

Evagrius of Pontus

Talking Back

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Evagrius of Pontus

Talking Back

A Monastic Handbook for
Combating Demons

Translated with an Introduction by
David Brakke



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Wilhelm Frankenberg
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To Mary Jo Weaver

experienced in the movements of the soul and the ways of prayer

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Portions of the Introduction repeat material from my *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

Introduction

Sometime in the final decade of the fourth century, a monk named Loukios wrote to Evagrius of Pontus, one of the leading spiritual guides among the monks of the Egyptian desert. Calling him “honored father,” Loukios asked Evagrius to compose for him a treatise that would explain the tactics of the demons that try to undermine the monastic life; Loukios hoped that such a work would help him and others to resist more successfully the evil suggestions that the demons made. In response, Evagrius sent Loukios a letter, now known as his fourth, and a copy of the work translated here: *Antirrhētikos*, or *Talking Back*. Among the monks of late antiquity and early Byzantium, it became one of the most popular of Evagrius’s books: ancient authors regularly mentioned it in their discussions of Evagrius, and it was eventually translated from the original Greek into Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, and even Sogdian.

Talking Back has not enjoyed the same level of popularity among modern students of early Christian monasticism. One reason for this neglect is linguistic: both the Greek original and the Latin translation are lost; complete texts survive only in Armenian and Syriac manuscripts that are either not fully edited or difficult to access. But also *Talking Back* concerns itself exclusively with the monk’s combat with demons, a topic that has not interested many modern historians and theologians, most of whom have directed their attention to social and cultural features of early monasticism

or to aspects of monastic spirituality that appear more directly relevant to contemporary persons, such as prayer or spiritual direction. Intense conflict with demons, however, especially in the form of thoughts, lay at the heart of the early Egyptian monk's struggle for virtue, purity of heart, and thus for salvation.¹ Opposition from demons, whether they tempted the monk to sin or tried to frighten him into abandoning the ascetic life, provided the resistance that the monk needed to form himself into a person of integrity. In *Talking Back* we find the thoughts, circumstances, and anxieties with which the demons assailed the monk, and we observe a primary strategy in the struggle to overcome such assaults: *antirrhēsis*, the speaking of relevant passages from the Bible that would contradict or, as Evagrius puts it, cut off the demonic suggestions.

Evagrius of Pontus crafted the most sophisticated demonology to emerge from early Christian monasticism and perhaps from ancient Christianity as a whole.² Born around 345 to a country bishop in the region of Pontus in Asia Minor, Evagrius showed religious and intellectual promise even as a teenager and was ordained a reader by Bishop Basil of Caesarea. He then became the protégé of Gregory of Nazianzus, serving as Gregory's archdeacon when he became bishop of Constantinople in the late 370s and assisting him in his efforts in behalf of Nicene theology. It is traditional to believe that Evagrius received his grounding in an Origenist Christian theology under Gregory and subsequently

¹ See David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), and Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont, "Démon: III. Dans la plus ancienne littérature monastique," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique: Doctrine et histoire* (1957) 3:189–212.

² On Evagrius's demonology see Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 48–77, and Guillaumont and Guillaumont, "Démon: III. Dans la plus ancienne littérature monastique," 196–205. For more extensive introductions to Evagrius's life and thought, see Evagrius of Pontus, *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies, Robert E. Sinkewicz, ed. and trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); A. M. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, The Early Church Fathers (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); and William Harmless, SJ, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 311–71.

learned about ascetic practice and demonic conflict from monks in Egypt, but we shall see below that there is evidence that even Gregory may have contributed to his knowledge of the demons and of strategies against them. In any event, Evagrius's discipleship under Gregory came to an end when Gregory had to resign his episcopal seat and Evagrius fled to Jerusalem after he fell in love with a married woman.

In Jerusalem Evagrius suffered an emotional and physical breakdown, and the ascetic leader Melania the Elder persuaded him to take up the monastic life in Egypt. In the deserts of Nitria and Kellia, Evagrius apprenticed himself to monks such as Ammonius and the two Macarii—Macarius the Great (or the Egyptian) and Macarius the Alexandrian—from whom he must have received much of his advanced knowledge about demons and combat with them. Evagrius soon emerged as an authoritative teacher in his own right, and around him gathered a group of monks that at least one contemporary author called “the circle around Evagrius.” Supporting himself as a calligrapher, Evagrius counseled the monks who visited him and with whom he gathered weekly for worship and fellowship, and he produced a large number of literary works of great variety, not only practical treatises on the monastic life, but also works of biblical exegesis and of advanced theology. Even these latter works, however, support Evagrius's vision of monasticism in which bodily discipline, demonic conflict, prayer and psalmody, biblical study, and speculation on higher theological questions all played important roles in forming the monk into a “gnostic,” a knower of God. *Talking Back* may be focused on the very practical problem of resisting demonic suggestions, but the scope and precision of both its attention to the monk's soul and its treatment of the Bible reveal the creativity and intelligence of a great theologian.

Literary Form and Function: A Manual for Spiritual Combat

After a prologue, *Talking Back* collects 498 biblical passages, each preceded by the person, thought, or situation to which it should be addressed during demonic conflict. The passages and their usually brief directive introductions are arranged in eight books according

to the eight primary demons that Evagrius claimed attack the monk: gluttony, fornication, love of money, sadness, anger, listlessness, vainglory, and pride. Because of numbering errors in the manuscript that has served as the primary basis for modern study of the work (B.L.Add. 14,578), modern scholars have not always recognized that there are 498 entries, and in fact the scribe of the manuscript mistakenly counted 497.³ I discuss this issue more fully in the Note on Texts and Translations. There are also numbering problems in Book 3 at 3.19–27, which I have noted there and taken into account in my translation.

The work is identified by a variety of titles in antiquity, but the most likely title is *Antirrhētikos*, which I have translated, following Elizabeth Clark, *Talking Back*.⁴ The scribe of the best-known manuscript simply called it, “A Treatise of Evagrius on the Eight Thoughts,” but ancient authors give it more specific titles. Evagrius himself in his letter to Loukios calls it “the treatise of responses” (*Ep.* 4.1), although it is not clear that he means this to be a formal title. Around 420, the bishop and former monk Palladius states in his *Lausiaca History* that Evagrius “composed three sacred books, so-called responsories (*antirrhētika*), for monks, proposing strategies against the demons.”⁵ Palladius’s reference to three books may be puzzling, but there can be no doubt that our work is what he means. The *Life of Evagrius* preserved in Coptic, whose original author was most likely Palladius, provides another certain reference to our work:

If you [sing.] want to know the experiences that he [Evagrius] underwent at the hands of the demons, read the book he wrote against the responses of the demons [*oube niouohem ntenidemōn*].

³ Among the few scholars who have seen that there are 498 entries is, as one might expect, Gabriel Bunge; see his “Evagrius Pontikos: Der Prolog des ‘Antirretikos,’” *Studia Monastica* 39 (1997): 77–105, at 78.

⁴ As far as I can tell, Clark was the first person to translate the title into English as *Talking Back* in her *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 131.

⁵ Palladius, *Lausiaca History* 38.10. See the Bibliography for full bibliographical data for ancient works referred to in the footnotes.

You will see their full power and various temptations. Indeed, it was for these reasons that he wrote about these subjects, in order that those who read about them might be comforted knowing that they are not alone in suffering such temptations, and he showed us how such thoughts could be mastered through this or that kind of practice.⁶

The phrase “against the responses of the demons,” with its attribution of “responses” to the demons rather than to the monk, may be a garbled translation of a Greek title that included the terms “against” and “responses,” perhaps “Responses against the Demons.” It is likely that the Coptic *Life of Evagrius* attests either a book on Egyptian monasticism that Palladius wrote before the *Lausiac History* or an earlier version of the *History* itself.⁷

Writing in the decades after Palladius, the church historian Socrates Scholasticus provides a list of Evagrius’s works, including “the *Antirrhētikos* from the holy Scriptures against the tempting demons, divided into eight parts according to the number of the eight thoughts.”⁸ Socrates lists the *Antirrhētikos* third, after the *Praktikos* and the *Gnostikos*, an order that perhaps Palladius had in mind when he referred to “three sacred books” in the *Lausiac History*. Here the Greek title, in its use of an adjective ending with *-ikos* to describe the subject of the book, parallels the other two books of Evagrius, lending support to its being the accurate title.

Toward the end of the fifth century, in his continuation of Jerome’s *Illustrious Men*, Gennadius of Marseilles began his list of the books of Evagrius by stating:

⁶ Coptic *Life of Evagrius* 21; trans. Tim Vivian, *Four Desert Fathers: Pambo, Evagrius, Macarius of Egypt & Macarius of Alexandria: Coptic Texts Relating to the “Lausiac History” of Palladius*, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 85, altered. The Coptic text is edited by E. Amélineau, *De Historia Lausiaca, quaenam sit huius ad monachorum aegyptonum historiam scribendam utilitas* (Paris: Leroux, 1887), 115–16.

⁷ Gabriel Bunge and Adalbert de Vogüé, *Quatre ermites égyptiens: d’après les fragments coptes de l’‘Histoire Lausiaque,’* *Spiritualité Orientale* 60 (Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Bellefontaine, 1994); Vivian, *Four Desert Fathers*, 46–52.

⁸ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 23.37.

Against the suggestions of the eight principal vices, which he was the first to observe or among the first to teach, he composed eight books with testimonies from the holy Scriptures. Doubtless he was imitating the Lord, who always met his attacker with testimonies from the Scriptures, so that a suggestion of whatever kind, whether from the devil or from vicious nature, might have a testimony against it. By request I translated this work into Latin with the same simplicity that I found in the Greek.⁹

As disappointing as it is for the modern scholar to read about a fifth-century Latin translation of *Talking Back* that apparently does not survive, this brief notice is instructive in other ways. Gennadius speaks not, as Evagrius does, of the eight principal demons or thoughts, but of the eight principal *vices*, and he states that suggestions to vice may come either from Satan or from humanity's fallen nature. When Gennadius says that Jesus "always" responded to his attacker with scriptural testimonies, he seems to refer not only to Jesus' temptation from the devil, the model that Evagrius cites in his prologue, but also to Jesus' entire career, including his interactions with human as well as demonic opponents (e.g., Mark 2:23-27). Gennadius's use of the term *vices* reflects the inward turn in how Evagrius's teachings were appropriated in the West. John Cassian had initiated this trajectory by speaking more frequently of vices than of demons and by situating the monk's conflict with temptation more within the interior division between the fallen human being's spirit and flesh than within Evagrius's cosmic division between human beings and demons.¹⁰ Gennadius, then, says that the evil suggestions that require refutation come not only from the demons but also from our own vicious nature.

Gennadius considered *Talking Back* an example of "testimonies from the Scriptures" (*testimonia Scripturarum*), an important clue to how ancient readers, or at least Latin-speaking Christians, might have understood the genre of the work.¹¹ Ancient people created

⁹ Gennadius of Marseilles, *Illustrious Men* 11; *Patrologia Latina* 58:1066-67.

¹⁰ Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 242-46.

¹¹ Unlike other scholars, I am not convinced that the seventh-century Syrian Christian Dadisho of Bet Qatraye gives our work the title *Demonstrations from*

anthologies of excerpts from written works for a variety of purposes, including private study, research for one's own work, and self-improvement. Christians created anthologies of excerpts from the Bible or "testimonies" primarily for apologetic reasons, to defend Christological and ecclesiological claims, and for moral exhortation, to encourage virtue and discourage vice.¹² Scholars debate whether already in the first or second century Christians had created "testimony books" of excerpts from the Septuagint in order to support their teachings about Christ and the inclusion of the Gentiles; such books, if they existed, may have served a polemical function in debates with nonbelieving Jews. Certainly by Evagrius's time, however, such works existed. Transmitted among the Latin works attributed to Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) are *To Fortunatus* (or *Exhortation to Martyrdom*), which collects scriptural excerpts in support of martyrdom, and *To Quirinus* (or *Testimonies Against the Jews*), in which such excerpts serve to condemn the Jews, promote Christological claims, and exhort to proper moral behavior.¹³ Closer to Evagrius's own context are fragments from a Greek papyrus codex, dated to the fourth century, in which messianic verses from Isaiah, Genesis, 2 Chronicles, and

the Holy Scriptures when he cites *Ant.* 7.37 (see, e.g., René Draguet's translation in *Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientaliu* 327:140, and Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006], 190). I translate: "Those [books of Aristotle] are the ones that the blessed Evagrius condemns with the demonstrations from the holy Scriptures that he sets out in the book against the eight passions of sin and against the inciting demons. For among those that he sets out against the demon of vainglory he says the following . . ." (*Commentary on the Book of Abba Isaiah* 13.4; *Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientaliu* 326:181).

¹² In general, see Martin C. Albl, "*And Scripture Cannot Be Broken*": *The Form and Function of the Early Christian "Testimonia" Collections*, *Supplements to Novum Testamentum* 96 (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

¹³ Cyprian, *Ad Quirinum*, *Ad Fortunatum*, ed. R. Weber, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 3/1 (CCSL 3/1) (Turnhout: Brepols, 1972); Cyprian, *Treatise 11 [To Fortunatus]* and *Treatise 12 [to Quirinus]*, Alexander Roberts and James Donovan, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 5 (ANF 5) (New York: Scribner's, 1911), 496–507, 507–557.

