

Rethinking Hebrews 12:1

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Translators and exegetes alike favour the presence of an athletic metaphor in Heb 12:1 (run/race). This is questioned on semantic and contextual grounds. The traditional interpretation and exegesis of many commentators is explored and shown to be ultimately untenable. A new translation is offered that claims to be semantically possible and contextually sensitive.

Hebrews 12:1 is a well-known verse and there is very little variance in the way English translations render it:

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.¹

The popular understanding of this verse is that the author of Hebrews² employed an athletic metaphor (run/race) to motivate his readers to the dedication, courage and endurance so vital in the Christian life.³ However, in this article we will explore the possibility of an alternative translation for 12:1; we will highlight the pitfalls inherent in exegetical works which insist on the presence of an athletic metaphor, and consequently ask if a foot race

¹ Unless otherwise stated all verses cited are taken from the NAU - New American Standard 1995 edition.

² AH from now on.

³ For example see, H. W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, Hermeneia--a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 354, F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev ed., *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 334, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1977), 519, William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, 2 vols., *Word Biblical Commentary*; 47 (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1991), 407.

is an apt metaphor given the context (Heb 11:1-12:13). The alternative context we propose is that AH understood the Christian life to be a pilgrimage to the presence of God. The core components of a pilgrimage are (1) the journey and (2) the goal. The journey comprises of distinct stages or elements, namely, (1) separation, (2) detachment, (3) suffering and hardship (pilgrimage is a costly journey), and (4) a final stage phase. Space does not allow us to elaborate upon each element, but we should note that the idea that a pilgrimage is a costly journey, involving the voluntary embracing of hardships and trials is fundamental to a pilgrimage worldview.⁴

If there is a pilgrimage motif present in the text, and especially prominent in the context in which we find Heb 12:1,⁵ then it may be possible to render the meaning of this verse in a very different manner; a meaning that highlights the suffering and perils of the pilgrimage path consistent with the emphasis of chapter 11 and 12:2-3, and in a way that a racecourse cannot. We shall first outline the popular understanding of this verse, and then ask if this is the only interpretation possible, or if there is an alternative.

Commentators generally agree on the following points.

This verse uses an athletic metaphor, namely, that of a footrace, one of the basic and highly respected events of the Pan-Hellenic games, and that the whole verse revolves around and supports the main metaphor – “run ... the race”.⁶

⁴ See E. Alan Morinis, ed., *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, vol. 7, *Contributions to the Study of Anthropology* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), Victor Witter Turner and Edith L. B. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*, vol. 11, *Lectures on the History of Religions New Ser* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

⁵ The pilgrimage motif is particularly prominent in Hebrews 11 and 12, as the pilgrim finally draws near to the goal of his pilgrimage – Zion and the presence of God.

⁶ For example, see, Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 354ff, Bruce, *Hebrews*, 333ff, N. Clayton Croy, *Endurance in Suffering: A Study of Hebrews 12:1-13 in Its Rhetorical, Religious, and Philosophical Context*, *Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series*; 98 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Hughes, *Hebrews*, 518ff, Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with*

The scene that the recipients are to imagine is that of the athletic stadium where the race takes place. To substantiate this, reference is made to the “cloud of witnesses”, about which Lane comments, “in the context of the athletic metaphor, it is perhaps natural to think of an amphitheatre, with its ascending rows of spectators who gather to watch the games”.⁷ Hughes makes the observation that the “champions of faith” mentioned in chapter 11 are “crowded as it were row upon row within the encircling amphitheatre”.⁸

Many, but not all, of these races would require the participants to strip naked before competing; the author of Hebrews requires his congregation to picture such a race. For example, Hughes states, “the athlete whose name is entered for the games strips for action ... (the Greek custom in fact required the competitors to be stripped naked), so the Christian should discipline himself”.⁹ Lane is of the same opinion. “Contestants removed all their clothing before running so that nothing could impede them during the race”.¹⁰

The kind of race mentioned is a long-distance race or a marathon. Lane is typical of most commentators when he states, “the allusion is to a distance race requiring disciplined commitment and endurance”. He then quotes Grässer saying, “not the sprinter but the marathon runner!” In a similar vein, H. Attridge writes, “that they should run with endurance suggests that the race is more marathon than short sprint”.¹¹

Introduction and Commentary (New York; London: Doubleday, 2001), 521ff, Lane, *Hebrews*, 407ff.

⁷ Lane, *Hebrews*, 408. Similarly see Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 354, Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 61, Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews. A Commentary on the Greek Text*, ed. I. Howard & W. Ward Gasque Marshall, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 638, Hughes, *Hebrews*, 518, Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (London/New York: Macmillan and Co, 1889), 392.

⁸ Hughes, *Hebrews*, 519.

⁹ Hughes, *Hebrews*, 519-520.

¹⁰ Lane, *Hebrews*, 409.

¹¹ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 355, Lane, *Hebrews*, 409.

Commentators cite a variety of texts to maintain the claim that this is an athletic metaphor in common use at the time of writing. H. Attridge cites the following texts as “examples of such commonplace athletic metaphors”:¹² 1 Cor 9:24-27; Gal 2:2; Col 2:1; Phil 1:30; 2:16; 1 Tim 6:12; 2 Macc 13:14; 4 Macc 17:10-14 and 4 Ezra 7, along with passages from Philo such as *De Migratione Abrahami* 133.

To summarise succinctly, the main understanding of Heb 12:1 is:

Hebrews 12:1 contains the metaphor “run ... the race” as its central theme.

There is a great crowd watching the event.

It takes place in an athletic stadium.

It is run while naked.

It is a marathon race not a sprint.

It was a common metaphor in use at the time of writing.

The task before us now is to evaluate the text and to ask:

If this verse does indeed contain a metaphor, what is the most appropriate context and translation? Is it that of running a race or does some other athletic metaphor such as a fight better fit the context?

Is it possible to translate the text in context without any allusion to athletic metaphors at all?

The Greek text of Hebrews 12:1 is as follows:

Τολγαροῦν καὶ ἡμεῖς τοσοῦτον ἔχοντες περικείμενον ἡμῖν νέφος μαρτύρων,
ὄγκον ἀποθέμενοι πάντα καὶ τὴν εὐπερίστατον ἀμαρτίαν, δι’ ὑπομονῆς
τρέχωμεν τὸν προκείμενον ἡμῖν ἀγῶνα

We find the traditional translation and interpretation of the text to be unconvincing. It ultimately undermines both the author’s argument and skill. We also think it is possible to translate this verse without any reference to an athletic metaphor. Therefore, we aim to show that the most appropriate context for Hebrews 12:1 is not the athletic arena, but rather an understanding of the Christian life as pilgrimage. As a result, the traditional interpretation is (1) not needed and (2) does not fit the context.

¹² Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 354 n.312.

When studying a text we need to ask which interpretative key best explains the vocabulary employed in the verse. In regards to Heb 12:1 we need to ask which context or paradigm best explains the vocabulary and argument of its author: the Christian life as a race or the Christian life as a pilgrimage. In other words, which translation requires the most explanation and which, if any, becomes almost self-explanatory? We are working on the supposition that all texts are to be understood in context. Initially the context of a word, phrase, or verse is the surrounding text, i.e. the words, sentences, and paragraphs of the same work. The wider context would then be a larger body of work by the same author, which in turn is referenced by works that proceed from the same cultural milieu, or works that could possibly have influenced the author. However, ultimately the context of any work (be it textual or pictorial) is the worldview that produced the work. The textual context in which we find Hebrews 12:1 is vital; however, the possible worldview of the author should also be taken into account when evaluating the potential, or probable, meaning and interpretation of any words or phrases he has employed.

Firstly, we will look at the context of Hebrews 12:1, followed by the key words employed, namely *τρέχω* and *ἀγῶν*, and finally at the supporting vocabulary.

The Context of Hebrews 12:1

The author of Hebrews has taken great pains to encourage his readers in their pilgrimage. In chapter 11 he has literally surrounded them with the examples of the great figures of faith. This acts as a literary equivalent to Turner's final stage of pilgrimage, where pilgrims find themselves surrounded by sacred topography, buildings, shrines, statues, stories, legends, and songs that have taken on symbolic significance for the pilgrim.¹³ The pilgrim may have become tired and weary, the journey has

¹³ "As one approaches the Holy of Holies the symbols become denser, richer, more involuted – the landscape itself is coded into symbolic units packed with cosmological and theological meaning". Turner, "The Centre out There: Pilgrims' Goals," 223. Also, "Towards the end of a pilgrimage, the pilgrim's new-found freedom from mundane or profane structures is increasingly circumscribed by symbolic structures: religious buildings, pictorial images, statuary, and sacralised

been a hard one, and it will not get any easier, so these symbols act to stimulate the pilgrim's resolve to press on in the face of hardships.

