The Etymology of Aramaic (and Hebrew) √*prns* 'to distribute, supply'

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The Aramaic verbal root √*prns* 'to distibute, supply' is first attested in the Middle Aramaic period (Palmyrene Aramaic and Targum Jonathan). It is then widely attested across all of the dialects of Late Aramaic. Outside of Aramaic, the root √*prns* is also found in post-Biblical Hebrew. A number of proposals have been made for the etymology of this root, but there continues to be no consensus on this question. The present note argues that the verbal root √*prns* 'to distribute, supply' derives from Greek προνοῆσαι, the aorist infinitive of προνοέω 'to perceive, foresee; to provide, take care of'. This etymology is compared with that of √*pys* D/C 'to persuade', which is also first attested in Middle Aramaic, also became productive in a number of the Late Aramaic dialects, and also derives from a Greek aorist infinitive (πεῖσαι).

The etymology of Aramaic (and Hebrew) √*prns* 'to distribute, to supply, to support' remains disputed.[1] Some scholars propose an inner Semitic etymology, others see it as a loanword from either Greek πρόνοος 'careful, prudent' or προνοητής 'supervisor, administrator', and still others remain agnostic about its origin. It is proposed here that √*prns* entered Aramaic as a loanword from Greek προνοῆσαι, the aorist infinitive of προνοέω 'to perceive, foresee; to provide, take care of'. This etymology of √*prns* can be compared with that of Aramaic √*pys* D/C 'to persuade', which has a similar distribution in Aramaic and which also derives from a Greek aorist infinitive (πεῖσαι).

attestations of √*prns* in aramaic and hebrew

Before looking at the various etymologies of √*prns* previously proposed in the scholarly literature, it is necessary to outline the distribution of this root in Aramaic and Hebrew. The verbal root √*prns* 'to distribute, supply' is first attested in Middle Aramaic (ca. 200 b.c.e.–ca. 200 c.e.).[2] In Palmyrene Aramaic, the verbal root √*prns* 'to provide' (*DNWSI* 940; Hillers and Cussini 1996: 401) occurs as well as the *nomen agentis* form *mpr<n>snyt* 'guardian, foster-mother' (*DNWSI* 674; Hillers and Cussini 1996: 385).[3] The Aramaic of Targum Jonathan also attests √*prns* 'to provide' (see, e.g., Ez. 34.8 [2x]; Is. 57.8; see also

1. According to the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon (CAL), "[t]he etymology of this verb and the many nouns related to it has defied scholarly attention"; <http://cal.huc.edu/>, accessed on 24 January 2014.

2. This paper adopts the chronological classification of Aramaic in Fitzmyer 1979.

3. The published photograph clearly reads *mprsnyt* (Ingholt 1938: plate xlvii), as found in Cantineau 1935: 116 and *DNWSI* 674. In the *editio princeps*, however, Ingholt (1938: 124, 130) incorrectly read *mprnsyt* with *n* and *s* reversed. This erroneous reading found its way into Hillers and Cussini's collection of Palmyrene texts (1996: 36–37 [0095]). The correct reading *mprsnyt* should be emended to *mpr<n>snyt*, a form which is found in an unpublished inscription (Ingholt 1938: 130).

Jastrow 1231) as well as the de-verbal nouns *parnus* 'maintenance' (see, e.g., 1 Kings 5:25; see also Jastrow 1231; Tal 1975: 115–16) and *parnɔsɔ* 'steward' (see, e.g., Is. 22:15; Ez. 34.8 [3x]; Zech. 11.7; see also Jastrow 1231).[4]