Deuteronomy are collected without any headings or commentary.¹⁴ Dating perhaps to the early fifth century, the *Testimonies Against the Jews* attributed to Gregory of Nyssa presents biblical excerpts under such headings as “concerning the unbelief of the Jews and concerning the church of the Gentiles.” Most of the excerpts in this last work come from the prophetic books, including the Psalms, and are labeled with the names of the prophets who spoke them (David, Jeremiah, Micah, and so on).¹⁵

The two Latin anthologies attributed to Cyprian provide the closest analogies to *Talking Back* in terms of both form and function.¹⁶ In each case the author introduces the collection with a prologue that states the overall theme of the book and explains why the author has found it useful to collect the excerpts. Biblical passages are collected under headings such as, “That they [the Jews] should lose Jerusalem and leave the land that they had received,” and, “That people are tried by God for this purpose, that they may be proved.”¹⁷ The biblical book from which each excerpt is taken is identified. In the prologue to *To Fortunatus*, Cyprian presents martyrdom as Evagrius does monasticism in the prologue to *Talking Back*: it is a war with Satan, in which Christians are “soldiers of Christ,” armed with the collected passages from the Bible as their

¹⁴ *P. Ryl. Gk.* 460; ed. C. H. Roberts, *Two Biblical Papyri in the John Rylands Library, Manchester* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1936), 47–62; cf. Albl, “*And Scripture Cannot Be Broken*,” 139.

¹⁵ Pseudo-Gregory of Nyssa, *Testimonies against the Jews*, *Writings from the Greco-Roman World* 8, trans. Martin C. Albl (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004); cf. Albl, “*And Scripture Cannot Be Broken*,” 142–44.

¹⁶ Scholars accept cyprianic authorship of *To Fortunatus*, but most doubt that Cyprian wrote *To Quirinus*, although some are open to the possibility that he compiled the third book and not the first two. Even if Cyprian did not compile *To Quirinus*, he appears to have known and made use of it. See Charles A. Bobertz, “‘For the Vineyard of the Lord of Hosts was the House of Israel’: Cyprian of Carthage and the Jews,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 82 (1991): 1–15, esp. 3–5, and “An Analysis of *Vita Cypriani* 3.6–10 and the Attribution of *Ad Quirinum* to Cyprian of Carthage,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992): 112–28. For our purposes, this question is not significant.

¹⁷ Cyprian, *Ad Quirinum*, 1.6; CCSL 3/1:11; ANF 5:510; 3.15; CCSL 3/1:106; ANF 5:537.

defensive weapons. *Tō Quirinus* now consists of three books, but its first two books appear to have been originally separate from the third: one prologue introduces Books 1 and 2, the testimonies of which concern the unbelief of the Jews and the career of Christ, and a second prologue precedes Book 3, which collects passages that promote the proper Christian life. While the first two books, like *Tō Fortunatus*, anticipate *Talking Back*'s combative or defensive use, the third book of *Tō Quirinus* parallels *Talking Back*'s less polemical function of building up the reader's character and serving as a means of reading Scripture. The compiler calls Book 3 "a succinct course of sacred reading, so that your [Quirinus's] mind, given over to God, might not be fatigued by long or numerous volumes of books, but, instructed with a summary of heavenly precepts, might have a wholesome and large compendium for nourishing its memory."¹⁸ In his prologue, Evagrius does not likewise present his anthology as a kind of abridged version of the Bible for rapid reading, but Evagrius concludes his letter to Loukios by highlighting the general benefit of "reading the divine Scriptures," which "removes even the love for representations by transferring it [the mind] to the formless, divine, and simple knowledge" (*Ep.* 4.5). *Talking Back*, then, resembles other ancient anthologies of biblical excerpts not only in its literary form, but also in its functions of arming the Christian for spiritual struggle with Satan or polemical conflict with opponents, exhorting the Christian to a higher moral life, and providing an alternative means of reading the Scriptures. At least Gennadius saw the connection when he called *Talking Back* a collection of "testimonies from the holy Scriptures."

Another type of anthology to which *Talking Back* may be compared in both form and function is the "notebook" (usually in the plural, *hupomnēmata*: "notes, reminders") that the cultivated person might compile in the effort to improve himself in virtue. For example, in a situation that anticipates Evagrius's correspondence with Loukios, Plutarch wrote to his friend Paccius, "Just now

¹⁸ Cyprian, *Ad Quirinum*, 3. Pref; CCSL 3/1:72; ANF 5:528.

I received your letter, in which you urged me to write for you something on tranquility of mind and on the things in the *Timaeus* [of Plato] that require more careful explication.” Plutarch professed to have no time to compose a polished work; instead, “I have collected [excerpts] about tranquility of mind from the notebook that I happen to have made for myself, supposing that you seek this treatise, not because you want to hear an elegant composition, but for practical help.”¹⁹ The work that Plutarch sent to Paccius is indeed full of excerpts and anecdotes that he might have gathered in a notebook as an aid to his own efforts at cultivating a tranquil disposition. Occasionally Plutarch directs a quotation at people with a specific problematic view of the good life; for example, he considers an excerpt from Menander to be an appropriate correction for “those who suppose that one form of life is especially free of pain, as some think concerning the life of farmers or unmarried people or kings.”²⁰ Evagrius directs some of his biblical excerpts to monks who hold incorrect ideas about the ascetic life or demonic conflict: such entries begin, “Against the soul that supposes that . . .”

Michel Foucault drew attention to notebooks such as the one that Plutarch compiled as an important tool that cultivated persons of antiquity used for “the shaping of the self.”²¹ In his analysis, Foucault emphasized the self-formative function of this kind of writing: the compilation of the notebook was itself an exercise in identifying and gathering the best of what one had read or heard; the writer then sought to unify in his own identity and rational action the inevitably “disparate” elements that he had collected from others. One may compare this self-forming literary practice with Athanasius of Alexandria’s description of the young ascetic Antony observing the diverse virtues manifested in more advanced ascetics: Antony then “gathered into himself the virtues of each

¹⁹ Plutarch, *De tranquillitate animi*, 464e–f.

²⁰ Plutarch, *De tranquillitate animi*, 466a.

²¹ Michel Foucault, “Self-Writing,” in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984, ed. Paul Rabinow, 207–22 (New York: The New Press, 1994), quotation at 211.

and strove to display them in himself.”²² Athanasius later has Antony recommend to monks a mode of writing that will develop their character: he suggests that the monk write down “the deeds and movements of [his] soul” as if they were to be read by other monks; in this way, Antony says, the monks will “form themselves.”²³ Foucault, however, contrasted the appropriation to oneself of recollected, disparate truths through notebooks with the kind of “narrative of the self” that Athanasius has Antony recommend that Christian monks write, that is, “the oral or written confession [of one’s own failings] . . . which has a purificatory value.”²⁴

Foucault’s analysis has drawn criticism, especially of its suggestion of an aesthetic, past-oriented self-fashioning on the part of men such as Plutarch and Seneca, but his argument that the notebook writer “constitutes his own identity through his recollection of things” that others have said seems to characterize also one of the functions of *Talking Back* for its monastic reader.²⁵ In this case, the monk is not the writer or compiler of the notebook as Plutarch is—it is Evagrius who makes the notebook—but he does shape his self, referred to in *Talking Back* as “the soul” or “the intellect,” in part through the recollection and recitation of what others have said in the Bible. He appropriates the collected and disparate sayings to himself as the enunciations for diverse circumstances of a single “monastic life” (Prol.6). In this respect, *Talking Back* resembles the *hupomnēmata* of Foucault’s Roman philosophers more than it does the Christian genre of self-confession of which Athanasius’s Antony speaks.

Talking Back, however, differs from most other anthologies, including the Christian testimony books and the philosophical *hupomnēmata*, in that many of the excerpts that it collects are meant to be addressed neither to other people nor to oneself, but to

²² Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 4.2.

²³ Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 55.7–13.

²⁴ Foucault, “Self Writing,” 209–14.

²⁵ Criticism: Pierre Hadot, “Reflections on the Idea of the ‘Cultivation of the Self,’” in Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, 206–13 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). Quotation: Foucault, “Self Writing,” 213.

supramundane beings: God, demons, even angels. As an arsenal of effective words to oppose demons, to enlist divine aid, or to help persons in distress, it invites comparison also with the magician's spell manual. Some examples of this genre that survive from late ancient Egypt provide a single prayer that invokes a divine, angelic, or demonic power and follow it with a catalogue of situations in which the prayer may be used and directions as to how to apply the prayer to each case. For example, a Coptic ritual that may date to the fourth or fifth century sets forth a lengthy prayer to God ("O God, O Lord, O Lord, O Omnipotent . . .") and then gives a list of situations in which it can be used, ranging from medical conditions to social problems. Here are some examples:

For the sting of an insect:

Recite it over some water, and have him drink it. . . .

For your enemies, that they may not prevail against you:

Recite it over some water, adjuring him, and sprinkle your house and every one of your ways. . . .

For the rescue of ships at sea or on the ocean along with everything:

Write it upon a clean piece of papyrus, and tie it to the tip of the mast. . . .

To make someone desire you:

Recite it over an *aparche* of wine. Give it to him to drink.²⁶

Like *Talking Back*, this and similar ritual handbooks address a wide range of concerns, list problematic situations or desired outcomes with brief remedies, and use powerful words to address God, angels, or demons. In contrast to *Talking Back*, however, these rituals (or at least the ones that I have studied) tend to use the same prayer for every situation: either the actions performed or the substances

²⁶ *Michigan Papyrus* 593; ed. and trans. W. H. Worrell, "A Coptic Wizard's Hoard," *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 46 (1930): 239–62. It appears also as No. 133 in Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith, eds., *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 304–10. For rituals with similar lists of situations, see nos. 128 and 135 in Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, 270–73, 326–41.

used or both are what vary. With a few exceptions, Evagrius does not advise that the monk perform specific physical actions in the situations that he lists, only that he use the most effective words from the Scriptures. While the “magical” texts combine powerful words, actions, and substances, Evagrius places anti-demonic power fully in the biblical words that he gives to the monk.

Is it possible that Evagrius himself saw his work as an alternative to such ritual handbooks? Athanasius of Alexandria’s *Epistle to Marcellinus* suggests that he may have done so. This letter serves as an especially apt analogy for *Talking Back* because it lies close to the monastic tradition of *antirrhēsis*, as I shall discuss shortly. Athanasius suggests the recitation of certain Psalms to address particular conditions in which Christians may find themselves, including persecution, the desire to give thanks to God, and attacks from demons. The words stabilize the soul through a power based in Christ’s incarnation. Athanasius explicitly contrasts the effective nature of the words of Scripture with the impotence of magical spells. In ancient Israel, he explains (somewhat anachronistically), people “drove demons away and refuted the plots they directed against human beings merely by reading the Scriptures.” But in recent days certain people have “abandoned” the Bible and instead have “composed for themselves plausible words from external sources, and with these have called themselves exorcists.” Athanasius says that the demons “mock” persons who use such nonbiblical words; in contrast, those who use passages from the Bible send the demons away in terror because “the Lord is in the words of the Scriptures.”²⁷ The spell-like form of *Talking Back* may have contributed to the efforts of leaders like Athanasius to encourage Christian monks to be less like “magicians” by addressing supra-mundane beings like God and the demons with scriptural passages rather than with formulae that they had composed themselves or had purchased from ritual specialists.

Talking Back may strike the modern reader as an odd sort of book, but ancient readers probably saw its affinities with several

²⁷ Athanasius, *Epistle to Marcellinus* 33.

kinds of ancient literary works, including Scripture testimony books, philosophical notebooks, even magicians' handbooks. As diverse as these genres are, they share a recognition of the power of words, whether that power is used to refute enemies, to shape the virtuous self, to invoke divine or supramundane beings—or, as in the case of *Talking Back*, to do all these things. And all of these genres are practical: these books were meant to be used, not just read. It seems unlikely that Evagrius expected many ordinary monks to have copies of *Talking Back*; rather, its entries directed to the struggling soul or intellect suggest that its ideal user is the advanced monk who serves as a guide or spiritual director to other monks. In his letter to Loukios, Evagrius addresses this recipient of a copy of *Talking Back* as such a monastic guide—even of himself. “Be for me,” Evagrius asks Loukios, “a preacher of continence, a listener of humility, and a destroyer ‘of thoughts and of every proud obstacle that is raised against the knowledge of Christ’ [2 Cor 10:4-5]” (*Ep.* 4.2). Loukios must not “hesitate . . . to converse with the brothers” (*Ep.* 4.3). *Talking Back* is meant for someone like Loukios, a monastic authority, who will give to monks under his care the verses appropriate to their particular situations, guiding them in the art of *antirrhēsis*.

The Theory and Practice of Antirrhēsis

Just as Evagrius's *Praktikos* concerns *praktikē*, the practice of the ascetic life, so too *Antirrhētikos* concerns *antirrhēsis*, the practice of talking back. In an excellent study of the Psalms and prayer in Evagrius's spirituality, Luke Dysinger provides a description of the diverse aspects of monastic *antirrhēsis*, which means “refutation” or “contradiction”:

In the practice of *antirrhesis* select biblical verses are employed to counteract the particular *logismos* [thought] against which the monk is struggling. *Antirrhesis* entails the deployment of biblical texts not only against the demons and their *logismoi* [thoughts], but also against sinful tendencies within the self, and even more broadly as “refutations” of particular groups of people and forms of behaviour. Furthermore, antirrhetic

biblical texts may console the tempted soul and remind it of virtues opposed to the *logismoi*. Finally, *antirrhesis* also includes the offering to God of successful biblical prayers.²⁸

Whether the monk uses biblical passages negatively, to refute a demon or thought, or positively, to petition God or console a fellow monk, warfare with the demons remains the context for *antirrhēsis*. Thus, its basic character is oppositional as well as verbal—the monk *speaks* the biblical text in the context of *warfare* with the demonic—as the English phrase “talking back” seeks to capture.