Commentators agree that the list of the faithful in chapter 11 functions to encourage the congregation to imitate such faith and to spur them on. However, as we shall see shortly, the heroes of faith not only act as examples of faith but also as examples of how to give testimony to faith. They are "witnesses who point to those unseen, hoped-for realities which have been brought to definitive, inaugurated fulfilment by Christ".¹⁴ They are active in their role, not passive as many commentators suggest. They give testimony to a forward-looking faith that embraces hardship with a purpose.¹⁵

To ascertain what kind of faith the author requires of his listeners, and therefore what kind of action he also requires of them, we need to look at the selection criteria employed in AH's choice of heroes. Pamela Eisenbaum has suggested that one of the key repeated elements, which can be seen in the lives of the heroes from Abel to Rahab, is the presence of death; each one either experiences death, is saved from death, is said to be as good as dead or looked beyond their own death.¹⁶ Each had to face his or her own mortality with steadfast faith. It is debatable whether death or facing death is the main selection criteria for all the heroes and their

features of topography, often described and defined in sacred tales and legend. Underlying the sensorily perceptible symbol-vehicles are structures of thought and feeling – ideological forms – that may truly be described as 'root paradigms'". Victor Witter Turner and Edith L. B. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives, Lectures on the History of Religions; New Ser., No. 11* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 10.

¹⁴ S.M. Baugh, "The Cloud of Witnesses in Hebrews 11," *West Th J* 68 (2006): 132.

¹⁵ We will have more to say about the noun μάρτυς shortly.

¹⁶ P. Eisenbaum, "Heroes and History in Hebrews 11," in *Early Christian Interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel: Investigations and Proposals*, ed. C.A. Evans and J.A. Sanders, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum, *The Jewish Heroes of Christian History: Hebrews 11 in Literary Context, Society of Biblical Literature: Dissertation Series* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1997).

actions,¹⁷ but what does seem to be clear is that peril, hardship, and death are recurring themes throughout the passage. The ability to look beyond their experience to the future fulfilment of a promise; their choice to embrace hardship in the attainment of that promise and the ability to re-evaluate the present sufferings, investing them with new meaning or context, are major themes in AH's choice of exemplars. They are also recognisable pilgrimage themes. Although each hero mentioned may exhibit different aspects of faith, it is the cumulative argument of the list that exerts its impact upon the reader or listener of the Epistle. Therefore if one were to posit a context for Hebrews 12:1 it would be the nature of faith in perilous situations, in the face of danger, death and hardships of the most extreme nature. It would include the forward-looking nature of such a faith, the ability to see a new (different) reality laid out before the faithful, and the strength of character to be able to embrace the path of suffering that lays ahead.

As mentioned earlier, the author wants his listeners to be inspired by such faith, to imitate it, and to be encouraged by their witness to faith. After giving a list of heroes whose lives exhibit a steadfast faith in the face of danger, peril, hardship and death, he then goes on to say,

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles - δι' ὑπομονῆς τρέχωμεν τὸν προκειμένον ἡμῖν ἀγῶνὰ

If we do indeed have a metaphor here, we would expect it to be one that has at its core the idea of, or potential for, danger, peril, hardship and maybe even death. The English translation "run the race" seems to lack any such reference. Given that the author is meticulous in his argumentation and given the context of 12:1, it is hard to believe that he would choose a metaphor that appears to lack the qualities he is trying to inspire. This

¹⁷ "Performing acts of righteousness" and "obtaining promises" (Heb 11:33) need not imply any relationship to death or escaping death; however, all other acts mentioned for the named heroes in verse 32 and the unnamed of later verses do indeed indicate or imply death, escaping death or experiencing terrible abuse.

seems even more incongruous when the author immediately goes on to write,

² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. ⁴ You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin. Heb. 12:2-4

Clearly the author has in mind times of opposition, peril, danger and death, yet we are told the best metaphor he could come up with is “run the race”.

One of the key concepts in the definition of pilgrimage is that it is a costly or perilous journey. Costliness and peril is obviously a main theme in chapter eleven and in chapter 12 verses 2 and 3. The question becomes, is AH now placing his readers in a sports spectacle or does he remain within the pilgrimage motif recognising the hardship and struggle of the pilgrimage, without any necessary reference to running or to a race?

To be able to answer this question we need to take a closer look at the two key terms that have led translators and commentators alike to interpret this verse in terms of running a race. While it is true that *τρέχω* means to run and *ἀγών* means race or stadium, the place where the race occurs, these are not the only meanings the words may carry. The semantic domains of each word are much wider.

Τρέχω

Apart from meaning ‘to run’ and that it can refer to a foot race in a stadium, Bauer states that by derivation it came to mean “exert oneself to the limit of one’s powers in an attempt to go forward, strive to advance”. While citing Romans 9:16 he comments, “the emphasis is entirely upon the effort which the person makes.” *Τρέχω* can also be used to signify continuing on or advancing “without hindrance” (2 Th 3:1).¹⁸ Barclay Newman (UBS)

¹⁸ Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: A Translation and Adaptation of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu*

shows the following possible meanings for τρέχω: run; exert oneself, make an effort; speed on, make progress (τ. καλῶς make good progress, do well Ga 5.7); rush (into battle).¹⁹ Louw and Nida have shown that along with meaning to run, τρέχω can be employed when speaking of the Gospel spreading, making progress in one's behaviour and attempting or trying to do something.²⁰ Gingrich gives the following list of examples for its meaning: "τρέχω run—1. lit. Mt 27:48; Mk 5:6; Lk 15:20; J 20:2, 4; 1 Cor 9:24a, b.—2. fig. *strive to advance, make progress* Ro 9:16; 1 Cor 9:24c, 26; Gal 2:2; 5:7; Phil 2:16; Hb 12:1. *Spread rapidly* 2 Th 3:1."²¹ Thayer states that τρέχω can be used metaphorically to mean "to exert oneself, strive hard, to spend one's strength in performing or attaining something", and that the "word occurs in Gk writing denoting to incur extreme peril, which requires the exertion of all of one's efforts to overcome".²² The Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint offers the following entry for the verb:

τρέχω + Gn 18,7; 24,20.28.29; 29,12, *to run* Gn 18,7; *id.* (metaph.) Jb 15,26; *to run swiftly, to spread quickly* Ps 147,4(15) *Jer 8,6 ὁ τρέχων ἀπὸ τοῦ δρόμου αὐτοῦ *the runner from his course* -ωτχωρμμ β *returns from his course for MT^k שב במרוצתם or MT^q שב במרוצתם they turn to their own course;*

den Schriften Des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen Urchristlichen Literatur, second ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 825.

¹⁹ Barclay Moon Newman, *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft United Bible Societies, 1993).

²⁰ J. P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 247.

²¹ F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, 2 ed. (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 202.

²² Carl Ludwig Wilibald Grimm, Joseph Henry Thayer, and Christian Gottlob Wilke, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, Being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti*, Copyright 1989-2000 International Bible Translators. ed., vol. Digital Edition (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1889), Entry 5335.

*Ps 61(62),5 ἔδραμον *they ran* for MT ירצו *they take pleasure*; *Jb 41,14 τρέχει *runs* (metaph.) for MT קפץ *leaps, exults*.²³

Therefore, while τρέχω means to run, we can also see that this is not the only meaning the verb can bear. In Hebrews 12:1, it is possible that what is in view here is the manner in which one's strength is spent in performing an action or attaining something, and that this can be conveyed without having a necessary reference to 'running', but rather to 'striving' or 'pressing onwards'.

