt the unity of their hearts in order to prevent them from the proper worship of God, and ultimately bring them to idolatry. The demons similarly try to prevent the heart from attaining impassibility, thereby preventing the monk from his final aim: to know God. The use of supplication to fight the adversary also means that in both traditions God was considered to be above the power of the enemy, and requesting Him for help was a way to contain the power of his attacks.

It has been shown that in the rabbinical tradition, which is generally known to be anti-ascetic, ascetic practices do appear and also have a strong connection to the *yetzer*. The Talmudic discussions that are found concerning this subject further accentuate the uncomfortable place that ascetic practices had within the rabbinical tradition. From the material that has been discussed in this thesis, two arguments could be made to explain this duality, the first of which being that while asceticism was considered to be sinful in the rabbinical tradition, it also had to integrate the Biblical practice of Nazirite

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<sup>265</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 89.

vows, which included depriving oneself of consuming wine. The other one is that the practice comes from the broader context, to which monastic Christianity certainly is a good candidate. As the rabbinical forms of asceticism include more than just refraining from wine – for example also fasting and abstaining from sex – the latter seems to be a good candidate. The ascetic practices against the *yetzer* generally show, besides some clear differences, also striking similarities with monastic asceticism that at times even are in opposition to the broader rabbinical tradition. Of course, other influences that fall outside the scope of this thesis should also be explored, but the connection between asceticism and the *yetzer* does point to the rabbinical ascetic practices existing within in the realm of demonology.

The comparisons that have been made in this thesis between the fight with the *yetzer* and the Evagrian demons strengthen the argument made by Rosen-Zvi that the development of the concept of the *yetzer* took place in a broader demonological context, and that it should be interpreted in the light of “a larger move toward placing demons inside the human psyche.”<sup>266</sup> The statement of Rosen-Zvi that “far from being a blind appetite, the rabbinic (evil) *yetzer* is a sophisticated antinomian enticer, struggling to trap humans,”<sup>267</sup> is also strongly confirmed by the results of my research. The very fact that the *yetzer* developed from being a natural part of a human being into a demonic agent that tries to trick the Torah-student to lawlessness and through that gain control of a person, with such a clear resemblance to the contemporary monastic ideas about how demons attack the monks, is – without excluding other explanations – too apparent to mark it as a mere coincidence.

Even though the comparisons that are made in this thesis generally confirms Rosen-Zvi’s argument about the relationship between the *yetzer* and early monastic demonology as being a ‘common formation’, further research is still needed to exclude other possible influences that might have influenced both traditions at the same time. What is clear is that the *yetzer*, in the way it is fought with, takes on a shape that in many ways resembles the demons of Evagrius. What still has to be answered, however, is what kind of relationship this exactly implies: whether there was a direct influence between the two traditions, if it was mutual or one sided, or if both traditions were both influenced by ideas that came from the outside. These questions fall outside the scope of this thesis, which it is solely devoted to comparing the *yetzer* in early rabbinical Judaism to Evagrian demonology, and need to be answered before more definitive conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between the *yetzer* and Evagrian demonology.

During the research that has been done for the master thesis, some limitations have come up. As the amount of references to the fight with demons in the Evagrian corpus is large, the comparison has become somewhat unbalanced, methodologically speaking. While it was possible to thoroughly and systematically study all occurrences of the *yetzer* in rabbinical literature, I have had to rely more on secondary literature and thematical selections of texts from Evagrius’ writings. From hindsight, more

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<sup>266</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 128.

<sup>267</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 6.

demarcation surrounding the scope and focus of the research would have probably added to the quality and produced stronger results.

# Appendix of Primary Sources

## Chapter 2

### Primary Text 2.1: Sifra Shemini 1

*This thing is what the Lord has commanded that you do (Lev 9:6)—remove that evil yetzer from your hearts, so that all of you will be as one in awe and of one mind to serve God. Just as He is singular (יחיד) in the world, so let your service be singular (מיוחדת) before Him. For it is said: Cut away, therefore, the thickening<sup>268</sup> about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more (Deut 10:16). On what account? For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords (Deut 10:17). If you do this, then the presence of the presence of the Lord shall appear to you (Lev 9:6).<sup>269</sup>*

### Primary Text 2.2: Bavli Nedarim 32b

R. Ammi bar Abba said: What is the meaning of the passage: *a little city, with few men in it?* (Ecc 9:14)

*A little city*—is the body;

*with few men in it*—these are the limbs;

*and to it came a great king, who besieged it*—this is the evil yetzer;

*and built mighty siege works against it*—these are sins.

*A poor wise man was in the city* (v. 15)—this is the good yetzer;

*who saved it with his wisdom*—this is repentance and good deeds.

*But nobody thought of that poor man*—for when the evil yetzer [dominates], the good yetzer is not remembered.<sup>270</sup>

*Wisdom makes the wise man stronger than ten rulers.* (Eccl. 7:19 NIV)

*Wisdom makes the wise man stronger* – this is repentance and good works,

*than ten rulers* – these are the two eyes, the two ears, the two hands, the two legs, the head of the penis (ראש הגוייה) and the mouth.<sup>271</sup>

### Primary Text 2.3: Exhortations, 2.19-22

Just as it is impossible to learn a skill without having persistently devoted one's time to it, so it is impossible to acquire prayer without having devoted oneself to God with an upright heart. The one who has not attained pure prayer has no weapon for battle. One who has not been adorned and cleansed by the virtues of God will be an abode for the demons. [...] As it is

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<sup>268</sup> ערלך, also: foreskin

<sup>269</sup> Sifra Shemini 1, trans.: Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 27.

