

OVERCOMING THE FEAR OF DEATH: PHYSICAL BODY AND COMMUNITY IN HEBREWS

Russell B Sisson
Union College

Abstract

The writer of Hebrews draws an analogy to athletic competition in exhorting his audience to imitate Christ's example of enduring suffering and death. The analogy to athletic competition is rhetorically significant because of the manner in which it evokes knowledge of values and ideals associated with a prominent social arena and cultural institution of the Mediterranean world. The Hebrews audience is expected to "see" points of similarity between Greek athletic games and the way of life to which they are called. The "contest" to which the Hebrews audience is called differs from those common in Greek athletic games with respect to the nature of the struggle. What the two contests share in common is the expectation of contestants to demonstrate fearlessness in the face of death. Fearlessness in the face of death is thus regarded as a virtue, and those who publicly embody it receive special honour and become models to be imitated. The athletic analogy in Hebrews unifies the exhortation of 12:1-13.

Keywords: Suffering, Death, Social Construction of Reality, Embody, Virtue

The fear of death is a reality that potentially undermines the moral solidarity of all human communities. Awareness of the inevitability of suffering and death for oneself and others can weaken an individual's resolve to obey social and communal norms.¹ To address this destabilizing force, humans often turn to religion. One way religion brings stability to social order is by placing humans within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference. Within a cosmological framework of reference, the ontological status of a "second" human nature, distinct from the instinctual or biological nature, is affirmed.² Through the nurturing of this second nature, a human's fear of suffering and death, which is rooted in the biological nature, can be overcome. Fearlessness in the face of death thus becomes a virtue to be acquired. The acquiring of this virtue depends in part upon persons being able to "envison" human embodiments of it. A certain type of pedagogy is needed, where human experience and activity give grounding to the visualization of the virtue. We find such a pedagogical program in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which is itself an adaptation of a pedagogical program of Hellenistic culture associated with athletic competition and training.

The author of Hebrews identifies "the fear of death" a problem to be overcome. First, he states that the problem has been overcome through Christ, who "frees those who by fear of

¹ Berger (1967, 21-24) explains how the socialization of individuals involves the *internalization* of externalized and objectified social norms. Awareness of the inevitability of suffering and death is one among several anomic forces that complicates the internalization process by casting doubt on the coherence or relevance of a worldview that a society expects individuals to accept.

² For discussion of how religion legitimates social institutions through construction of cosmology, cf. Berger (1967, 33-34).

death were subject to slavery their whole lives” (Heb 2:15) and helps those who are being “tested” by suffering, as he was tested through suffering (Heb 2:17). “Fear of death” does not mean the fear of life in Hades where Satan rules, although Christ is said to have defeated “the one who holds the power of death” (Heb 2:14). It is reasonable to believe that the author is speaking of the fear of death in an existential sense. As Attridge (1994, 93) notes, the fear of death is acknowledged to be a fundamental human problem in the Greco-Roman tradition and among some Hellenistic Jewish writers. The author of Hebrews explains how Christ makes it possible to overcome the fear of death in subsequent exhortations to his audience. He says, “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2-3). He then admonishes some members of the community, saying, “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (Heb 12:4). Implicit in this admonition is the belief that some in the community have become unwilling to suffer for their faith,³ avoiding in particular suffering that might lead to death, thus making them imperfect in faith by the measure of Christ’s example. Further exhortation employs the language of pedagogy: “Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?” (Heb 12:7). The expectation that all persons are to “resist to the point of blood” is not a call to martyrdom, although the prospect of death appears to be a reality for some in the community. For example, the author reminds his audience that some in the community have endured imprisonment and torture (Heb 10:32-34), while others are currently facing it (Heb 13:3). What seems to be at issue is whether individuals in the community have a proper attitude toward suffering and death and manifest that attitude in their actions.