The verb is used seventeen times in the New Testament. It appears eight times in the Gospels and on each occasion it is translated 'to run', and its simple meaning would require that understanding. Paul uses the term seven times; however, it is not always clear if he intends his readers to imagine a racecourse. For example, Romans 9:16 has been translated "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy". However, the translators of the NIV have recognised that the idea of effort exerted is in view here and so translated the verse, "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or *effort*, but on God's mercy." The NIV conversely translates Galatians 5:7 as "you were running a good race", supplying the term race where it is absent in the Greek. The term ἑτρέχετε καλῶς can also mean make good progress and so Galatians 5:7 could also read "you were making good progress who hindered you?" In 2 Thessalonians 3:1 τρέχω is employed to speak of the gospel making good or swift progress. None of these verses requires us to imagine a race or racecourse. However, it does appear that in 1 Corinthians 9:24-26, and perhaps Galatians 2:2, we are more securely in the presence of an athletic scenario. Galatians 2:2 does not mention a 'race'; Paul simply states that he presented the gospel he preached among the Gentiles to those who appeared to be leaders, because he μή πως εἰς κενὸν τρέχω ἢ ἔδραμον. Most translations interpret this phrase similar to the NAU: "for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain". The NIV again supplies the noun 'race' where it does not exist in the text. If Paul did intend to signify the action of running in this verse, the running is understood to be

²³ J. Lust, Erik Eynikel, and K. Hauspie, *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, Rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003), Entry 8966.

with purpose and direction, otherwise he could not fear it may have been in vain. It seems reasonable therefore to supply the noun *race*. However, it is possible to understand the verse to say ‘lest I had striven or am striving in vain’, without drastically altering the import of the sentence. The emphasis is on the effort and apparent progress Paul had made; this can be conveyed either through the terms ‘strive’, ‘exert’, ‘struggle’, or the verb ‘run’, if the running is understood to be an exertion of energy and will in a racecourse scenario, i.e. with an end purpose. In 1 Corinthians 9:24, Paul uses the phrase “run the race”, but there he uses the more common term *στάδιον* and not *ἀγών* to refer to the race. It could be that Paul’s use of the term has led translators to see an athletic metaphor at work here in Hebrews 12:1 as an appropriate expression of the dedication and determination required as a disciple of Christ. *Τρέχω* is also used in Revelation 9:9, where it refers to the sound of many horses rushing into battle.

Taking into consideration the variety of ways in which the verb can be employed, it is not unreasonable to think that the *τρέχωμεν* of Hebrews 12:1 could easily be translated “let us make every effort”, “let us press on”, “let us make swift progress”, or even “let us force ourselves onward”. Of course, it may have been translated that way if it were not for the presence of the noun *ἀγών*, to which we now turn our attention.

Ἄγών

Lane admits that strictly speaking *ἀγών* does not mean *race*.²⁴ It is the arena in which a contest or athletics takes place, and therefore, by association refers to an athletic event. It also came to mean a fight against an opponent, and then struggle or intense opposition.²⁵

Friberg’s Analytical Lexicon defines *ἀγών* as follows:

²⁴ Lane, *Hebrews*, 399.

²⁵ For example Bruce, *Hebrews*, 335, Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 639, Lane, *Hebrews*, 399. See also, Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 9. 1978 ed., vol. I. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 134-140. “*ἀγών* originally means a ‘a place of assembly,’ then a ‘place of contest’ or ‘stadium,’ then ‘contest’ itself (including litigation and debate), and finally any kind of ‘conflict.’” (135). The TDNT also points out that it is frequently used metaphorically.

ἀγών, ἀγώνος, ὁ (1) literally (*athletic*) *contest*; metaphorically *race* (i.e. *course*) of *life* (2) of exertion and self-denial in the face of opposition *conflict, struggle, fight*; figuratively, of intense nonphysical *struggle, conflict*.²⁶

According to Louw and Nida, ἀγών can mean “to engage in intense struggle, involving physical or nonphysical force against strong opposition – ‘to struggle, to fight’”.²⁷ Bauer is in agreement.²⁸ Liddell and Scott notes that the noun means a gathering or assembly, a place of contest, and also states that it generally means ‘struggle’, including a life or death struggle, a law-suit, battle action or mental struggle.²⁹

The LXX employs the noun sixteen times.³⁰ In the extended version of Esther 4:17 the phrase ἀγώνι θανάτου can be translated “mortal peril”,³¹ or deathly struggle. In 2 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees it is used to variously denote a sporting game, contest, battle, fight or conflict. In 4 Maccabees the term is accompanied by more explicit athletic terminology and those who are involved in the struggle or contest are called athletes.³² Wisdom 4:2 also implies a contest or athletic scenario where the victor gains a reward. In Isaiah 7:13 the noun is used to translate אָנִי,³³ and although אָנִי appears many times in the OT, it is only here translated as ἀγών by the

²⁶ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Baker's Greek New Testament Library; 4 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000).

²⁷ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 3.

²⁸ “under a great strain or in the face of great opposition 1 Th 2:2” Bauer et al., *BAGD*, 15.

²⁹ H.D. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9 (completed 1940) ed., vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), 18-19.

³⁰ Est 4:17(ex 11); 2 Macc 4:18; 10:28; 14:18, 43; 15:9; 4 Macc 9:23; 11:20; 13:15; 15:29; 16:16; 17:11; Wis 10:12, and Is 7:13 (twice).

³¹ So, NJB.

³² 4 Macc 6:10; 17:15-16.

³³ אָנִי To be tired, unable, cease; in. be weary, unable, exhaust oneself; hi. To weary someone, render ineffective (#4206); תְּלִיָּה. nom. hardship, trouble (#9430)” Willem VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, 5 vols., vol. 2 (USA: Paternoster Press/Zondervan Pub. House, 1996), 748.

translators of the LXX. It is generally translated into English as “to weary” or “try the patience of”;³⁴ Benton’s English Translation of The Septuagint Version³⁵ renders it “is it a little thing for you to contend with men? And how do ye contend against the Lord?”. $\alpha\gamma\omega\gamma$ appears in the hiphil voice on both occasions; the hiphil can signify simple action or denote causation. Therefore, Isaiah 7:13 could read ‘to weary’, or ‘to cause to weary’. It is possible that the translators of the LXX understood the state of weariness to be caused by contention or struggle; what is worth noting here is that the semantic domain of $\alpha\gamma\omega\gamma$ was considered sufficiently broad to encompass a term with no immediate connection to the athletic arena or the competitive field.

In the New Testament the noun $\alpha\gamma\omega\gamma$ is used five times; in all but one (Hebrews 12:1) it is normally translated struggle, conflict or fight.³⁶

Although Lane prefers to translate Hebrews 12:1 as “run the race”, he does point out that J.D. Robb argued on lexical grounds that “there is no basis for translating $\alpha\gamma\omega\gamma$ as “race”.³⁷ Robb maintained that the notion is rather of a “fight” or “struggle” and that $\tau\rho\acute{\epsilon}\chi\epsilon\iota\ \alpha\gamma\omega\gamma\alpha$ was a technical term for engaging in a contest.³⁸ Lane then goes on to mention that the “classical expression $\tau\rho\acute{\epsilon}\chi\epsilon\iota\ \alpha\gamma\omega\gamma\alpha$ was also used metaphorically for the endurance

³⁴ See, CJB, KJV, NAU, NIV, NRS,

³⁵ *The English Translation of The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament* by Sir Lancelot C. L. Brenton, 1844, 1851, published by Samuel Bagster and Sons.

³⁶ See Philippians 1:30 τὸν αὐτὸν **ἀγῶνα** ἔχοντες, οἷον εἶδετε ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ νῦν ἀκούετε ἐν ἐμοί.

Colossians 2:1 Θέλω γὰρ ὑμᾶς εἰδέναι ἠλίκον **ἀγῶνα** ἔχω ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν καὶ τῶν ἐν Λαοδικείᾳ καὶ ὅσοι οὐχ ἑώρακαν τὸ πρόσωπόν μου ἐν σαρκί,

1 Timothy 6:12 ἀγωνίζου τὸν καλὸν **ἀγῶνα** τῆς πίστεως, ἐπιλαβοῦ τῆς αἰωνίου ζωῆς, εἰς ἣν ἐκλήθης καὶ ὠμολόγησας τὴν καλὴν ὁμολογίαν ἐνώπιον πολλῶν μαρτύρων.

2 Timothy 4:7 τὸν καλὸν **ἀγῶνα** ἠγωνίσαι, τὸν δρόμον τετέλεκα, τὴν πίστιν τετήρηκα

³⁷ Lane, *Hebrews*, 399.

³⁸ J.D. Robb, "Hebrews xii.I," *Expos T 79* (1967-68): 254.

of peril by both prose writers and poets”.³⁹ This fits well with the context (Hebrews 11-12:4).

We have seen that both *τρέχω* and *ἀγών* while used separately, are capable of carrying meanings other than ‘to run’ or ‘a race’. When they are used together all commentators immediately take them to mean ‘run the race’, but is this always necessary? Commentators who understand the phrase to mean ‘run the race’ generally have recourse to three main arguments:

- the use of athletic imagery in Hellenistic or Hellenistic influenced literature
- the athletic imagery present in Hebrews
- the phrase is said to constitute a cognate accusative

It is indisputable that Hellenistic literature employed athletic motifs; they found footraces and hand to hand combat to be worthy illustrations of the dedication and stamina needed to train the body and the mind in a disciplined and structured manner. There is much literature on the subject and we do not wish to imply that such imagery was not widespread and easily grasped by all.⁴⁰ Neither do we wish to imply that such athletic motifs are absent in the New Testament. However, before we can be sure that AH is indeed employing an athletic or agonistic motif at this point in his address, we need to eliminate any other possible interpretations of this word grouping within the context of Hebrews.

