An Agonistic[1] Explosion: An Investigation of Athletics in the Seven Cities of Revelation

in Honor of Dr. Walter F. Taylor Jr.

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Dr. Walter Taylor's classes were renowned among students at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and students will especially remember his classes on Romans. For this former pupil, however, it was his class on John's Apocalypse which provided the inspiration for his future studies. This enigmatic text with its fantastical visions actually has a specific setting in the seven assemblies (ἐκκλησίαι) of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamon, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea in the Roman province of Asia during the reign of the Emperor Domitian (81–96 C.E.). In Revelation, there is a message to each of these congregations and in each of these messages there is a promise to the one who is victorious (ὁ νικῶν; Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26ff; 3:5, 12, 21).

This verb, νικάω, was often used for victory in a variety of contexts, including military, athletic, or judicial contexts. The phrase oJ nikw:n in Rev 2–3 has been almost always understood by commentators as a military metaphor or in light of its connections to military conquest. For example, Richard Bauckham argues that this phrase invites the readers "to participate in the eschatological war which is described in the central part of the book, where the vocabulary of conquest (nika:n) is frequent, and so gain their place in the new Jerusalem."[2] Such a background is important, especially for highlighting the risk of death for faithfulness to Jesus. Adela Yarbro Collins takes a different tack and understands this verb in light of a judicial context, which highlights the issues of justice in Revelation and the struggle of the faithful with Roman judicial authority.[3] A broader reading, which takes these backgrounds into account and engages the image of athletic victory, would provide a deeper understanding of how the call to be victorious would have impacted John's audience. The goal of this paper is to highlight the additional significance of Greek athletics for the language of victory in order to determine how it aids in John's exhortations to his audience to endure, remain faithful to Jesus, and bear witness to his lordship. As we will see, athletic victory would have been a powerful image for John's audience on account of the continued importance of athletics and the rising number of athletic festivals in the cities of the province of Asia.

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An agonistic explosion in first-century Asia

By the time of John's Revelation, athletics had long been an important part of Panhellenic civic culture.[4] Athletics in the ancient Greek world were one of various forms of competition or *agones* in this agonistic culture and they played a central role in Greek cities both in terms of individual achievement and more broadly as an interwoven cultural element.[5] Athletics played an important role in the education of young citizens, in cities' massive gymnasium

1. The term "agonistic" is an adjective derived from the Greek word ἀγῶν, which was used to refer to a gathering or assembly and to competition of various kinds, especially athletics. Cf. Stephen G. Miller, *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources* (2nd ed; Berkley: University of California, 1991), 209.

2. Richard Bauckham, "The Apocalypse as a Christian War Scroll," in *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (New York: T&T Clark, 1993), 213. Cf. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (vol. 1; Word Biblical Commentary 52a; Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 151.

3. *The Apocalypse* (New Testament Message 22; Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1979), 14.

4. For definitions of "athletics" see W.E. Sweet, *Sport and Recreation in Ancient Greece* (New York: Oxford University, 1987), 4; and Michael Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World: Competition, Violence, and Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1987), 7.

5. Greek culture was referred to as "agonistic" because of the significant role that competitions of all kinds played in the culture and the importance of individual achievement and distinction. Cf. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports*, 104ff.

complexes,[6] and an important role in the spectacles of festivals.[7]

Among the festivals, none were greater than the four *periodos* games: the Olympic, Isthmian, Pythian, and Nemean games. Beyond these contests were many other contests of varying status and notoriety, from local contests in honor of some person or god, to those that attained recognition throughout the Greek world for their sacred character, which could be known as sacred (*hieros*) or crown (*stephanic*) games.[8] The most prestigious games gave the victor the right to receive triumphal entry upon his return home, and under the Roman emperors, such statuses became an imperial bequest.[9]

Another distinction among these festivals lay in the honoree. Many festivals that held athletic competitions honored a specific deity or group of deities, such as the Olympics in honor of Zeus. In such games, "competitive excellence was thought to be a peculiarly appropriate way of showing due respect for the gods."[10] As Simon Price notes, athletics "always occurred within a religious context," and the competitions were encapsulated within, interwoven between, and punctuated by cultic elements.[11] Festivals could also honor human beings, such as benefactors or legendary heroes and their cults.[12] Some games even honored human beings as divine, as was the case with the imperial cult, where the emperor was worshipped beside another deity and honored in the athletic contests.

Under Roman imperial rule there was a massive number of new Greek gymnastic festivals throughout the empire, so much so that the renowned scholar Louis Robert called it "an agonistic explosion."[13] This was especially the case in the Roman province

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of Asia, the location of Revelation's seven churches, where athletics had appeared among the Greek colonies along the coast of the eastern Aegean and became a central part of the Greek identity of these cities. In the late Hellenistic period, as Rome started to exert its force in the East, new festivals appeared in honor of Roma and Roman officials who provided various benefactions for the region.[14] Then, under the Roman emperors, athletics became closely linked to the imperial cult and the emperors themselves.[15] Athletics became an essential way "to establish links to the new Roman power" through a Greek past and became even more closely tied to civic ideology.[16] By the time of John's Revelation, the continued celebration of older athletic festivals and the founding of new festivals under imperial approval all evidence this rising import of athletics in the life of these cities. This is most apparent in the city of Ephesus, which celebrated traditional festivals and newly founded ones under the Roman emperors and particularly under the emperor Domitian.