The following statistics concerning the addresses of the biblical excerpts in *Talking Back* illustrate both the diversity of *antirrhēsis* and its primarily adversarial character:

1. Excerpts directed against demons or the thoughts they suggest: 315 (63.3%)
 - a. Against thoughts: 278 (55.8%)
 - b. Against demons: 37 (7.4%)²⁹
2. Excerpts directed against a human soul or intellect captive to or at risk from the demons and their thoughts: 134 (26.9%)
 - a. Against the soul: 114 (22.9%)
 - b. Against the intellect: 20 (4.0%)
3. Excerpts directed to the Lord or the angels: 48 (9.6%)
 - a. To the Lord: 46 (9.2%)
 - b. To the angel(s): 2 (0.4%)
4. Excerpt concerning a topic: 1 (0.2%)³⁰

²⁸ Luke Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 132.

²⁹ Included in this reckoning is 5.17, which is directed “against the anger that . . .”

³⁰ “Concerning the suffering that comes from temptations” (4.69). My statistics differ from those of Dysinger (*Psalmody and Prayer*, 137). Although some of these differences may be attributed to Dysinger’s mistaken view that there are 492 excerpts, I am not able to explain them fully.

Although only 37 of 498 excerpts are directed explicitly against demons, more than half address the thoughts that the demons suggest; that is, they repel the arrows that the demons hurl against the monk (Prol.2). Evagrius frequently identifies thoughts by their demonic instigators—“against the thought of vainglory that . . .”, “against the thoughts of listlessness that . . .”—and thus emphasizes that the thoughts are the means by which the demons attack the monk and not simply (or at all) dispositions of the monk’s own soul or intellect. Likewise, the excerpts directed “against the soul” or “against the intellect” most often rebuke or reprimand the monk who has succumbed to or is in danger of succumbing to a demonic suggestion, or they correct the monk who holds a mistaken or dangerous view of the ascetic life; others console or encourage the monk who may be in despair over the difficulty of the battle.³¹ Fewer than 10 percent ask God or the angels for help or thank them for assistance they have rendered. In *Talking Back* Evagrius surely seeks constructively to form the monk as a virtuous person, but this self-forming discipline takes place within a determinedly polemical, anti-demonic context, in which the vast majority of excerpts are directed toward agents external to the monk, whether hostile (the demons, armed with thoughts) or supportive (God, assisted by angels).

Evagrius would never claim that he invented *antirrhēsis*; rather, he cites two biblical founders for the practice in the Prologue to *Talking Back* and in other works, David and Jesus, whose precedents earlier monastic teachers transmitted. David’s reputation as a

³¹ Dysinger prefers to translate “for a soul” and “for a mind” (e.g., Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer*, 137, emphasis added). Although this translation may capture a somewhat less adversarial spirit in the use of biblical texts directed toward another monk than in such directed against demons or thoughts, the Syriac text provides no support for such a distinction, using in all these cases the preposition *luqbl*. In contrast, excerpts directed “to the Lord” use *lwt* rather than *luqbl*. In his translation of the Syriac into Greek, Frankenberg suggests that the Greek *pros* lies behind *luqbl*, and this hypothesis may find support in the examples from *Scholia on the Psalms* that Dysinger cites (*Psalmody and Prayer*, 144); but Evagrius’s quotation of Prov 26:4–5, which urges the hearer not to “answer a fool in proportion to (*pros*) his folly,” but rather “in opposition to (*kata*) his folly,” may argue for *kata* instead.

warrior against the demons rests on his reputed authorship of the book of Psalms (Prol.6), many of which are directed against the speaker's persecutors and enemies, and on his successful warfare against the Philistines, whom Evagrius equates with the demons (Prol.3).³² Evagrius refers to "the entire contest of the monastic life, which the Holy Spirit taught David through the Psalms" (Prol.6) and thus places the verbal refutation of the demons at the core of the monastic struggle against vice and for virtue. Jesus' use of biblical verses to respond to the temptations of Satan, found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13), provides the other biblical precedent for *antirrhēsis* that Evagrius cites.³³ He couples "what he [Jesus] did," that is, his practice, with "the rest of all his teaching" (Prol.2): both are gifts of the Savior to Christians. Evagrius identifies "the blessed fathers" as those who handed down *antirrhēsis* from its biblical founders (Prol.6). "Blessed fathers" refers primarily, of course, to the experienced monks such as Macarius the Great and Macarius the Alexandrian whose guidance Evagrius sought when he came to the Egyptian desert, but it may also include Gregory of Nazianzus, Evagrius's teacher in Constantinople. Gregory "planted me," Evagrius wrote elsewhere, and "the holy fathers" of the Egyptian desert "now water me."³⁴

Gregory taught that the demons attacked baptized Christians and composed a series of what Dayna Kalleres has called "prayer texts," in which attacking demons are addressed and refuted.³⁵ In Gregory's view, a "paradoxical fusion" of intelligible and sensory

³² See Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer*, 131, where he cites the following references to David the spiritual warrior in Evagrius's works: *Thoughts* 10, 14, 20; *Letters* 11.2; 56.8; *Scholia on Ecclesiastes* 10; *Scholia on Proverbs* 12; *Scholia on the Psalms* 14. For the Philistines as demons, see *Letter* 58.2; *Kephalaia Gnostica* 5.30, 36, 68.

³³ See Gabriel Bunge, *Akedia: La doctrine spirituelle d'Évagre le Pontique sur l'acédie* (Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1991): 111–12.

³⁴ *Praktikos* Epilogue.

³⁵ The texts appear in *Patrologia Graeca* 37:1397–1406. Dayna Kalleres has reproduced, translated, and analyzed them in "Demons and Divine Illumination: A Consideration of Certain Prayers by Gregory of Nazianzus," *Vigiliae Christianae* 67 (2007): 157–88. I am grateful to Professor Kalleres for sharing this article with me in advance of publication.

essences in Adam had enabled him to know God, but the fall upset this balance. Baptism unites a person to Christ, in whom this paradoxical fusion was restored, and thus sets the baptized Christian on a path toward renewed apprehension and contemplation of God.³⁶ Demons attempt to thwart the Christian's progress toward divine contemplation by introducing false impressions and images and so distorting proper knowledge. The Christian, then, must learn to discern, as the Stoics had taught, true and false impressions, but Gregory also composed short prayers that function as apotropaic speech to repel the demons. For example, one prayer begins, "You have come, o evil doer, I recognize your thoughts. You have come, in order that you might deprive me of the light and beloved life."³⁷ Here the speaker announces his successful discernment of a demonic thought. Another prayer simply seeks to send the demon away:

Go away, go away, evil one, manslayer;
 Go away, sight of terrible sufferings, raging evil;
 Go away, Christ is within, to whom I have offered
 and given my soul. Flee, giving up as quickly as possible.
 O help, angels stand by!
 O the tyrant, and the thief is approaching.
 From them take me away, yes, beloved ones, I am being stoned.³⁸

In this case the presence both of Christ within the baptized Christian and of attendant angels nearby helps to send the demons away. Other prayers refer to the mark of the cross within the baptized person. The prayers use speech to harness this divine power against the demons, and they draw on the rites that attended baptism, which included exorcisms and verbal renunciations of Satan and

³⁶ See not only Kalleres, "Demons and Divine Illumination," but also Susanna Elm, "Inscriptions and Conversions: Gregory of Nazianzus on Baptism," in *Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing*, ed. A. Grafton and K. Mills, 1–35 (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2003).

³⁷ Prayer 1 (Kalleres, "Demons and Divine Illumination," 161–62).

³⁸ Prayer 5 (Kalleres, "Demons and Divine Illumination," 166).

his demons.³⁹ It is possible that Gregory composed these anti-demonic prayers after he had left Constantinople for retirement and Evagrius had departed for Jerusalem and the Egypt,⁴⁰ but they suggest that Evagrius could have arrived in Egypt already having learned from Gregory about the danger of demonic thoughts and the possibility of refuting them verbally with powerful words. He would, then, have been well prepared for the monastic practice of *antirrhēsis* as taught and performed by the monks he called “the blessed fathers.”

One of those “blessed fathers” was Antony. Antony died long before Evagrius became a monk, but Evagrius knew the Antony who appears in Athanasius’s *Life of Antony* singing Psalms and reciting biblical verses to repel demons.⁴¹ Verbal give-and-take characterizes Antony’s first conflict with the devil, which comes after he has achieved a high level of virtue already as a young man: “The one suggested filthy thoughts, but the other repelled them with prayers.”⁴² Athanasius does not identify these prayers as scriptural, but the power of biblical verses soon becomes evident when the devil appears to Antony as a black boy. Antony gives a short speech of refutation to the demon, concluding with Psalm 117:7: “The Lord is my helper, and I will look down on my enemies.” “When he heard this,” Athanasius writes, “the black one immediately fled, cowering before these words and afraid even to approach the man.”⁴³ In Antony’s long ascetic discourse to other monks, Athanasius has him say that when “the saints” saw demonic appearances, they recited verses from the Psalms, ironically ones

³⁹ See Henry Ansgar Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism: Ritual, Theology, and Drama* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 81–122, 136–57, and Dayna Kalleres, “Exorcising the Devil to Silence Christ’s Enemies: Ritualized Speech Practices in Late Antique Christianity” (PHD dissertation, Brown University, 2002).

⁴⁰ Kalleres, “Demons and Divine Illumination,” 161n13.

⁴¹ Gabriel Bunge quips, perhaps only half-jokingly, that Evagrius must have known the *Life of Antony* by heart (“Évagre le Pontique et les deux Macaire,” *Irénikon* 56 [1983]: 215–27, 323–60, at 332).

⁴² Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 5.4.

⁴³ Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 6.4–5.

that refer to not speaking and keeping one's mouth closed.⁴⁴ But here too the more significant precedent is Jesus' use of biblical passages to refute Satan's temptations: "For what the Lord said, he did for our sakes, so that when the demons hear similar such sayings from us they will be overturned because of the Lord, who rebuked them with these sayings."⁴⁵ Note that Athanasius has Antony attribute the anti-demonic power not to the biblical words themselves, but to "the Lord," who first used them. This subtle distinction may not have been clear to every reader of the *Life*, which frequently portrays Antony singing Psalms or reciting other biblical verses in his conflicts with demons without such Christological explanations.⁴⁶ Antony, of course, uses other means to repel demons—for example, the sign of the cross, the name of Christ, and his own words⁴⁷—but biblical verses, especially from the Psalms, are his most frequent spiritual weapons.

There can be no doubt that Evagrius had read the *Life of Antony* and appropriated many of its teachings. In *Talking Back* he explicitly invokes the example of Antony: confronted by "the demons that gradually begin to imitate obscene images and to appear out of the air," the monk "should answer with a phrase, as also the righteous blessed Antony answered and said: 'The Lord is my helper, and I shall look upon my enemies' [Ps 117:7]" (*Ant.* 4.47). Evagrius cites precisely the verse that Antony uses in the *Life* to repel the devil's appearance as a black boy. Eight more scriptural passages in Book 4 appear also in the *Life* as citations or allusions, most in Antony's ascetic discourse on demons.⁴⁸ The predominant theme of Book 4 on the demon of sadness is the discouragement or fear that the monk may feel in the face of demonic attacks,

⁴⁴ Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 27.1–3, citing Pss 38:2–3; 37:14–15.

⁴⁵ Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 37.3–4.

⁴⁶ Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 9.2–3; 13.7; 39.3; 40.5; 41.5.

⁴⁷ Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 35.2; 41.6; 52–53.

⁴⁸ Exod 15:9: *Ant.* 4.7, *Life* 24.3. 2 Kgs 6:17: *Ant.* 4.27, *Life* 34.3. Ps 19:8–9: *Ant.* 4.32, *Life* 39.3. Ps 26:3: *Ant.* 4.34, *Life* 9.3. Job 1:10–11: *Ant.* 4.51, *Life* 29.3. Job 2:4–5: *Ant.* 4.52, *Life* 29.1. Matt 8:30–32: *Ant.* 4.66, *Life* 29.5. Rom 8:18: *Ant.* 4.70, *Life* 17.1.

especially those that are visual, physical, or both. The temptation to lose heart in one's battle with the demons, not an important aspect of sadness as Evagrius describes it in his other works, appears prominently in the *Life of Antony*. Athanasius portrays Antony as facing fearsome and painful demonic appearances and yet maintaining his spiritual integrity and faith in God. Here the *Life of Antony* has clearly influenced Evagrius's presentation of monastic spirituality and of *antirrhēsis* in particular.⁴⁹

Athanasius, we have already seen, attributed anti-demonic power to the words of Scripture also in his *Epistle to Marcellinus*: unlike the exorcistic texts that contemporary people compose, "the Lord himself is in the words of the Scriptures," which therefore have the power to drive demons away.⁵⁰ This teaching echoes that attributed to Antony in the *Life*. But in his letter to Marcellinus, Athanasius places greater emphasis on the therapeutic value of reciting the Psalms, which he understands to epitomize the entire canon of Scriptures, and thus articulates the self-formative aspect of *antirrhēsis*.⁵¹ The Psalms can help to ameliorate the individual's vulnerability to the passions and form him or her into a virtuous subject thanks to their double character. On the one hand, the Psalms make present Christ's own life, the secure model to which the changeable human being must conform him- or herself; on the other hand, they provide a mirror of the human soul's movements and dispositions. Reciting the Psalms becomes a means of both therapeutic recognition of the soul's condition and ethical formation of the soul after the pattern of Christ.⁵² It is arguable that certain excerpts in *Talking Back*, especially those directed to God in the first person, have this same function.⁵³ It is not clear

⁴⁹ See Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 23–47, 63–65.