To assist his audience in adapting a proper attitude toward suffering and death, which is to say, toward their own bodies, he evokes human examples. A “great cloud of witnesses” are present at the “contest” with suffering. The witnesses are great persons of faith from Israel’s past, described in Heb 11:1-40, whose faith was manifested in their deeds. These persons, although dead, are spoken of as if they are in some sense alive and present. For example, it is said of Abel, the first to be described, “he died, but through his faith he still speaks” (Heb 11:4). The common denominator in these living examples of faith is that they lived their lives desiring a “better” or “heavenly” home. With some of them, faith was demonstrated in the face of death. Abraham, in his willingness to sacrifice his son, became the prototype for faith in the power of God to “raise someone from the dead” (Heb 11:17-19). Jacob and Joseph testified to their faith in their dying acts (Heb 11:21-22). Moses and Rahab risked death in becoming models of faith (Heb 11:29-31). The anonymous author thus is not speaking just on his own authority when admonishes those who have not “shed blood” in the struggle against sin; he suggests that the “great cloud of witnesses,” together with Christ, speak through their deeds. In the context of Heb 11:1-40, the phrase “struggle against sin” primarily means struggle against forces in the world opposed to God, but in some cases an individual’s inner struggle against the fear of death may be understood.

The use of athletic analogies in Heb 12:1-4 helps the audience receiving these exhortations to conceive of the “great cloud of witnesses” as witnesses to the struggles in which they are engaged. Earlier, when reminding his audience of sufferings they had

³ These exhortations belong to a larger body of exhortation that begins in 10:32-39, where the author exhorts the community to remember earlier sufferings and not lose the “confidence” or “boldness” (παρρησία) born from previous “struggle” (ἀθλήσις) with sufferings.

already endured, the author uses language that evokes an image of athletic competition witnessed by spectators. He speaks of them having endured a great “struggle” (ἀθλησις), involving “public exposure” (θεατριζόμενοι) to abuse and persecution (Heb 10:32-33). In the exhortation, “[l]et us run with endurance the race set before us” (Heb 12:2), the word translated “race,” ἀγών, is the Greek word commonly used to denote any type of athletic “contest,” both footraces and combat sports such as boxing, wrestling, and the *pankration*. With the subsequent talk of “resisting (ἀνταγωνιζόμενοι) to the point of blood,” the author seems to be evoking both types of athletic competition, similar to Paul’s shift from footrace to boxing images in 1 Cor 9:24-27. The allusion to running a race may evoke a range of ideas. Appropriate to the context in Hebrews is the idea of having a standard by which to measure progress toward a goal. Such use of the *agōn* motif is commonplace among Hellenistic philosophers and early Christian writers. Paul, for example, speaks of himself as not running “aimlessly,” implying that he knows what is required to finish the race. Developing that idea, he shifts to the image of a boxer who “does not beat the air,” but subjects his body to the blows of an opponent in order to prove his fitness to compete (1 Cor 9:26-27). The latter image is drawn from the sphere of athletic training, not stadium competition, but the training is intended to prepare the athlete for competition in the stadium. This aspect of the analogy is in tune with the cultural and ideological aspects of athletic competition in the Hellenistic world. Would-be contestants in athletic contests, in the combat sports in particular, were tested to prove their fitness for competition. Paul thus speaks of subduing his body through the endurance of hardships lest he be proven “unfit” (ἀδόκιμος). The allusion to a stadium race in Hebrews seems to function in manner similar to Paul’s analogy, evoking the idea of a contestant setting out on a course knowing the ways his fitness will be tested. When the author describes the *agōn* as one “set before us,” the sense of the modifying phrase may be that the nature of the contest has been revealed by the heroes of faith from Israel’s past, described in Heb 11:1-40, and by the example of Christ. The subsequent language of “resisting to the point of blood” shifts the metaphor from the stadium track to the arena of combat sports, where preparation for competition requires especially hard training. Although the fighting image is less developed than Paul’s likening himself to a boxer in training, it serves a similar purpose. It evokes the idea that suffering, in whatever form one experiences it, serves as God’s instrument for disciplining a person and nurturing them in faith.