The verbal root √*prns* and/or de-verbal nouns are attested in all of the dialects of Late Aramaic (post ca. 200 C.E.): Jewish Palestinian Aramaic (JPA) √*prns* 'to provide, sustain, support' (*DJPA* 448, 842) as well as the de-verbal nouns *prnws* 'maintenance' (*DJPA* 448), *prns* 'community leader' (*DJPA* 448), and *prnsh* 'maintenance, charitable support, livelihood' (*DJPA* 448); Christian Palestinian Aramaic (CPA) √*prns* 'administravit' (*DCPA* 341; *LSP* 163) as well as the de-verbal nouns *prns* 'curator' (*DCPA* 341; *LSP* 163) and *prnsnw 'administratio' (*DCPA* 341; *LSP* 163); Samaritan Aramaic (SA) √*prns* 'to support' (*DSA* 704–05) as well as the de-verbal nouns *prnws* 'dominion, rule' (*DSA* 705), *prns* 'tiller, worker' (*DSA* 705), and *prnsh* 'work' (*DSA* 705); Mandaic *pʾrnʾstʾ* 'provision, sustenance' (*MD* 364); Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (JBA) √*prns* 'to support' (*DJBA* 935) as well as the de-verbal nouns *parnɔsɔ* 'communal leader' (*DJBA* 935) and *parnɔsuṯɔ* 'support' (*DJBA* 935); Late Jewish Literary Aramaic (LJLA) √*prns* 'to endow, provide, sustain, cultivate' (see, e.g., Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Gen. 30:30, Lev. 25:35; see also Jastrow 1231) as well as the de-verbal nouns *prns* 'manager, administrator, leader of a community' (see, e.g., Targum Pseudo-Jonathan 49.24; see also Jastrow 1231), *prnsh* 'management, administration' (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Gen. 15.2 [see n. 4 above]; see also Jastrow 1231), *prnswtʾ* 'provision, maintenance, outfit' (Targum Kohelet 11.1; see also Jastrow 1232); and Syriac √*prns* 'to divide, distribute; supply, provide for' (*TS* 3269–72; *LS2* 599; *SL* 1243) as well as the de-verbal nouns *purnɔsɔ* 'nourishment; help, administration' (*SL* 1170–1171), *parnɔsɔ* 'steward, administrator' (*SL* 1243–44), *mparnsɔnɔ* 'benefactor; steward' (*SL* 810), *mparnsɔnɔʾiṯ* 'by divine providence' (*SL* 810), and *mparnsɔnuṯɔ* 'superintendence; administration' (*SL* 810).

Outside of Aramaic, post-Biblical Hebrew also attests the root √*prns* 'to endow, provide, sustain, cultivate' (Jastrow 1231; *LNVTH* 293–94) as well as the de-verbal nouns *prns* 'manager, administrator, leader of a community' (Jastrow 1231; see also Fraade 2011), *prnsh* 'provision, maintenance, outfit' (Jastrow 1231–32), and *prnswt* 'administrative office' (Jastrow 1232). It should be noted that the noun *prnsyn* 'stewards', with an Aramaic ending, is attested already in a Hebrew letter from Murabbaʿat dated to 134/135 (ed. Benoît, Milik, and de Vaux 1961: 155–59 [no. 42]). Given the Aramaic morphology of the form in question, it seems likely that Hebrew √*prns* and the related nominal forms derive from Aramaic.

PREVIOUS ETYMOLOGIES

A number of different etymologies have been proposed for √*prns* and the related de-verbal nouns.[5] Bernstein (*apud TS* 3269) suggested that Syriac √*prns* is a denominative verb from

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4. The substantive *parnɔsɔ* 'steward' probably also occurs in Targum Onqelos at Gen. 15:2, the relevant portion of which reads *uḇar parnɔsɔ hɔḏen diḇeṯi hu damasqɔʾɔ ʾɔliʿazar* "and the son of this *parnɔsɔ* of my house is Eliezer of Damascus" (translating the problematic Hebrew *uḇen-mɛšɛq beṯi hu(ʾ) dmɛsɛq ʾɛliʿɛzɛr*). Jastrow (1231) proposed that *parnɔsɔ* in this verse is a feminine abstract noun meaning 'management, administration'. This analysis, however, has difficulty accounting for the masculine demonstrative pronoun *hɔḏen*, since it cannot modify *parnɔsɔ*, which would be feminine singular absolute, and since it also probably cannot modify *ḇar* in *ḇar parnɔsɔ*, since *ḇar* would be in construct with an absolute noun and so indefinite. Thus, it seems best to analyze *parnɔsɔ* in this passage as the masculine singular emphatic noun meaning 'steward', even if the context (and the relation to the Hebrew) is difficult (so also *GTO* 229). It should, however, be noted that in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan the same verse reads *wʾlyʿzr br prnst byty dʿl ydwy ʾytʿbydw ly nysyn bdrmšq msky lmyrt yty* "Eliezer, the manager (lit. 'the son of the management') of my house, at whose hands signs have been performed for me in Damascus, expects to be my heir," where a feminine abstract noun *prnsh* 'management, administration' is assured.