⁵⁰ Athanasius, *Epistle to Marcellinus* 33.

⁵¹ See especially Paul R. Kolbet, "Athanasius, the Psalms, and the Reformation of the Self," *Harvard Theological Review* 99 (2006): 85–101.

⁵² Kolbet, "Athanasius, the Psalms, and the Reformation," esp. 94–95.

⁵³ E.g., "To the Lord concerning the thoughts of listlessness that are in us, 'So-and-so, one of our brothers or one of our relatives, has attained and joined a rank of honor and authority, and he has become a powerful man': 'It is good for me to cleave to God, to place my hope in the Lord' [Ps 72:28]" (6.23).

whether Evagrius had read the *Epistle to Marcellinus*, but his statement that “the melody that is applied to the Psalms alters the condition of the body” (*Ant.* 4.22) may indicate knowledge of the *Epistle’s* teaching that the melody affects the soul, which can then bring harmony to the body’s members.⁵⁴

The anti-demonic use of scriptural verses appears in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* as well, although often in a way that renders the biblical character of the words or the precise nature of their power ambiguous. For example, when the demons ask an old man (that is, an advanced monk) whether he would like to see Christ, he anathematizes them and their question, declaring, “I believe in my Christ, who says, ‘If someone says to you, “Look, the Christ is here or he is there,” do not believe’ [Matt 24:23].” Immediately the demons disappear.⁵⁵ The story leaves unclear whether it is specifically the monk’s quotation of Matthew or his general rebuke that repels the demons. When a monk plagued by thoughts of blasphemy asks him for advice, Poemen recommends a refuting statement that is not biblical.⁵⁶ According to another anecdote, a monk troubled by thoughts of fornication asked a more senior monk for advice:

The brother answered and said, “What shall I do, for I am weak and the passion defeats me?” He [the old man] said, “Observe them [the demons], and when they begin to speak, do not answer them, but get up, pray, and make repentance, saying, ‘Son of God, have mercy on me!’” And again the brother said, “I recite, Abba, and yet there is no compunction in my heart because I do not understand the force of the saying.” And he said to him, “In your case, just recite. For I have heard that Abba Poemen and many fathers made this statement: ‘The charmer does not understand the force of the words that he says, but the beast hears, understands the force of the saying, and submits. So too with us: even if we do not

⁵⁴ Athanasius, *Epistle to Marcellinus* 28.

⁵⁵ *Apophthegmata Patrum* 15.90 (= N 313).

⁵⁶ *Apophthegmata Patrum* 10.63; cf. Poemen 93.

understand the force of the things we say, when the demons hear, they withdraw in fear.’⁵⁷

The words that the monk speaks have such power that the speaker need not understand their “force,” that is, both their meaning and their effectiveness, for them to repel the demons. Still, the words that the story recommends—“Son of God, have mercy on me”—are not precisely scriptural, although they may allude to such passages as Matthew 9:27, and in any event the story does not attribute their power to their possible biblical origins. The *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* provide evidence for such monastic practices of *antirrhēsis* as short prayers offered to God and rebuking statements aimed at demons or thoughts, but unlike Athanasius and Evagrius, they do not insist on the use of biblical verses in such speech.

Our anecdote from the *Sayings* characterizes the power of the monk’s anti-demonic words as similar to that of magical spells, as a quality that is inherent in the words themselves, while Athanasius attributed the effectiveness to Jesus (“the Lord”), who originally used biblical words to refute Satan and who makes himself present in the Psalms. Evagrius would probably not deny either of these views, but he presented his own theory of why *antirrhēsis* works, which reflects his well-developed understanding of how the human intellect works. In the prologue to *Talking Back*, he cites Qoheleth: “No refutation [*antirrhēsis*] comes from those who perform evil quickly; therefore, the heart of the children of humanity has become confirmed with them for the doing of evil” (8:11). Evagrius interprets this and related verses (Ezek 18:4; Prov 26:4–5) to mean that one should refute an evil thought as soon as possible after it occurs to one, before “it is firmly set in one’s thinking”; if the monk does so, “sin is easily and swiftly handled.” But if the thought is allowed to persist, it leads the soul from merely thinking about sin to actually performing sin and thus to death (Prol.2). By repelling the evil thought, *antirrhēsis* prevents the monk from performing the evil deed.

⁵⁷ *Apophthegmata Patrum* 5.37 (= N 184).

Evagrius inherited the idea behind this practice from his predecessor Origen (ca. 185–254) and his contemporary Didymus the Blind (ca. 313–98), both of whom adapted to Christian ethics the Stoic notion of a “proto-passion” (*propatheia*) or “first movement.”⁵⁸ In the Stoic view morally culpable passions such as anger or lust result from our making poor judgments and assenting to an impulse or impression beyond what is natural or reasonable. All people are subject to involuntary “first movements,” which we may either control and use to good ends or allow to develop into a morally culpable passion. For example, I may have a visceral rush of anger when I learn of some injustice (first movement), but I can control it and respond appropriately by, say, calmly rebuking the offender. But if I assent to the impulse unreasonably and allow the full-blown passion of anger to develop, then I become guilty of the passion. First movements may come from the movements of the body (for example, the sexual urge), but they may also arise as responses to external stimuli (for example, the news of some injustice), which Stoics sometimes called “impressions” (*phantasiai*). The Stoics argued that we encounter a wide range of impressions, incoming images and ideas, which we must sort out as true or false, leading to virtue or vice, and the like. However a first movement arises, it is the person’s rational faculty, the intellect, that forms a judgment about the movement and either arrests it or allows it to develop into a full-fledged passion.

Origen and Didymus took over this teaching and adapted it to Christian views, in which Satan could serve as an external source for such first movements. One motivation to do so was exegetical: the notion of an involuntary and morally innocent “proto-passion” could explain, for example, biblical passages that appeared to attribute emotions to Jesus or other virtuous persons.

⁵⁸ On this topic see Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Margaret R. Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 85–108; Richard Layton, “Propatheia: Origen and Didymus on the Origin of the Passions,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 54 (2000): 262–82; Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 38–41, 54–56.

The Jewish Alexandrian scholar Philo (d. ca. 45 CE) had already used this strategy in his exegesis of the Septuagint. Origen and Didymus applied the idea to the Christian's conflict with Satan and the demons as well. Origen used the technical term "first movements" (*primi motus*) to refer to impulses that arise from the body ("according to the desire of the flesh"), which the soul can either bring under control or allow to develop into sin. Demons can incite to greater sin the soul that fails to stop a first movement.⁵⁹ Without calling them "first movements," Origen also called attention to thoughts that come from demons and incite us to evil deeds; we cannot help but receive such thoughts, but we can choose whether to resist or act upon them. He cited Satan's suggestion of betrayal to Judas—the devil "cast" the idea "into his heart," according to John 13:2—as an example of a demonically inspired thought that a person could have resisted.⁶⁰ Such thoughts function like the Stoics' impressions. Didymus likewise cited the example of Judas, but he called Satan's suggestion a "first movement" (*propatheia*): rather than rejecting it immediately, Judas allowed the first movement to persist and to become a full-fledged passion and then a disposition of the soul, which led him to commit the evil act.⁶¹

Evagrius's teaching stands in this tradition of Christian appropriation of Stoic ideas. According to Evagrius, the monk must, like the Stoic sage, exercise discernment in sorting through the thoughts and images that confront him. He writes to Loukios:

When the battle takes place with discernment, it is filled with many thoughts, but it creates a great purity of thinking because the demons can no longer mock or accuse the soul. For just as practical wisdom is assigned the reasonable judgment of practical matters, so too discernment is entrusted with the impressions [*phantasiai*] that occur in thinking,

⁵⁹ Origen, *On First Principles* 3.2.2; *Homilies on Exodus* 4.8.

⁶⁰ Origen, *On First Principles* 3.2.4.

⁶¹ Didymus the Blind, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* 294.8–20. See Richard A. Layton, *Didymus the Blind and his Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria: Virtue and Narrative in Biblical Scholarship* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 117–29.

discerning holy and profane, clean and unclean thoughts. And, according to the prophetic saying, it [discernment] has experience of the tricks of the mocking demons, which imitate both perception and memory in order to deceive the rational soul that strives for the knowledge of Christ (*Ep.* 4.4).

The first step in *antirrhēsis*, then, is to identify an impression as a demonic thought, a task that requires the gift of discernment.⁶² Even if correctly identified, an evil thought can still function like a first movement, inciting us to sin. A demon presents an evil thought to us, and we have the power to put a stop to it. If we do not, but instead allow it to persist, it will lead us into evil action. *Talking Back's* arsenal of biblical verses provides a means for preventing a demonically inspired first movement from developing into a full-fledged passion and thus into sin. Evagrius was not unique in adapting to Christian spiritual warfare such ethical perspectives and therapeutic speech practices from philosophical traditions: John Chrysostom did so as well in his recommendations to newly baptized Christians and their sponsors.⁶³

But the goal of the Evagrian monk is not simply to avoid evil deeds; remarkably, he seeks not to experience the first movements that incite to sin at all. Evagrius urges his reader to become not merely a “monastic man,” that is, someone who has withdrawn from committing sins in action, but rather, a “monastic intellect,” that is, someone who is free even from thoughts of sin. Such a thought-free monk enjoys complete clarity of mind and “at the time of prayer sees the light of the Holy Trinity” (Prol.5). The ultimate goal is to eliminate the thoughts themselves and to pray and contemplate God purely. The biblical verses he provides in this book are designed, as he puts it, to “cut off” their corresponding thoughts (Prol.6).

⁶² On discernment in Evagrius, see Antony D. Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers: 'Diakrisis' in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2007), 39–74.

⁶³ Kalleres, “Exorcising the Devil to Silence Christ’s Enemies,” 93–98.

With the use of the term “cut off” Evagrius alludes to his theory of mental operations, which lies behind his concept of *antirrhēsis* but which he does not explain fully in *Talking Back*. In his treatise *Thoughts* Evagrius provides a more thorough explanation of this “cutting off”:

Among the thoughts some cut off, and others are cut off: the evil thoughts cut off the good ones, and likewise the evil thoughts are cut off by the good ones. And so the Holy Spirit pays attention to the thought that is given priority, and it condemns us or approves of us based on that. What I am saying is like this: I have a certain thought concerning hospitality, and I have it for the sake of the Lord, but this thought is cut off when the tempter attacks and suggests that I show hospitality for the sake of glory. Likewise I have a thought that I should manifest hospitality before human beings, but this thought too is cut off when a better thought intervenes that directs our virtue toward the Lord instead and dissuades us from practicing it for the sake of human beings. Therefore, should we, through our actions, finally stick with the prior thoughts, despite being tested by the second ones, we shall receive only the reward that belongs to the thoughts that are given priority. Because we are human beings and wrestlers with demons, we cannot always keep the proper thought uncorrupted, nor conversely can we hold the evil thought untested since we possess seeds of virtues. But if one of the thoughts that cut off persists, it settles itself in the place of cutting off, and eventually the person will be set in motion by that thought and become active.⁶⁴

This passage provides the broader context for *antirrhēsis*. Every thought that we have, good or bad, can be cut off by a corresponding opposing thought, and in fact Evagrius suggests that nearly every thought that we have does encounter its opposite. The question is whether we stick with the first thought despite the challenge of the second or whether the first thought is cut off and the second

⁶⁴ *Thoughts* 7; this discussion appears also in Letter 18.3–5.

persists and sets us on a course of action. In Evagrius's view the conflict between thoughts within the intellect is endemic to the fallen human condition: we may still possess "seeds of virtues," but we are human beings, not angels, and so "wrestlers with demons." In *antirrhēsis*, then, the monk deliberately sets in motion a process that would otherwise take place inevitably by consciously using good thoughts drawn from the Bible to cut off bad ones suggested by the demons. *Antirrhēsis* works because it corresponds with how the fallen human intellect works.

It should be noted, however, that in *Thoughts* Evagrius gives three sources for the good thoughts that might cut off demonic ones, and these do not include the Bible. He writes:

Three thoughts oppose the demonic thought, cutting it off when it persists in one's thinking: the angelic thought; the thought that arises from our free will when it inclines toward the better; and the thought that is imparted naturally by our humanity, which sets even the pagans in motion to love their children and honor their parents. Only two thoughts oppose the good thought: the demonic thought and the thought that arises from our free will when it declines toward the worse. No evil thought comes from our nature, for we have not been evil from our origin, since it is good seed that the Lord sowed in his field [cf. Matt 13:24].⁶⁵

One might argue that biblical verses might be included in the category of angelic thoughts, but it seems more honest to set the biblical thoughts of *Talking Back* alongside the angelic thoughts mentioned here as opposing thoughts that come to the monk from outside himself. In any event, Evagrius indicates that he understands the biblical passages in these terms when in the Prologue he uses the technical term "cut off" to describe their effect on demonic thoughts.