Traditional festivals in Ephesus

Ephesus had two of the most widely known traditional festivals with athletics, the *Epheseia* and the *Artemisia*.[17] These were the "oldest and probably the most revered of the festivals at Ephesus" and both of these festivals continued into the first century C.E.[18]

6. For the import of athletics within the Greek educational system see Miller, *Arete*, chapter 10. Cf. Lucian of Samosata, *Anacharsis* (in *Works* vol. 4. Loeb Classical Library. Translated by A. M. Harmon. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1925), 15 and 30.

7. Simon R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (New York: Cambridge University, 1984), 110; cf. Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* (in *Works*; 5 volumes; Loeb Classical Library; translated by J. W. Cohoon; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1946–1951) 27.5ff; Lucian, *Anacharsis*, 12.

8. Louis Robert, "Sur des Inscriptions d'Éphese," *Revue de Philologie, de Litteráture et d'Histoire Anciennes* 41 (1967): 7–84, 16.

9. Sofie Remijsen, "The So-Called 'Crown-Games': Terminology and Historical Context of the Ancient Categories for *Agones*," *ZPE* 177 (2011): 97–109, 107. Cf. Pliny, *Letters* (vol. 2; Loeb Classical Library; translated by William Melmoth; revised by W.M.L. Hutchinson; New York: Macmillan Co., 1915), 10.118–119.

10. Paul Cartledge, "The Greek Religious Festivals," in *Greek Religion and Society* (eds. P. E. Easterling and J. Muir; Cambridge: Cambridge, 1985), 108. Tertullian, *De Spectaculis* (translated by T. R. Glover; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931) ch. 7.

11. Simon R.F. Price, *Religions of the Ancient Greeks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 43. Stephen G. Miller, *Ancient Greek Athletics* (Italy: Yale University Press, 2004), 118–124; cf. Victor C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 19ff.

12. Such as the *Balbilla* games in Ephesus (see below) or hero cults at the Olympics [E. N. Gardiner, *Athletic Sports and Festivals* (Handbooks of Archaeology and Antiquities; London: MacMillan, 1910), 38].

13. "Ce fut un explosion agonistique" (Louis Robert, "Discours d'Ouverture," in Praktikav tou H' dieqnouvV sunedrivou Ellhnikhv kai; LatinikhvV epigrafikhvV, Aqhvna, 3-9 Oktwbrivou 1982, tovmoV A (Athens, 1984), 35–45, 38).

14. E.g., the games in honor of proconsul Moukios Scaevola [Max Fränkel, *Die Inscriften von Pergamon: Altertümer von Pergamon* (Band 8. 2 Vols. Berlin: W. Spemann, 1890, 1895), no. 268AB].

15. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* (vol. 2; Loeb Classical Library; transl. by Earnest Cary; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1961), 4.25.4.

16. Sophia Aneziri, "Greek Strategies of Adaptation to the Roman World: The Case of the Contests," *Mnemosyne* 67 (2014): 423–442, 423–424. Cf. Zahra Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World: Victory and Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 201 and 279.

17. Hicks, E. L. *The Collection of Ancient Greek Inscriptions in the British Museum* (Part III; ed. C. T. Newton. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), 79.

18. I. R. Arnold, "Festivals of Ephesus," *American Journal of Archaeology* 76 (1972): 17–22, 17. We have evidence from a first-century C.E. victory inscription that the Artemisia continued at that time [Wolfgang Blümel, ed., *Die Inschriften von Iasos* (Vol. 1; Inschriften Griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien, bd. 28.1; Bonn: Rudolf Habelt GMBH, 1985), no. 110]. For the Epheseia, we must base our conclusion on the appearance the games on inscriptions from the Hellenistic period through the second century C.E. [cf. Robert, "Inscriptions d'Éphese," 23; Wankel, Hermann, et al., eds., *Die Inschriften von Ephesos* (8 vols; Inschriften Griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien, bds.

Both of these festivals drew spectators from far and wide. The Ephesians claimed that the *Epheseia* were their oldest competitions.[19] This festival celebrated the city itself, but was celebrated by people from around the region.[20] The *Artemisia* on the other hand honored the city's main goddess, Artemis of the Ephesians, and at least some of the contests were held in the gymnasium in the Artemision.[21] The cultic celebrations at both festivals likely included significant honors for the emperors.[22] This is especially apparent for the *Epheseia* in the inclusion of the Greek title for Augustus (*Sebastos*) in the title τὰ μεγάλα Σεβαστὰ Ἐφέσηα, which appears on a late first-century B.C.E. inscription.[23] As we will see, throughout the province of Asia, older traditional festivals were modified to include honors for the emperors and new festivals were developed specifically in their honor.

Similar games tied to civic cults likely continued into the first century C.E. in the city of Pergamon, another one of Revelation's seven cities, with their *Nikephoria* festival in honor of *Athena Poliados kai Nikephoros* and the *Asklepeia* festival in honor of the healing god Asklepius.[24] The *Nikephoria* festival was established in the second century B.C.E. following a military victory and was recognized as sacred throughout the Greek world.[25] The *Asklepeia* games grew in importance along with the cults of Asklepios Soter and Hercules following wars in the second century B.C.E. and also continued under Roman rule.[26] The continued celebration of these traditional games further emphasizes the significance of athletics as part of religious cults and festivals in the civic environment of the province of Asia.

The import of athletics expanded under the Roman emperors, and, as with the *Epheseia* and *Artemisia* festivals, athletics became closely linked to these new rulers and were used to honor them.