5. Jastrow's etymology (1231) from Mishnaic Hebrew √*prn* C 'to assign, provide, endow' (Jastrow 1230) can be safely disregarded (so also Ingholt 1938: 130; Fraade 2011: 156–57 n. 5).

pursɔ 'means, way; provisions' (*SL* 1171), which in turn is a loanword from Greek πόρος 'means of passing a river; way, pathway' (*LSJ* 1450–51). This was followed by Payne Smith (*SL* 3269) and Schulthess (*LSP* 163). This etymology can be ruled out on two grounds. First, it provides no explanation for the third root consonant *n*. Second, Syriac is the only Aramaic dialect that attests Greek πόρος as a loanword, and so this explanation is unable to account for √*prns* in the other Middle and Late Aramaic dialects as well as in post-Biblical Hebrew.

A different etymology was proposed by Nöldeke (*apud* Fraenkel 1886: 280), who suggested that √*prns* is a loanword from Greek πρόνοος 'careful, prudent' (*LSJ* 1491). This was adopted by Brockelmann in the first edition of his *Lexicon Syriacum* (*LS1* 288) as well as by others (see, e.g., Ingholt 1938: 130).[6] This etymology works well phonologically. Semantically, however, the meaning of √*prns* and of the related nominal forms fits better with Greek προνοητής 'supervisor, administrator' (*LSJ* 1491) or the verb προνοέω 'to perceive, foresee; to provide, take care of' (*LSJ* 1490–91). In addition, it is unlikely that a Greek adjective served as a source for either a verbal root √*prns* 'to distribute, supply' or a nominal form from which such a denominative root could have been formed.

Other scholars have followed Nöldeke in viewing √*prns* as a loanword from Greek, but have preferred a different Greek source. The most commonly given is προνοητής 'supervisor, administrator' (*LSJ* 1491). This etymology was, for instance, recently maintained by Fraade (2011), who provides references to others who adopt it. Semantically, there is no difficulty in analyzing Aramaic √*prns* as a loanword from Greek προνοητής 'supervisor, administrator' (*LSJ* 1491). Problems, however, arise on the phonological level. As Fraade (2011: 156–57 n. 5) has already noted, if √*prns* has its origin in προνοητής, it is difficult to account for the fact that the Aramaic root contains four consonants whereas five were presumably available in the Greek source (*p*, *r*, *n*, *t*, and *s*). One could have recourse here to loanword accommodation. It is well known that loanwords are adapted, to varying degrees, to the phonological and morphological system of the recipient language. In some cases, this adaptation results in drastic changes to the form of the word in the recipient language.[7]

Thus, it is possible to envision a scenario in which one of the input consonants from Greek προνοητής was deleted so that the word would fit the morpho-phonological system of the recipient language, especially given the fact that roots of three or four consonants are preferred in Aramaic (and in Semitic more broadly).[8] The problem with such an argument, however, is that it does not align with the accommodation pattern of similar nouns in Aramaic. In Syriac, for instance, the *status emphaticus* ending replaces Greek -ης in the vast majority of Greek loanwords that end in -ητης (Brock 1967: 392; 1996: 254):

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6. Brock (1996: 257 with n. 24) states that the Syriac verb probably derives directly from the Greek noun πρόνοος, though he notes that the Syriac may be a loanword from *parnāsā* in another Aramaic dialect. In a later article, Brock (2004: 35 n. 10) states that the etymology of Syriac √*prns* is unclear and that one possibility is Greek. In a still later article, Brock (2005: 11 n. 4) states that √*prns* "could possibly be derived" from Greek πρόνοος.