Persistent evil thoughts, ones that are not cut off by good thoughts, pose great danger to the monk: not only do they set him

⁶⁵ *Thoughts* 31; this discussion appears also in *Letter* 18.1–2; cf. *Reflections* 46.

in motion to sin in deed, but they distort his intellect and prevent him from achieving knowledge of God or seeing the light of the Trinity in prayer.⁶⁶ Here we may see a more direct debt to Gregory of Nazianzus's teachings about demons and divine illumination that I discussed above. According to Evagrius, thoughts have some (usually propositional) content (such as, "I should store up more bread") and can come from angels (good), demons (bad), or the monk himself (good, bad, or neutral). But thoughts make use of the more basic intellectual material of representations (*noēmata*), which are simple concepts that Evagrius understands primarily in visual terms (for instance, the image of bread). Representations come to us through the body's senses, but they can be stored in memory and thus retrieved by the intellect or by the demons even while the monk is asleep and his body inactive. The mind cannot think without representations: even the thoughts of hospitality that Evagrius mentioned above require some representation, perhaps an image of the food that the monk would offer his guest. Representations themselves are neither good nor bad—they are like sheep, given to the intellect to shepherd responsibly—but they serve as the basis for thoughts, which can be morally evaluated. For example, the representation of gold has no moral significance, but thoughts about gold do. The angelic thought that leads the monk to consider why gold was created and what it symbolizes in the Bible is good, whereas the demonic thought that suggests acquiring gold is bad, enflaming the passion of love of money.

The close connection between thoughts and representations means that persistent thoughts cause representations to persist in the intellect. The intellect can entertain only one representation at a time, but representations often move through the intellect at a rapid pace, giving the illusion of simultaneity. A representation can persist in the intellect if a bad thought, one that enflames a passion, attaches to it (an "impassioned" representation); the representation of gold, for instance, persists in the intellect of the

⁶⁶ For the following two paragraphs, see *Thoughts* 2, 4, 8, 17, 22, 24, 25, 32, 36, 41; Columba Stewart, "Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001): 173–204, esp. 186–89.

greedy person. A persistent representation of a corporeal object can “imprint” the intellect, distorting the intellect in a way that prevents the clarity of vision required for knowledge of God and pure prayer.⁶⁷ Evagrius alludes to this phenomenon in *Talking Back* when he describes how the thoughts of a resentful soul can leave the intellect “enflamed with anger” so that, “even after the thought of this passion subsides and some time has passed, there remains a representation of a word or transitory matter that clouds and imprints the intellect” (5.21). Likewise, regretting the alms that one has given to the poor causes thoughts about money to persist and harm the intellect (3.47). Persistent bad thoughts, then, not only lead the monk into sin, but also, by causing impassioned representations to persist in the intellect, damage the intellect, preventing the monk from becoming the “monastic intellect” that sees the light of the Trinity at the time of prayer.

The practice of *antirrhēsis* that *Talking Back* facilitates not only belongs to the first stage in Evagrius’s view of the monastic life, ascetic practice (*praktikē*), in which the monk battles the demons and the vices and acquires the virtues; it applies also to the more advanced stage of the monastic “gnostic” (*gnōstikos*), in which the monk contemplates the material world and rational beings on his path to knowledge of God. Demonic suggestions, especially of vainglory and pride, continue to plague the gnostic monk, and the practices of biblical refutation and short prayers to God help to clear his intellect of evil thoughts and distorting representations and thus to prepare him for the vision of the Trinity’s light.

Monastic Authority: Evagrius the Fighter of Demons

These comments have focused on the function of *Talking Back* for the reader, its user, so to speak, but have not considered the role of the compiler. By what authority does Evagrius compose a work like *Talking Back*? How does the work configure the legitimacy of its author and thus its reliability in the monk’s conflict with the

⁶⁷ See *Thoughts* 22, 41; *Reflections* 23; *Chapters on Prayer* 55–57, 67–68, 70.

demons? *Talking Back* invites such questions not only because all such works do but also because the author's voice appears most fully only in the Prologue and surfaces only indirectly or sporadically in the remainder of the work. Leaving aside the question of Evagrius's authority generally within late fourth-century monasticism, we can identify at least three ways in which *Talking Back* legitimates Evagrius as an expert in demonic combat: it presents Evagrius as an experienced and successful fighter with demons, an heir to a long tradition of monastic teachers, and a perceptive reader of the Scriptures.

Evagrius's firsthand experience of demonic combat forms the primary source of his authority here: it is this experience to which Loukios appeals in his letter requesting the work. Evagrius, Loukios claims, has lived in the desert a long time, and he is at home there ("as if at a mother's breast"); he has achieved such a level of success in his contests with the demons that the demons fear him and he has summoned others to take up the fight. It is because Evagrius has personal knowledge of the demons and the combat with them, not because he is learned, that Loukios seeks a treatise from him. This picture of Evagrius remained influential in early monasticism even after Evagrius's death: Palladius noted that Evagrius received the gift of discerning spirits, and he vividly described Evagrius's physical and mental conflicts with demons.⁶⁸ While students of Evagrius, whether ancient or modern, have noted both his education in philosophy or theology and his experience in demonic combat, it may be argued that his modern interpreters have stressed the former and neglected the latter to an extent that his ancient colleagues would not.⁶⁹

Evagrius himself does not invoke his personal experience as directly or primarily as Loukios does, but it nonetheless functions as a powerful form of self-legitimation in *Talking Back*. In his reply to Loukios, which functions as a cover letter for *Talking Back*, Evagrius confesses to not having dealt with demonic attacks as

⁶⁸ Palladius, *Lausiac History* 38.10–12.

⁶⁹ For an example of an ancient observer who notes both Evagrius's learning and his experience with demons, see *Historia Monachorum* 20.15–16.

well as he should have and remarks that he has suffered greatly because of the demons since Loukios left him. He adduces his experience with severe demonic conflict without explicitly claiming any success in it; instead, he praises God for what he has learned of Loukios's asceticism (*Ep.* 4.1). This self-presentation resembles the opening of *Letter 55*, in which Evagrius calls himself "full of passions" and "a coward." Robin Darling Young suggests that in *Letter 55* Evagrius "presents himself as nonauthoritative and even fearful, perhaps in order to gain the confidence of his addressee, perhaps as part of his own strategy in the monastic combat against thoughts and their prompting demons who, once they saw signs of arrogance instead of humility, engaged in battle to bring down the monastic teacher."⁷⁰ Both motivations seem likely to be in play here, as Evagrius expresses solidarity with Loukios and embodies the humility that repels demons, but certainly his reference to the "unspeakable sufferings" that the demons have inflicted on him also represents a subtle claim to authority.

In the Prologue to *Talking Back*, Evagrius does not refer to his own experience, but rather highlights his reception of monastic tradition, to which I shall turn next. Still, in the subsequent eight books he does frequently signal to the reader his firsthand acquaintance with the demons and their tricks. At the most basic level, the frequent use of the first person ("me," "us") as the recipient of thoughts or the object of demonic attacks places the author among those who have experienced these things. But some of these references appear too specific to Evagrius's own situation to be taken as merely the report of experiences that are simply typical or that belong only to others; among these I include the threat that the monk will experience shame for revealing "all the kinds of all the unclean thoughts" (4.25). As evidence for the sometimes fantastic things that he reports, Evagrius can appeal to his firsthand visual confirmation (2.65; 4.36) and to the knowledge of monks

⁷⁰ Robin Darling Young, "Cannibalism and Other Family Woes in Letter 55 of Evagrius of Pontus," in *The World of Early Egyptian Christianity: Language, Literature, and Social Context*, ed. James E. Goehring and Janet A. Timbie, 130–39 (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), at 135.

who have undergone such experiences: “those who have been tempted by this demon will understand what I am saying” (2.55; cf. 8.21). His explicit refusals to describe certain experiences in writing because of their disturbing quality alert the reader that Evagrius knows even more than the work itself contains and thus more than even the most attentive reader who has not had experiences like his (2.65; 8.21). At one point Evagrius rebukes critics who “ridicule” accounts of demonic attack as persons who lack experience (4.72), and his condemnations of certain seemingly positive visions (of God or Christ) as the products of the demons of vainglory or pride serve to label the visionary experiences of other monks as illegitimate (7.31; 8.17, 21). He may not say so explicitly, but Evagrius indicates that he is a veteran spiritual warrior, with longer and better experiences of demonic combat than others.

Evagrius more explicitly invests authority in the monastic tradition that he has inherited from older monks and that he claims to be transmitting. In the Prologue, as we have seen, he professes not to present a new program for the ascetic life, but only to make more accessible a very ancient tradition: “I have made public the entire contest of the monastic life, which the Holy Spirit taught David through the Psalms and the blessed fathers handed over to us, but which I have named in this book after these [demons]” (Prol.6). The only innovation that Evagrius makes is to organize this presentation of the monastic life by the named demons. Here he refers only in general to “the blessed fathers” as the immediate sources of his teaching, but he later mentions three of his teachers by name: John of Lycopolis, whom he calls “the seer [or prophet] of Thebes” (2.36; 5.6; 6.16; 7.19), Macarius the Alexandrian (4.23, 58; 8.26), and Macarius the Egyptian or the Great (4.45).⁷¹ John appears as an authority on the workings of the intellect, wise to the demonic images that appear in it (2.36; 5.6) and schooled in what can and cannot be known about its nature (6.16). Each of the four times that he names either Macarius the Alexandrian or

⁷¹ For sorting out the identities of the two Macarii, see Bunge, “Évagre le Pontique et les deux Macaire,” 218–23.

Macarius the Great Evagrius cites them as the precedent for using the specific verse in answering back to a demon. In his book *Thoughts*, Evagrius twice mentions Macarius the Alexandrian, who was the priest at Kellia, as an authority on the activities of demons.⁷² Although the distinction should not be pressed too far, John appears primarily as a source for theoretical knowledge about the intellect, and the two Macarii for practical knowledge about demonic combat. In any event, these three prominent monks represent specific conduits of the traditions of “the blessed fathers,” which Evagrius claims to transmit.

Finally, Evagrius appears as an authoritative reader of the Bible, study of which emerges as an advanced ascetic practice. His mastery appears first in his ability to select “carefully” from the entire Bible the words that are most suited to demonic conflict, even though they are “scattered” and “difficult to find” (Prol.3). His cover letter to Loukios presents *Talking Back* as a particular form of scriptural reading, which purifies the intellect by transferring it from worldly matters to spiritual knowledge. Because other ascetic practices like fasting have the lower aim of eliminating the passions, reading the Scriptures emerges here as a more advanced endeavor, even sequentially following ascetic practice (*Ep.* 4.3-5). Appropriately, then, reading the Scriptures becomes an issue in combat with the final two demons, vainglory and pride, which tempt the monk either to abandon the effort or to accept the demons’ own interpretations (7.14; 8.21, 26). Implicitly, throughout *Talking Back*, it is Evagrius who can see the anti-demonic implications of numerous biblical passages that the less advanced reader might never have recognized. For this reason we should not draw a sharp distinction between the allegorical exegesis aimed at contemplation that Evagrius practices in such other works as his exegetical scholia and the *antirrhetic* use of the Bible here: references to the *antirrhetic* functions of biblical passages can be found in the scholia, and the anti-demonic force of some of the passages cited in *Talking Back* can be seen only through figural

⁷² *Thoughts* 33, 37.

interpretation. The Bible functions diversely at every level of Evagrius's spiritual program.⁷³

However Evagrius may have understood his own authority, the publication and dissemination of *Talking Back* in antiquity cemented his reputation as an outstanding opponent of the demons, familiar with their tactics and adept at countering them.

Evidence for Early Monasticism

As fascinating as *Talking Back* is as a window into a crucial aspect of early monastic spirituality, it is of interest also as a source for the lifestyle and experiences of the monks resident in northern Egypt in the late fourth century. To reconstruct early monasticism in Nitria, Scetis, and Kellia, historians have relied primarily on such sources as the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, the *History of the Monks of Egypt (Historia monachorum)*, and Palladius's *Lausiac History*. But these works are not entirely satisfactory: none of them was written in Egypt during the fourth century. Although it can be dated to the 390s, a Palestinian monk composed the *History of the Monks* after he had returned home from a journey among monastic settlements in Egypt. Palladius did live among the monks during this period, but he wrote his account decades later as a bishop in Asia Minor. As we have seen, though, it is possible that the Coptic fragments of Palladian material, including the *Life of Evagrius*, preserve an earlier work of Palladius. And the various collections of the *Sayings*, although they doubtless preserve oral traditions and even reflect smaller written collections from the fourth century, originated no earlier than the second half of the fifth century in Palestine. Historians, then, increasingly question the accuracy of a picture of northern Egyptian monasticism based primarily on these works. It is arguable that some scholars have become too

⁷³ On this point see Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer*, esp. 142–49 on antirrhetic texts in the *Scholia on Psalms*. Michael O'Laughlin draws too sharp a contrast in "The Bible, the Demons, and the Desert: Evaluating the *Antirrheticus* of Evagrius Ponticus," *Studia Monastica* 34 (1992): 201–15, at 202–4.

skeptical, especially of the *Sayings*, but there is no denying the shortcomings of these works as historical sources.⁷⁴

Evagrius, in contrast, composed his works while he lived as a monk in Nitria and Kellia. Although most of his works deal with matters of ascetic theory, spirituality, and biblical exegesis and provide few details of monastic social life, *Talking Back* refers constantly to the everyday lives of monks, circumstances that they regularly faced, and the emotions that monks felt. It represents a neglected source for the texture of early monastic life.⁷⁵ The monks of Kellia would spend their weeks in solitude but gather on Saturdays and Sundays for shared worship and conversation. The Coptic *Life of Evagrius* reports that these weekly gatherings offered monks the opportunity to consult Evagrius about their struggles with demonic thoughts:

This was his practice: The brothers would gather around him on Saturday and Sunday, discussing their thoughts with him throughout the night, listening to his words of encouragement until sunrise. And thus they would leave rejoicing and glorifying God, for Evagrius' teaching was very sweet. When they came to see him, he encouraged them, saying to them, "My brothers, if one of you has either a profound or a troubled thought, let him be silent until the brothers depart and let him reflect on it alone with me. Let us not make him speak in front of the brothers lest a little one perish on account of his thoughts and grief swallow him at a gulp."⁷⁶

It seems likely that much of the data found in *Talking Back*, the thoughts that it lists, came from these and other discussions Evagrius had with his fellow monks as well as from his own experience. In any event, this work would be useful to its monastic readers only if it genuinely reflected their experiences. Thus,

⁷⁴ See my brief discussions of these issues in *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 127–29, 145–46, with the literature cited there.