Games in honor of Rome and its emperors

The import of athletics expanded under the Roman emperors, and, as with the *Epheseia* and *Artemisia* festivals, athletics became closely linked to these new rulers and were used to honor them.[27] The *Romaia* games of Ephesus were a part of this trend. These games were akin to others in eastern cities which were established in honor of Rome and *Dea Roma* and they were possibly instituted with the cult of Roma in Ephesus ca. 133 B.C.E.[28] Under imperial rule, these games came to include honors for the emperor as well. This is apparent on an inscription from Ephesus that mentions sacrifices in honor of Rome, the emperor *Sebastos* (Augustus), and the god Artemis in conjunction with these games.[29] The use of athletic competitions to honor and express loyalty to the emperor will become even more evident with the institution of new games in conjunction with the imperial cult.

At the end of the first century C.E., the Ephesian Olympics were founded in honor of Zeus Olympios and likely the emperor Domitian in connection with the new provincial cult in his honor.[30] These were the second games instituted in connection with

11-17.4; Bonn: Habelt, 1979-1984), nos. 14.25–27 {as cited in Guy MacLean Rogers, *The Sacred Identity of Ephesos: Foundations Myths of a Roman City* (London: Routledge, 1991), 57} and 3080].

19. Cf. Luigi Moretti, *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche* (Studi Pubblicati Dall'Istituto Italiano per la Storia Antica 12, Rome: Angelo Signorelli, 1953), 213; Helmut Engelmann, "Zur Agonistik in Ephesos," *Stadion* 24.1 (1998): 101–108, 106.

20. Arnold, "Festivals of Ephesus," 18.

21. Engelmann, "Zur Agonistik in Ephesos," 102; cf. Wankel, et al., *Inschriften von Ephesos*, nos. 1102, 1143.

22. Price, *Rituals and Power*, 104.

23. Wankel, et al., *Inschriften von Ephesos,* no. 14.25–27.

24. A variety of traditional festivals appear in later inscriptions but may have been celebrated in the first century C.E.: the Tyrimnea of Thyatira [Moretti, *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche*, no. 69], the Sebasta *Anaeiteia* of Philadelphia [Cagnat, R., et al., eds., *Inscriptiones graecae as res romanas pertinentes* (vol IV; Scholar's Reference Edition; Chicago: Ares Publishers, 1975) no. 1634], the *Trajaneia Deiphilea* of Pergamon [Moretti, *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche*, p. 214] and the *Nemeseia* of Smyrna [Martin P. Nilsson, *Griechische Feste von Religiöser Bedeutung: Mit Ausschluss der Attischen* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1906), 441].

25. Cf. Fränkel, *Inschriften von Pergamon*, p. 105 and Cagnat, *Inscriptiones graecae* IV, no. 293 notes on line 50; David Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor: to the End of the Third Century After Christ* (2 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 739–740. Blümel, *Iasos*, no. 6.

Based on the appearance of these games in inscriptions from the second and first centuries B.C.E. and from the second and third centuries C.E. it seems likely that they continued throughout the first century C.E. [Erwin Ohlemutz, *Die Kulte und Heiligtümer der Götter in Pergamon* (2nd ed.; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), 40; Cf. Fränkel, *Inschriften von Pergamon*, nos. 167, 523, 525; H.W. Pleket, et al., eds., *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* (vol. XLIV; Amsterdam: Gieben, 1997), no. 994].

26. H.W. Pleket and R.S. Stroud, eds., *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* [vol. XXXIV; Amsterdam: Gieben, 1987], no. 1249. Cf. Fränkel, *Inschriften von Pergamon*, no. 513; Moretti, *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche*, 197.

27. Cf. Louis Robert, "Deux Concours Grecs à Rome," (Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres 114 (1970): 6-27), 38; Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 59.

28. Engelmann, "Agonistik in Ephesos," 106. Cf. Moretti, *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche*, 137–138; Smyrna also had *Romaia* games (Ibid., 239).

29. Wankel, et al., *Inschriften von Ephesos*, no. 859a. Cf. no. 902 for the altar to Augustus in the forum.

30. Steve Friesen [*Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia, and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Religions in the Greco-Roman World 116; Leiden: Brill, 1993), 140] is confident in this conclusion based on the close association between these two in the imperial cult, as is apparent from coins which depict Domitian on the obverse and Zeus Olympios on the reverse (Ibid., 119), and from erasures tied to the *damnatio memoriae* of Domitian, which concerned these games Ibid., 139). Such erasures and the disappearance of the games after Domitian, clearly

the Asian provincial imperial cult. In 29 B.C.E., the *koinon* of Asia founded the *Roma Sebasta* games in Pergamon in conjunction with the provincial cult in honor of Roma and the emperor Augustus.[31] The *Roma Sebasta* games, in ways similar to athletic festivals in honor of gods, were considered a fitting way to honor and worship Augustus and the deified Rome for their various benefactions to the province and the empire at large.[32] In addition, these games had a significant impact on the province as a whole. First of all, the establishment of these games by the *koinon* of Asia itself evidences the role of these games in expressing the province's loyalty to the emperor and in honoring him.[33] Second, there was also a significant economic component since there was a tax exemption on imports and exports through the port at Ephesus for thirty days on the occurrence of the festival.[34] Thus the economy and political relationship of the entire province was impacted by and benefited from this festival.

The Ephesian Olympics likely had a similar purpose and impact. The inaugural Ephesian Olympics probably occurred in the year 89 C.E. and possibly lasted for five days, the same as the original Olympics on which they were modeled.[35] These games would have been particularly fresh for John's audience.[36] In these games, the emperor became closely linked to the main Greek god of athletics, who was worshipped with athletic competition and victory, making it even clearer that emperors were honored and worshipped for their benefactions to the empire through athletic competition.