7. In Japanese, for instance, English hunger strike was accommodated as *hangā-sutoraiki* as well as *han-suto*, a truncated variant which conforms more closely to the morpho-phonological system of Japanese (Loveday 1996: 118–19).

8. This type of accommodation is attested in Semitic languages. In Egyptian Arabic, for instance, the English noun *hydrogen* was accommodated as *hayeðroǧīn*, from which the denominative verbal root √*hðrǧ* was formed (see Hafez 1996: 393, 398 with several similar examples). The loanword *hayeðroǧīn* had a potential consonantal input of six consonants: *h*, *y*, *ð*, *r*, *ǧ*, and *n* (or five if the "weak" consonant *y* is excluded). Only four of these, however, were realized in the quadri-consonantal root √*hðrǧ*. Or, to take an example from Aramaic, Syriac √*pṭrk* 'to make a patriarch' (*SL* 1184) is a denominative formation from the noun *paṭryarkɔ* 'patriarch' (*SL* 1184), which is a loanword from Greek πατριάρχης 'patriarch' (*LSJ* 1348). In this case, only four of the potential six consonants of the noun (*p*, *ṭ*, *r*, *y*, *r*, *k*; or five if the "weak" consonant *y* is excluded) were realized in the denominative verbal root.

(1)   a.   ἀθλητής (*PGL* 46; *LSJ* 32) > *ʾtlyṭʾ* 'athlete, fighter' (*SL* 111–12)
      b.   ἀναχωρητής (*PGL* 129) > *nwkryṭʾ* 'anchorite, monk' (*SL* 899)
      c.   διαβήτης (*LSJ* 390) > *dybṭʾ* 'scale' (*SL* 293)
      d.   κυβερνήτης (*LSJ* 1004) > *qwbrnyṭʾ* (with alternative orthographies) 'helmsman, pilot' (*SL* 210, 1323)
      e.   ποιητής (*LSJ* 1429) > *pwʾṭʾ* (with alternative orthographies) 'poet' (*SL* 1158)

In fact, it is only in less than 10% of the cases that the Greek first declensional ending -ης is realized as *-(y)s* in Syriac, e.g., τοποτηρητής (*LSJ* 1806) > *ṭwpwṭryṭys* 'legate, deputy' (*SL* 520). In addition, the final *-s* is not preserved in the only example in Syriac in which a denominative verb is formed from a Greek noun ending in -ητης: κυβερνήτης (*LSJ* 1004) > *qwbrnyṭʾ* (with alternative orthographies) 'helmsman, pilot' (*SL* 210, 1323) → √*qbrnṭ* Dt 'to be a helmsman, pilot' (*TS* 3512; see also Nöldeke and Euting 1904: §182). Thus, though it is not impossible, it is unlikely that προνοητής would have retained the final *-s* when accommodated into Aramaic.

Yet another etymology for √*prns* was proposed by Hoffmann in the *Glossarium* to his *De hermeneuticis apud Syros aristoteleis* (1873: 200; see also 1896: 238–39), where he derived √*prns* from √*prs* 'to divide' (*SL* 1244). This was followed by Brockelmann in the second edition of his *Lexicon Syriacum* (*LS2* 599)—departing from his earlier view—and in his *Grundriß* (1908: 661, 665; see also 1942: 270) as well as more recently by Beyer (2004: 464; see also 1984: 671). It has also been tentatively accepted by Sokoloff in his translation of Brockelmann's *Lexicon Syriacum* (*SL* 1243).[9] This etymology is problematic since it is difficult to explain the third root consonant *n* in √*prns*. Proponents of the etymology refer to a dissimilation *rr > *rn*, citing as possible parallels Arabic *ðurrū/aḥ-* with byforms *ðu/arnūḥ-* 'Spanish fly' (Lane 960; see also *BK* 768), Arabic *ḫarrūb-* 'carob' with a byform *ḫurnūb-* (Lane 716–17; *BK* 553), Arabic *burnus-* 'a garment' (Lane 196; *BK* 118) allegedly related to *bu/irs-* 'cotton' (*BK* 110), and Arabic *firnās-* 'strong and courageous; lion' (Lane 2368; *BK* 587) from *fāris-* 'lion', but normally 'horseman' (Lane 2368; *BK* 568–69). Even if these Arabic examples are accepted, they are at most illustrative of a very rare dissimilation of *rr > *rn* in Arabic. This is not, however, enough comparative evidence to account for a regular dissimilation of *rr > *rn* in √*prns* across so many dialects of Middle and Late Aramaic. In addition, it is difficult to explain why this dissimilation would have been restricted to this one root throughout these dialects. Thus, the derivation of √*prns* from √*prs* 'to divide' is improbable.