⁷⁵ See Bunge, "Der Prolog," 78, and O'Laughlin, "The Bible, the Demons, and the Desert," 206–7.

⁷⁶ Coptic *Life of Evagrius* 17; trans. Vivian, *Four Desert Fathers*, 84–85.

modern readers can learn from it about several facets of early monastic life, as long as we keep in mind that the information it contains comes only from the monks around Evagrius and so cannot be taken as representative of all monks, not even all monks in Nitria and Kellia. Moreover, it is Evagrius who selected the data that appears here: he decided which features of monastic life to include, which to exclude, and whether and how to evaluate them negatively (as demonically inspired or exploited).⁷⁷

The evidence of *Talking Back* suggests that many of the monks with whom Evagrius consulted came from relatively privileged social backgrounds. Monks remembered fondly the feasts that they used to enjoy in their pre-monastic lives (1.30, 36, 38–41), and they considered, sometimes with regret, the wealth and property that their families possessed (3.1, 3, 16–18, 22, 46, 50). Some monks remained entangled in worldly affairs through lawsuits (3.39), and others received criticism from friends and relatives when they failed to distribute their (presumably significant) wealth to them when they became monks (4.60). The prestige of a monk's relatives in the world could become a source of either discouragement (6.23) or pride (8.37). To be sure, Evagrius does mention monks whose families are poor (1.61) and monks who used to be or perhaps still are slaves (5.44). He speaks also of monks who are truly needy because, for example, illness has prevented them from working (3.7, 9, 10, 37, 38, 40, 57). But such poor monks usually appear as the potential objects of charity from the better-off monks whom Evagrius addresses. Monastic renunciation did not entirely erase the

⁷⁷ For more focused and detailed investigations of *Talking Back* (and other Evagrian works) along these lines, see David Brakke, "Making Public the Monastic Life: Reading the Self in Evagrius Ponticus' *Talking Back*," in *Religion and the Self in Antiquity*, ed. David Brakke, Michael L. Satlow, and Steven Weitzman, 222–33 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), and David Brakke, "Care for the Poor, Fear of Poverty, and Love of Money: Evagrius Ponticus on the Monk's Economic Vulnerability," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan Holman, 76–87 (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2008). See also the earlier observations of O'Laughlin, "The Bible, the Demons, and the Desert," 207–11.

monks' differing social levels, as well-born monks looked down on their inferiors (8.37) or taunted former or current slaves (5.44).

The loosely knit ascetic community that these monks joined had its own economic life and measures of status. Most monks engaged in some form of manual labor, which could either become a source of dissatisfaction or be pursued too vigorously in pursuit of greater income (1.61, 63, 64; 3.29; 6.1, 28). It seems that some advanced monks told their disciples how much labor to perform, a custom that could leave the junior monk vulnerable to exploitation (3.4, 6, 8). Evagrius does not mention precisely what kind of work these monks did (other sources suggest that basket weaving was the archetypal monastic trade), but he does refer to trips to the market (2.58), to loans between monks (3.40), (possibly) to cattle that monks owned (5.18), and to cooperative ventures in which monks transacted business on behalf of the wider community or served as a "steward" or "overseer" (3.15, 56; 7.10). The necessities of life that the monk needed to acquire consisted primarily of such basics as food and clothing. The primary foodstuffs that Evagrius mentions are bread and oil (1.8); to abstain from oil was a severe ascetic discipline (1.18). Wine was available, although discouraged (1.22, 26, 35, 67); vegetables and fruits appear as special treats or temptations (1.32, 45, 53, 54). There are many references to possessions in general, but few to anything specific: Evagrius warns, for example, against using either refreshment for the brothers or acquisition of a Bible as the pretense for acquiring more things (3.35).

Like any collection of human beings, the early monastic community had its share of conflicts. Book 5 of *Talking Back*, on anger, concerns mostly the anger that monks felt toward one another. Monks gossiped maliciously about one another (5.4, 6, 11), accused one another of bad behavior (5.14), plotted against other monks (5.20), failed to repay loans (5.57), and held grudges (5.1). Monks complained that their leaders were uncaring, callous, or insufficiently experienced in the monastic life (6.2, 55; 8.8). Their peers too, they could say, were unfeeling (6.30) or such a bad influence that the better choice would be to live alone (7.11). In a community in which social rank was determined primarily by acknowledged

wisdom, virtue, and success in the ascetic life, a certain amount of judging others and discussion of their virtues and shortcomings must have been necessary.⁷⁸ Without such discussions we would lack many of the *apophthegmata*. Yet such evaluation of self and others brought the monk into dangerous moral territory, which Evagrius considers here at length. To be sure, there were times when it was proper for one monk to chastise another (5.23). But especially for the advanced monk the danger of harshly or unfairly condemning other monks and believing oneself to be morally superior was very grave (8.31, 33, 38, 42, 49d, 53–54, 57).

If the moral scrutiny of his monastic brothers was not enough, the monk could also find himself the object of criticism or even persecution from his nonmonastic family members (5.34, 56), one sign of how the withdrawn monk remained connected to the world that he had left behind. Some monks wanted to try to persuade their skeptical relatives of the value of the monastic life, an impulse that Evagrius condemns as a desire to please people (7.39). Indeed, Evagrius shows no enthusiasm for the desire of monks to enter villages and cities even for seemingly good reasons, whether simply to teach (7.9, 18) or to encourage others to become monks (7.1). Monks could be indiscreet in talking to secular people about the monastic life (7.17). Still, there were several ways in which Evagrius's colleagues exercised authority in "the world": they settled disputes (7.12), served as guarantors for loans (7.16), and performed healings (7.35, 42). The wider church appears only occasionally in this work. It seems that monks were aware of the liturgical calendar and wanted to eat a little more on feast days (1.3, 29, 40, 60), which sometimes the leading monks allowed, to the mixed feelings of some (1.32). Ordination to the priesthood was the primary way that a monk might establish a formal connection to the church, and in *Talking Back*, as in Evagrius's other works, ordination consistently appears as a danger, fuel for the fire of pride (7.3, 8, 26, 36, 40).

⁷⁸ See Maud Gleason, "Visiting and News: Gossip and Reputation-Management in the Desert," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 501–21.

Finally, in these pages, we learn about some of the anxieties that troubled these monastic pioneers. Monks worried about the debilitating effects of their asceticism on their bodies (1.14, 19, 20, 43, 44, 47, 56, 57, 59, 65; 4.76) and about the health of their family members (4.42). They missed the relatives whom they had left (6.7, 43, 44, 53). They feared that they might go mad (4.43), and they fretted about the poor condition of their cells (6.26). They feared getting old (6.32). As we read about such touchingly human concerns, we cannot fail to feel somewhat closer to these ancient men who made the remarkable choice to seek God in the harsh desert. Yet the overall point of *Talking Back* is that these anxiety-producing obstacles to their knowledge of God were not natural human feelings to be understood, but suggestions of demons to be refuted. It is here that the spirituality of *Talking Back* becomes most distant from our ways of thinking about ourselves and so perhaps most able to say something new to us.

Note on Texts and Translations

Loukios's letter to Evagrius survives only in an Arabic version, published by Irénée Hausherr.¹ I made an initial draft translation from Hausherr's retroversion into Greek, and my colleague Professor Kevin Jaques compared this draft to the Arabic text and made suggestions for revision.

Evagrius's *Letter 4* survives completely only in a Syriac version, published by Wilhelm Frankenberg.² However, a Greek text for a substantial portion of the letter, running from the middle of section 3 to the end, appears in a thirteenth-century manuscript and has been published by Claire Guillaumont.³ My translation follows the Syriac, but then switches to the Greek when it becomes extant. The section divisions follow those found in Gabriel Bunge's German translation.⁴

¹ Irénée Hausherr, "Eulogius—Loukios," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 6 (1940): 216–20.

² Wilhelm Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus*, Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philologisch-historische Klasse, Neue Folge 13.2 (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1912), 568.

³ Claire Guillaumont, "Fragments grecs inédits d'Evagre le Pontique," in *Texte und Textkritik: Eine Aufsatzsammlung*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur 133, ed. Jürgen Dummer, 209–21 (Berlin: Akademie, 1987), at 219–20.

⁴ Gabriel Bunge, *Evagrius Pontikos: Briefe aus der Wüste*, Sophia: Quellen östlicher Theologie 24 (Trier: Paulinus, 1986), 214–16.

The Greek text of *Talking Back* apparently does not survive. Complete versions are extant in Syriac and Armenian, and there are fragments in Georgian and Sogdian. I have not consulted the Armenian and Georgian texts at all.⁵ In 1912 Frankenberg published the text of a single Syriac manuscript now in the British Library (B.L.Add. 14,578), which serves as the basis for this translation.⁶ In the notes “MS” refers to B.L. Add. 14,578. In 1985 Nicholas Sims-Williams published an edition and translation of the Sogdian fragments.⁷ The Sogdian fragments attest, although under a different numbering system, 1.3-10; 2.38-42, 46-50, 63-65; 3.2-7, 13, 17-19, 53-55, 58; 4.1-2, 35-36, 43-45: 6.20-24, 29-30.⁸ As he edited the Sogdian fragments, Sims-Williams also collated B.L. Add. 14,578 and several other Syriac manuscripts against Frankenberg’s text and noted several corrections and variants. I have sometimes incorporated these readings into my translation, especially when they agree with variants found in Sims-Williams’s English translation of the Sogdian fragments, and I have noted these instances where they occur. In addition, I made my own collations from microfilms of the entire text of B.L. Add. 14,578 and of portions of the text found in B.L. Add. 12,175, which have resulted in a few more corrections to Frankenberg’s text, also noted. I do not pretend to offer anything close to a new edition, which would require an account of all the surviving witnesses, including the Armenian and the Georgian. Should someone create such an edition, this translation would require replacement, but no one would be happier than I. I have benefited also from the several abridged or incomplete translations into modern languages that precede this one.

⁵ Armenian: Barshegh Sargisean, *The Life and Works of the Holy Father Evagrius Ponticus in an Armenian Version of the Fifth Century with Introduction and Notes* (in Armenian) (Venice: S. Ghazar, 1907), 217-323.

⁶ Frankenberg, *Euagrios*, 472-544.

⁷ Nicholas Sims-Williams, *The Christian Sogdian Manuscript C2*, *Schriften zur Geschichte und Kultur des alten Orients: Berliner Turfaufentexte* 12 (Berlin: Akademie, 1985), 168-82.

⁸ See the concordance at Sims-Williams, *Christian Sogdian Manuscript C2*, 181-82.

I have included all of the entries that appear in B.L. Add. 14,578, and I have followed its numbering system, with some corrections. The text in B.L. Add. 14,578 has 498 entries. Most modern scholars have counted 492 entries by adding the numbers that the manuscript gives for the final entries in each book. There is, however, one unnumbered entry in Book 4, following 4.19, and there are five in Book 8, following 8.49. These six unnumbered entries bring the total to 498. In the translation I have labeled these entries 4.19a and 4.19b, 8.49a, 8.49b, and so forth. It is likely that the scribe of the manuscript recalled the five unnumbered entries in Book 8, but not the one in Book 4, when he calculated a total of 497. There are also numbering problems in Book 3 at 3.19–27, which I have noted there and taken into account in my translation.

The only other Syriac manuscript that I have studied, B.L. Add. 12,175, contains fewer entries and uses a different numbering system. Like the Sogdian fragments, it numbers all the entries in the entire book sequentially and does not begin again with 1 at the beginning of each book. Thus, the first entry in Book 2 is numbered 70. The six unnumbered entries of 14,578 appear in this text in the same order and properly numbered, thus supporting their inclusion in this translation. The final entry in 12,175 is numbered 495, but this is a mistake: the text actually has 496 entries. 12,175 lacks two entries that appear in Book 3 in 14,578 (3.8, 10), and it contains numbering errors of its own. It uses each of the numbers 267 and 269 twice and does not use 419 at all, resulting in an undercount of 1. Although they share the same system, the numbering in the Sogdian fragments does not appear to match that of 12,175 precisely, suggesting either numbering errors or a different number of entries in that textual tradition. Any eventual critical edition of *Talking Back* will have to sort through such differences in numbering. It may be that the system in 12,175 and the Sogdian fragments is the more common one.