<sup>270</sup> Until here, I have used the translation of Rosen-Zvi from: Rosen-Zvi, 1, also found on p.77, the rest of the citation is my own rendering.

<sup>271</sup> Bavli Nedarim 32b; The cited story is an interpretation from the following parts from Ecclesiastes: "I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded" (Eccl. 9:13-16 NIV), and: "Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful than ten rulers in a city" (Eccl. 7:19 NIV).

impossible for a king to dwell in the house of a poor man, so Christ will not dwell in a soul defiled by sin.<sup>272</sup>

#### Primary Text 2.4: Exhortations 2.4-5

Just as it is impossible to transport water to a height without it being enclosed on all sides so it has no way out, so too the mind cannot ponder sublime realities and be in the realm of the incorporeals without having purified the heart, for it must turn towards those things by which it is held. Just as it is impossible to see one's own image in water that has been disturbed, so too the mind will not be able to see the Lord as in a mirror without having set right its interior state and without having purified the soul of passionate attachments to material things.<sup>273</sup>

#### Primary Text 2.5: Eulogios 3

On this account, let him who is beginning to attain to such virtue consider the warfare that is launched against it, lest, caught without training, he be easily dragged down as one unprepared. Therefore, the practice of ascetic labours is praiseworthy when there is peace, but bravery in these is eminently praiseworthy when warfare arises. Genuine virtue consists in bringing forth perseverance as one's weapon, not only for those circumstances in the course of which one is engaged in ascetic labours, but also for those evils in the course of which one is engaged in warfare; for impassible is the person who through very many battles has conquered passion, but caught in the passions is the one who says he has acquired virtue without warfare. For the evil of the opposing forces is ranged against the battle line of the virtuous army of ascetic labours. The heart that does not have experience of warfare is deprived of the state of virtue, for 'virtue' (*aretē*) is the name of the action that comes from the word 'deeds of valour' (*aristeia*).<sup>274</sup>

#### Primary Text 2.6: Letter on the Faith 26

We did not undertake the investigation of these passages out of rivalry or vainglory, but rather for the benefit of the brethren, so that those earthen vessels containing the treasure of God [cf. 2 Cor 4.7] should not obviously be deceived by men with hearts of stone [cf. Ez 36.26] and uncircumcised men who have armed themselves with the arms of foolish wisdom [cf. Jer 4.4].<sup>275</sup>

#### Primary Text 2.7: On Vices 2

Chastity is a robe of truth, an axe of wantonness, a charioteer for the eyes, an overseer for one's thinking, a circumcision of thoughts [*λογισμῶν περιτομή*], excision of licentiousness, a planting opposed to nature and a counter to lustful burning, an assistant to our works and a collaborator with abstinence, a lantern for the heart and an inclination for prayer.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Evagrius, *Exhortations*, 2.19-22, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 221.

<sup>273</sup> Evagrius, *Exhortations* 2.4-5, trans.: Sinkewicz, 219.

<sup>274</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 3, Sinkewicz, 30-31.

<sup>275</sup> Evagrius, *Letter on the Faith* 26, trans.: Augustine Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (London: Routledge, 2006), 69 (ebook).

<sup>276</sup> Evagrius, *On Vices* 2, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 63; For the Greek words in brackets, see: Charles-Antoine Fogielman, 'Les Deux Traités à Euloge d'Evagre Le Pontique: Introduction, Édition Critique, Traduction, Commentaire et Notes' (2015), 290.

## Primary Text 2.8: Peri Logismon 35

I would be amazed if someone who took his fill of bread and water were able to receive the crown of impassibility; I am speaking not of impassibility that hinders sins in act, for that is called abstinence, but that which cuts off impassioned thoughts in the intellect [ἀλλὰ τὴν ἀτὰ διάνοιαν τοὺς ἐμπαθεῖς λογισμοὺς περικοπτουσαν], what saint Paul called the spiritual circumcision of the hidden Jew [πνευματικὴν περιτομὴν τοῦ κρυπτοῦ Ἰουδαίου] (cf. Rom. 2: 29).<sup>277</sup>

## Chapter 3

### Primary Text 3.1: Peri Logismon 1

Among the demons who set themselves in opposition to the practical life, those ranged first in battle are the ones entrusted with the appetites of gluttony, those who make to us suggestions of avarice, and those who entice us to seek human esteem. All the other demons march along behind these ones and in their turn take up with the people wounded by these. For example, it is not possible to fall into the hands of the spirit of fornication, unless one has fallen under the influence of gluttony; nor is it possible to trouble the irascible part, unless one is fighting for food or wealth or esteem. And it is not possible to escape the demon of sadness, if one is deprived of all these things, or is unable to attain them. Nor will one escape pride, the first offspring of the devil, if one has not banished avarice, the root of all evils (I Tim. 6: 10), since, according to the wise Solomon, ‘poverty makes a person humble’ (Prov. 10:4). To put it briefly, no one can fall into a demon’s power, unless he has first been wounded by those in the front line.<sup>278</sup>

### Primary Text 3.2: Genesis Rabbah

[a] Sin (הטאת, feminine) *crouches at the door* (Gen 4:7)—it does not say “*crouches*” in the feminine (רובצת), but in the masculine (רובץ) — first it is weak, like a female, and then becomes strong like a male.