Domitian also was the first emperor to successfully establish permanent cyclical gymnastic games in Rome, the *Capitoline* games in honor of Jupiter.[37] These games were likely well known throughout the whole empire, as they appeared in victory inscriptions alongside the most elite games in the period.[38] Of particular note is the reward of Roman citizenship which was bestowed upon victors and is reflected in their new names including the emperor's *gens* (Flavius) and tribe (Quirina).[39] These games and this prize are significant for providing further evidence of Domitian's involvement in the promotion of athletics throughout the empire and, in them, Domitian drew clear links between Greek athletics and the emperors, between Jupiter and himself, and between victory and his family's name.

In addition to games in honor of emperors, there were new games throughout the empire in honor of benefactors, some of which received imperial recognition as sacred contests.

Other athletic festivals in Ephesus

In addition to games in honor of emperors, there were new games throughout the empire in honor of benefactors, some of which received imperial recognition as sacred contests. Prior to the institution of the Ephesian Olympics, Emperor Domitian's father, the emperor Vespasian, permitted such an establishment of sacred games (ἀγῶνα...ἱερὸν) in Ephesus in honor of the astrologer Balbillus, known as the *Balbilla* games.[40] In the past, cities would send messengers to Greek cities throughout the region and to major holy sites in order to receive recognition for the sacred nature of their contests. Now, as we see in Vespasian's permission for the games, only the emperor needed to recognize such status in order for it to be so throughout the empire, making him a benefactor of both the games and the city.[41] Such status places these games among the most important in the empire. The important status of the *Balbilla* games is also evident in their inclusion among the greatest contests in the touring schedule of the athletic guilds in the second century C.E. and in the quality of the athletes who won there in the first century.[42] The *Balbilla* games, like many other athletic festivals, may have honored the emperor in significant ways, as is apparent in the addition of the title Σεβαστῶν in an early second century C.E. inscription from Ephesus.[43] As such, the *Balbilla* games provide an excellent example of how even games that honored civic benefactors became opportunities for imperial benefaction and to honor the emperors.[44]

Ephesus also hosted games run by the *koinon* of Asia, the koina; AsivaV games. These games were held in eight other cities throughout the province and quickly dominated its athletic scene. By the end of the first century C.E., they were held in five of the

indicate their role in honoring him.

31. Dio Cassius, *Roman History* (9 vols.; Loeb Classical Library; translated by Earnest Cary; New York: Putnam's Sons, 1914–1927), 51.20.6–9; Friesen, *Imperial Cult*, 26ff. Cf. Moretti, *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche*, nos. 59, 60.

32. Price, *Rituals and Power*, 217.

33. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, 15.

34. H.W. Pleket and R.S. Stroud, *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* (vol. XXXVI; Amsterdam: Gieben, 1989), no. 1027.

35. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, 117, 139. cf. Blümel, *Inschriften von Iasos*, no. 108.

36. Significantly, the Ephesian Olympics did disappear after the *damnatio memoriae* of Domitian, only to reappear in honor of Hadrian and Zeus in the second century C.E.; Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, 118.

37. Suetonius, *Domitian* (vol. 2; Loeb Classical Library; Transl. by J.C. Rolfe; New York: Putnam's Sons, 1920) 4.4; Newby, *Greek Athletics*, 27; cf. Robert, "Deux Concours," 7ff.

38. Cf. Moretti, *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche*, nos. 66, 67, 68.

39. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, 117. Cf. Moretti, *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche*, nos. 66, 67, 68.

40. Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 65.9.2.

41. See fn. 9 above.

42. Corbier, Mirielle, et al., eds., "ASIE MINEURE," *L'Année épigraphique* 2006 (2009): 530–621, no. 1403b and pp. 552–553, 556. For first-century competitors, Moretti, *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche*, nos. 62, 65, 66, 67.

43. Wankel, et al., *Inschriften von Ephesos*, no. 1122.

44. Cf. honors for the emperor at the *Demostheneia* games in Oenoanda, Stephen Mitchell, "Festivals, Games, and Civic Life in Roman Asia Minor." *Journal for Roman Studies* 80 (1990): 183–193, 185 lines 50–55.

seven cities in Rev 2–3: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamon, Sardis, and Laodicea.[45] The festivals were considered to be of two strata, the greater (mevgala) *koina Asias*, which were held at Ephesus, Pergamon, and Smyrna, and the other *koina* at Cyzicus, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Miletus, Sardis, and Tralles.[46] The cycle for these games is uncertain, but the evidence points toward each of the host cities holding a festival every four years, leading to at least one *koina* game every year by the end of the first century C.E.[47] However, in spite of their provincial character, the greater *Koina* games became renowned throughout the empire.[48] These games, like the others we have discussed, may also have had some religious elements and offered honors to the emperor, and as such were another way for the province as a whole to express loyalty to him.[49] These games are particularly significant for our efforts to understand the first century context of John's audience because of their apparent frequency and this role in the political life of the province.

Summary

In the first century C.E., athletics came to play an increasingly important and visible role in the city of Ephesus and the province of Asia as a whole. Under the Roman emperors and by the reign of Domitian, ancient or traditional festivals flourished alongside many new competitions. Ephesus alone appears to have hosted six different athletic festivals by the end of the first century C.E. Athletic competitions and their religio-cultic components became an important traditionally Greek way to express gratitude to the emperor for his benefactions and so reinforce this ideology of benefaction which helped to maintain Roman rule. This "agonistic explosion" of festivals, especially in light of the role of athletics in supporting ideologies of Roman power, would have made athletics a particularly relevant background for how John's audience might have understood the promises to the victors in Rev 2–3.

