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Fightin' words in Pauline texts: Their translation and appropriation in modern political discourse

ABSTRACT

The politicisation of biblical language has become more acute with the rise of Christian nationalism and right-wing movements in many countries. This article explores the American political scene and its rhetorical appropriation of biblical language. Fightin' words drawn from presumed Pauline texts, have become staple rhetoric among candidates seeking to attract Christian voters to their cause. The article then discusses the use of such discourse by Republican and Democrat politicians in recent decades. Next, it attempts to reduce, if possible, combative speech by examining three verses: 1 Timothy 1:18, 6:12, and 2 Timothy 4:7. It asks whether Bible translators have accurately conveyed the Greek text of these verses in English. The article argues that modern translations have overlooked the contextual meaning and lexical background found in the material culture of the Graeco-Roman world. It is hoped that the proposed new translations will produce less toxic debate in future political discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION[1]

> You know they's lots o' words that's called fightin' words. Some o' them starts a brawl, no matter who they're spoken to.

So writes the American author Ring Lardner (1917:209) in his satirical travelogue, *Gullible's travels*. Words drawn from the Bible are important because of its canonical status in Western civilisation. But what about fightin' words? In an increasingly polarised world, verbal fisticuffs toward the "other" have become increasingly manifest. This can be observed with the rise of nationalist movements in many countries. Particularly troubling are far-right expressions of Christian nationalism now appearing in some of them. Comprised of individuals who call themselves "Christian" but demonstrate minimal knowledge of Scripture and its ethical teaching, this movement plumbs the Bible for proof texts to justify its aggressive behaviour. Combative speech drawn from the Bible has become a staple in the political rhetoric of "Christian" countries such as America. Schiess (2023:21) writes about the United States:

> We live in a Bible-haunted nation. Our history is full of politicians invoking biblical images. Much of our shared language comes from the Old and New Testaments.

This article explores recent examples of such speech promulgated by prominent politicians from both the Republican and Democrat parties and fightin' words in the New Testament, by examining three texts in the Pastoral Epistles, namely 1 Timothy 1:18, 6:12, and 2 Timothy 4:7.[2] The article asks whether Bible translators have accurately conveyed the sense of the Greek text into English and argues that English translations have overlooked the contextual meaning and the lexical background in the material culture of the Graeco-Roman world. While a fresh translation that reduces the fightin' words

1 I thank the organisers of the session "Politicization of Bibles and biblicization of politics in the twenty-first century" at the European Association of Biblical Studies, for the opportunity to present a draft of this article at the annual meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria, in July 2024. I also thank the reviewer for the helpful comments to improve the article; any remaining infelicities are my own.

2 This study encompasses the 13 canonical books attributed to Paul. Whether the Pastoral Epistles are Pauline or Deutero-Pauline remains a topic of debate. For the issues regarding authorship, see Knight (1992:21-52) and Towner (2006:86-88). Unbeknownst to this author, Beale (2022) was also publishing on these same texts. The hypothesis and research for this article were developed independently of him. Beale's (2022:205) useful observation is adopted herein: "The author of the Pastoral Epistles will be referred to as 'Paul'. The results of this article have no bearing on the debate about authorship nor do issues of authorship affect the argument of this essay".

in the New Testament might not affect the toxicity of current debates, it is hoped that it might have such an effect in future political discourse.

2. FIGHTIN' WORDS AS POLITICAL RHETORIC

The biblicisation of politics is evident in the use of fightin' words drawn especially from Pauline literature. These have become the staple rhetoric of politicians in many countries, with a significant Christian population familiar with the Bible. This is particularly evident in the United States, where politicians of both major parties have politicised Scripture, by appropriating biblical language in their rhetoric. Republican candidates have sought to attract Christian evangelicals to their cause with such speech. A familiar exhortation used by Ron DeSantis, governor of Florida and one-time presidential candidate in 2024, was "to put on the full armor of God" (Gankarski 2023). The context was that Christians were in a battle and thus needed "to stand firm against the lies, against the deceit, against the opposition". DeSantis regularly closed out his stump speeches with a paraphrased Bible verse: "I will fight the good fight, I will finish the race, and I will keep the faith" (Stanley 2023). It is no wonder then that a political action committee, formed in December 2023 to support his candidacy, was called "Good Fight" (Haberman *et al.* 2023). The lieutenant governor of Texas, Dan Patrick, similarly declared that

> we have to be ready for battle … We're in a fight of lightness and darkness. We're in a fight of powers and principalities (Lempinen 2022:n.p.)

Lauren Boebert, the ultra-MAGA congresswoman from Colorado, also took up this rhetorical refrain. Writing on her private account on X, Boebert (2024: n.p.) states:

> Fight the good fight of faith … Notice this begins with 'fight' which means there most certainly will be a battle. The just shall live by faith and we can clearly understand there is a spiritual war taking place for our country and the hearts of her great people. We are not victims! Thanks be to God who GIVES us the victory through Jesus!

