

The Arrow Prayer in the Coptic Tradition

Anthony St Shenouda

MA, Macquarie University Dec 2007

Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
Department of Ancient History, Faculty of Arts, Macquarie University

December 2018

3- Arrow Prayer as Weapon of War

The purpose of this chapter is two fold. The first is to show the heavy reliance on the name of Jesus and short verses from the psalms in private prayer to fight against demons. The other purpose of the chapter is to show the wide spread use of the war imagery when using short prayers. This is particularly important since the earliest attestation to the name of the prayer comes from the twentieth century which is very late attestation. In this chapter I would like to demonstrate that though the name of the prayer was not used in earlier centuries yet the imagery of short prayers as weapons against the demons was well known in Christian texts in general and monastic texts in particular.

Demons have been a regular feature of the monastic literature since the first recorded monastic biography, the *Life* of Anthony. In fact, we can see that a substantial part of the *Life* revolves around fighting, or rather the saints' victory over demons or advice on how to discern the tricks of the demons²⁹⁶. As early as the fifth paragraph, we see Anthony having his first encounter with demons, and it is also this chapter that reveals many aspects about demonology that are consistent with other Christian writings from other genres as early as Origen, Irenaeus, and Justin the Martyr and continues throughout other ascetical and hagiographical writings. Eshagh brings to our attention the fact that the early monastic fathers living in the desert are perceived by an early

²⁹⁶ Harmless, 2004, p. 85.

Egyptian peasant to live where demons live, as the desert for an ancient Egyptians was the home of demons²⁹⁷.

One of these aspects is the *Life*'s undertone as a theological apology against heretics²⁹⁸; in the case of the *Life* of Anthony, it is the Arians, where St Athanasius emphasises how the incarnation was the reason for St Anthony's victory: "he who had vaunted himself against flesh and blood was being rebuffed by a flesh and blood human being. For working with Anthony was the Lord, *who for us bore flesh and gave the body victory over the Devil*"²⁹⁹. In the closing paragraph of the *Life*, he again uses it as an apology against the pagans: "If the need arises, read this also to the pagans so they too may know in the same way that not only is our Lord Jesus Christ God and Son of God, but also that those who truly serve him and faithfully believe in him are *repudiating the demons whom the pagan themselves believe to be Gods*"³⁰⁰.

The other aspect, which is much more common, is the use of Anthony's victory as an inspiration for other monastics to enjoy the same victory. In the preface, St Athanasius states that his intention in writing the *Life* was to *emulate his zeal*. Also, in paragraph five, he declares the victory that was won by Anthony in his first battle with the demons was "so that *each of those who struggle like Anthony* can say it is not

²⁹⁷ Eshagh, 2016, p. 55.

²⁹⁸ Some scholars such as Brakke (Brakke, 1998, pp. 201-203) have reduced the *Life* of Anthony to a work of political propaganda while others such as Harmless, 2004, p. 93 and Urbano, 2008, pp. 894-895 have taken a moderate view of Athanasius' political stances.

²⁹⁹ *Greek Life of Anthony*: 5.7 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 69 emphasis is mine.

³⁰⁰ *Greek Life of Anthony*: 94.2 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 259 emphasis is mine.

I but the grace of God that is in me”³⁰¹. For St Athanasius the monk’s life should be in the state of constant warfare to ensure his spiritual progress³⁰².

David Brakke³⁰³, in his treatment of the demonic attacks that St Anthony endured, notices a progression in the way that demons launched their attacks. The first attack came in the form of “thoughts” that distracted him by wondering about his sister’s wellbeing, the possessions he left behind, pleasure of life in the form of food and the luxuries of life. When St Anthony was able to conquer these thoughts, he was faced by a second wave of attacks, which was in the form of visions aimed at making him feel confused, helpless, and dejected. The third wave of attacks was directed at the body, which came in the form of physical attacks and the appearance of women. As Brakke finally remarks, “these are not systematic, precisely ordered lists, but they provided in part the ingredients for Evagrius’s carefully ordered set of eight thoughts, which would serve as the template for the monk’s struggle with the demonic as Evagrius envisioned it”³⁰⁴.

The struggle of the monk with demons was often depicted in monastic writings as an imagery of warfare. This warfare was sometimes between the demons and angels³⁰⁵, other times between the monk and the demons. Furthermore, the attacks are sometimes initiated by the demons who try to distract the monk from his prayer or lead him to fall into fornication, which is a very common scenario in monastic literature. To a lesser extent, the monks are sometimes depicted as attacking the

³⁰¹ *Greek Life of Anthony: 5.7* Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 69 emphasis is mine.