Finally, it should be noted that a number of scholars do not mention any Greek source in discussions of √*prns* and so presumably, though not explicitly, accept a Semitic etymology for it.[10]

A NEW ETYMOLOGY: GREEK προνοῆσαι

As outlined in the previous section, several different Greek etymologies have been suggested for √*prns*, but none of them has been able to account adequately for the semantics and

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9. In his dictionary of JBA, Sokoloff (*DJBA* 935) mentions neither the Greek etymology nor the inner-Semitic etymology (similarly in his dictionary of Judean Aramaic [*DJA* 73]). In his dictionary of JPA, he (*DJPA* 448) refers to Hoffmann 1887: 47 for a possible etymology; there is, however, no mention of √*prns* on this page (or the nearby ones), but rather a discussion of *parsin* in Daniel 5:25 (perhaps the reference is a typo for Hoffmann 1873: 200 or 1896: 239). In his most recent dictionary, on CPA, he (*DCPA* 341) lists the etymology as "uncertain."

10. See, e.g., Brock 2005 (Palmyrene Aramaic; but see n. 6 above); Cantineau 1935 (Palmyrene Aramaic); Cook in *GTO* (Aramaic of Targum Onqelos); Goshen-Gottstein 1970: 64 (Syriac); Healey 2009: 219 (Palmyrene Aramaic; see Butts 2011: 152); Hillers and Cussini 1996 (Palmyrene Aramaic); Hoftijzer and Jongeling in DNWSI (Palmyrene Aramaic and JPA); Tal 1975 (Aramaic of Targum Jonathan).

phonology of the root. A different Greek etymology is proposed here: προνοῆσαι, the aorist infinitive of προνοέω 'to perceive, foresee; to provide, take care of' (*LSJ* 1490–91).[11] Semantically, there is no difficulty in analyzing Aramaic √*prns* as a loanword from προνοῆσαι, since this Greek word means not only 'to perceive, foresee' but also 'to provide, take care of'. In addition, phonologically, this etymology works well since each of the potential root consonants available in προνοῆσαι is realized in √*prns*.

The most serious difficulty with this etymology would *prima facie* seem to involve the input form: the aorist infinitive. It should, however, be noted that cross-linguistically there is a wide range of possible input forms with loan-verbs (Wohlgemuth 2009: 76–86). In addition, the aorist infinitive is attested as an input form with Greek loan-verbs in Aramaic. In Syriac, for instance, there are a small number of Greek aorist infinitives that are accommodated with √ʿ*bd* 'to do, make' (*SL* 1054–56),[12] as in the following example:

(2)   *Scholia* by Yaʿqub of Edessa (d. 708; ed. Phillips 1864)
      ṣɔbe   (h)wɔ   dplyrwpwrysʾ   neʿbḏiw(hy)
      want-PART.M.SG.ABS be-SUF.3.M.SG   that+inform   do-PRE.3.M.SG+him

      he wanted to inform him (3.17)

In this example, a conjugated form of the verbal root √ʿ*bd* occurs with *plyrwpwrysʾ*, which derives from the Greek aorist active infinitive πληροφορῆσαι (*LSJ* 1419). Thus, this example provides a parallel for the use of the aorist infinitive as an input form with loan-verbs in Aramaic. The difference between *plyrwpwrysʾ* and √*prns* would be the accommodation strategy employed.