Athletic victory

In a context where athletics were such a major factor in civic life, the idea of athletic victory would have been a powerful image for John's audience. As Otto van Nijf claims "the large numbers of agonistic inscriptions throughout Asia Minor suggests that athletic victory was one of the most powerful and widespread images around."[50] Within athletics there was a passion for and "obsession with victory," to the degree that athletes were willing to die to achieve it.[51] This lust for victory was at least in part due to the various privileges, pensions, and honors which came as the rewards for it.[52] A victor at one of the major or sacred contests could receive free meals from the city stores of his or her hometown, monetary pensions, honorary seating at games and festivals, exemptions from having to pay taxes or tribute, and even a military style triumph.[53] Athletic victory was also thought to bring honor to the victor's hometown as one sees in the zeal of cities "to immortalize the athletic successes of their sons, by statues and inscriptions."[54] As a result of their fame and these rewards, victors frequently became wealthy and influential members of society.[55] They were the celebrities of the ancient world, receiving ovations from the crowds, having their names and images etched in stone and their deeds sung by poets; they were idolized like heroes and gods.[56]

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The most important prize for victory, however, was the least physically valuable, the crown. The crown given to an athletic victor was usually made of branches and leaves cut from a sacred tree.[57] While the crown itself was perishable, the glory and fame associated with it lived on.[58] Victory was also closely associated with divine favor, as one sees with the sacred nature of the crown, with prayers and sacrifices for victory, and with the dedication of crowns or equipment to the gods as a response for these victories.[59] Indeed, victory in athletics was wrapped in the cultic and religious life of the ancient Greek world. For John's audience, when they heard the language of victory it seems likely that such images of honor, glory, fame, and, perhaps, piety would have come to mind

45. Moretti, *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche*, nos. 62, 65, 66.

46. Arnold, "Festivals of Ephesus," 20; cf. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, 114.

47. Cf. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, 115; Luigi Moretti, "ΚΟΙΝΑ ΑΣΙΑΣ," *Rivista di Filologia e di Istruzione Classica* (1954) 82: 276–289, 285; Moretti, *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche*, no. 65.

48. Moretti, *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche,* nos. 65, 67, 68; Pleket and Stroud, *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* vol. XXXIV no. 1314; Corbier, et al., "ASIE MINEURE," no. 1403b, pp. 554–556.

49. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, 114.

50. Onno van Nijf, "Athletics, Festivals and Greek Identity in the Roman East," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 45 (2000): 177-200, 191.

51. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports*, 106; cf. Sweet, *Sport and Recreation*, 118–119.

52. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports*, 105.

53. Miller, *Arete*, 167, 169, 181.

54. Ibid.; cf. Moretti, *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche*, no. 64 (ca. 49 C.E.).

55. Cf. H. W. Pleket, "Games, Prizes, Athletes and Ideology: Some Aspects of the History of Sport in the Greco-Roman World," *Stadion* 1 (1975): 50–89, 80–81; Rogers, *Sacred Identity of Ephesos*, 56.

56. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports*, 113f; Lucian, *Anacharsis*, 10.

57. Pausanias, *Descriptions of Greece*, 5.15.3 [as cited in Craig Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Yale Bible 38A; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 2014), 277].

58. Pindar, *Olympian Odes* (in *Works*, vol. 1; Loeb Classical Library; edited and translated by William H. Race; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1997), 8.10ff; Lucian, *Anacharsis*, 10; Cf. Moretti, *Inscrizioni Agonistiche Greche*, no. 64 (49 C.E.).

59. Cf. Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 8.9 and 9.112; Sweet, *Sport and Recreation*, 47, 258 (no. 2); Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif*, 19-20, especially p.19 n.6.

in addition to the images of military victory and conquest that other scholars have identified.

A call to victory

Since athletic victory was ever present in the many festivals, victory triumphs, victory inscriptions, and statues, it seems likely that the audience of Revelation would also have drawn meaning from the background of athletics in understanding John's exhortation to be victorious. The role of athletics in the cultic life of these cities and in honoring and expressing loyalty to the emperor, along with the image of the victorious athlete, who received honor, adoration, and rewards for his or her struggles, provides a powerful context for understanding John's call to be victorious in the face of his audience's struggles.

These communities faced a variety of challenges: slander from local so-called "synagogues," rival teachers, and teachings; accommodation to Greco-Roman society; conflicts with Roman authority in its judicial system; and larger issues with its claims to lordship and honor. The communities in Smyrna and Philadelphia struggled with other groups that John vitriolically labels "synagogues of Satan" (2:9; 3:9). He accused these groups, made up of either local Judeans or perhaps early Christian Gentile converts,[60] of slandering the faithful (*blasphemeia*; 2:9) and, in so doing, of challenging the honor of these early Christian communities, perhaps in an attempt to shame them into conformity with society.[61]

Among the rival teachings, the most significant was the toleration of eating food offered to idols (2:14, 20; possibly the Nicolaitans in 2:6, 2:15), which John considered to be idolatrous. This issue is closely linked to a larger issue of accommodation to the surrounding Greco-Roman society. By eating idol meat, Christians could attend banquets, guild meetings, and fully participate in civic festivals, which allowed them to maintain the necessary social connections to attain and retain wealth. On the other side, a lack of participation in these civic and social events would potentially lead to poverty and hardship.[62] As such, eating idol meat and participation in the surrounding society is likely also connected to the criticism of the wealth of Laodicea (3:17), which probably depended on such behavior, and the praise for Smyrna in the face of poverty (2:9), which may have resulted from their rejection of such practices.[63]

The role of athletics in the cultic life of these cities and in honoring and expressing loyalty to the emperor, along with the image of the victorious athlete, who received honor, adoration, and rewards for his or her struggles, provides a powerful context for understanding John's call to be victorious in the face of his audience's struggles.