³⁹ Lane, Hebrews, 399

⁴⁰ For a basic introduction to the athletics and athletic imagery see, Clarence A. Forbes, "Ancient Athletic Guilds," *Classical Philol* 50, no. 4 (1955), Edward Norman Gardiner, *Greek Athletic Sports and Festivals, Handbooks of Archaeology and Antiquities* (Dubuque, Iowa: W. C. Brown, 1970), H.A. Harris, *Greek Athletes and Athletics* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1966; reprint, 1979), Jerry M. Hullinger, "The Historical Background of Paul's Athletic Allusions," *BibSac* 161, no. July-September (2004), V. C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature, Supplements to Novum Testamentum; V. 16* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), Robert Paul Seesengood, *Competing Identities: The Athlete and the Gladiator in Early Christianity*, vol. 346, *Library of New Testament Studies* (New York; London: T & T Clark, 2006).

It is usual for modern scholars of ancient texts to compare uses and meanings of words found in one text to their uses and meanings in other contemporary texts. Sometimes it is possible to trace the history of a word's meaning by this method, and if the date of the text under scrutiny is known, then it is easier to place it within the development of the significance and use of the words under discussion. This is the only method available to modern scholars of ancient texts, and it sheds light on many texts that otherwise might remain elusive to the modern reader. Nevertheless, care must be taken not to import meaning that would be alien to the *context*. When compared with living and evolving languages ancient texts offer only limited contexts and vocabulary for comparison and understanding. This should make the modern interpreter cautious when approaching an ancient text; even if words (X) in a text are used frequently to express a certain idea (Y), then it does not logically follow that every time X appears Y is to be understood. It is entirely possible that the same grouping of words can hold a different connotation for the author (and the reader) depending on the context in which they appear.

With this in mind we should recognise it is possible that the author of Hebrews simply wished to say, 'press on in the face of the conflict or hardship/danger set before us', without having any idea of agonistic or athletic metaphors in mind. It is not necessary to think that each time an ancient (hellenistic) author wished to approach the subject of suffering, hardship, courage, danger and death, he would automatically think of the games even if he employed language that originated in the gymnasium or the theatre. Words can break free from their original or foundational meaning. We would not expect a modern speaker to be aware of the origins of all the phrases he uses. Even if he were, it is unreasonable to believe that he would expect his audience to immediately think of the phrase's origins before it could grasp what he might be trying to communicate. Simply put, because a τρέχειν ἀγώνα means 'let us run the race' in other literature, and might even have been a classical expression for entering a completion, it does not necessarily mean this is the exact meaning apportioned to it in Hebrews 12:1. Both words signify a variety of meanings and when used in conjunction it is possible that they can mean 'let us strive on in the conflict'.

Of course, the phrase could have been a common metaphor by the time AH used it, with its origins in the gymnasium or international games. Nevertheless, if it formed a popular metaphor, there is still no compelling reason to believe that AH even thought of the games or how they functioned just by employing the metaphor. It would be unrealistic to expect every person today, no matter how well educated, to know the origins of the majority of the metaphors in common use in the English language. She would only be expected to know how to apply it. For AH, the phrase *τρέχειν ἄγῶνα* could simply imply the application of all of one's efforts when faced with conflict or hardship.

Metaphors are elusive constructions; in general, they work as a 'whole'. When they are deconstructed or over-analysed they can lose impact or focus, their character is diminished or their context is distorted. If AH did use *τρέχωμεν ... ἄγῶνα* as a metaphor, and if he intended it to read 'run ... the race', then modern day commentators should be careful not to over-analyze and deconstruct its meaning (which they often do as we shall see shortly). By overemphasising (and over analysing) certain aspects of the 'race' the surrounding text is invested with meaning it cannot bear, the text collapses under the strain and the resulting 'interpretation' or exegesis becomes strained. We shall note this when we take a closer look at the surrounding vocabulary and the way commentators have tried to 'exegete' the verse.⁴¹

⁴¹ Ted Peters warns against over-analyzing the components of a metaphor – "I suggest that in doing this they may discern meaning in the metaphor, but they do so only at the cost of losing the creative event character of metaphor." Ted Peters, "Metaphor and the Horizon of the Unsaid," *PPR* 38, no. 3 (1978): 357. For a discussion on what constitutes a metaphor, types of metaphor, how they work and how to translate them see, Christopher M. Bache, "Towards a Unified Theory of Metaphor," *JAAC* 39, no. 2 (1980), Merrie Bergmann, "Metaphorical Assertions," *PhR* 91, no. 2 (1982), Max Black, "How Metaphors Work: A Reply to Donald Davidson," *Crit Inq* 6, no. 1 (1979), Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," *Crit Inq* 5, no. 1 (1978), James Deese, "Mind and Metaphor: A Commentary," *New Lit. Hist.* 6, no. 1 (1974), Monika Fludernik, Donald C. Freeman, and Margaret H. Freeman, "Metaphor and Beyond: An Introduction," *PoT* 20, no. 3 (1999), Charles Forceville, "(a)Symmetry in Metaphor: The Importance of Extended Context," *PoT*

To maintain an athletic interpretation of Hebrews 12:1, commentators note the use of athletic language in other passages of Hebrews. We do not wish to dispute such terms are used, we simply offer the same criticism as above; because athletic terminology is used in some passages of Hebrews, it does not necessitate its use or understanding here. Once again we would stress that it is the context that decides how any word or word grouping is to be understood.

Commentators and lexicologists alike, note that *τρέχωμεν ... ἄγῶνα* is a cognate accusative; therefore commentators assume it must be the equivalent to “run-race”.⁴² There are no syntactical grounds for understanding a phrase to be a cognate accusative other than the obvious (the verb’s noun appears in accusative form). Identifying a cognate accusative belongs more to the realm of semantics, i.e. the meaning of each verb and noun employed. Robertson defines the cognate accusative as follows:

THE COGNATE ACCUSATIVE. It may be either that of inner content, *ἐχάρησαν χαράν* (Mt. 2:10), objective result *ἁμαρτάνοντα*

16, no. 4 (1995), . Raymond W. Gibbs Jr, "When Is Metaphor? The Idea of Understanding in Theories of Metaphor," *PoT* 13, no. 4 (1992), Charles O. Hartman, "Cognitive Metaphor," *New Lit. Hist.* 13, no. 2 (1982), Jay T. Keehley, "Metaphor Theories and Theoretical Metaphors," *PPR* 39, no. 4 (1979), John T. Kirby, "Aristotle on Metaphor," *Amer. J Philology* 118, no. 4 (1997), David S. Miall, "Metaphor as a Thought-Process," *J Aes. Art. Crit.* 38, no. 1 (1979), Richard Moran, "Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image and Force," *Crit Inq* 16, no. 1 (1989), Laurence Perrine, "Four Forms of Metaphor," *Coll Engl* 33, no. 2 (1971), Peters, "Metaphor and the Horizon of the Unsaid.", Paul Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics," *New Lit. Hist.* 6, no. 1 (1974), Brian S Robinson, David N. Livingstone, and Richard T. Harrison, "On "Meaning through Metaphor"," *Ann Assoc Am Geogr* 72, no. 2 (1982), Yeshayahu Shen, "Cognitive Aspects of Metaphor Comprehension: An Introduction," *PoT* 13, no. 4 (1992), Gerard Steen, "Literary and Nonliterary Aspects of Metaphor," *PoT* 13, no. 4 (1992), Don R. Swanson, "Towards a Psychology of Metaphor," *Crit Inq* 5, no. 1 (1978), Jean-Jacques Thomas, "Metaphor: The Image and the Formula," *PoT* 8, no. 3/4 (1987).

⁴² For example, Bauer et al., *BAGD*, 1814, Howard N. Bream, "More on Hebrews xii.1," *Expos TLXXX*, no. 5 (February) (1969): 150, Lane, *Hebrews*, 399.