[b] R. Akiva said: first it is like a spun thread, and then becomes like a ship’s rope, as it is said: *Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope* (Is 5:18).

[c] R. Isaac said: at first it is a visitor (אכסניי), then it becomes a guest (אורייה), then it becomes the master of the house (בעל הבית). This is the verse: *and a passer-by (הלך) came to the rich man —a walking foot [i.e., visitor]; and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the guest —thus a guest; and he took the poor man’s lamb and dressed it for the man that was come to him —thus the master of the house* (2 Sam 12:4).

[d] R. Tanhum b. Marion said: There are dogs in Rome which know how to beguile (למשדלה). They go and sit in front of a bakery and make themselves appear sleeping and the owner of the bakery nods off and [the dog] knocks the bottom loaf to the ground [causing all the loaves to collapse], and until [the baker] gathers them, [the dog] grabs a loaf and leaves with it.

[e] R. Abba b. Yudan said: It is like a powerless (שפוף) highway robber on a crossroads. He would tell all the passers-by: give me everything you’ve got. A clever man went by and

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<sup>277</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon 35*, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 178; The Greek text is taken from the critical edition of Evagrius’s *Peri Logismon*, see: Evagrius et al., *Sur les pensées*.

<sup>278</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon 1*, trans.: Sinkewicz, 153.

saw he was useless (שאין בו תועלת) and began to beat him. So too *yetzer hara* destroyed several generations, the generation of Enosh and of the flood and of the dispersion, and when Abraham stood and saw he was impotent, he began to crush it (מכתתו), this is the verse: *and I shall beat (וכתתי) his enemies from him and his haters I shall smite* (Ps 89:24). [f] R. Ammi said: *Yetzer hara* does not walk on the side ways, but in the middle of the road, and when he sees a man rub (משמשם) his eyes, fix his hair, hang upon his heels, he says: this one is mine (הדין דידי). Why? *You have seen a man wise in his eyes—the fool is hopeful with regard to him* (תקוה לכסיל ממנו; Prov 26:12). [g] R. Avin said: Anyone who indulges his *yetzer* in his youth shall be mourned (מנון) it in his old age. Why? *An indulger of his slave from youth shall at the end be* מנון (Prov 29:21). [h] R. Hanina b. Papa and R. Simon. R. Hanina b. Papa said: If your *yetzer* tries to drive you to frivolity (להסחיקך), throw the words of Torah at it like a spear (רומחיהו בדברי תורה), [as it is said] *the confident yetzer you guard in perfect peace* (יצר סמוך תצור שלום; Isa 26:3). And if you do so, I shall consider it as if you had created peace: the verse does not say “guard (תנצור) peace” but “make (תצור) peace.” And if you should say it is not in your power, it says *because he trusts in you* (ibid.), and I have dictated to you in the Torah, *its urge is toward you, and you shall rule over him* (Gen 4:7). [i] R. Simon says: If your *yetzer* tries to drive you to frivolity (להסחיקך), gladden it with words of Torah (שמחיהו בדברי תורה), [as it says] *gladden the yetzer* (יצר סמוך; Isa 26:3). And if you do so, I shall deem you as if you had created two worlds. It does not say “keep peace” but *peace peace* (ibid.). And I have dictated to you in the Torah, *its urge is towards you*. (Gen 4:7; Gen Rab. 22:6, ed. Theodor-Albeck, 210–13).<sup>279</sup>

### Primary Text 3.3: Peri Logismon 9

But since in time of temptation the mind may happen to be muddled and not see accurately what is happening, one should do the following after the withdrawal of the demon. Sit down and recall for yourself the things that happened to you – where you started from, where you went, and the place in which you were caught by the spirit of fornication or anger or sadness, and how in turn these things took place. Examine these events carefully and commit them to memory that you may be able to expose him when he approaches; and uncover the place hidden by him, and how you will not follow him again. If you want to get him really mad, expose him immediately when he presents himself; and with a word show him the first place he entered, then the second and third, for he gets extremely vexed and cannot bear the shame. Let the proof that you have spoken to him in timely fashion be that the thought has fled you, for it is impossible for him to stand his ground after he has been openly exposed.<sup>280</sup>

### Primary Text 3.4: Peri Logismon 37

But let us flee, brothers, the disease of slander, and let us never hold onto an evil memory of anyone and let us not avert our gaze at the mention of our neighbour, for the evil demons examine carefully all our gestures and they leave nothing of ours unexamined—not our reclining, not our sitting, not our standing, not our speaking, not our goings, not our gazings; they examine everything carefully, they deploy all resources, all day long they study deceits to use against us in order to oppress the lowly mind at the time of prayer and extinguish its blessed light.<sup>281</sup>

<sup>279</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 66–68.

