

## “God’s Athlete”: Reevaluating Early Christian Attitudes to the Games

This paper reexamines early Christian attitudes towards the Greco-Roman games in the period prior to the writings of Tertullian. Most evaluations of these early Christian attitudes towards Greco-Roman sport begin with the late second century author Tertullian. Taking Tertullian as the starting point, however, does not take into account the many sources in Christianity’s first two centuries that use athletics positively. Studies of early Christian attitudes towards the games tend to follow a pattern that claims that Jewish moral sensibilities were opposed the games: “Christians therefore inherited opposition to, but also familiarity with, pagan entertainments” (Kyle, 2015). To be sure, the paucity of references to athletics in early Jewish writings make it a bit surprising that athletic metaphors are such a large part of our earliest Christian writings.

The work of two scholars should, however, cause us to question early Christian attitudes towards athletics. Examining Herod the Great’s Jerusalem games, Zeev Weiss has argued that Jewish attitudes towards the game are perhaps more positive, at least by the first century BCE (Weiss, 1999). His conclusion would support the emergence of athletic motifs in Jewish writings in the first century—notably the works of Philo, 4 Maccabees, and Josephus. Additionally, Uta Poplutz has challenged the notion that the earliest Christians were vehemently opposed to the games, noting the overwhelmingly positive use of athletic metaphors in the writings of the Apostle Paul (Poplutz, 2004).

In light of these works, a reevaluation of other early Christian literature in the period between Paul and the works of Tertullian is needed. Thus, this paper will focus primarily on the writings of the so-called Apostolic Fathers written in the late first and early second centuries—an

under explored corpus of texts as it relates to our understanding of early Christian attitudes towards athletics. In particular, references to athletic imagery from 1 Clement, 2 Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp complicate definitive claims that early Christians held negative attitudes toward the games.

#### Bibliography

Kyle, Donald G. *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*. 2nd ed. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015.

Poplutz, Uta. *Athlet des Evangeliums: Eine motivgeschichtliche Studie zur Wettkampfmetaphorik bei Paulus*. Herder's Biblical Studies 43. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2004.

Weiss, Z. "Adopting a Novelty: The Jews and Roman Games in Palestine." Pages 23-49 in *The Roman and Byzantine Near East*. Vol. 2. Edited by J.H. Humphrey. Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplement Series 21. Portsmouth: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1999.