ἁμαρτίαν (1 Jo. 5:16), φυλάσσουντες φυλακάς (Lu. 2:8), or even a kindred word in idea but a different root, as δαρήσεται ὀλίγας (πληγὰς) Lu. 12:48). Considerable freedom must thus be given the term "cognate" as to both form and idea. The real cognate accusative is a form of the *Figura Etymologica* as applied to either internal or external object. The quasi-cognate is due to analogy where the idea, not the form, is cognate.⁴³

Given that τρέχω means not only 'to run' but can also mean 'to strive', 'to press on' or 'to make progress', and that ἀγών not only means a contest but a hard struggle or fight, then it is entirely possible to see the phrase as a cognate accusative but instead of 'run-race' it could read 'strive-struggle' or 'contend-conflict'.

We have seen that both τρεχω and ἀγών are capable of meanings other than those assigned to them in the English translations. A possible translation would then be "let us steadfastly strive on in the face of the struggle set before us" or "let us steadfastly press on in the face of the conflict set before us". Although there may be no way to categorically determine the most appropriate translation, it should be noted that an alternative interpretation is at least possible. The question is, what other way AH could have communicated the need to strive on in the face of conflict or opposition, and does the above proposed translation make more sense given the context? To determine the answer to this question we need to look at the context of the phrase; that is the immediate context (words of close proximity) and the wider context (chapter 11 and 12). In the process we shall note the way in which many commentators understand these words and employ them in their sustained use of a racing metaphor in the text.

We shall now consider the supporting vocabulary employed by AH in 12:1, namely the nouns μαρτύρων ἀνδ ὑπομονῆς, and the phrase ὄγκον ἀποθέμενοι πάντα καὶ τὴν εὐπερίστατον ἁμαρτίαν ἁμαρτίαν

Μαρτύρων

⁴³ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 3rd, 1919 ed. (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, George H. Doran company, 1914), 477.

Firstly, we need to ask, if AH truly intended his readers to imagine themselves in a great race surrounded by the heroes of the faith urging them on, then why did he not use the term ‘spectator’ instead of ‘witness’? If he had done, then there would be no contesting the race motif, but the term he uses is not the usual term for someone who observes a race or spectacle (θεατής ἰὸν θεητή).⁴⁴ Commentators point out that while the term μαρτύρων can sometimes mean spectator, it seldom does, so they go on to interpret it in keeping with the idea of a witness rather than a spectator. As they do this the simple metaphor of a race with spectators becomes uncomfortable and quite often the exegesis somewhat strained. Lane’s work is a typical example of this.

In the NT, however, a witness is never merely a passive spectator but an active participant who confirms and attests the truth as a confessing witness. The tendency to associate “witness” with martyrdom is strengthened by the account of the martyred and persecuted exemplars of faith in 11:35b-38. The emphasis in v1 thus falls on what Christians see in the host of witnesses rather than on what they see in the Christians. The appeal to their example is designed to inspire heroic Christian discipleship.⁴⁵

Lane then quotes Bruce in brackets, who in turn is quoting Trites:

(so F.F. Bruce, 346; cf. Trites, Witness, 220-21, who remarks, “the context rules out the thought of spectators in an amphitheatre who watch the contemporary Christian race, and instead speaks of God’s testimony to the heroes of faith in the pages of the OT”).⁴⁶

Lane goes on to say, “Christians can benefit from the testimony of these OT witnesses to the validity of faith as they exert themselves in the race of

⁴⁴ Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon Vol. I*, 787.

⁴⁵ Lane, *Hebrews*, 408. See also Westcott who writes, “These champions of old time occupy the place of spectators but they are more than spectators. They are spectators who interpret to us the meaning of our struggle, and who bear testimony to the certainty of our success if we strive lawfully”. Westcott, *Hebrews*, 391.

⁴⁶ Yet Lane spends quite some time trying to show that it does fit an amphitheatre motif.

faith prescribed for them.”⁴⁷ This is a perfect example of the confusion that results in only seeing a racing metaphor at work here. While insisting on the presence of an athletic metaphor, and while trying to explain the term μαρτύρων, recourse to a non-athletic scenario is required to explain the activity of the witnesses. Yet if we were to take the pilgrimage motif seriously, the term is self-explanatory and Trites’ explanation is completely appropriate. Pilgrims give testimony to faith through their pilgrimage; past pilgrims give testimony through the retelling of their story. Ellingworth states that the basic meaning for μάρτυς “is doubtless one who testifies in a court of law; but this sense is almost certainly excluded here, since the context requires the meaning of spectators in a stadium, watching an athletic contest.”⁴⁸ He then goes on to say,

The immediate role is passive by contrast with that of Jesus, and indeed with that of the readers since the spectators cannot reach their goal unless the readers do so also (11:40); the details of the image must not be pressed too far.⁴⁹

We agree with Ellingworth that care must be taken not to push the image too far. However, there is no need to see the role of the witnesses as passive; indeed, we would want to argue that their role is active. They actively bear testimony to faith; their function is to continually bear testimony to faith’s object – the promise, even if they, as yet, have not attained it. Allison Trites, having studied the idea and role of a witness in the New Testament, examined the Epistle to the Hebrews and concludes that the epistle:

has some valuable things to say about witness, it recognises the Jewish law of evidence, the importance of signs and wonders as offering confirmatory testimony, and the testimony of God through the Scriptures.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Lane, *Hebrews*, 408.

⁴⁸ Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 638.

⁴⁹ Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 638.

⁵⁰ Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, vol. 31, *Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 221.

AH states in Hebrews 11:39 that the heroes had gained a good testimony for themselves; their testimony is borne in the scriptures that relate their stories. In chapter 11 they bear active testimony to faith; there is no reason to believe that in chapter 12 their function has now become passive, that of a spectator. To quote Trites more fully:

... the context rules out the thought of spectators in an amphitheatre who watch the contemporary Christian race, and instead speaks of God's testimony to the heroes of faith in the pages of the Old Testament. They are described as witnesses because they 'have experimental knowledge of that which is required of us, viz faith, x. 35-37, xi. 6sq., xii.2'⁵¹

Each pilgrimage has its own history and hence its own heroes. Stories are told and songs are sung of those who have gone before, those who have shown great courage and faith during the pilgrimage. In these stories and song the pilgrims of the past still bear witness to their faith and to the great acts such faith achieved. Hebrews 12:1 uses the heroes of chapter 11 in similar fashion; they are not present to "witness" the lives of the AH's congregation as they run a race, but to bear witness to their own lives, because "they have experimental knowledge" regarding faith in the face of opposition, conflict and abuse. As we have seen commentators are aware of this and so break down the athletic metaphor at this point while still insisting that we are to imagine an athletic stadium, an athletic event, and the attending crowd.

Ἑπομιση

If the race motif is the correct interpretive key, then AH calls his readers to run with patient endurance, steadfastness or perseverance the 'race' set before them. The question we ask here is, is patience or perseverance a term that automatically comes to mind when thinking of a race? Howard

⁵¹ Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, Paperback Edition 2004 ed., vol. 31, *Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977 (first published)), 221. Trites' closing quote is taken from H. Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek* (4th ed., Edinburgh, 895), 413.

Bream, in answering J.D Robb's article, questioning the racing motif in Hebrews 12:1, wonders if:

Robb's real difficulty does not stem from the word 'patience' rather than 'race'. In Hebrews 12¹, however, ὑπομονη, does not mean forbearance, but endurance. A quick survey of modern translations will demonstrate this. A patient runner would be a strange creature, no doubt, but endurance is an obvious asset to one who races.⁵²

Whether ὑπομονη means patience, endurance, or even patient endurance, the manner in which it can be applied to a race very much depends on the race in question. If the race is a short one, then it is over relatively quickly, and neither patience or endurance is required, nor is steadfastness or perseverance. Patience and endurance might more readily come to mind when thinking of the training and preparation for the race; however, AH is not here speaking of training for an event, but rather participation in an event. Commentators are aware of this of course, and so declare that the race AH has in mind is obviously a long distance race, a marathon.

We have already seen what Lane thinks about this but it is worth quoting him a more fully here as he is typical of many commentators.

(The metaphor of running a race is taken from the stadium, and reflects the recognised pre-eminence of the footrace in the Greek games. The footrace was one of the five contests of the pentathlon in the great Panhellenic games and always came first. At the Olympic Games the footrace was the only athletic contest for an extended period (Bream, *ExpTim* 80 [1968-69] 150-51). The exhortation to run δι' ὑπομονῆς, "with endurance," identifies the race not as a contest of speed but of stamina. The allusion is to a distance race requiring disciplined commitment and endurance (cf

⁵² Bream, "More on Hebrews xii.1," 151.