³⁰² Marx, 1956, p. 114.

³⁰³ Brakke, 2006.

³⁰⁴ Brakke, 2006, p. 28.

³⁰⁵ As depicted in, *Macarius the Great: 33* Ward, 1984a, p. 134; *Moses: 1* Ward, 1984a, p. 138.

monks, as David commanded Joab to “take the city and sack it”³⁰⁶. Abba Poemen explains further, “the city is the enemy”³⁰⁷. In a later hagiography of St John of Scetes, he narrates that the demons once appeared to an elder named Youanis, saying: “stop, stop fighting me! I will not bother you again!”³⁰⁸ Abba Youanis continued:

I said to him: ‘and what are these on your body?’

He said: ‘these are arrows.’

I said to him: ‘who did all this to you’

He said: ‘you are the one’

I said to him: ‘and how did I do this to you?’

He said to me: ‘every time you stand up to pray, one of these pierces my body’³⁰⁹

In other instances in the *sayings* there seems to be a confusion regarding who is fighting whom, as an anchorite once asked, “why do you fight me like this, Satan?” Satan replied, “it is you who fights me so greatly”³¹⁰. Elsewhere, a demon is reluctant to wake up a sleeping monk because one time when he woke him “he got up and burned me by singing psalms and praying”³¹¹.

Paragraph five of the *Life* of St Anthony clearly presents the struggle of St Anthony with the demons in the language of the martyr’s struggle with beasts in the arena, as noted by Brakke:

³⁰⁶ *Poemen*: 193 Ward, 1984a, p. 194.

³⁰⁷ *Poemen*: 193 Ward, 1984a, p. 194.

³⁰⁸ I used the Arabic edition in Zanetti, 1996, pp. 233-335.

³⁰⁹ Zanetti, 1996, pp. 233-335.

³¹⁰ *Anonymous*: 5.35 Stewart, 1997, p. 27.

³¹¹ *Anonymous*: 6.36 Stewart, 1997, p. 27.

Athanasius describes this combat, whether mental, physical, or visual, with the vocabulary of the arena: it is a “contest” (*Athlon*), in which the devil is “thrown for a fall” (*katapalaiein*) like the wrestler (VA 5.3, 7.1). Like the martyrs before him, Anthony proves paradoxically to be powerful and triumphant when he is the most vulnerable³¹².

Later on in the *Life*, Athanasius is consistent in using the martyr language when he describes Anthony after a physical attack from the devil as “lying on the ground, unable to speak because of the torturous blows”³¹³. In another instance, they appear to him in the shapes of various beasts that tortured martyrs in the arena: “the lion was roaring, wanting to leap on him; the bull acted as though it would gore him; the snake crawled forward but did not reach him; the wolf rushed at him, but then stopped”³¹⁴.

Similarly, in the *AP* there are numerous examples of the imagery of the monk’s fight against demons expressed in the language of war. When the noble woman went to visit Arsenius, he explained to her why it was wrong of her to be in the desert, saying: “Do you not realise that you are a woman, and that it is through women that *the enemy wars* against the Saints?”³¹⁵ Also when St Macarius asked a certain monk called Theopemptus about his spiritual life, he asked him if his “thoughts war against” him³¹⁶. Abba Agathon even calls the hard-working monk a “warrior”³¹⁷. Further on,

³¹² Brakke, 2006, p. 30.

³¹³ *Greek Life of Anthony*: 8.2 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 79.

³¹⁴ *Greek Life of Anthony*: 9.7 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 83.

³¹⁵ *Arsenius*: 28 Ward, 1984a, p. 14, emphasis is mine.

³¹⁶ *Macarius the Great*: 3 Ward, 1984a, p. 127.

³¹⁷ *Agathon*: 1 Ward, 1984a, p. 20.

Abba Agathon makes the connection between the Prayer, Warfare, and Demons in the following saying:

I think there is no labour greater than that of prayer to God. For every time a man wants to pray, his enemies, the demons, want to prevent him, for they know that it is only by turning him from prayer that they can hinder his journey. Whatever good work a man undertakes, if he perseveres in it, he will attain rest. But prayer is warfare to the last breath³¹⁸.

The use of war and arena imagery is particularly interesting for our topic since it provides us with a plausible reason behind the naming convention of the Arrow Prayer that we see used in Christian literature as early as the third century³¹⁹. The war imagery, as I have demonstrated, is a common metaphor for the spiritual battle between the monk and the demons. While this name is not used as a common name for the prayer, it always comes up as a result of, and an extension to, the battle metaphor. This is obvious from its first recorded uses by Origen when he refers to continuous prayer as “an arrow shot from the saint by knowledge and reason and faith. And it wounds the spirits hostile to God to *destroy and overthrow them*”³²⁰. The arrow as weapon-of-war metaphor here points to a more specific practice that becomes more apparent in the monastic literature.