What is significantly different about the athletic analogy in Hebrews is the place of Christ in the metaphor. Christ has already finished the contest, so to speak, through his endurance of suffering on the cross, which makes him “the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” He is described as one “who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:3). Honour, in addition to monetary rewards, was the prize of athletes competing in the Greek games. Shame might also be experienced, particularly by contestants in combat sports who conceded defeat without putting up a good fight. The shame of the cross to which the author of Hebrews refers here is different and falls outside the scope of the athletic analogy. The “disregarding of shame” refers to Christ’s inner struggle in accepting death on a cross and has no direct parallel in Greek athletic competition. The point of the analogy is that Christ has demonstrated how the endurance of suffering, especially the suffering of death on a cross, makes him the perfect model of faith. Although this may make Christ worthy of honour, there is no explicit mention here of Christ securing honour for himself or any other prize. In Paul’s athletic analogies, he speaks of “prizes” and “crowns” to be won, both for himself and for those he exhorts to imitate his example (1 Cor 9:24-25; Phil 3:14-17). Although he does not use the word “honour” in describing the prize,

his speaking of a “crown of boasting” as an eschatological reward (1 Thess 2:19) might be understood as a form of honour. Some interpreters of Heb 12:1-3 see the athletic imagery functioning as an elaboration on the topics of shame and honour, with the “great cloud of witnesses” being the crowd of spectators to confer honour on those who prevail in the contest.⁴ Christ may in fact have been seen as a recipient of honour for his deeds, but it is not clear that Christ’s honour or the community’s honour is an issue of concern. The issues are what Christ did to become “pioneer and perfecter of faith” and its implications for how the Hebrews community should value their own physical existence in this world. To understand better the intended point of comparison between Christ’s endurance of suffering and death and an athletic contest, we need to examine the social function performed by athletes in the Hellenistic world that made them figures of honour and emulation.

Victory in competition was a basis of honour for athletes, but there was special honour for athletes who died in competition. The Greek writer Philostratus describes a vase painting depicting an athlete named Arrichion being crowned victor in a *pankration* match despite the fact that he died in competition:

You come to the Olympic festival itself and to the finest event in Olympia, for right here is the men’s *pankration*. Arrichion, who has died seeking victory, is taking the crown for it, and this Olympic judge is crowning him... Let’s look at Arrichion’s deed before it comes to an end, for he seems to have conquered not his opponent alone, but the whole Greek nation... They shout and jump out of their seats and wave their hands and garments. Some spring into the air, others in ecstasy wrestle the man nearby... Though it is indeed a great thing that he already won twice at Olympia, what has just now happened is greater: He has won at the cost of his life and goes to the land of the Blessed with the very dust of the struggle. Don’t think this is the result of chance! There were very clever advance plans for this victory... The one strangling Arrichion is depicted as a corpse, and he signals concession with his hand, but Arrichion is depicted as all victors are – indeed his blush is blooming and his sweat is still fresh, and he smiles, as do the living, when they perceive their victory.⁵

A modern audience may find this account of an athletic contest too fantastic to be believed; yet, certain elements of the description reflect the beliefs and values associated with the Greek games.

⁴ DeSilva (2000, 361-364, 426-438) observes that physically or socially deprived individuals or groups used athletic analogies to interpret their sub-cultural or counter-cultural status as a basis of honour. He considers the community addressed in Hebrews to be of this type. It is an open question, though, whether the author of Hebrews employs the athletic analogy for this purpose. Cynic philosophers are the primary group that used athletic analogies in the way DeSilva describes, but this is hardly true of all Hellenistic moralists. Thus, it is not clear why we should see the faith of the “great cloud of witness” from Israel’s past in juxtaposition to moral expectations of “pagan” neighbors of the Hebrews community. He also proposes that it is consistent with the athletic imagery to identify the “joy” set before Christ as his “prize,” a point also made by Croy (1998, 66-67, 177-185). This is probably true, but it hardly supports a counter-cultural reading of the text where a community’s sense of “honour” is at stake in its struggles with persecutors. To the extent that parallels with Hellenistic moralists are an indication of how the analogy in Hebrews might function, we should note that the moralists generally use athletic analogies to describe inner struggles and conflicts, not external ones. The author of Hebrews was probably aware of how moralists of his day used athletic analogies and may have been influenced by them, but we should suppose that he could develop his own analogy to serve his own rhetorical purpose. Moreover, we should suppose that for any analogy to be meaningful the author and his audience probably had some firsthand knowledge what actually transpired in athletic arenas and how society at-large viewed athletes and athletic competition.

⁵ Philostratus, *Imagines* 2.6. Cited by Poliakoff (1987, 1).