All that I have said thus far applies to the Syriac text of the prologue and the entries written by Evagrius. For the biblical passages I have translated the Greek text of either the Septuagint or the New Testament (with the exceptions of the two cases in

which I have not identified the biblical passage), as have nearly all my modern predecessors as translators of this work. The Syriac text (at least that of B.L. Add. 14,578 and 12,175) is markedly influenced by the Peshitta, and in numerous cases the relevance of the biblical passage to the entry with which it is paired becomes clear only when one reads the Greek. To be sure, the texts of the modern editions of the Septuagint and the New Testament were not those known to Evagrius, but they are doubtless closer to what Evagrius read than what one finds in the Syriac manuscripts of *Talking Back*. I have not noted the numerous differences between the Syriac text of the biblical passages and the Greek, except in the few cases in which the differences are striking enough that one might question whether I have correctly identified the biblical passage that Evagrius meant. Neither have I noted instances in which Frankenberg's text of the Syriac must be corrected in the case of biblical passages. My references to Old Testament passages are to the Septuagint, even where the Syriac text uses a different reference (e.g., I cite as from 1 Kingdoms a passage that the Syriac text identifies as "from Samuel"). My translations from the New Testament are adapted from, but not always identical with, the New Revised Standard Version.

My citations of most other works of Evagrius follow Evagrius of Pontus, *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Editorial Signs and Abbreviations

MS	B.L. Add. 14,578
12,175	B.L. Add. 12,175
< >	text restored by the translator, without attestation in any examined manuscript
[]	text added by the translator for clarity

Loukios, *Letter to Evagrius*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, a single God. Letter of the holy father Loukios to the holy father Evagrius. May God grant us the blessing of their prayers doubly.

You, O father, have lived in the desert, as if at a mother's breast, for these many years, doing battle with the invisible enemies. O honored father Evagrius, you have put on the weapons of the soul's fitting labors, and you have become such an experienced combatant against the spirits of wickedness that not only have you become an object of fear among the demons, but you have also summoned others, so that they too might become combatants against the evil spirits and filthy thoughts.

Therefore, I ask your fatherhood to classify the fight against the beings of darkness, and I entreat your holiness to compose for me some clear treatise concerning it and to acquaint me with the demons' entire treachery, which by their own efforts and according to their own undertaking they produce in the path of monasticism. Send it to us, so that we, your friends, might also easily cast off from ourselves those evil suggestions of theirs. For I know that you will attend to the one who requests from you spiritual things, and therefore I have addressed this to you. Farewell in the Lord.

Evagrius, *Letter 4*

1. I have seen the letter of your holiness, in which you amply demonstrated your love for us and commanded us to send you something from our labors. I had not wanted to send anything of my own accord because of my embarrassment in the face of your temperance. But now, because I have been commanded, I have readily obeyed and have sent you the treatise of responses, so that you might read it, correct it, and complete whatever is lacking, in case we have presented any of the unclean thoughts imprecisely or we have not properly found the answer that opposes them. I confess to your reverence that for some time I have not dealt with the demonic thoughts as one ought because I have been frequently hindered by them, and after your departure from me I have endured unspeakable sufferings from them. But now I praise our Lord because of the things that I have heard and learned about you, just as I have prayed.

2. Be for me, then, a proclaimer of continence, a listener of humility, and a destroyer “of thoughts and of every proud obstacle that is raised against the knowledge of Christ” [2 Cor 10:4-5], so that at the time of prayer the intellect might have the frankness of speech that belongs to those who transcend these [thoughts] and so that it [the intellect] might not be weighed or bent down because it is either knocked about by anger or drawn aside by desire. Such things happen to irascible and gluttonous persons who do not practice abstinence during the day and so do not escape evil illusions during the night.

3. So you too know through our Lord Jesus that reading the divine Scriptures is very useful for purification because it removes the intellect from this visible world's anxieties, from which stems the perversity of unclean thoughts, which through their passions bind the intellect and attach it to corporeal things. Do not hesitate,¹ therefore, to converse with the brothers, to read the Scriptures at the appointed time, not to "love the world and anything in the world" [1 John 2:15], and to keep watch over thoughts, which is a wolf-killing poison that the demons despise.

4. When the battle takes place with discernment, it is filled with many thoughts, but it creates a great purity of thinking because the demons can no longer mock or accuse the soul. For just as practical wisdom is assigned the reasonable judgment of practical matters, so too discernment is entrusted with the impressions that occur in thinking, discerning holy and profane, clean and unclean thoughts. And, according to the prophetic saying, it [discernment] has experience of the tricks of the mocking demons, which imitate both perception and memory in order to deceive the rational soul that strives for the knowledge of Christ.

5. And so everyone who has enlisted in this army must request discernment from the Lord without neglecting the things that contribute to the reception of this gift, which are, to speak in outline, self-control, gentleness, keeping vigil, withdrawal, and frequent prayers, which are supported by reading the divine Scriptures—for nothing is as conducive to pure prayer as reading. Ascetic practice cuts off the passions by destroying desire, sadness, and anger, but the reading that follows it [ascetic practice] removes even love for the representations by transferring it² to the formless, divine, and simple knowledge, which the Lord symbolically named in the gospels "room" [Matt 6:6], having indicated the hidden Father.

¹ Here begins the translation from the Greek fragment published by Claire Guillaumont.

² Most likely "it" refers to the intellect, which does appear in the (otherwise rather different) Syriac version.

Talking Back

A Treatise of Evagrius on the Eight Thoughts

PROLOGUE

[1] From the rational nature that is “beneath heaven” [Qo 1:13], part of it fights; part assists the one who fights; and part contends with the one who fights, strenuously rising up and making war against him. The fighters are human beings; those assisting them are God’s angels; and their opponents are the foul demons. It is not because of the severity of the enemies’ power, nor because of negligence on the part of the assistants, but because of slackening on the part of the fighters that knowledge of God disappears and perishes from them.

[2] 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].¹ 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,² 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 his folly and showed it that he has learned that there is an antidote [against it] according to the Scriptures.

[3] 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.

[4] 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. This we learn from Job when he said, “Whenever I begin to speak, they wound me” [Job 6:4], and also from David when he said, “I am peaceful. Whenever I spoke to them, they made war against me gratuitously” [Ps 119:7]. 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

¹ MS: “Rather, answer a fool according to your wisdom . . .” The LXX passage distinguishes between answering a fool “in proportion to” (*pros*) his folly and answering a fool “in opposition to” (*kata*) his folly, and it is this distinction that Evagrius seeks to clarify. The Syriac translator perhaps misunderstood the particular meaning of *kata* here and so falsely corrected the text.

² 12,175 reads the singular “demon.”

our trust in Christ and keep his commandments, we will cross over the Jordan and capture the city of palms.³ 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. 1 Thess 5:17]. I would be amazed if there were a person who could fight the battle that takes place in the intellect or could be crowned with the garlands of righteousness [cf. 2 Tim 4:7-8] while satisfying himself with bread and water, something that quickly stirs up his anger and causes him to despise and neglect prayer and to associate with heretics. For St. Paul said, “Athletes exercise self-control in all things” [1 Cor 9:25] and to all people they show constant humility [cf. Titus 3:2], lifting up their hands everywhere without anger or evil intentions [cf. 1 Tim 2:8].

[5] Therefore, it is proper for us, when we labor at this task, to equip ourselves with the weapons of the spirit [cf. Eph 6:11-13] and to show the Philistines that we will fight against sin to the point of blood [cf. Heb 12:4], as we destroy evil intentions and “every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God” [2 Cor 10:5]. We are zealous, so that “we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ” [Rom 4:10; 2 Cor 5:10] not merely as a monastic man but as a monastic intellect. For a monastic man is one who has departed from the sin that consists of deeds and action, while a monastic intellect is one who has departed from the sin that arises from the thoughts that are in our intellect and who at the time of prayer sees the light of the Holy Trinity.⁴

[6] Now, however, is the time, “through the power of our Lord Jesus Christ” [1 Cor 5:4] to contend first with the thoughts of the demon of gluttony and, after these, with the thoughts of the seven

³That is, Jericho (Deut 34:3); see *Thoughts* 20. Here the Jordan River represents the border between the “desert” of ascetic practice (*praktikē*) and the “promised land” of knowledge (*theoretikē*) (Gabriel Bunge, “Evagrius Pontikos: Der Prolog des ‘Antirrhētikos,’” *Studia Monastica* 39 [1997]: 76–105, at 91, citing *Kephalaia Gnostica* 6.49 and *Scholia on Proverbs* 17.2).

⁴ See *Reflections* 15–16.

other demons, which I have written in sequence at the beginning of the book on the monastic life.⁵ I have struggled “to open my mouth” [Ps 118:131] and to speak to God, to his holy angels, and to my own afflicted soul. I have made public the entire contest of the monastic life, which the Holy Spirit taught David through the Psalms and the blessed fathers handed over to us, but which I have named in this book after these [demons]. For us the entire struggle will take place through the thoughts that approach us from each of these eight demons. But I have written and quoted for each of the thoughts an answer from the Holy Scriptures that is able to cut it off.

⁵ Evagrius refers to the *Praktikos*, in which he lists the eight thoughts or demons in chapter 6: see the discussion of Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont in Evagrius Ponticus, *Traité pratique, ou Le moine*, Sources chrétiennes 170–71 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971) 1:405–6.

FIRST BOOK

Against the Thoughts of Gluttony

From the Book of Genesis

1. Against the thoughts that seek without the labor of fasting to cultivate the rational land:

Issachar has desired that which is good, resting between the inheritances. And because he saw that the resting place is good and the land is fertile, he subjected his shoulder to labor and became a farmer (Gen 49:14-15).

From Exodus

2. Against the thought that says to me, “Do not torment your soul with a lot of fasting that gains you nothing and does not purify your intellect”:

He made the bronze basin and its bronze stand from the mirrors of the women who fasted, who fasted by the doors of the tabernacle of witness, in the day in which he set it up (Exod 38:26).¹

¹ MS: “He made the bronze basin and its bronze stand for the washing of the women who fasted and came to pray at the door of the tabernacle” (cf. Exod 30:18, from which likely comes the phrase “for the washing”). The entry number “2” is missing in the MS, but appears in 12,175.

<From Numbers>

3. Against the thoughts that stir up in us the desire to eat meat on a feast day and that advise us also to eat on account of the body's illness:

And to the people say, "Purify yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat. . . . You shall not eat one day, not two, not five days, not ten days, and not twenty days. For a month of days you shall eat, until it [the meat] comes out of your nostrils. And it shall be nausea to you because you disobeyed the Lord, who is among you" (Num 11:18-20).

From Deuteronomy

4. Against the thought that seeks to be filled with food and drink and gives no heed to the harm that springs from filling the belly:

Having eaten and been filled, pay attention to yourself, lest you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Deut 6:11-12).²

5. Against the thought that says to me, "The command to fast is burdensome":³

The command that I give you this day is not burdensome, nor is it far from you (Deut 30:11).

6. Against the thought that desires to be filled⁴ with food and drink and supposes that nothing evil for the soul comes from them:

And Jacob ate and was filled, and the beloved one kicked; he grew fat and became thick and broad, and he abandoned the God who made him and departed from God his Savior (Deut 32:15).

²The entry number "4" is missing in the MS, but appears in 12,175.

³Frankenberg's text incorrectly lacks a dalet before *yqyr*.

⁴Frankenberg's text incorrectly gives *dtsbl*, while the MS has *dtsb^c*.

From Samuel

7. Against the thought of gluttony that compels me to eat at the ninth hour:

God do so to me and more besides if I eat bread or anything else before the sun goes down (2 Kgdms 3:35).

From the Book of Kings

8. Against the thought that suggests to me the loss of bread, oil, and other things that we need:

Thus says the Lord, "The jar of meal will not run out, and the jug of oil will not be diminished, until the day when the Lord gives rain upon the earth" (3 Kgdms 17:14).

9. Against the soul that wants to follow the path of the saints while being full of bread and water:

And the king of Israel said, "Take Michaias and send him to Semer the ruler of the city, and tell Joas the ruler's son to put him in prison and to have him eat bread of affliction and water of affliction until I return in peace" (3 Kgdms 22:26-27).

10. Against the thought that says to us, "Look, the provisions that we have gathered are not sufficient both for us and for the brothers who come to us":

For thus says the Lord, "They will eat and leave [some remaining]." And they ate and left [some remaining], according to the word of the Lord (4 Kgdms 4:43-44).

From David

11. Against the thought that embitters me in the life of harsh poverty:

The Lord shepherds me, and I will lack nothing (Ps 22:1).

12. Against the thought that, even when there is no scarcity, gathers more bread than it needs, on the pretext of hospitality:

I was young, and I have indeed grown old. I have not seen a righteous person abandoned or his progeny seeking bread (Ps 36:25).

13. Against the thought that is attentive to food and clothing, but rejects attention to the truth:

I will declare my iniquity and I will attend to my sin (Ps 37:19).