Overarching these issues is a larger issue with Roman authority and its claims to lordship. Direct confrontations with Roman power are evident in the seven messages in the threats of imprisonment and execution (Rev 2:10, 13), the presence of the Satan's throne in Pergamon (2:13; cf. 13:1–2), and possibly in the "impending judgment" of the whole empire (*oikoumene*; 3:10).[64] These flashpoints reflect the larger conflict. According to Brian K. Blount, John calls his audience to "refuse any opportunity, no matter how seemingly inconsequential, to acknowledge Roman imperial or pagan lordship," and instead to bear witness to Jesus as Lord.[65] Roman emperors claimed to be worthy of honor, to be divinely favored, and to have brought peace and prosperity to the whole empire. Their subjects, especially local elites who benefited from Roman rule, sought ways to respond to these supposed benefactions with requisite honors, worship, and expressions of loyalty, particularly in relation to the imperial cult.[66] We

60. The identity of the members of these "synagogues" remains unclear. It is possible that John is not referring to diaspora Judeans but is criticizing Gentile Christian converts who have claimed the title "Jews" while maintaining a connection to Greco-Roman culture and dietary practices, perhaps in line with Pauline teachings, that John finds deeply problematic and unfaithful to Judean identity and to Jesus (David Frankfurter, "Jews or Not? Reconstructing the 'Other' in Rev 2:9 and 3:9," *Harvard Theological Review* 94 (2001): 403–425, 403 and 422). See Barbara R. Rossing, "Revelation," in *The Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament* (ed. by Margaret Aymer, et al.; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2014), pages 725 and 727 for an overview of the current opinions.

61. David A. deSilva, "Honor Discourse and the Rhetorical Strategy of the Apocalypse of John," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 71 (1998): 79–110, 82.

62. Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Revelation of John: An Apocalyptic Response to a Social Crisis," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 8 (1981): 4–12, 5. David A. deSilva, "The Social Setting of the Revelation of John: Conflicts Within, Fears Without," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992): 273–302, 290–291 and 294–296.

63. Cf. J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2010), 159–160.

64. Collins connects Antipas' death and "Satan's throne" to Roman power ("The Revelation of John," 7). For the understanding of *oikoumene* as empire see Barbara R. Rossing, "(Re)claiming *Oikoumenē*?: Empire, Ecumenism and the Discipleship of Equals," in *Walk in the Ways of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* (eds. Shelly Matthews, et al.; Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2003), 76ff.

65. Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation Through African American Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), ix. Cf. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza [*Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Proclamation Commentaries; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 57]: "No compromise can be made between one's loyalty to God and one's loyalty to Caesar because God and Christ are the true rulers of the world and the nations."

66. deSilva, "Honor Discourse," 83–84. Cf. Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 54, 57ff, 144f.

have already seen how athletics were adapted for this cause with honors to the emperors added to the cultic activities at festivals and the creation of new athletic festivals entirely in honor of the emperor and another god. For John, though, Rome's claims were blasphemous and the response of the people, particularly in the province of Asia, was idolatrous. Rome claimed divine honors and the empire responded to Rome's benefactions with gratitude and worship that were only due to God.[67]

In this context, bearing witness to Jesus as Lord in contrast to Caesar would have social, economic, and political ramifications. Ultimately, John calls the audience to "get out" of Rome, to remove themselves from the empire's sins (18:4ff).[68] They are called to not participate in the worship of the beast (13:8, 15; 20:4), who reflects the imperial cult and honors to the emperors, and to not participate in an economy in which Roman claims to lordship were expressed on coins (Rev 13:16-17) and in which wealth was obtained through idolatrous compromise with "a self-glorifying, violently repressive, economically exploitative system."[69] It was a call to remove oneself from the deceptive ideologies of peace and prosperity which Roman emperors claimed to bring and which local elites sought to maintain.[70] For John these were theological and ethical issues of justice and power.[71] In such a context, bearing witness to the lordship of Jesus over against Rome required significant withdrawals from public life, from social settings in which the emperor was honored, such as guild meetings and civic and athletic festivals, and from much of the economy of the empire, and required bearing witness to the true nature of Roman power.[72]

In light of the communities' issues with idolatrous participation in the blasphemies of the Roman emperors, the call to be victorious is a call "to consistently resist the threats and allurements of empire and remain loyal to the Lamb, even in the face of death."[73] It is a call to "the ethical activity of witnessing to the lordship of Jesus Christ" [cf. *martys*, 1:2, 4; 2:14; 12:11] as opposed to the lordship of the emperor through non-participation in the idolatrous society which supported Roman rule and recognized imperial claims to lordship and divine favor.[74] For an audience facing such a call and these various challenges of the image of victory, in light of how athletic victory functioned and was rewarded in the surrounding society, would have been a powerful call to resistance, challenging imperial claims to honor and encouraging faithful witness.