<sup>280</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 9, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 159.

<sup>281</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 37, trans.: Sinkewicz, 179.

### Primary Text 3.5: Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 37

The demons do not know our hearts, as some people think, for the Lord alone is a ‘knower of hearts’ (cf. Acts 1: 24; 15: 8), ‘who knows the mind of human beings’ (Job 7: 20), and ‘who alone fashioned their hearts (Ps. 32: 15). Rather, they recognize the many mental representations that are in the heart on the basis of a word that is expressed and movements of the body such as this.<sup>282</sup>

### Primary Text 3.6: *Praktikos* 47

Some word proffered or a movement arising in the body is an indication of the affections present within the soul. Through these the enemies perceive whether we hold and nourish their thoughts, or cast them aside and devote our concern to our salvation. For only the God who made us knows our mind and has no need of indications to know what is hidden in the heart.<sup>283</sup>

### Primary Text 3.7: *Eulogios* 22

The demon of lust, after suddenly hurling its filth at the champion of ascetic labours, springs quickly away from the fiery torch of his ascetic labours, unable to bear the heat. [...] For little by little the demon plots against the person who has relaxed his abstinence due to the flattery of pleasures, in order to become the familiar of his heart, so that once ignited by converse with vice it may be captured and its hatred of sin come to an end.<sup>284</sup>

### Primary Text 3.8: *Praktikos* 13

The thought of vainglory is a most subtle one and readily insinuates itself within the virtuous person with the intention of publishing his struggles and hunting after the esteem that comes from people (cf. I Thess. 2: 6). It invents demons crying out, women being healed and a crowd touching his garments (cf. Matt. 9: 20-1; Mark 5: 27); it even predicts to him that he will eventually attain the priesthood; it has people come to seek him at his door, and if he should be unwilling he will be taken away in bonds. When this thought has thus raised him aloft on empty hopes, it flies off abandoning him to be tempted either by the demon of pride or by that of sadness, who brings upon him further thoughts opposed to his hopes. Sometimes it delivers him over to the demon of fornication, he who a little earlier was a holy priest carried off in bonds.<sup>285</sup>

### Primary Text 3.9: *Eulogios* 22

If therefore one should wish to prevail over these (two demons) with God’s help, let him waste the flesh to counter fornication and let him humble the soul to counter vainglory, for thus will we easily drive out the empty esteem of the one and be pleasing to God; and we shall blow away the impure fantasies of the other and render our heart pure of pleasures.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 37, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 179.

<sup>283</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 47, trans.: Sinkewicz, 106.

<sup>284</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 22, trans.: Sinkewicz, 48.

<sup>285</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 13, trans.: Sinkewicz, 100.

<sup>286</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 22, trans.: Sinkewicz, 48.

### Primary Text 3.10: Bavli Sukkah 51b-52a

In the Coming World, the Holy One (blessed is He) will take the evil *yetzer* and slaughter (שוחט) him in front of both the just and the unjust people. To the just it will be like a high mountain, and to the unjust it will be like a thread of hair. They will both lament. The just will lament and say: how could it be that we were able to overcome (לכבוש) such a high mountain? And the wicked will lament and say: how can it be that we were unable to overcome this thread of hair? And even the Holy One (blessed is He) will be amazed with them, as is written: so said the Lord of hosts: surely, it will seem amazing in the sight of the remainder of this people. It will in those days also be amazing in My eyes. (Zech 8:6).

### Primary Text 3.11: Praktikos 48

The demons war with seculars more through objects, but with monks they do so especially through thoughts, for they are deprived of objects because of the solitude. Further, to the extent that it is easier to sin in thought than in action, so is the warfare in thought more difficult than that which is conducted through objects. For the mind is a thing easily set in motion and difficult to check in its tendency towards unlawful fantasies.<sup>287</sup>

### Primary Text 3.12: Peri Logismon 34

Since there are also successions among the demons, when the first has grown weak in combat and is unable to mobilize the passion that is dear to him, we have observed these successions, and this is our discovery. When thoughts associated with a particular passion become rare over a long period and there is a sudden boiling up and movement of this passion without our having given any pretext for it out of our negligence, then we know that a demon more formidable than the first has succeeded him and, watching over the place of the one who had fled, has filled it with his own wickedness. But he understands our soul completely, engaging it in a warfare much more violent than usual and having abandoned the thoughts of yesterday and the day before without any pretext intervening from the outside.<sup>288</sup>

### Primary Text 3.13: Bavli Shabbat 105b

The one who, in his anger, tears his clothing in pieces, and who breaks his things in his anger, and who scatters his money in his anger, consider him to be an idol worshipper, because thus is the work of the evil *yetzer*. Today he says one to do this, and tomorrow he tells him to do that, until he tells him to worship idols and he goes and worships [idols]. Rabbi Abin answered: to what biblical verse does this refer? ‘There shall be no strange god in you (בך) and you shall not bow down for an unknown god’ (Ps. 81:10). Who is this foreign god that exists in the body of man? In other words, this is the evil *yetzer*.<sup>289</sup>

### Primary Text 3.14: Bavli Sanhedrin 106a

[Balaam] told them: their [i.e. the Jews’] God hates libidinousness and they want things made from linen. Come here and I will advise you: make braidwork (קלעים) for them and let harlots sit in them. [Place] an old woman on the outside and a girl on the inside, and

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<sup>287</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 48, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 106.