14. Against the thoughts that advise us and say, “Do not live so severely; through fasting and constant labor you will wear out your weak body”:

And he labored forever, and he will live to the end, so that he will not see corruption when he sees sages dying (Ps 48:10).⁵

15. Against the thought that says to me, “Do not wear yourself out so unsparingly and afflict your soul by keeping vigil”:

A broken and contrite heart God will not despise (Ps 50:19).

16. Against the thought that is anxious about food and drink and diligent about where it can get them:

Cast your anxiety upon the Lord, and he will sustain you (Ps 54:23).⁶

17. Against the thought that suggests to me, “Keeping vigil does not benefit you at all; rather, it gathers many thoughts against you”:

I have watched and have become like a sparrow dwelling alone on a roof (Ps 101:8).⁷

⁵The entry number “14” is missing in the MS, but appears in 12,175.

⁶ Evagrius often cites this verse in urging the monk to overcome anxiety about having enough: see *Foundations of the Monastic Life* 4; *To Eulogios* 28.30; *Thoughts* 6.

⁷ Evagrius calls the vigilant monk a sparrow in *To Monks* 46.

18. Against the thought that rebukes us because we abstain from oil and that does not remember that David did this and said:

My knees have become weak from fasting, and my flesh has been altered by [the lack of] oil (Ps 108:24).

19. Against the thoughts that hinder us from our way of life by instilling fear in us and saying, “A miserable death results from austere fasting”:

I will not die, but live, and I will recount the Lord’s works (Ps 117:17).

20. Against the thoughts that persuade me to desist a little from keeping frequent vigils and to give a little rest to the weak and miserable body:

I will not go into the tabernacle of my house; I will not get up upon the couch of my bed; I will not give sleep to my eyes nor drowsiness to my eyelids nor rest to my temples, until I find a place for the Lord, a tabernacle for the God of Jacob (Ps 131:3-5).

From the Proverbs of Solomon

21. Against the thought that predicts to us that famine or great affliction is coming soon:

The Lord will not famish a righteous soul, but he will overthrow the life of the ungodly (Prov 10:3).

22. Against the thought that suggests to me desire for wine on the pretext that the liver and spleen are harmed by water:

He who takes pleasure in banquets of wine will leave dishonor in his strongholds (Prov 12:11a).

23. Against the thought that is bound by concern about the desire for foods and rejects concern about achievements in virtue:

With everyone who is careful there is abundance, but the pleasure-taking and the indolent will be in want (Prov 14:23).

24. Against the thought that weeps over simple foods and dry bread:

A morsel with pleasure in peace is better than a house full of many good things and unjust sacrifices with strife (Prov 17:1).

25. Against the thoughts that persuade us on a feast day to show a little mercy to our body by offering it a few delicacies:

Delight does not suit a fool, [nor is it proper] if a servant begins to rule with arrogance (Prov 19:10).

26. Against the thought that, in the absence of serious illness, coaxes us to drink wine and prophesies to us about pain in the stomach and the entire digestive system:

Wine is an intemperate thing, and drunkenness leads to insolence, and anyone who is tangled up in it is no sage (Prov 20:1).

27. 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).

28. Against the thought that hinders us by suggesting that we not give from our bread to those in need and by saying to me, “That person can [find mercy] anywhere, but we cannot approach any stranger’s door”:

The one who shows mercy will himself be supported, for he gave to the poor from his own bread (Prov 22:9).

29. Against the thoughts that on a feast day gently approach us and say to us that we might just once in a long stretch of time taste meat and wine:

Do not be a wine-drinker, and do not stay long at feasts and sales of meat, for every drunkard and customer of prostitutes will be poor, and every sluggard will clothe himself in tattered and ragged garments (Prov 23:20-21).

30. Against the thought that recalls delicacies of the past and remembers pleasant wines and the cups that we used to hold in our hands when we would recline at table and drink:

For if you set your eyes on bowls and cups, you later will go more naked than a pestle. At the end he stretches himself out like someone struck by a snake and through whom venom is diffused as by a horned serpent (Prov 23:31–32).

31. Against the thoughts that entice us to fill our belly with bread and water:

Do not give the bed of a righteous man to a sinner, and do not go astray in satiety of the couch.⁸

32. Against the thoughts that we have in opposition to the shame in which we respect the fathers when they persuade us to relax the fast and to eat vegetables during a feast:

For there is a shame that brings sin, and a shame that is glory and grace (Sir 4:21).

33. Against the demon that persuades me through its flattery and says to me with promises, “You will no longer suffer any harm from food and drink because your body is weak and dry from prolonged fasting”:

A weeping enemy promises everything with his lips, but in his heart he contrives deceits (Prov 26:24).

34. Against the thought that shows me God’s commandments as if they were difficult and tells me that they bring many difficulties and miseries upon the body and soul:

The wounds of a friend are more trustworthy than the spontaneous kisses of an enemy (Prov 27:6).

⁸The text for nos. 31–32 may be corrupt. The biblical quotation for no. 31 is not clear. 12,175 reads “satiety of the belly” rather than “satiety of the couch.” Number 32 possibly contains remnants of two entries (“against the thought that . . .”; “against the shame that . . .”), and its quotation comes from Sirach, not Proverbs.

*From Qoheleth*⁹

35. Against the thought that asks for a little wine in the absence of illness and says to me, “Look, it was for the sake of human beings that wine was created”:

He has made all things beautiful in his season (Qo 3:11).

36. Against the thought that reminds me of past feasting and drinking and wants [to return to] this custom:

It is better to go into a house of mourning than to go into a house of drinking (Qo 7:2).

37. Against the vain thought that persuades us to extend our discipline beyond what is appropriate by putting sackcloth on our loins, setting out for the desert, living continuously under the sky, and tending wild plants; and that advises us as well to flee from the sight of human beings who comfort us and who are comforted by us:

Do not be very righteous or especially wise, lest you be deceived (Qo 7:16).

From Job

38. Against the thoughts that remind us of past feasts and show us the difficulty that has occurred:

If we have received good things from the Lord's hand, shall we not endure evil things? (Job 2:10).

*From Micah*¹⁰

39. Against the soul's thought that travels to its corporeal kinfolk and finds a table filled with all kinds of foods:

Get up and leave, for this is not your place of rest because of uncleanness (Mic 2:10).

⁹This heading is missing in the MS, but appears in 12,175.

¹⁰This heading is missing in the MS, but appears in 12,175.

From Habakkuk

40. Against the thought of gluttony that on feast days enumerates for me many people reclining at the finest table, exulting and rejoicing:¹¹

**But I will exult in the Lord and rejoice in God my Savior
(Hab 3:18).**

From Isaiah

41. Against the thoughts that remind us of pleasures and of a table that has been filled with all good things and praise these things as better than the monastic life:¹²

**Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who make
darkness light and light darkness, who make bitter sweet and
sweet bitter (Isa 5:20).**

42. Against the soul's thought that has become tired and weary of the hunger that comes with little bread and scant water:

**And the Lord will give you bread of affliction and scant water,
and yet those who deceive you will no longer come near you;
for your eyes will see those who deceive you, and your ears
will hear the words of those who went after you to lead you
astray (Isa 30:20-21).**

From Jeremiah

43. To the Lord concerning the infirmity of my body, which has been weakened by much fasting and diminished by an austere

¹¹ MS: "Against the thought of gluttony that on feast days shows us many people reclining at table < . . . >, exulting and rejoicing." 12,175 reads "enumerates for me" and fills the lacuna.

¹² MS: "Against the thoughts that remind us of the pleasures of a table that has been filled with good < . . . > and praise them as better than the monastic life." The translation reflects the text of 12,175.

discipline, and concerning my soul, which is filled with evil thoughts of fornication:

Lord, remember me and visit me, and vindicate me from before those who persecute me without delay. Know how I have received reproach for your sake from those who set at naught your words (Jer 15:15).

44. To the Lord concerning the demon that chills the stomach and all the sinews of the body, and casts great weakness into the body as if from hunger and prolonged illness:

See, Lord, that I am afflicted, that my belly is troubled and my heart is turned within me (Lam 1:20).

*From Daniel*¹³

45. Against the soul that is not satisfied with bread for food and water for drink, but wants vegetables along with these, and does not remember the affliction of the seeds that Daniel and his companions ate:

Then Daniel said to Amelsad, whom the chief eunuch had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, "Test your children for ten days, and give us seeds, and let us eat, and let us drink water. And let our appearance be seen by you and the appearance of the children that eat at the king's table, and deal with your servants as you see." And he listened to them and tested them for ten days. And at the end of the ten days, their appearance looked better and stronger in flesh than the children who ate at the king's table. And Amelsad took away their supper and the wine of their drink, and he gave them seeds (Dan 1:11-16).¹⁴

¹³The MS lacks "Daniel," which appears in 12,175.

¹⁴Ironically, in *Thoughts* 35 Evagrius says that the demon of gluttony may adduce this story about Daniel and his companions in order to tempt the monk to undertake too severe an ascetic regime with respect to food.

From the Gospel of Matthew

46. Against the soul that at the time of attack wants to find strong armor:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished (Matt 4:1-2).

47. Against the thoughts that are anxious about food and clothing on the pretexts of hospitality, illnesses, and prolonged miseries of the body:

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? (Matt 6:25).¹⁵

48. Against the soul that is bound by gluttony and supposes that by refreshing the body with delicacies it travels the road of life:

For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who take it (Matt 7:14).

From the Gospel of Luke

49. Against the thought that hinders us from giving to the needy from our food and clothing on the pretexts, “The provisions are not enough for both us and them” or “There is someone weaker or in greater need than this person, and we should give to that person rather than this one, for this one is lazy and wants to eat and be clothed without working”:

Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise (Luke 3:11).

¹⁵ See *Thoughts 6* for a discussion of freedom from anxiety that also cites this verse.

From Acts

50. Against the soul that loves the desires and collects food and clothing for itself alone:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need (Acts 2:44-45).¹⁶

51. Against the soul that grows weary in the affliction that comes upon it from restriction of bread and water:

It is through many afflictions that we must enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).

The Apostle: From the Letter to the Romans

52. Against the thoughts that persuade us to show a little care for our body by eating and drinking:

Make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Rom 13:14).

53. Against the thoughts that entice us to be comforted with a little treat of vegetables:

The weak eat vegetables (Rom 14:2).

From the First Letter to the Corinthians

54. Against the thought that at harvest time casts into us the desire for fruits:

Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one (1 Cor 9:25).

¹⁶The entry number “50” is missing in the MS, but appears in 12,175.

From the Second Letter to the Corinthians

55. Against the thoughts that arise in us because of great need and that gradually relax the soul's vigor:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies (2 Cor 4:8-10).

56. Against the thought that depicts before our eyes a disease of the stomach, liver, and spleen, and a blowing that exceeds [the capacity of] the navel:

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day (2 Cor 4:16).

57. Against the thoughts that arise in us as our entire body becomes gradually corrupted:

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens (2 Cor 5:1).

58. Against the thought that arouses compassion in us, persuades us to give to the poor, and afterward makes us sad and annoyed about what we gave:

Not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver, and the one who has compassion on the poor will be supported (2 Cor 9:7; Prov 22:8-9).¹⁷

59. Against the thought that depicts in us severe weakness from diseases that are about to arise in us from fasting, and that persuades us to eat a little cooked food:

For whenever I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12:10).

¹⁷ The MS has combined the two passages.

*From the Letter to the Ephesians*¹⁸

60. Against the thought that wants to be filled with wine on a feast day:

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts (Eph 5:18-19).¹⁹

From the Letter to the Philippians

61. Against the thoughts that make our soul neither want to gather provisions through manual labor nor be persuaded to receive something from its family because they are poor and reside at a great distance, but rather advise it to fill its need from others:

The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God (Phil 4:5-6).

62. Against the thought that predicts to me hunger and loss of bread and suggests to me the disgrace of receiving a favor from others:

In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me (Phil 4:12-13).²⁰

¹⁸ "From" is missing in the MS, but appears in 12,175.

¹⁹ The number "60" is missing in the MS, but appears in 12,175.

²⁰ Evagrius warns elsewhere against feeling ashamed to accept material help from others: *Foundations of the Monastic Life* 4; *Praktikos* 9.

From the First Letter to the Thessalonians

63. Against the thought that hinders us from working with our hands and persuades us to expect to receive what we need from others:

But we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one (1 Thess 4:10-12).

From the Second Letter to the Thessalonians

64. Against the thinking that hinders us from working with our hands and compels us to eat bread and to fill ourselves:

Anyone unwilling to work should not eat (2 Thess 3:10).

From the Letter to the Hebrews

65. Against the thought that says that the monastic discipline is difficult and extremely burdensome, that through affliction it cruelly lays waste to our body, and that it does not profit the soul:

Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Heb 12:11).

66. Against the thinking that is diligent about food and neglects compassion for the needy:

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God (Heb 13:16).

From the First Letter to Timothy

67. Against the thought that, in the absence of pain in the stomach and severe illnesses, advises us to drink wine by suggesting to us the blessed Apostle's direction when in his letter he commanded Timothy on this point:

Keep yourself pure. No longer drink only water, but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments (1 Tim 5:22-23).

From the Letter of James

68. Against the thoughts that turn us back toward the world and its commandments:

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God (Jas 4:4).

From the Letter of John

69. Against the thought that supposes that the commandment to fast is burdensome:

And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith (1 John 5:3-4).

Blessed is our Lord Jesus Christ, our God, who has given us the victory over the thoughts of the demon of gluttony!