There is reason to believe that athletes did occasionally die in competition, particularly in the *pankration* which combined elements of wrestling and boxing. The *pankration* was exceptionally brutal because it allowed combatants to use potentially lethal holds such as strangleholds and pressure locks. Only biting and gouging the eyes were prohibited.⁶ Victory was often won by forcing an opponent into submission. From limited ancient sources, we know of eight athletes who died in competition. One of these was the boxer Agathos Daimon of Alexandria, nicknamed “the Camel,” for whom there is an inscription at Olympia that reads: “Boxing here in the stadium died, praying to Zeus for either wreath or death”⁷ Scanlon (2002, 304-305) notes records of eight athletes who died in competition. This may not seem like a lot; but, as he points out, only athletes renowned for their victories who died in competition, like Arrichion and Agathos Daimon, were likely to be remembered. If athletes renowned for their victories died in competition, it is reasonable to believe that less-gifted athletes probably died in greater numbers.

The description of the crowd’s reaction to Arrichion’s feat is also realistic and provides insights into the ideological aspect of the Greek games. Dio Chrysostom reports: “At the games you are under the influence of some maniacal drug; it is as if you could not watch the proceeding in a civilized fashion” (*Ad Alexandrinos* 45).⁸ Contests such as the *pankration* were not designed to produce death, but the possibility of an athlete dying was real and no doubt contributed to the atmosphere surrounding the competition. Scanlon (2002, 318-319) explains the attitude toward death as it related to the Greek games:

Death and desire in Greek athletics ... function antiphonally, in a kind of tension. Stopping short of death in all earnest competition is a principle common to both humans and animals to preserve one’s species and yet establish a hierarchy. Athletic desire of some commonly sought goal supplies athletes, audience, and even coaches with the incentive to succeed at any cost, and preferably with some visible cost by which their victory will be distinguished.

Neither games officials nor spectators wanted athletes to die in competition, and it is difficult to believe that athletes themselves desired to die. Yet, when an athlete like Arrichion died without conceding defeat, the spectators were certain to recognize a virtue present in the athlete greater than sheer physical strength. According to Philostratus’ account, the witnessing of such feats had a pronounced effect on spectators.

The Greek text of Philostratus’ account is not clear as to whether Arrichion planned his own death or “higher” forces planned it for him. Poliakoff (1987, 1), whose translation is cited above, translates σοφώτατα γὰρ προυιοήθη της νίκης, “there were very clever advance plans for this victory.” Scanlon (2002, 306) reads the same statement, “very cleverly it was thought out before the victory.” The question arises: Who made the advance plans or thought it out? In Scanlon’s translation,⁹ Philostratus understands Arrichion to have planned ahead to die in competition. Poliakoff’s translation is more ambiguous, and perhaps is plausible for that reason. While it is certainly conceivable that an athlete might enter a contest prepared to die if he could not win, it is also possible that Philostratus and his Greek readers believed divine forces might determine the outcome. After all, Philostratus wants his readers to imagine Arrichion’s soul leaving his body and going directly from the arena to the realm of the Blessed. Also, the fact that the contest occurs at Olympia, a sacred site for Greeks, makes the idea of divine presence at the competition a

⁶ Poliakoff (1987, 54-56).

⁷ Cited by Scanlon (2002, 305).

⁸ Cited and discussed by Harris (1976, 89).

⁹ The aorist passive form of προυιοέω is commonly used with an active meaning.

reasonable one. Although it is impossible to say with certainty what meaning Philostratus intends, it is conceivable that Greek readers understood Arrichion competing for something more than his own glory. Some athletes no doubt understood that through their competition they were embodying the highest values of their society.