Again in paragraph five of the *Life of Anthony*, the saint is described to be using some weapons when attacked by demons. Among the list of weapons that are used by St Anthony, such as Faith and Fasting, we read that the devil was “cast down by

³¹⁸ *Agathon*: 9 Ward, 1984a, p. 22.

³¹⁹ Rowan, 1979, p. 104.

³²⁰ Rowan, 1979, p. 104, emphasis is mine.

Anthony's unceasing prayers"³²¹, and by "reflecting on Christ in his heart and the goodness he had through him, and reflecting on the spiritual insight given to him by his soul, extinguished the devil's deceitful coal"³²². By unceasing prayer, St Athanasius is undoubtedly referring to meditating on passages from scripture, especially the psalms, as well as remembering the name of Christ. This is very apparent from the way these practices are frequently referred to throughout the *Life*.

In paragraph nine, when St Anthony returned to the tomb after being beaten up by demons, he "continued to pray while lying down. And after his prayer he would cry out... even if you do worst things to me, nothing 'will separate me from the love of Christ'. Then he also recited the psalm: 'Though an army should array itself against me, my heart will not be afraid'"³²³. In other instances, the demons would show him illusions of gold in the desert but he warded them off by chanting the psalms³²⁴. In general terms, the advice St Anthony gave to "all the monks who came to see him" is to "pray without ceasing, to say the psalms before going to sleep and after raising from sleep, to learn by heart the precepts in the scriptures, and to remember the works of the saints and with them zealously train the soul to be mindful of the commandments"³²⁵.

Likewise, in the *sayings* an Abba advises that it is "good for a person to study the sacred scriptures against the attacks of the demons"³²⁶. Also, when St Macarius

³²¹ *Greek Life of Anthony*: 5.3 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 67.

³²² *Greek Life of Anthony*: 5 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, pp. 68-69.

³²³ *Greek Life of Anthony*: 9.3 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 81.

³²⁴ *Greek Life of Anthony*: 40 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 145.

³²⁵ *Greek Life of Anthony*: 55.2 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 175.

³²⁶ Cited from Burton-Christie, 1993, p. 132, note 69.

succeeded in helping Theopemptus to confess his sins, he gave him this exercise: “meditate on the Gospel and the other Scriptures, and if an alien thought arises within you”³²⁷. It is also said about another brother that as long as he was meditating the demons were unable to attack him, but when he stopped they were able to fight against him³²⁸. These meditations on the scriptures have a power to save from the demon attacks, regardless of the understanding of the monk being attacked, as an elder explains: “The magician does not understand the meaning of the words which he pronounces, but the wild animal who hears it understands, submits, and bows to it. So it is with us also: even if we do not understand the meaning of the words we are saying, when the demons hear them, they take fright and go away”³²⁹.

Unceasing prayer not only included recitation of the psalms and other scripture verses. In the life of Anthony we have very specific references to what would be later called the Jesus Prayer. I am not referring here to the specific formula that was later developed on Mount Athos, but I am referring to the concept of calling on the name of Jesus against the attacks of the demons. There are numerous examples in the *Life* of Anthony when he resorted to the name of Christ to repel demons.

When the demon tried to trick St Anthony by appearing to him, pretending to be God, Anthony repelled him by “invoking the Lord’s name... suddenly this huge apparition disappeared, along with all his demons”. St Athanasius again emphasises the cause of

³²⁷ *Macarius the Great*: 3 Ward, 1984a, p. 127.

³²⁸ *Anonymous Series*: 235 Ward, 1986, p. 63 Meditation here, as will be discussed in later chapters, refers to the repetition of some psalms or verses of the Bible.

³²⁹ Ward, 1986, p. 17.

St Anthony's victory to be "because of the name of Christ"³³⁰. In a different demonic attack, St Athanasius, (whether intentionally or not is not clear), explains the use of the name of the Christ by referring to a psalm (20:7) "'these come with chariots and these others come with horses, but we will be exalted through the name of Lord God'. And by these prayers, these demons were turned away by the Lord"³³¹. In another instance, when it was not St Anthony's intention to invoke the name of Christ but was only part of his speech with the demons, St Athanasius says: "when the Devil heard the name of Christ, he could not stand the searing heat and disappeared"³³². Elsewhere, the demons are chased away just by Anthony's declaration that he is a "servant of Christ"³³³.