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Honoring God and Jesus in victory

As we have noted, the Roman emperors and their empire were honored by and at athletic festivals. In the province of Asia, the *Roma Sebasta* games in Pergamon were founded in honor of Augustus and the goddess Roma, who personified the city and the empire of Rome, and the Olympics in Ephesus were founded in honor of Zeus/Jupiter, the divine source of Rome's empire, and the Emperor Domitian. In addition, honors for emperors were added to other festivals, such as *Epheseia Sebasta* and *Balbilla Sebasta* games in Ephesus. In these games, athletics functioned to honor and worship the emperors and Rome in much the same way they were used to honor and worship traditional Greek deities, that is by the very effort and striving for victory, the competition itself.[75] The athletic events and the sacrificial honors with them were seen as an appropriate response to the benefactions of peace and prosperity which the Roman emperor claimed to bring.[76] As such, athletics and athletic festivals provided another space in which to express loyalty to the Roman emperors and to reinforce the ideology of benefactions which helped to maintain Roman rule.

The victory of the faithful however may be understood as a stark contrast to this. Instead of their efforts and victories honoring and worshipping the emperors, the Roman Empire, or other deities whose favor the Roman emperors claimed, the faithful would honor and worship God and Jesus as their divine benefactors.[77] In

67. deSilva, "Honor Discourse," 89ff.

68. "Roman ideology and the structures of empire are so corrupt that followers of Jesus must abandon all relationship with them." (Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 162).

69. David A. deSilva, *Seeing Things John's Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 59. For exploitation in the Roman economy note that John especially marks out slaves at the end of his list of cargo that merchants send to Rome (Rev 18:13). For the connection between coins and the mark of the beast see Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 149f.

70. Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 141ff.

71. Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, 117.

72. Barbara Rossing argues that the call to be victorious means "putting the unjust empire on trial and telling the truth about it." *Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 120).

73. Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 165.

74. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?*, ix. "Revelation craves witness as engaged, resistant, transformative activism that is willing to sacrifice everything in an effort to make the world over into a reality that responds to and operates from Jesus' role as ruler and savior of all" (Ibid., 38).

75. See comments above.

76. The close association of the emperors with athletics and athletic victory in particular is also apparent in their role as benefactors in bestowing sacred status on athletic festivals and the prize of Roman citizenship, which included receiving the imperial family name and tribe.

77. According to David deSilva, John is concerned with "whom to honor and at what cost that honor is to be preserved" and with "the

light of the role of athletic competition in these festivals, the daily efforts of these communities in pursuit of victory by remaining faithful to Jesus and bearing witness to his lordship perhaps could be understood as similarly honoring God for God's benefactions (cf. the twenty-four elders in Rev 4:9–11 and the praise of the Lamb in 5:9, 12). This is possibly evident in the promise that the faithful person is made an honorary pillar in the temple of God following his or her victory (Rev 3:12). Victors in athletics received honorary inscriptions on statue bases and stones (*stelai*), on which were inscribed their name, their father's name, and the name of their city. By including the name of the victor's father and hometown, the inscription and statue honors them in addition to the athlete for his or her victory. In Rev 3:12, the faithful victor, as a pillar, similarly has the names of God, New Jerusalem, and Jesus' new name written upon him or her. In this way the believer-pillar becomes a fixture in God's temple and his or her victory gives honor to God, to New Jerusalem, and to Jesus by bearing their names.

As such one can understand the striving in faithfulness and achievement of victory by the faithful, their non-participation in the surrounding idolatrous and Rome-supporting culture and their endurance of hardships on account of their faithful witness to Jesus' lordship, that is to say their very acts of resistance, as honoring God and Jesus as benefactors of the world instead of the gods, Rome, or its emperors who were so honored with athletic competition and victory.[78]

Encouragement and challenge in the call to be victorious

In addition to honoring God instead of the emperors and their empire, the idea of victory in light of athletics would have encouraged John's audience to be faithful in the face of dishonor, to put in the effort needed for victory, and to be a public spectacle of faithfulness to Jesus. For John's audience, there was not only an issue of who to honor but also the issue of the sources of honor.[79] The poverty, slander, weakness, imprisonment, and execution of some faithful (2:9, 10, 13; 3:8) all reflect a lack of honor in the Greco-Roman society around them.[80] However, others, such as those who ate idol meat (2:14, 20) and the wealthy community in Laodicea (3:17), accommodated to the culture around them to maintain social, political, and business contacts and as such were likely concerned with receiving honor and reputation from the surrounding Greco-Roman society. For John's audience, the call to be victorious in light of the honors tied to athletic victory would have provided an encouragement or a challenge that true honor comes from God not society or the emperor.

In addition to honoring God instead of the emperors and their empire, the idea of victory in light of athletics would have encouraged John's audience to be faithful in the face of dishonor, to put in the effort needed for victory, and to be a public spectacle of faithfulness to Jesus.

Victorious athletes received honors, glory, and fame in the various crowns, proclamations, inscriptions, statues, citizenship, and other rewards which came with it. For communities and individuals who faced dishonor as a result of their faithful witnessing, athletic victory and the expected honor and rewards that went with it would provide a powerful motivating image for them in their own contest of faithfulness.[81] Like athletes, the faithful too can expect honors for their victories, receiving rewards of crowns (2:10; 3:11), life (2:7, 10–11; 3:5), food (2:7, 10), new names (2:17; 3:12), clothing (3:5), proclamations (3:5), and power (2:26–28; 3:21). Such assurance of honors from God and Jesus would encourage the audience to continue in their faithful witness, even if it meant shame from the community around them. The reception of honor from God and Jesus, in contrast to honor from one's city and the empire at large, establishes a powerful and alternative court of reputation for achieving honor, fame, and glory.[82] As such, these communities can expect honor, glory, and fame from God, Jesus, and the heavenly court, even if the surrounding society dishonors them with slander, imprisonment, and social and economic ostracism. Like victorious athletes, they are assured that they will be honored and receive praise, however, unlike athletes in the Greco-Roman world, those honors and fame will not come from their city or the empire, but from greater sources of honor, God, Jesus, and the heavenly court.