Grässer, *Glaube*, 58: “not the sprinter but the marathon runner!” so also H. Montefiore, 214; Dyck, “Jesus our Pioneer.” 137-38).⁵³

What we have here is yet another example of the confusion that results when one insists on sustaining the race metaphor. Endurance is obviously not a prerequisite for sprinting 200 metres or so, so recourse to long distance running and the marathon runner is needed; but did the stadium games involve long distance running?⁵⁴ The Panhellenic games were built upon the use of a stadium, and races were measured according to how many *stade* they took to complete. One *stade* measured roughly 200 yards or between 177.5 metres and 192.28 metres, depending on the construction of the stadium. The longest race in the Olympic Games was introduced in the year 726 BCE it was called a *dolichos* and it measured between 12 or 24 *stades*, which is anything between 2,194 metres and 4,389 metres;⁵⁵ hardly a marathon. The marathon was never a part of the original Olympic Games; it was introduced for the modern Olympics.⁵⁶ There were long distance races which took place outside the stadium such as the Eleutheria at Plataea,⁵⁷ or the torch race which “was no part of an ordinary athletic

⁵³ Lane, *Hebrews*, 409. See also Attridge; “That they should run with endurance (δὲ ὑπομονῆς) suggest that the race is more marathon than short sprint.” Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 355.

⁵⁴ We ask this question about stadium races because, as we have seen, scholars insist the setting is in a stadium where the spectators sit row upon row (the cloud of witnesses) to watch the athletics.

⁵⁵ The *dolichos* measured between 2.27273 and 2.72727 miles, that is between 3657.60000 and 4389.12000 metres.

⁵⁶ “There is one modern event which bears a Greek name, but which had no place in the Greek athletics of antiquity, the marathon. ... When the first modern Olympic Games were held at Athens in 1896 it was felt that these feats of pedestrianism at Athens' finest hour should be mirrored in the proceedings. Accordingly, a race was arranged from Marathon to Athens, a distance of twenty-four miles, 1500 yards; appropriately it was won by a Greek. Since then the race has formed part of every Olympiad, and it is often included in the programme of other meetings.” Harris, *Greek Athletes and Athletics*, 76-77.

⁵⁷ “... a race in armour founded to commemorate the great victory there over the Persians in 479B.C.” Harris, *Greek Athletes and Athletics*, 75.

meeting, and was connected with quite different religious festivals from those to which the usual games were dedicated".⁵⁸ However, there was no marathon, and as Harris points out "The Greeks never raced over such a distance. As we have seen, they recognized the value of 'ponos' or toughness in athletics, but in all departments of life they followed their excellent principle, 'Nothing in Excess'."⁵⁹

AH's readers who were familiar with the games would never have known the marathon as a stadium race. It is hard to believe that fit athletes would call between 1 mile and 3 miles an endurance race. In 1999 Haile Gebrselassie from Ethiopia ran the 5000 meter in 12:50.38mins. in Birmingham, England, quite a feat of speed and power, but hardly patient endurance.

We should also note the context in which the verb ὑπομένω and its cognate noun appears in Hebrews. Ὑπομένω and ὑπομονή, appear six times in Hebrews.⁶⁰ On each occasion times of conflict and hardship are in view; in 10:32 the congregation are said to have endured a great conflict, in 10:36 AH tells them they still have need for such endurance (one that can face such a great conflict); in 12:2 Jesus is said to have endured the cross (suffering and death); in 12:3 Jesus endured such hostility from sinful men (presumably the hostility refers to his suffering and death on the cross); in 12:7 AH's congregation are told to endure as in training or discipline (AH describes the discipline as a μαστιγῶν – a scourging, a painful process). As we see, on each occasion AH uses the verb and noun, he has in view a time of painful conflict. If AH is consistent in his use, then we would expect whichever metaphor AH employs here to be able to transmit the context of a trying and painful conflict. If we substitute the race motif for that of pilgrimage, then the need for endurance and steadfastness in the face of hardship is self-evident. It appears that the race metaphor lacks the necessary themes of danger, peril, hardship and death that chapter 11 has introduced as key aspects of a life of faith, and that the marathon race that

⁵⁸ Harris, *Greek Athletes and Athletics*, 75.

⁵⁹ Harris, *Greek Athletes and Athletics*, 76.

⁶⁰ Hebrews 10:32, 36; 12:1, 2, 3, 7.

commentators employ to make sense of part of the race metaphor was unknown to AH's audience.

We will now look at the idea of sin and its entanglement.

ὄγκον ἀποθέμενοι πάντα καὶ τὴν εὐπερίστατον ἁμαρτίαν

AH encourages his readers to lay aside all that hinders in making progress and the sin that so easily entangles or besets the pilgrim. This has traditionally been understood in terms of the runners in ancient games who ran naked (or nearly naked)⁶¹ and therefore laid aside all that could hinder their swiftness.⁶²

There are four observations we wish to make in response to this idea.

Sin and entanglements are just as applicable to a pilgrimage as to a race; probably more so. The idea of sin holding someone back from running a race does not automatically come to mind when watching a race, but it could so easily beset a pilgrim and hinder or even terminate their progress. Indeed, many pilgrimages are all about the problem of sin and its resolution.

Commentators fall over themselves trying to explain the relationship of the sin to the running of the race, until one is left wondering which is the metaphor, the sin, or the race. Scholars' interpretations become almost allegorical as sin or the (excess) weight (ὄγκον) is identified with the

⁶¹ Not all races were run naked; one race required the runner to complete the race in full armour!

⁶² Bruce understands it to refer to contestant to ensure he is not carrying excess weight, including body weight. Bruce, *Hebrews*, 335-336. Ellingworth states the athlete stripped off clothes or lay aside clothing that would hinder his performance. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. "...by the removal of all unnecessary garments and adornments at the time of the contest itself (the Greek custom in fact required the competitors to be stripped naked)", Hughes, *Hebrews*, 519-520. Koester notes that ἀποτίθημι "was used for removing clothing as athletes, did before competing since clothing added unnecessary 'weight'". Koester, *Hebrews*, 522. "Contestants removed all their clothing before running so that nothing could impede them during the race." Lane, *Hebrews*, 409.

runner's clothing or excess body weight.⁶³ The idea of sin, worldly entanglements and even extra 'baggage' are familiar themes for pilgrims and fit a pilgrimage scenario with little explanation, unlike the racecourse scenario where 'sin' becomes clothing or some other hindrance to smooth and swift running. If AH does use a metaphor here, he does not maintain it well, he breaks in and out of it. When *τρέχωμεν ... ἄγῶνα* is understood as the metaphor 'run the race', scholars employ an extended metaphor or an allegorical interpretation of additional elements in their exegesis. If, however, it is understood to simply mean 'press on in the face of conflict', then leaving behind all encumbrances in the heat of the struggle is intelligible; to be aware of the ensnaring power of sin is also intelligible to a pilgrim. If pilgrimage is seen to be an arduous and trying journey, beset by many perils, including constant temptations and allurements of sin, it requires no further explanation; no reference to clothing or other hindrances to 'racing' is required. Sin is simply seen as a danger and a temptation to divert the pilgrim from the arduous pilgrimage path.

Attridge recognises that sin is seen as dangerous in this passage but is unsure in what sense.⁶⁴ The danger lies in sin's ability to distract the pilgrim from his pilgrimage; sin's distractions can be to such an extent that the pilgrim fails to reach his destination. The sin and 'weight' is described by AH as *εὐπερίστατος* - holding tightly, controlling tightly, or surrounding. Scholars have noted the hostile sense with which the sin 'entangles' the actor.⁶⁵ This sense of hostility and almost malicious control, or

⁶³ "Here it refers most naturally to the weight of a long heavy robe, which would hamper running; it may equally apply to superfluous body weight." Lane, *Hebrews*, 409. See also, Bruce, *Hebrews*, 335-336, Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 638, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp and George W. MacRae, *Society of Biblical Literature Centennial Publications* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989), 519-520, Koester, *Hebrews*, 522, Westcott, *Hebrews*, 392-393. Attridge, however, notes "The noun [ῥῆμα] can have a variety of metaphorical uses, none of which is specified initially, and thus far the image is not developed or explained." Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 355.

⁶⁴ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 355.

⁶⁵ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 355, Bruce, *Hebrews*, 336, Hughes, *Hebrews*, Westcott, *Hebrews*, 394.

entanglement, is precisely the kind of hostile conflict and demanding struggle that is the context of Hebrews 11 and 12:1-4. One of the perils of pilgrimage is the power of sin to dissuade the pilgrim or entangle the pilgrim so they fail to make progress. Tough times call for tough measures; all things must be laid aside if the pilgrim wishes to make good progress in trying times and AH leaves his congregation in no doubt of this.