<sup>288</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 34, trans.: Sinkewicz, 177.

<sup>289</sup> Bavli Shabbat 105b; a different rendering of the same saying of Rabbi Yohanan ben Nuri is found in Tosefta Bava Kamma 9; also discussed in Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 31-32.

they will sell them things made from linen. And [Balak] made braidwork (קלעים) for them [...] and he made harlots sit in them, an old woman on the outside and a girl on the inside. When the Jews (בשעה שישראל) were eating, drinking and were joyful and going out walking in the market, the old woman said to one of them: are you looking for linen garments? The old woman offered him a fitting price and the girl offered him a lower price. This happened two or three times. Afterwards, she told him: See, you are like a son of the house, sit down and choose what you want. Cups of Ammonite wine were placed next to her – Ammonite wine and gentile wine were not yet forbidden – and she asked him: do you want to drink a cup of wine? As soon as he drank, [his *yetzer*] burned within him. He said to her: surrender to me. She brought out an idol (הוציאה יראתה) from her bosom and told him: worship this. He answered her, am I not a Jew? She said to him: why do you care? We only ask from you to uncover yourself (but he did not know its worship is performed like this). And I won't withdraw from you (מנהתך) until you renounce the Torah of Moses your teacher.

## Chapter 4

### Primary Text 4.1: Antirrhethikos, Prologue

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave up everything for our salvation, gave us the ability to “tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy” [cf. Luke 10:19]. He handed on to us—along with the rest of all his teaching—what he himself did when he was tempted by Satan [Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13]. In the time of struggle, when the demons make war against us and hurl their arrows at us [cf. Eph 6:16], let us answer them from the Holy Scriptures, lest the unclean thoughts persist in us, enslave the soul through the sin of actual deeds, and so defile it and plunge it into the death brought by sin. For “the soul that sins shall die” [Ezek 18:4]. Whenever a thought is not firmly set in one’s thinking, so that one can answer the evil one, sin is easily and swiftly handled. This is wisely declared to us by Qoheleth, when he says, “No answer comes from those who perform evil quickly” [Qo 8:11]. Moreover, Solomon also says in his Proverbs, “Do not answer a fool in proportion to his folly, lest you become like him. Rather, answer a fool in opposition to his folly, lest he appear wise in his own eyes” [Prov 26:4-5]. That is, the person who commits an act of folly and becomes angry with his brother has answered, by his act, the fool “in proportion to his folly,” and he has become like the demons, for their anger is like “the raging serpent” [Deut 32:33]. But the person who is patient and says, “It is written, ‘Cease from anger, and forsake wrath’” [Ps 36:8] has answered the fool “in opposition to his folly,” and he has reproved the demon in its folly and showed it that he has learned that there is an antidote [against it] according to the Scriptures.<sup>290</sup>

### Primary Text 4.2: Antirrhethikos, Prologue

Now, the words that are required for speaking against our enemies, that is, the cruel demons, cannot be found quickly in the hour of conflict, because they are scattered throughout the Scriptures and so are difficult to find. We have, therefore, carefully selected words from the Holy Scriptures, so that we may equip ourselves with them and drive out the Philistines forcefully, standing firm in the battle, as warriors and soldiers of our victorious King, Jesus Christ.<sup>291</sup>

<sup>290</sup> Evagrius, *Antirrhethikos*, Prologue, trans.: Brakke, 49-50.

<sup>291</sup> Evagrius, *Antirrhethikos*, Prologue, trans.: Brakke, 50.

#### Primary Text 4.3: *Sifrei Devarim* 45

*Therefore impress these My words upon your heart* (Deut 11:18)— this tells us that the words of Torah are like an elixir of life (סם היים). This is comparable to a king who was angry with his son, struck him a violent blow, and placed a bandage on the wound. He told him: My son, as long as this bandage remains on your wound, you I may eat whatever you please and drink whatever you please, and bathe either in hot or cold water, and you will come to no harm. But if you remove it, it will immediately fester. Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: I created your evil *yetzer*, and there is nothing more evil than it, [but] If [*sic*] you do right, there is uplift (Gen 4:7). Be occupied with words of Torah and it will not reign over you. But if you abandon words of Torah, then it will gain mastery over you, as it is said (ibid.): *sin* (הטאת) *crouches at the door, its urge is toward you*— it has no business other than with you. But if you wish, you can rule over it, as it is said (ibid.): *yet you can be its master; If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat...you will be heaping live coals [on his head]*. (Prov 25:21–22; *Sifre Deut* 45, ed. Finkelstein, 103–4) *When man's ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him* (Prov 16:7)...R. Joshua b. Levi said: it refers to the evil *yetzer*. Usually if one is brought up along with another for two or three years he becomes closely attached to him, but this one grows with man from his youth until his old age and yet if he can, he strikes him down even in his seventies or his eighties. This is [the meaning of] what David said: *You save the poor from one stronger than he, the poor and needy from his despoiler* (גזול; Ps 35:10). R. Aha said: is there a greater despoiler than it [the *yetzer*] ? This is [the meaning of ] what Solomon said: *If your enemy is hungry, feed him bread*. (Prov 25:21; *Gen Rab.* 54:1, ed. Theodor-Albeck, 575).<sup>292</sup>