This last point probably explains why Hellenistic philosophers and early Christian writers found athletic analogies an effective rhetorical device for developing the idea that the endurance of suffering was a virtue. For example, Epictetus explains how struggles involving suffering are beneficial to a person by evoking the image of a wrestler preparing himself for Olympic competition:

It is difficulties that show what men are. Consequently, when a difficulty befalls, remember, that God, like a physical trainer, has matched you with a rugged young man. What for? someone says, So that you may become an Olympic victor; but that cannot be done without sweat. To my way of thinking, no one has got a finer difficulty than the one which you got, if only you are willing to make use of it as an athlete makes use of a young man to wrestle with.¹⁰

Epictetus warns of dire consequences for those who accept the calling to the moral life but fail to commit themselves fully to it:

Man, it's the Olympic contest in which you are intending to enter your name, not some cheap and miserable contest or other. In the Olympic games it is not possible for you merely to be beaten and then leave; but, in the sight of the whole civilization, not merely before men of Athens, or Lacedaemon, or Nicopolis; and, in the space place, the man who carelessly gets up and leaves must be flogged, and before he is flogged he has to suffer thirst, and scorching heat, and swallow quantities of wrestler's sand.

Think the matter over more carefully, know yourself, ask the Deity, do not attempt the task without God. For if God so advises you, be assured that He wishes you either to become great, or to receive many stripes.¹¹

Paul draws an analogy to athletic competition when he speaks about the necessity of suffering in Philippians:

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, *striving side by side* (συναθλοῦντες) with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – since you are having the same *struggle* (ἀγῶνα) that you saw I had and now hear that I still have (1:27-30).

Like Epictetus, Paul speaks of God calling individuals into a “contest” involving suffering. Paul, though, focuses on the communal bonds uniting those who suffer in a manner that Epictetus with his Cynic tendencies does not. Later in the letter Paul speaks of being united with Christ in a “fellowship of suffering” (Phil 3:10). When read in the context of the Philippians letter as a whole, Paul's reference to a common *agōn* in which he and the Philippians are engaged – united in their imitation of Christ's suffering – is an exercise in

¹⁰ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.24.1-2. Epictetus elsewhere likens the moral life to an athletic contest played out before the gods. Cf. *Discourses* 3.20.9; 22.51-45, 57-59; 4.9.14-16. Epictetus, *Encheiridion* 29.51.

¹¹ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.51-45.

community construction in which Paul ascribes a special role to himself as chief human model.¹²

The athletic analogy employed in Heb 12:1-3 draws upon tacit knowledge of the ideological and religious aspects of the Greek games in a manner that combines elements of the analogies developed by Epictetus and Paul noted above. What the author of Hebrews describes is a common *agōn* to which he and his community have been called, in which the endurance of suffering is expected of all. Like Epictetus, he admonishes those who fail to accept suffering as a form of divine discipline. He may not mean the phrase “resisting to the point of blood” to be taken literally, but a figurative use makes the same point: Those who are slack in training will not prevail in actual competition. Like Paul, the author of Hebrews views suffering as a basis of community solidarity. But, he differs from Paul by not presenting himself in particular as a model to the imitated. Authorial *ethos* is not developed in Hebrews; the truth of what is presented speaks for itself. If there are human authorities who can speak to the truth of what is being said, they are the “great cloud of witnesses” – embodiments of faith from Israel’s past. The presence of these witnesses is evoked to inspire those engaged in the contests, perhaps like the statues of great athletes erected on the stadium grounds.¹³ In admonishing some in his audience for not resisting sin “to the point of blood” and exhorting all to view suffering a form of divine discipline (Heb 12:4-13), the author of Hebrews envisions a “common *agōn*” somewhat like that of which Paul speaks. However, in his social construction of reality (social construction of the church) the author of Hebrews presents God as the parent-figure, not an apostle like Paul. Christ, ascended to sit at the right hand of the throne of God, is the sole mediator of divine benefaction. Human inspiration does come from those in the history of Israel who have already run the race. Paul’s conceptual orientation is almost exclusively vertical, as he envisions a hierarchy of faithful servants with Christ at the top and himself as a mediating figure between Christ and the faithful.¹⁴ The conceptual framework presented in Hebrews gives equal attention to the vertical (cosmological) and horizontal (historical) dimensions of space and time. The cosmological dimension is developed in the opening section of the letter where Christ is presented as “sustainer of all things,” an agent of creation superior to angels (Heb 1:1-3). In the analogy of Heb 12:1-3, “the pioneer and perfecter of faith” is said to have “taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” The horizontal dimension is developed in Heb 11:1-40 with the description of figures from Israel’s past who embodied faith and still speak through the community’s remembrance of their deeds. The two dimensions of reality meet in the earthly Christ whose endurance of suffering and death on the cross demonstrates to humans how the fear of suffering and death can be overcome.