AH has shown great respect for the Jewish Scriptures and their usage. He skilfully demonstrates his knowledge of Jewish customs and expectations throughout his address. Therefore, it seems strange that he would use a metaphor implying nakedness and the need for it if one is to make progress. Jewish attitudes to the body, even in Hellenistic societies, were incredibly modest. By the time Hebrews was written (whether pre 70 CE or even shortly after) no singular 'hellenistic' attitudes to nudity, public nudity, and nudity in public sporting spectacles existed throughout the Roman Empire. To imagine that AH's attitude to nudity would be the same as an average Hellenist (if there was such a person) is ingenuous. The picture is more complex than a simple assertion of a homogenous hellenistic attitude to the naked body or even the sporting naked body. We believe the author of Hebrews to be a Jew, probably a Hellenist (taking his rhetorical education and argumentation into consideration). As a Jew he would have inherited a certain disposition to the naked body which we will outline shortly. However, we do not know his more specific origins, we do not know if he hailed from Italy or Alexandria (or anywhere in between), and we do not know if he penned his epistle to Christians in Rome, Jerusalem, Ephesus or Alexandria. We do, however, believe that he wrote to a predominantly Jewish Christian community. All these factors would have influenced just how comfortable AH would have been with seeing the naked body and alluding to the naked body, or requiring his congregation to think of the naked body.

Michael Satlow's study of Jewish attitudes to nakedness reveals a number of important points.⁶⁶ Nakedness, its meaning and consequences, was categorised according to the gender of the naked person. Male nudity was seen as an offence against God while female nudity was not. Male nudity

⁶⁶ Michael Satlow, L., "Jewish Constructions of Nakedness in Late Antiquity," *J B L* 116, no. 3 (1997).

was hierarchical; males should not be seen naked by their inferior, whereas this did not apply to women. Female nudity was a question of modesty, and practically regarded as an invitation to sin; this was not the case for a man. While it was recognised that there were occasions where it was appropriate or permissible for a man to be naked (working in a field or while in a bathhouse), no male could recite the shema or pray while naked, or even recite it in front of a naked Jew.⁶⁷ According to Satlow, “holy activities are not to take place in the presence of any male nakedness.”⁶⁸ Satlow recounts an interesting mishnaic story to illustrate the rabbinic attitude to male nakedness before God, or what one considers to be a god. It is worth quoting in full here.

Proklos ben Philosēphos [or philosopher] once asked [a question of] Rabban Gamaliel in Akko, where he was bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite. He said to him, “It is written in your Torah, ‘Let nothing that is doomed stick to your hand ...’ [Deut 13:18]. Why do you then bathe in the bathhouse of Aphrodite?”

• He said to him, “One doesn’t answer in a bathhouse.”

When they went outside, he [Rabban Gamaliel] said to him, “I did not come into her territory, she came into my territory. Don’t say that the bathhouse was made [as] an ornament for Aphrodite, but that Aphrodite was made [as] an ornament for the bathhouse.”

Another version:[Rabban Gamaliel said,] “If they would give you much money, you would not enter into your temple of idolatry naked, having had a seminal emission, and urinate in front of her [the statue of the goddess]. [But] she stands on the gutter and all urinate before her! It is written [‘Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire, and cut down the images] of their gods, [obliterating their name form that site]’ [Deut 12:2]. [An image] that one treats as a god is forbidden [to come near], but one that one does not treat as a god is permitted.” (*m. ÁAbod. Zar.* 3:4)

Satlow notes three important elements in the story.

⁶⁷ Satlow, "Jewish Constructions of Nakedness in Late Antiquity," 432.

⁶⁸ Satlow, "Jewish Constructions of Nakedness in Late Antiquity," 433.

Rabban Gamaliel does not answer while in still in the bathhouse. This coincides with traditions forbidding discussion of Torah while there may be naked males present.

Aphrodite is probably naked, but the story makes no mention of this as female nakedness “(at least of a statue)” would not have caused the same consternation as male nakedness.

Walking naked in front of a god, having seminal emissions approaching a god, and urinating in front of a god, are all seen as “signs of gross disrespect, as treating a ‘god’ as a ‘no god’”.⁶⁹

The rabbis saw male nakedness as totally inappropriate when approaching God, the sanctuary, or holy space. This echoes the scriptural injunction to the Aaronic priesthood to wear appropriate covering when approaching the altar. (Ex 20:23; 28:42-43) Although Satlow’s evidence is taken from Late Antiquity, he does show that the rabbis’ concern was paralleled in other Jewish text such as Jubilees 3:30-31, and material from Qumran such as the 1QS 7:12-14; 1QM 7:7; 10:1.

In concluding his article Satlow states,

Jewish sources from antiquity construct male nakedness in a more or less consistent manner. Male nakedness is an offense to the sacred. Similarly, the divine – and his representatives here on earth, whether they are kings, priests, or rabbis – does not reveal himself to social subordinates. In nonsacral and nonhierarchical contexts male nakedness was not problematized. Working naked in a field, or going naked into a bathhouse, for example, incurs little or no rabbinic opprobrium. That there were forums in which male nakedness was considered acceptable demonstrates that the logic was not taken to its inevitable end: because God is everywhere, male nakedness should be prohibited everywhere.⁷⁰

It is reasonable to assume that if AH was indeed a Jew, one who was passionate regarding the holiness of God, the need for sacrifice and holy space, and was equally passionate about ensuring that his congregation approach and arrive at the presence of God, then nakedness or naked

⁶⁹ Satlow, "Jewish Constructions of Nakedness in Late Antiquity," 435.

⁷⁰ Satlow, "Jewish Constructions of Nakedness in Late Antiquity," 453-454.

imagery would probably not have formed part of his argument. This is especially so when we take the context of 12:1 into consideration; in 10:22 AH encourages his congregation to approach the living God, in Hebrews 11 he prepares them for the final stretch of their pilgrimage, in Hebrews 12:22 he can declare that they have drawn near to God's awesome presence. The idea of drawing near or approaching God's presence is one of AH's main objectives in Hebrews (4:16; 7:19, 25; 10:1, 22). If a Jew could not approach God while naked, it is unlikely that AH would have used the idea even as a metaphor.

We have seen that the idea of nakedness for a Jew, while accepted under certain conditions, was not appropriate when speaking of God or approaching Him. Nakedness was not whole-heartedly endorsed throughout the Roman Empire either. For some Roman citizens public nakedness was an affront to decency and had little to do with religious beliefs as such. It is common to speak of the culture of the New Testament as being Hellenistic, and while this is true, it needs to be nuanced. A better description for the cultural milieu would be Greco-Roman.⁷¹ The Roman Empire had its own cultural mores and, although it was influenced by Greek ideas, it did not display the same attitude in all things.⁷² Public

⁷¹ Some 'Greek Cities' are more aptly termed Roman colonies and favoured Roman law, rule and customs; a well known example is the city of Corinth. See Edward Togo Salmon, *Roman Colonization under the Republic, Aspects of Greek and Roman Life* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1969). Salmon states, Corinth had a 'strong gravitational pull' towards all things Roman'. 51. Also, Susan E. Alcock, *Graecia Capta: The Landscapes of Roman Greece* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Paul Cartledge and Antony Spawforth, *Hellenistic and Roman Sparta: A Tale of Two Cities, States and Cities of Ancient Greece* (London; New York: Routledge, 1989), Donald W. Engels, *Roman Corinth: An Alternative Model for the Classical City* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), Erich S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge Massachusetts / London England: Harvard University Press, 2002), Erich S. Gruen, *Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy, Cincinnati Classical Studies, New Ser., V. 7* (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1990).

⁷² For example, Roman and Greek attitudes to sex and sexuality were not identical; see Ruth Mazo Karras, "Active/Passive, Acts/Passions: Greek and Roman Sexualities," *Am Hist R* 105, no. 4 (2000), Peter Walcot, "Plutarch on Sex," *Greece*

nudity is an example; Satlow cites Cato's dislike of public nudity, a custom Cato calls particularly Greek.⁷³ In an article entitled 'Nudity and Morality: Athletics in Italy', Nigel Crowther states:

Although the Romans probably competed naked in athletics in Greece, there is no definite evidence that they did so in Rome, at least on a permanent basis, until the first century A.D. ...