#### Primary Text 4.4: *Peri Logismon* 43

You who long for pure prayer keep watch over your irascibility, and you who love chastity control your stomach; do not give your belly its fill of bread, and restrict its use of water; keep vigil in prayer and put resentment far from you; may the words of the Holy Spirit not leave you; knock on the door of scripture with the hands of the virtues. Then impassibility of heart will dawn for you and during prayer you shall see your mind shine like a star.<sup>293</sup>

#### Primary Text 4.5: *Eulogios* 20

Out of fear become conversant with the divine scriptures on a daily basis, for by association with these you will drive away converse with thoughts. He who by meditation treasures the divine scriptures in his heart easily expels thoughts from it. In listening to the divine scriptures in the night-time reading at vigils, let us not render our hearing moribund by means of sleep, nor hand over our soul to the captivity of thought; rather, with the goad of scriptures let us prod the heart, so that with the goading of diligence we may pierce through the opposing negligence.<sup>294</sup>

#### Primary Text 4.6: *Eulogios* 2

But he who is clothed in the purple of afflictions, that is, in perseverance, in the battle line of voluntary exile, and is surrounded with faith in regard to hopes in ascetic labours, will with unceasing thanksgiving shake off the raindrops of these thoughts from his inner self;

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<sup>292</sup> *Sifrei Devarim* 45, trans. :: Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 65–66.

<sup>293</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 43, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 182.

<sup>294</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 20, trans.: Sinkewicz, 46.

and the more they should compel the heart to turn back, all the more shall we still flee and chant against them.<sup>295</sup>

#### Primary Text 4.7 *Antirrhethikos*, Prologue

Let us understand this, my beloved: to the extent that we resist the demons in the conflict and answer them with a word, they will become all the more embittered against us. [...] But we must not be shaken by them; rather, we must resist them by relying on the power of our Savior. For if we place our trust in Christ and keep his commandments, we will cross over the Jordan and capture the city of palms. In this battle we need weapons of the spirit [cf. Eph 6:11-13], which are the true faith and, second, the teaching, which is a perfect fast, hard-won victories, humility, stillness—to be moved only barely or not to be moved at all—and unceasing prayer [cf. I Thess 5:17].<sup>296</sup>

#### Primary Text 4.8: *Praktikos* 49

We have not been commanded to work, to keep vigil, and to fast at all times, but the law of unceasing prayer (I Thess. 5:17) has been handed down to us. In fact, those things which heal the passionate part of the soul require also the body to put them into practice, and the latter because of its weakness is not sufficient for these labours. Prayer, on the other hand, invigorates and purifies the mind for the struggle, since it is naturally constituted for prayer, even without this body, and for fighting the demons on behalf of all the powers of the soul.<sup>297</sup>

#### Primary Text 4.9: *Peri Logismon* 33

There are certain impure demons who always sit in front of those engaged in reading and try to seize their mind, often taking pretexts from the divine scripture themselves and ending in evil thoughts. It sometimes happens that they force them to yawn more than they are accustomed [to] and they instil a very deep sleep quite different from natural sleep. Whereas some of the brothers have imagined that it is in accordance with an unintelligible natural reaction, I for my part have learned this by frequent observation: they touch the eyelids and the entire head, cooling it with their own body, for the bodies of the demons are very cold and like ice; and the head feels as if it is being sucked by a cupping glass with a rasping sound. They do this in order to draw to themselves the heat that lies within the cranium, and then the eyelids, relaxed by the moisture and cold, slip over the pupils of the eyes. Often in touching myself I have found my eyelids fixed like eyes and my entire face numb and shivering. Natural sleep however normally warms bodies and renders the faces of healthy people rosy, as one can learn from experience itself. But the demons provoke unnatural and prolonged yawning, and they make themselves small enough to touch the interior of the mouth. This phenomenon I have not understood to this day, though I have often experienced it, but I heard the holy Makarios speak to me about it and offer as proof the fact that those who yawn make the sign of the cross over the mouth according to an old and mysterious tradition. We experience all these things because we are not vigilantly attentive to the reading and we do not remember that we are reading the holy words of the living God.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 2, trans.: Sinkewicz, 30.

<sup>296</sup> Evagrius, *Antirrhethikos*, Prologue, trans.: Brakke, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 50–51.

<sup>297</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 49, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 106.

<sup>298</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 33, trans.: Sinkewicz, 176.

## Primary Text 4.10: Yerushalmi Berachot 1:1

His *yetzer* was accusing him (מקטרגו) and said to him: David, it is habit of kings (של מלכים) to be awakened by dawn, and you say: “I shall awake dawn.” (Ps. 57:8) It is the habit of kings to be sleeping until the third hour (להיות ישנין עד שלש שעות) and you say: “at midnight I will rise.” (Ps. 119:62) And he said: “because of Your righteous laws.” (Ps. 119:62) And what did David do? [...] He took a lyre and lute and placed it on his pillow, stood up in the middle of the night and played them so that his fellow Torah students would hear [it]. And what did his fellow Torah students say? If David the king is engaged in Torah, it is all the more so necessary for us [to do the same].