Similarly, in the sayings, an elder advises a monk who is overcome with passion to "kneel down, saying, 'Son of God, have mercy on me'". St Macarius, when asked about how to pray when a monk is attacked, replied: "it is enough to stretch out one's hands and say, 'Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy'. And if the conflict grows fiercer, say, 'Lord, help!'"³³⁴. Abba Elias also narrates the story of another monk who was physically attacked by demons to get out of a temple, the monk cried out, "'Jesus, save me.' Immediately the devil fled away"³³⁵.

The power of the name of Christ was not only applicable to St Anthony's personal war with demons, but he also used it to exorcise those who were possessed by

³³⁰ *Greek Life of Anthony*: 40 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 145.

³³¹ *Greek Life of Anthony*: 39 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 143.

³³² *Greek Life of Anthony*: 41 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 147.

³³³ *Greek Life of Anthony*: 53 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 171.

³³⁴ *Macarius the Great*: 19 Ward, 1984a, p. 131.

³³⁵ *Elias*: 7 Ward, 1984a, p. 71.

demons. When he was once on a boat he *smelled* the demon that possessed a young man who was on the boat, so St Anthony “rebuked the demon in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and it left the man”³³⁶. In another anecdote, St Anthony exorcises the daughter of a woman who was afflicted by a demon: “when Anthony prayed and invoked the name of Christ, the child was healed”³³⁷.

It is of interest to note here that the concept of calling on the name of Jesus to ward off demons or evil thoughts had been a common teaching and practice in the early Christian church. We have evidence as early as the second century AD, in the writings of Justin the Martyr³³⁸ and Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons³³⁹, supporting the use of the name of Jesus Christ to exorcise demons. Yet we notice that this practice is further developed in the monastic literature³⁴⁰.

Evagrius’s Weapons of War

Evagrius, not too long after St Anthony, further developed and systemised the way short prayers were used to ward off evil thoughts. For Evagrius, the best weapon of war was the Book of Psalms. King David was the ideal model of spiritual progress for

³³⁶ *Greek Life of Anthony*: 63 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 191.

³³⁷ *Greek Life of Anthony*: 71 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 209.

³³⁸ “We call him our Helper and Redeemer, by the power at whose name even the demons shudder; even to this day they are overcome when we exorcise them in the name of Jesus Christ.” *Dialogue with Trypho, Second Apology*: 30.3 Halls, 2003, p. 46; *Dialogue with Trypho, Second Apology*: 85.2 Halls, 2003, p. 133.

³³⁹ “Yet “no other name” of the Lord “has been given under the heavens, by which men are saved,” except that of God, who is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to whom even the demons are subject as well as evil spirits... through the invocation of the name of Jesus Christ” *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*: 97 Behr, 1997, p. 99.

³⁴⁰ The same practice is observed in the fifth century Palestine, Horn, 2006, pp. 131, 174.

Evagrius because of his balance between his success in waging war against the Philistines, who generally symbolised war against evil³⁴¹, and his contemplative life³⁴². While Evagrius was the first to systemise the use of the psalms in the monks' warfare, Luke Dysinger asserts that the source of this practice is the practice of psalmody and memorisation of psalms that was prevalent in the monk's life:

Evagrius asserts that the Book of Psalms is a means by which the Holy Spirit taught David the 'contest' of the *praktiké*. Thus the monastic practice of psalmody, which presupposes memorization and ongoing recollection of the psalms, places at the monk's disposal a rich source of biblical verses for use in the monastic 'contest'.³⁴³

Evagrius, in his writings, went to great lengths to systematise short prayers that were inspired from different books of the Scripture. The most well-known work is *Antirrhetikos*, often translated as 'talking back'³⁴⁴. In this work, Evagrius composed a collection of verses from scripture that a monk should use against different thoughts. For Evagrius, answering a thought with a contradicting bible verse is a great aid for the ascetic to clear his mind before prayer. These short prayers are used as a weapon of war against any distracting thoughts that may attack a monk at any time, but especially during prayers. He advises that when one is attacked with these thoughts, they should not continue their prayers but "direct some words of anger against the one causing the affliction"³⁴⁵. Only then can one attain pure prayer.

³⁴¹ For Evagrius's use of this imagery, read Dysinger, 2005, pp. 130, note 3.

³⁴² Dysinger, 2005, p. 130.

³⁴³ Dysinger, 2005, p. 132.

³⁴⁴ The term literally means *refutation* or *contradiction* yet its more common meaning is 'talking back'.