It is only in 60 A.D. at the Neronia that we know conclusively that athletes were naked at an athletic competition in Rome, when Tacitus believed that national morality had been overthrown by imported licentiousness.⁷⁴

It is possible, that on occasions, athletes competed naked in Rome prior to this date as women were excluded from the games by Augustus.⁷⁵ While the earliest date for nude participation in the games in Rome may be unsure, Crowther states, "there was a remarkable change in the first century A.D. from the stern morality of Ennius, Cicero, and M. Cato". Nudity in public athletics started late in Rome due to the Roman attitude to the appropriateness or otherwise of displaying the naked male figure. "When the prejudice against nudity disappeared in Rome, so too it appears did a large part of the prejudice against Greek athletes".⁷⁶ By the end of the first century CE nudity in Roman games was the norm. We can see from this that Roman attitudes to nakedness were not entirely the same as those found in Greece. If the Epistle to the Hebrews is linked with Rome then

& *Rome 2nd Ser.* 45, no. 2 (1998), Craig A. Williams, "Greek Love at Rome," *Classical Quart. ns* 45, no. 2 (1995). Also see J.P. Hallet 'Roman Attitudes towards Sex.' In Michael Grant and Rachel Kitzinger, *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome*, 3 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1988).

⁷³ Satlow, "Jewish Constructions of Nakedness in Late Antiquity," 352. Satlow cites Plutarch *M. Cato* 20.5-6

⁷⁴ Nigel B. Crowther, "Nudity and Morality: Athletics in Italy," *CJ* 76, no. 2 (Dec.-Jan.) (1980/81): 121.

⁷⁵ Crowther, "Nudity and Morality: Athletics in Italy," 122.

⁷⁶ Crowther, "Nudity and Morality: Athletics in Italy," 123.

the author could also have been aware of the more modest view on nudity that Roman citizens may have shared.⁷⁷

We have seen that not everyone accepted nakedness in all spheres; just because it might be accepted in one sphere (working in a field, participating in sports, or at a bathhouse) does not mean it would have been accept when speaking of God, or thinking of approaching Him. Romans might have thought nakedness was acceptable in other parts of the Empire but not in Rome, at least not until late first century CE

Paul uses athletic terminology or metaphors when writing. It might therefore be argued that this substantiate AH's use of such terminology. In addition, if Paul is comfortable using racing terminology and runners participated in the nude, then does that not imply that AH would also have been comfortable with such an image? This is not necessarily the case. If Paul finds a given image appropriate, it does not of necessity follow that AH would therefore find it appropriate too. The context must decide and part of that context must be the intended audience. If Paul directed his epistles to predominantly Gentile congregations and AH to a predominantly Jewish one, and if we can reasonably expect them to be sensitive to their congregations' needs and cultural mores, then it follows that we may also reasonably expect them to either employ distinct metaphors and imagery,⁷⁸ or to be circumspect when employing any given image so as not to offend the intended audience.

⁷⁷ We have noted previously that some authors believe the Epistle's destination to be Rome or that the author was well known in Rome. He appears to be accompanied by Romans even if he himself is not Roman.

⁷⁸ We may expect each author to stress certain elements of a metaphor or to employ certain metaphors and images more often. For example, AH uses cultic terminology consistently throughout the Epistle, while Paul seems to use it only sparingly. If we take two key cultic terms such as 'priest' and 'blood' to compare our two authors we note: Hebrews uses the noun 'priest' some 25 times whereas Paul never uses it. Paul does, however, use the verb participle *ἱεουργοῦντα* to refer to his ministry (Rom 15:16). Hebrews uses *αἷμα* some 18 times in a cultic context, i.e. the shedding of blood in sacrifices, for forgiveness of sins, or the cutting of a covenant; Paul uses the term in similar contexts only 6 times.

Nevertheless, it is worth looking very briefly at Paul's race metaphor. The passage that undeniably employs a running metaphor (as opposed to putting the stress on 'making progresses or 'striving ahead') is 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. Here Paul is referring to the manner or attitude of the Christian disciple; it should be purposeful, dedicated, and single-minded. To this end he uses the metaphor of a runner who competes to win. The runner does not run for the love of participating alone, he runs to win. Paul uses the metaphor simply; he does not once push the metaphor to the extent where his audience is forced to imagine themselves, or others, doing so in the nude. He does not mention the removal of any item to aid the runner; the only aids to the runner are self-control and bodily discipline.

Insistence on seeing a running metaphor in Hebrews 12:1 has required scholars to interpret the text allegorically,⁷⁹ and to import into the text an image (nudity) that AH would probably have been very uncomfortable employing.

Yet what of non-New Testament references to athletic metaphors cited by commentators? Are they truly comparable with the context and usage of Hebrews 12:1 as commentators imply? As we have noted, many commentators point out that athletic metaphors were used to express times of hardship and danger. Various examples are given, two of the most common being 2 Maccabees 13:14 and 4 Maccabees 17:10-14.⁸⁰ Yet in neither case is the term "run the race" used or implied; the idea is that of engaging in a fight, struggle or contest. The athletic reference is that of a contest, and in 2 Maccabees 13:14, by extension, to participation in a fight or battle. If an athletic metaphor is required to understand Heb 12:1, then it may be more appropriate to understand it in similar fashion to 2 Maccabees, where the idea of a hard and perilous contest is in view, not the relatively peaceful contest of running a race.

Attridge also cites Philo, namely *De Agricultura* (On Husbandry) 112 and 119, *De Praemiis et Poenis* (On Rewards and Punishments) 5, and *De*

⁷⁹ Sin = clothing or long heavy robes that can entangle the runner. Weight = clothing or excess body weight.

⁸⁰ For example, Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 354, Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 37ff, Lane, *Hebrews*, 408.

Migratioe Abrahami (On the Migration of Abraham) 133.⁸¹ Yet none of these is truly comparable with Hebrews 12:1. *De Agricultura* speaks of the true Olympic contests and the role of reason, vice and virtue. *De Praemiis et Poenis* is about the true athletes of virtue who have been trained by the law, and those weak unmanly souls who, to their own shame, fainted even before the contest began and were derided by the spectators. *De Migratioe Abrahami* uses the image of a good runner as an example to follow in order to avoid growing weary or taking the wrong road. This last use of athletic imagery may be the closest to Hebrews 12:1, but we should note that the setting is not that of endurance in suffering or in the face of perilous circumstances, but the pursuit of reason, wisdom and true piety.

If we wish to argue that an athletic metaphor is at work in Hebrews 12:1, then maybe it would be best to see *avgw,n* as referring to a martial arts contest, a free-style fighting contest. That way at least some reference to a struggle, opposition and danger is retained.⁸² However, we believe there is no compelling reason to insist on such a metaphor. Hebrews 12:1 can be understood by seeing it as part of the pilgrimage process, where the idea of opposition and struggle is a key theme without the need for recourse to athletic scenarios that lack the concept of peril and danger. To substantiate this claim we must ask ourselves if we find any other evidence for a pilgrimage motif in chapters 11 and 12.

Pilgrimage is a costly or perilous journey, and so pilgrims will encounter times of danger and hardship in their journey. There are a variety of common pilgrimage responses to suffering. When a pilgrim is confronted by opposition or danger, (1) pilgrims should develop the ability to look beyond their present circumstance to their ultimate condition upon arriving at the pilgrimage goal or centre, accepting that their hardships are not 'forever'; (2) suffering may be understood as discipline, correction, or sacrifice. (3) Together with this, their response can be often one of joy in the face of suffering, knowing that their joy will be complete when they arrive at the goal of their pilgrimage.

⁸¹ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 354.

⁸² Attridge notes that the image used in 12:4 appears to be a boxing or military image rather than a race. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 360.

Keeping this in mind, let us once again briefly look at the context of Hebrews 12:1. We have noted the main themes of conflict and peril in chapter 11. If the pilgrimage motif best explains Hebrews 12:1, then we can expect to find reference to: (1) looking beyond ones present circumstances, (2) hardships understood in terms of discipline or correction, and (3) maybe even joy, within the immediate context of 12:1, as these are ideas that naturally flow together in the pilgrimage paradigm. We believe that we do indeed find them in Hebrews 11:26, 35; 12:2-11.

In chapter 11, AH lists a number of heroes as examples of faith in the face of severe hardship to encourage his readers to press on when they too experience such hardships. In chapter 12 he tells them to look to Christ, the founder and supreme example of their faith who endured such hardship to the point of death, but who responded with resolve because he could see in view a future experience of joy. He then goes on to tell his congregation to accept the hardships as a child accepts discipline and correction from a loving father. The whole context and conceptual framework of Hebrews 12:1 is the need for endurance in suffering and hardship, a common pilgrimage theme. If that is so, to understand δι' ὑπομονῆς τρέχωμεν τὸν προκείμενον ἡμῖν ἀγῶνα as an athletic metaphor is not required. Indeed to see it as a metaphor at all is unnecessary; he literally requires them to strive on and to face the hardship and peril that lies before them as any faithful pilgrim would.

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