## Chapter 5

### Primary Text 5.1: Prayer 49-50a

All the warfare that is waged between us and the impure demons concerns nothing other than spiritual prayer, for this is extremely offensive and odious to them, but salvific and very pleasant for us. Why do the demons want to produce in us gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, and resentment, and the other passions? So that the mind becomes thickened by them and unable to pray as it ought.<sup>299</sup>

### Primary Text 5.2: On Prayer 55-57

One who has attained impassibility has not already found true prayer as well, for one can be among simple intellections and be distracted by the information they provide, and so be far from God. Even when the mind does not delay among the simple intellections of objects, it has not yet attained the place of prayer; for it can remain in the contemplation of objects and be engaged in meditation on their reasons, which, even though they involve simple expressions, nevertheless, insofar as they are contemplations of objects, leave their impress and form on the mind and lead it far away from God. Even if the mind has transcended the contemplation of corporeal nature, it has not yet beheld perfectly the place of God, for it can be occupied with the knowledge of intelligible objects and so be involved with their multiplicity.<sup>300</sup>

### Primary Text 5.3: Eulogios 30

Sometimes we exert ourselves to make our prayer pure, and we may perhaps be unable. But in turn it also happens that pure prayer arises in the soul when we are making no effort; for our weakness on the one hand and grace from above on the other call on us to ascend to purity of the soul, while at the same time through both means training us not to attribute the work to ourselves in the practice of pure prayer, but to acknowledge the one who bestows the gift: ‘For we do not know how to prayer as we ought’ (Rom. 8: 26). Whenever then we make an effort to have our prayer purified and are unable, but find ourselves in the darkness, then, having drenched our cheeks with tears, let us beseech God for the night of warfare to be brought to an end and for the radiance of the soul to be illumined.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Evagrius, *on Prayer* 49-50a, trans.: Sinkewicz, 197–98.

<sup>300</sup> Evagrius, *on Prayer* 55-57, trans.: Sinkewicz, 198.

<sup>301</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 30, trans.: Sinkewicz, 55.

## Primary Text 5.4: Foundations 11

This is the way you should pray, especially because of our malicious and mischievous invisible enemies who would treat us insolently. When they see us engaged in prayer, then do they oppose us vigorously, insinuating into our mind things which one ought not to entertain or think about during the time of prayer, in order that they may lead our mind away captive and render [...] the petition and supplication of our prayer useless, empty and profitless. Prayer, petition, and supplication become truly empty and profitless when they are not carried out, as we said, in fear and trembling, with vigilance and wakefulness. If then someone approaches a human king with fear, trembling, and vigilance and presents a petition in this way, all the more should one not present himself similar fashion to God the Lord of all and to Christ the King of kings and Prince of princes and so make his petition and supplication?<sup>302</sup>

## Primary Text 5.5: On Prayer 94

Watch out lest the evil demons deceive you through some apparition, rather, be mindful, turn to prayer, and call upon God in order that, if the mental representation comes from him, he may enlighten you, but if not, that he may quickly drive the deceiver from you. Take heart, the dogs will not hold out if you are fervent in your supplication before God, for immediately they will be invisibly and imperceptibly scourged by the power of God and driven far away.<sup>303</sup>

## Chapter 6

### Primary Text 6.1: Peri Logismon 35

When a demon of gluttony, after numerous and frequent struggles, lacks the strength to destroy the abstinence well-formed within us, he throws the mind into a desire for an extreme ascetism. Subsequently, he brings forward the companions of Daniel, their poor life and the grains (Dan. 1:12,16), he evokes the memory of certain other anchorites who have always lived in this way or who began to, and he compels him to become their imitator so that in pursuing an immoderate abstinence he may fail to attain even a moderate one, the body not being strong enough because of its weakness. In reality this demon blesses with his mouth and curses in his heart (cf. Ps. 61:5).<sup>304</sup>

### Primary Text 6.2: Foundations 10

Fast as much as you are able before the Lord. Fasting completely purifies your transgressions and sins; it exalts the soul, sanctifies your way of thinking, drives away demons and prepares you to be close to God. Eating once a day, do not desire to eat a second meal lest you become extravagant and trouble your thinking. Thus, you will be able to accumulate an abundance for the purpose of works of beneficence, and you will be able to put to death the passions of the body. But if a visit from brothers should occur and there is need for you to eat a second and third time, do not be sullen or downcast; rejoice rather that you are obedient to necessity and, eating a second or third meal, give thanks to God

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<sup>302</sup> Evagrius, *Foundations* 11, trans.: Sinkewicz, 11.

<sup>303</sup> Evagrius, *on Prayer* 94, trans.: Sinkewicz, 203.