In addition to encouraging believers who were faced with dishonor and shame, this alternative court of reputation would challenge those early Christians who accommodated to the culture around them. For these individuals, who likely accommodated to maintain social, political, and business contacts and as such were likely concerned with receiving honor and reputation from the surrounding Greco-Roman society, this alternative court of reputation would be a challenge to repent of such efforts and to live faithfully apart from the surrounding culture, seeking honor and glory from God instead.[83]

claim that God has to receive honor and the necessity of choosing that course of action that shows God the honor which is God's due" ("Honor Discourse," 87f).

78. Cf. Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (The New Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John-Knox, 2009), 12.

79. deSilva, "Honor Discourse," 87.

80. Ibid., 82.

81. Ibid., 107.

82. Ibid., 94f.

83. Ibid., 107: "Accommodation will mean defeat and shame;

The efforts required to attain victory in athletics would similarly encourage and challenge John's audience. These communities would have been familiar with the efforts required to be victorious in athletics, the constant training, regimented diet, and the need for endurance and persistence in the face of blows from opponents, even to the point of death, all to attain glorious victory.[84] For the faithful person to be victorious in the contest of faithfulness he or she must expect and exert similar struggles. Thus for those who were faithful, the image of the athletic victor would encourage them to continue in their labor and toil (2:2), to avoid certain foods (2:14, 20), and to endure social, physical, and spiritual pressures (2:2-3, 9–10, 19; 3:9–10). However, for those who took the easier route of accommodating to Greco-Roman society, the idea of victory in faithfulness would challenge them to face the hardships that would come with faithful witness and separation from it. According to Brian Blount, these communities thought that "as long as they did not witness openly for the exclusive lordship of Christ, as long as they blended into a world that did not recognize that lordship, they would be physically, socially, politically, and economically secure."[85] John's call to victory then stands in stark contrast to this and calls them to embrace the insecurity and labor of faithful witness to Jesus with knowledge that God and Jesus rule the world.

An understanding of the public nature of athletic victory would also further encourage the faithful to public witness. Those in John's audience who were accommodating to the surrounding culture were blending in to keep their faith in the lordship of Jesus silent or at least inoffensive. However, John was calling them to bold, faithful witness to Jesus' lordship in opposition to the imperial claims of lordship.[86] The very idea of bearing witness is a public statement or act. So here, the very lifestyle which witnesses to Jesus' lordship would be public. The communities' non-participation in civic, trade association, or domestic rituals in honor of the gods and particularly their non-participation in the cultic expressions of loyalty and honors for the emperors and empire would be noticed.[87] Such acts of resistance to imperial claims would put the faithful at risk of imprisonment, as with the Smyrnaeans (2:10), exile, like John (1:9), and even martyrdom, as the Pergamenes had already witnessed with Antipas (2:13) and as others had experienced (6:9–11). For the call to such public witnessing to Jesus' lordship, the image of victory in athletics would have been especially forceful. Victory in athletics was achieved before cheering crowds and it was recognized publicly through proclamations, inscriptions, statues, and even military-style triumphs. For John's audience, being victorious in bearing witness to Christ's lordship was to be similarly public and they would have been urged on by the knowledge that victory had to be obtained in a public setting in front of their city and the empire.[88]

It seems likely that John's audience would have at least in part understood this call to be victorious in light of how athletic victory functioned and was rewarded in their cities.

Summary and conclusions

John's communities were struggling with accommodating to the surrounding Greco-Roman culture which validated Roman imperial claims to lordship. In contrast, John called for public, social, economic, and political witnessing to the lordship of Jesus. John sets before these communities the possibility of victory and reward to encourage them in their witnessing. In light of the rising significance of athletics and athletic festivals in their province and their role in honoring and expressing loyalty to the emperor, it seems likely that John's audience would have at least in part understood this call to be victorious in light of how athletic victory functioned and was rewarded in their cities. In contrast to the role athletic competition and victory played in honoring and expressing loyalty to the emperors and other gods, the faithful would honor and express loyalty to God as their benefactor in their victories in faithful non-participation and endurance. The idea of being victorious in faithful witness, in light of athletic victory, also provides an encouragement in the face of struggle and a challenge to those who accommodated. The honors and glory that athletes received would provide a powerful motivating image for John's audience and an alternate court of reputation from God and Jesus would embolden the dishonored and challenge the accommodators to seek honor outside their civic context. Furthermore, understanding the call to victory in light of athletics would be a call to effort and striving, which would encourage those who already labored in faithfulness and challenge those who chose lifestyles that led to less hardship. Lastly, understanding the call to victory in light of athletic victory would reinforce the public nature of victory in faithful witness. In order to be victorious, believers needed to bear witness to Jesus in the world around them, through their non-participation and their endurance of hardships, imprisonment, and even execution. Victory in faithfulness was a victory attained in public. In conclusion, the athletic background of the verb νικάω especially in light of a flourishing athletic context, allows us to see more broadly how impactful the imagery of victory would have been for John's audience in their struggles to bear witness to the lordship of Jesus.

treading the path of fidelity to God will constitute honorable victory over the world."

84. Cf. the example of the boxer Melancomas in Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 28–29.

85. Blount, *Revelation*, 41.

86. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?*, 38; cf. p. 46.

87. Ibid., ix. Ibid., *Revelation*, 42.

88. Cf. the Cynic Diogenes' victories in his public competitions with hardship in Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse* 8.6-16.