
Barnaby Hughes, bepress (DC Admins)
At a time when many Christians, let alone non-Christians, do not believe in the existence of the devil, demons, angels or immaterial spirits of any sort, it may seem strange to revive this ancient monastic curio. Yet, even those who do not believe in such things can find in this book practical guidance and inspiration for combating their own inner demons. It is for this reason, rather than out of any interest in exorcism (so increasingly evident in popular films), that Cistercian Publications now make Evagrius of Pontus’ Talking Back available to modern readers. This audience includes not only thousands of English-speaking monks, nuns and religious, but a much larger educated lay readership often associated with local monasteries, as well as academics specialising in monastic studies, spirituality and related disciplines.

Evagrius (345–399), originally from Pontus, in Asia Minor, and closely associated with the Cappadocian Fathers, became a monk and renowned spiritual teacher in Egypt. In addition to works of biblical exegesis and advanced theology, he wrote practical treatises on the monastic life, of which Talking Back is one. Multiple studies and translations of other Evagrian texts have recently been published. Moreover David Brakke’s translation of Evagrius’ Talking Back follows closely on the heels of his recent study Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity (2006). Brakke’s introduction to this translation succinctly distils some of the arguments put forth in that book.

Talking Back consists of 498 biblical quotations, each preceded by a person, thought or situation to which it should be addressed during demonic conflict. For facility of reference, the treatise is divided into eight books corresponding to each of the demons that afflicted the monk: gluttony, listlessness, fornication, vainglory, pride, love of money, sadness and anger. These are the same eight demons that John Cassian in the West transposed inwardly into the eight evil thoughts or vices, described in the Institutes. The obvious model for such a collection of biblical citations is Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness: every time the devil taunted him, Jesus quoted an appropriate passage from the scriptures in response. Brakke shows that Evagrius also had other literary models to follow, such as Athanasius’ Life of St Antony.
The aim of *Talking Back*, argues Brakke, is to prevent the first movements from becoming fully fledged sins, to check them at the outset. As Evagrius writes in the prologue:

In the time of struggle, when the demons make war against us and hurl their arrows at us, 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. (p.49)

Thus, by constantly meditating on certain key biblical passages that provide warning, consolation and moral exhortation, the reader will be saved from temptation. *Talking Back* is thus not just a ready reference for monastic spiritual combat, but a biblically centred and practical guide to growing in holiness.

*Barnaby Hughes*