<sup>304</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 35, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 177–78, cited in: Leszek Misiarczyk, *Eight Logismoi in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, *Studia Traditionis Theologiae* 44 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 137.

that you have fulfilled the law of love and that you have God himself as the one who disposes for your life. There will be also the time when sickness of the body comes along and makes it necessary for you to eat a second and third time or even more often: so do not let your thoughts be saddened by this.<sup>305</sup>

#### Primary Text 6.3: Eulogios 33

He who engages in the training of bodily ascetic works with greater harshness, let him not engage in such work for reasons of praise nor let him put on airs for reasons of glory. For if the demons can make the soul conceited in these matters, they can fortify both the harshness and the asceticism of the body with glory and draw the soul on the attainment of greater ascetic works with the result that it puts on even greater airs.<sup>306</sup>

#### Primary Text 6.4: Eulogios 33

Sometimes they deceptively put to sleep the burning of the flesh, hiding impure thoughts from his interior self, [...] so that he might think that he has overcome the spirit of fornication by means of his austerity and sanctified his heart in the radiance of the saints (cf. Ps. 109: 3) and has ascended to the highest rank of holiness. Both in these ascetic works and also in his abstention from foods and his prolonged fasts, they confirm for him their durations, in which he ought to take pride as one who stands out and to be arrogant towards the brotherhood as if it were of no account. And so they have him recount his struggles as if they had been accomplished by his strength alone 'I did this, I accomplished such and such works, I was maltreated', while they stop his mouth from saying further—'It was not I, but the assistance that was in me.' For they do not allow him to acknowledge God as his helper in the works they made him boast of, so that he might demand all the praises [...] due him for his contests as if he had accomplished the entirety of the struggles by his own supposed strength, with the result that he should be plunged into the depth of blasphemy, as he suggest through his insensibility that he can provide for his own assistance.<sup>307</sup>

#### Primary Text 6.5: Praktikos 14

Evagrius explains very clearly what the demon of pride can do to a person: "The demon of pride brings the soul to the very worst sort of fall. It induces the soul to refuse to acknowledge that God is its helper and to think that it is itself the cause of its good actions, and to take a haughty view of its brothers as being unintelligent because they do not all hold the same opinion of it. Anger and sadness follow closely upon this as well as the ultimate evil, derangement of mind, madness, and the vision of a multitude of demons in the air."<sup>308</sup>

#### Primary Text 6.6: Bavli Qiddushin 81a

Certain [redeemed] captive women came to Nehardea. They were taken to the house of R. Amram the pious. As one passed by, light came in through the window; [thereupon] R. Amram seized the ladder, set it up and proceeded to ascend. When he had gone half way up the ladder, he cried out: A fire at Amram's! A fire at Amram's! The rabbis came and reproved him: You have shamed us! He said to them: It is better that you should be shamed

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<sup>305</sup> Evagrius, *Foundations* 10, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 10.

<sup>306</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 33, trans.: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 57-58.

<sup>307</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 33, trans.: Sinkewicz, 58.

<sup>308</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 14, trans.: Sinkewicz, 100.

by me in this world and not be shamed by me in the world to come. He then adjured [the evil yetzer] that he would go out of him, and it issued from him in the shape of a fiery column. He said to it: See, you are fire and I am flesh, yet I am stronger than you.<sup>309</sup>

#### Primary Text 6.7: Tosefta Nazir 4:6

Shimon the Righteous said: I have never eaten a nazirite's guilt-offering, except once. A man came to me from the south and I saw he was beautiful of eyes and good looking and his hair was curly, and I said to him: My son, why do you want to destroy that beautiful hair? He said, I was herding sheep in my town and came to fill water from the river and looked at my reflection (בבוואה), and my yetzer rushed (פדז) over me and wished to remove me from the world. I said to it [the yetzer]: Evil one (רשע), did you not find anything better to take pride of (להתגאות בו), other than something that is not yours, something that will be dust and maggots and worms?! I am going to shave you for the sake of heaven. I [Shimon] lowered his [the nazirite's] head and kissed it, and said: My son, may those like you who obey the will of the Omnipresent (המקום) increase in Israel. You have fulfilled the verse, a man or a woman who shall vow extraordinarily (יפליא לנדור; Num 6:2). (t. Nez. 4:7 [ed. Lieberman, 138–39]).<sup>310</sup>

#### Primary Text 6.8: Bavli Qiddushin 81b

Rabbi Hiyya bar Ashi had the habit of saying the following when he would fall to his face: may the Compassionate deliver us from the evil yetzer. One day, his wife (דביתהו) had heard him and said: since how many years have you been separate from me, and for what reason did you say this? One day, he was studying in his garden and she made herself beautiful and repeatedly passed in front of him. He said to her: who are you? I am Harutah,<sup>311</sup> coming back from my day. She aroused (תבעה) [him] and said to him: bring me that pomegranate from the head of the stem of the tree (ריש ציציתא). He jumped and gave it to her. When he arrived home, his wife (דביתהו) was igniting the oven. He went and sat down inside it. She said to him: what is this? He answered her: this and that has happened. She said to him: I was it. He ignored her until she gave proof to him. He said to her: anyway, my intention was forbidden. All his life that righteous man was fasting, until he died death because of his desire (באותה).

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<sup>309</sup> Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, 112.

<sup>310</sup> Rosen-Zvi, 32.

<sup>311</sup> Harutah probably was a famous prostitute, see: Cohen Stuart, *The Struggle in Man between Good and Evil*, 243 note 4.

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