An even better parallel to √*prns* can be found in Aramaic √*pys* D/C 'to persuade'. This root is first attested in Targum Onqelos (*GTO* 108 [*s.v.* √*ṭps*]; see the comments in Butts 2012: 158). This root also occurs in most of the Late Aramaic dialects, including JBA √*pys* (*DJBA* 899–900); CPA √*ṗys* (*DCPA* 327–28; *LSP* 156); JPA √*pys* (*DJPA* 430–31); SA √*pys* (*DSA* 676); and Syriac √*pys* C 'to persuade, to convince; to demand, seek, beseech', Ct 'to be persuaded; to obey' (*SL* 1188). Aramaic √*pys* derives from Greek πεῖσαι, the aorist infinitive of πείθω (*LSJ* 1353–54). Both √*prns* and √*pys*, then, derive from an aorist infinitive. In addition, these verbs both entered Aramaic around the same time, at least by the Middle Aramaic period, and then spread throughout the Late Aramaic dialects.

CONCLUSION

The verbal root √*prns* 'to distribute, supply', along with several de-verbal nominal forms, is attested in a variety of Middle and Late Aramaic dialects as well as in post-Biblical Hebrew. The etymology of this root has long been disputed. It has been proposed here that this root derives from Greek προνοῆσαι, the aorist infinitive of προνοέω 'to perceive, foresee; to provide, take care of'. According to this proposal, √*prns* entered Aramaic as a loan-verb by the Middle Aramaic period and then spread throughout the Late Aramaic dialects. From Aramaic, it was transferred into Post-Biblical Hebrew. The proposed etymology of √*prns* can be compared with that of √*pys*, which is also first attested in Middle Aramaic, also became productive in a number of the Late Aramaic dialects, and also derives from a Greek aorist infinitive (πεῖσαι).

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11. Other aorist forms, such as the third singular aorist active indicative προενόησε, are also possible input forms.

12. This is known as the *light verb* accommodation strategy in Wohlgemuth's typological study of loan-verbs in the world's languages (2009). For an analysis of Syriac examples of light verb strategy, see Butts 2016: §6.3.

ABBREVIATIONS OF LEXICOGRAPHICAL RESOURCES

BK	Biberstein-Kazimirski, A. de. 1860. *Dictionnaire arabe-français*. Paris: Théophile Barrois.
CAL	Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon, accessible online at <http://cal.huc.edu/>.
DCPA	Sokoloff, M. 2014. *A Dictionary of Christian Palestinian Aramaic*. Louvain: Peeters.
DJA	Sokoloff, M. 2003. *A Dictionary of Judean Aramaic*. Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press.
DJBA	Sokoloff, M. 2002. *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods*. Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press.
DJPA	Sokoloff, M. 2002. *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period*, 2nd ed. Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press.
DNWSI	Hoftijzer, J., and K. Jongeling. 1995. *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*. Leiden: Brill.
DSA	Tal, A. 2000. *A Dictionary of Samaritan Aramaic*. Leiden: Brill.
GTO	Cook, E. M. 2008. *A Glossary of Targum Onkelos. According to Alexander Sperber's Edition*. Leiden: Brill.
Jastrow	Jastrow, M. 1886–1903. *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
Lane	Lane, E. W. 1863–93. *An Arabic-English Lexicon*. London: Williams and Norgate.
LS1	Brockelmann, C. 1895. *Lexicon Syriacum*. Berlin: Reuther & Reichard.
LS2	Brockelmann, C. 1928. *Lexicon Syriacum*, 2nd ed. Halis Saxonum: Sumptibus M. Niemeyer.
LSJ	Liddell, H., and R. Scott (revised by H. Stuart Jones and R. McKenzie). 1996. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
LSP	Schulthess, F. 1903. *Lexicon Syropalaestinum*. Bern: G. Reimer.
MD	Drower, E. S., and R. Macuch. 1963. *A Mandaic Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
LNVTH	Moreshet, M. 1980. *A Lexicon of the New Verbs in Tannaitic Hebrew*. Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press. (Hebrew)
PGL	Lampe, G. W. H. 1961. *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
SL	Sokoloff, M. 2009. *A Syriac Lexicon. A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
TS	Payne Smith, R. 1879–1901. *Thesaurus Syriacus*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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