³⁴⁵ *Praktikos*: 42 Sinkewicz, 2006, p. 105.

In his work *Antirrhethikos*, he provided a list of 492 verses from throughout the Bible that can be used against different thoughts. He divided his work into eight chapters, each chapter dealing with one of the eight principal thoughts that may assail the monk, such as gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, acedia, vainglory, and pride. For each of these thoughts, he introduces a thought that relates to this thought, then he gives a verse from the Scripture to combat this thought.

This idea of answering back evil thoughts with verses from the Scripture is not original to Evagrius. St Anthony before him is said to have used the same technique against the assaults of the demons. In the *Life of Anthony*, St Athanasius describes a dialogue between St Anthony and a demon that called itself the ‘spirit of fornication’. At the end of the dialogue, he recited a verse from the psalms: “the lord is my helper, and I shall look upon my enemies”³⁴⁶ after which the demon fled away. In another instance, he was physically beaten by demons and taken to the town. When he returned to the tomb, he said to the demons “look, here I am – Anthony! I will not run from your blows! Even if you do worse things to me, nothing ‘will separate me from the love of Christ’”, then he recited a verse from psalm 26:3³⁴⁷.

Evagrius himself does not claim to be a pioneer in this kind of attack on thoughts, as he expounds to the recipient of one of his letters that David used the same technique in the psalms:

Therefore one must be intrepid in opposing his foe, as blessed David demonstrates when he quotes voices as if out of the mouth of demons and

³⁴⁶ Ps 117:7.

³⁴⁷ Elizabeth A. Clark gives more examples of the use of the ‘talking back’ technique as a rhetorical tool in some Christian ascetical exegesis in Clark, 1999, pp. 128-132.

[then] contradicts them. Thus if the demons say, “When will he die and his name be forgotten?” (Ps. 40: 5) he then also replies, “I will not die, but live and proclaim the works of the Lord!” (Ps. 117: 17). And if, on the other hand, the demons say, “Flee and abide like a sparrow on the mountain” (Ps. 10: 1), then one should say, “For he is my God and my saviour, my strong place of refuge; I will not waver” (Ps. 17: 3). Therefore observe the mutually contradicting voices and love the victory; imitate David and pay close attention to yourself!³⁴⁸

Not only was David used as an example of talking back to demonic thoughts, but we find in some monastic writings the example of Jesus’s verse-for-verse refutation with the devil on the mountain³⁴⁹ after spending forty days of ascetical rigor of fasting and prayers that we see is very common in the monastic way of life. *Life of Anthony* offers a clear reference to this connection between Jesus on the mountain and the monastic practice. In chapter 37, St Anthony gives a treatise on how one should discern the spirits when they come in apparitions; he used the example of Christ who “whenever such apparitions came to him, the Lord rebuked them and said ‘get behind me Satan!’ for it is written, ‘the Lord your God shall you worship and him only shall you serve’”³⁵⁰.

Jesus is also used by Evagrius as an example of this practice³⁵¹. When he was tempted on the mountain, Jesus was able to defeat Satan by quoting verses from the scriptures.

³⁴⁸ Cited from Dysinger, 2005, p. 134.

³⁴⁹ Matt 4.

³⁵⁰ *Greek Life of Anthony*: 37 Vivian & Athanassakis, 2003, p. 139.

³⁵¹ Dysinger, 2005, p. 134.

In his prologue to his work, *Antirrhethikos*, Evagrius refers to Jesus's use of the biblical verses in His temptation in the desert as a proof for his endeavour: "Our Lord Jesus Christ [. . .] [together with] all his teaching handed on to us what he did when he was tempted by Satan so that in the time of battle, when the demons are fighting us and hurling darts against us, we [may] answer them from the holy scriptures"³⁵².

Furthermore, it is interesting to notice the language Evagrius uses in his analogy, which is battle language. Not only that, but his use of the demons' attacks as darts is consistent with other writers, as already discussed above, and it is also consistent with the naming of this mode of prayer that came later in history to be called the Arrow Prayer.

To get a better understanding of the way the Arrow Prayer was practised in antiquity and to help make sense of these conclusions, we must study the social factors that must have influenced the practice of this prayer. In the following chapters, I will discuss some of the social factors that I believe had a profound influence on the practice of the Arrow Prayer and are consistent with the conclusions I have made above. In so doing, I will attempt to accurately place the practice of the Arrow Prayer in its historical context. Before I do that, I will discuss the background that gave rise to the name of the prayer.

³⁵² Cited from Dysinger, 2005, p. 134.