The athletic analogy in Hebrews is fundamental to the conceptualization of a basic human experience in time and space. The analogy in Hebrews, though less developed than comparable analogies in Paul, draws deeply on a tacit understanding of the social and cultural function of the Greek games in the Mediterranean world. In the language of Berger (1967, 6-8), the author of Hebrews is engaged in a “social construction of reality.” This

¹² For a full analysis of how Philippians functions as an exercise in community construction, see Sisson (2003, 242-263).

¹³ Poliakoff (1987, 114-115) notes that athletes who broke the rules governing the games might be fined and the revenue from fines was used to erect bronze statues of athletes that lined the entrance to the stadium at Olympia. He interprets the statues functioning as visible warning against dishonesty in competition, presuming that athletes knew how the statues were paid for. It would seem that the primary purpose of such statues would be to honour great athletes from previous games and inspire athletes coming to compete.

¹⁴ Sisson (2003, 252-256).

social construction of reality, by employing athletic imagery that was probably familiar to the audience of the letter, copies the program of world construction associated with Greek athletic contests, particularly the “sacred games.” According to Berger (1967, 13-21), norms of relationship – how individuals relate to each other as well as to their own bodies – are established through the interrelated processes of the processes of objectivation and internalization. In the case of the human body, society, through the culture it creates, presents to persons a defined (objectified) relationship of self to body which it deems desirable, and in a form that can be absorbed into the subjective consciousness (internalization). It is an attempt to nurture “second nature,” but the process is not perfect and its results are never completely stable or final.¹⁵ Awareness of the inevitability of death and suffering is a force that threatens to undermine the norms that society prescribes. The cultural significance of the Greek games lies in the way they “objectify” the values of the Greek society. This is done various ways: Through the conduct of the contests themselves, through physical location (sacred sites like Olympia), and art (statues memorializing great athletes and paintings of athletic scenes on vases). When the virtue of fearless in the face of death is effectively objectified, as in the painting of the dead Arrichion being crowned victor and his soul departing to the realm of the Blessed, the threat to the social order posed by the fear of death is neutralized. What facilitates the adaptation of a distinctively Greek form of “world construction” is the capacity of the Hebrews audience to conceptualize a space where fearlessness in face of death, as they experience it, is embodied and rewarded. In the objectivation of the norms of the community addressed in Hebrews, every encounter with suffering, especially suffering associated with persecution, is seen as a “contest” where faith is tested and further perfected. It is a contest where Christ has shown that victory is possible and those currently engaged in struggle feel the inspiring presence of past human examples of faith.

It is important not to press the analogy between Greek athletics and Christian life of faith too far. The use of athletic imagery in Hebrews does not imply that the author holds a favorable view of Greek athletic culture. On the other hand, even though the rhetoric of the letter at times has a counter-cultural tone, there is no evidence of a veiled polemic against this prominent Hellenistic cultural institution, nor is there evidence of a sub-cultural appropriation of a distinctively Greek value-system. As with most aspects of Hellenistic culture, it was possible for Jews and Christians to have contact Greek cultural institutions without having to stake out a “for” or “against” position toward them. The Greek games seem to be a case in point. The Jewish writer Philo found nothing objectionable in the games and encouraged Jews to attend them. He also happens to be a primary source for firsthand observations of how the games were conducted. Appreciation of the games seems to require no specific set of religious or philosophical beliefs. Whether the author of Hebrew and the audience he addresses conceived of a disembodied form of existence, as when the soul of Arrichion departs his body and proceeds to the land of the Blessed, is uncertain. Later in the letter, the author speaks of “spirits of the righteous made perfect” in the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:23). The perfection of the spiritual nature of persons – their “second” nature – is the concern of the author in Heb 12:1-13. The perfection of the spirit depends upon the adoption of a certain attitude toward the physical body; namely, viewing physical suffering as a form of divine discipline. The nurturing of this attitude among members of the Hebrews community provides a basis for solidarity in the face of persecution.

¹⁵ Biologically, humans lack the specialized instinctual structure possessed by other higher mammals, and thus are born in somewhat “unfinished” state, which requires the nurturing of a “second nature.”

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