Boebert used similar rhetoric during her public speeches for re-election in 2024. In a *New York Times* opinion piece, Cottle (2024) writes that Boebert

> even turned to the Book of Revelation to call out 'Republican lite' politicians too chicken to fight the good fight. God said, 'Since you are lukewarm, you are neither hot nor cold, I will spew you from my mouth …' Y'all, it's time to choose a side!

While it might be expected that biblical fightin' words would be performative in the political rhetoric of the American right, it is nevertheless surprising how often this language has been adopted by Democrats on the political left. The titles of some books published over the past two decades also use this Pauline trope. Peter Beinart (2006), a Jewish commentator on American Middle East policy, wrote a volume called *The good fight*. The subtitle clearly reveals its political orientation: *Why liberals – and only liberals – can win the war on terror and make America great again*. It is ironic that the title's final four words became the catchphrase for Donald Trump's presidential campaigns in 2016 and 2024, and whose acronym is MAGA.[3] In 2008, Harry Reid, Senate majority leader from 2007 to 2015, published his autobiographical tale of Washington politics under the title, *The good fight: Hard lessons from searchlight to Washington* (Reid & Warren 2008). Subsequently, Walter F. Mondale (2010), Vice-President from 1977 to 1981, published his memoirs entitled, *The good fight: A life in liberal politics*.

In 2017, a legal drama called "The good fight" premiered on television, running for six seasons with sixty episodes. Its storyline concerned political and social commentary from a liberal perspective regarding sexual harassment, the MeToo movement, online bullying, and police brutality of African Americans. Its lead attorney was a longtime Democrat who had to negotiate Trump-era politics and the rise of the alt-right (*Wikipedia* 2024). Then a consulting group called Good Fight Political (2022) was formed to help Democrat candidates get their message across to voters, by providing "tools, support, and infrastructure (that) campaigns need to win".

This section concludes with a comment by Stephen L. Carter (2001:187), a professor at Yale Law School and former columnist at *Christianity Today*. In 2001, he wrote about the co-option of biblical language in political rhetoric:

> Imagine the reaction were a professor at an Ivy League school, say, to use the classroom as a pulpit from which to evangelize, urging students to go out and fight the good fight because God demands it.

It is unfortunate that Carter's prescient warning given over two decades ago was not heeded, particularly by American politicians who call themselves Christians.

3 The phrase "Let's make America great again" was first used as a campaign slogan by Ronald Reagan in 1980.

3. THE GOOD FIGHT IN PAULINE LITERATURE

The language of "fight the good fight", cited often in political rhetoric, is drawn from two texts, namely 1 Timothy 1:18, 6:12 and a related verse in 2 Timothy 4:7. English versions offer similar translations, despite important verbal differences in the Greek text; so clearly an interpretive conundrum is in play, in this instance. In their translation handbook on 1 Timothy, Arichea and Hatton (1995:153) discuss this issue at verse 6:12:

> There is no unanimity regarding the sport that is being referred to. Some think that it is perhaps a boxing bout or a wrestling match. Others think it is warfare that is being referred to … Still others think that what is referred to is a foot race.

They offer Phillips' version as an example of the first two options: "Fight the worthwhile battle of the faith", and the TEV and the NEB as an example of the third: "Run the great race of faith". These two interpretative options are discussed next, by examining comparative texts with militaristic and pugilistic/agonistic language in the Pauline corpus. The article then focuses on these target verses and suggests a revised translation for the latter two that most accords not only with lexical usage but also with contextual readings in other Pauline literature as well as with Graeco-Roman material culture.

4. MILITARY METAPHORS IN PAULINE TEXTS

Lystra and Pisidian Antioch were among the Roman colonies in the province of Galatia that Paul visited on his three journeys described in Acts 13-14, 16, and 18 (see Wilson 2019:484-492; 2024a:200-210). Lystra was colonised soon after 25 BCE by roughly 1,000 veterans from two legions (Gemina), suggesting a total population with families of approximately 3,000 persons. As the eastern terminus of the Via Sebaste built in 6 BCE, Lystra served to contain a Pisidian tribe called the Homonadenses. After this hostile tribe was defeated by Publius Sulpicius Quirinius sometime before 1 BCE, Lystra's role as a military colony was reduced, although it was still significant for its identity (see Levick 1967:37-39, 95-95, 153-156; Mitchell 1993:76-79). Over 20 Latin inscriptions have been found around Lystra, including an Augustan one named "Colonia Julia Felix Gemina Lustra" (McLean 2002:84, no. 236). Nevertheless, its refoundation under Claudius as Claudioderbe shows its ongoing importance in Paul's day. Thompson (2013:12) asks what Paul would have found when he visited Lystra: "What we would expect would be a semi-Hellenised Lycaonian city with numerous inhabitants of mixed-Italian blood". I would modify this to a semi-Romanised multilingual city, since Lystra was never Hellenised. When Paul and Barnabas are mistaken as gods after healing

a blind man, the local populace acclaims them in the Lycaonian language (Acts 14:11). Luke emphasises twice (Acts 16:1, 3) that Timothy's mother was a Jewish believer, while his father was a Ἕλλην. While English versions translate this as "Greek", in most usages in Acts (11:20; 14:1; 18:4; 19:10, 17; 20:21), the contextual meaning is non-Jewish, that is, a Gentile. Therefore, Timothy's father and paternal grandfather were likely Romans involved with the colony either in a military or commercial capacity (Mitchell 1993:73-78). Understanding this civic and familial background for Timothy, it is little wonder that Paul chose to use a military metaphor to address his disciple and spiritual son. Punt (2016:208) notes:

> Given the ubiquity of Empire and its army as its key symbol, the strong presence of military imagery in the Pauline letters – notwithstanding few direct references to military events – is unsurprising.

The first letter to Timothy begins with an exhortation based on the prophecies about Timothy's calling: ἵνα στρατεύῃ ... τὴν καλὴν στρατείαν (1 Tm. 1:18). English versions render this as "so that you might fight … the good fight" (NRSVUE), "you may wage the good warfare" (ESV), or "you may fight the battle well" (NIV). In this instance, Paul clearly uses military language as a metaphor for the Christian life. Louw and Nida (1989:55.4) write that στρατεύομαι and στρατεία

> in 1 Tm 1.18 are used figuratively, and it may be essential to mark this figurative usage as a type of simile.

They suggest a translation such as "you may, so to speak, wage the good battle" or "it is like you are fighting". Nell (2017:179 n. 475) notes:

> This verse is full of military vocabulary …which, together with 2 Tim 2:3, further casts a significant identity on the young Timothy from Paul's perspective: for him, he was entirely a (spiritual) warrior, a (spiritual) soldier.

2 Corinthians 10:3-4 is the only other New Testament text that uses these Greek words together: οὐ κατὰ σάρκα στρατευόμεθα, τὰ γὰρ ὅπλα τῆς στρατείας ἡμῶν οὐ σαρκικα. Louw and Nida view their usage similarly, with a suggested translation for verse 4 as "in what is like a battle for us". In this instance, Paul emphasises that it is not a literal physical battle with real weapons in which Christians are to engage. Rather their warfare is cosmic with spiritual weapons.

The verb στρατεύω is used alone in two other texts in the Pauline corpus. In 1 Corinthians 9:7, it begins a threefold analogy related to his material support as an apostle. Paul asks rhetorically: "Who serves as a soldier (στρατεύεται) at

his own expense?" (NIV, ESV). In this instance, the idea of warfare is absent from the analogy, which instead relates to military requisitioning. The other text is 2 Timothy 2:3, where Paul writes to Timothy: "Endure with me[4] as a good soldier" (καλὸς στρατιώτης[5]). This imperative is also among a threefold analogy with the first a military one: "No one serving as a soldier (στρατευόμενος) gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer" (NIV; στρατολογήσαντι[6]). The soldier analogy is followed by that of an athlete and a farmer (2 Tm. 2:5-6).[7] In this instance, the use of military terminology has nothing to do with warfare but rather with attention to duty. There is only one other example of a military metaphor in the Pauline corpus. 1 Corinthians 14:8 reads: "And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle" (NRSVUE; εἰς πόλεμον). This is the only instance where πόλεμος is used, from which the English word "polemic" is derived. Paul never uses the verbal form πολεμέω, used frequently in the LXX for military conflict.

Beale (2022; 2023) has published important articles on the texts under discussion. Beale (2022:205) argues that the combination of στρατεύω + στρατεία in 1 Timothy 1:18

> can be called a patriotic warfare idiom in Classical and Hellenistic Greek which denotes someone who shows persevering loyalty to king and country.

By sacrificing oneself in battle for the common good, he notes that an individual is "thus earning a reputation as a good and honourable citizen". To make his point, he presents 19 ancient texts that use this combination. Paul's purpose is, therefore, to commend Timothy to preserve his good character while battling the false teachers around him who are famously known for their ethical lapses. Using 22 additional ancient texts, Beale (2022:211) further observes that the fight idiom is also used in a

4 While "suffer with me" (συγκακοπάθησον) seems to be the preferred translation in 2 Timothy 1:8, where Paul is speaking of himself as a prisoner, the context in 2 Timothy 2:3 makes this translation less probable. The work of a soldier, an athlete, or a farmer would not be considered suffering. Each vocation requires intense discipline, even hardship, to be successful.

5 While this is the only place in the Pauline corpus where στρατιώτης is used, a cognate συστρατιώτης describes Epaphroditus (Phlp. 2:25) and Archippus (Phlm. 2) as his fellow soldiers in the faith.

6 Even though the literal meaning may be "enlisting officer" (NRSVUE, ESV, NLT), the context does not suggest this meaning. An active-duty soldier is responsible solely to his commanding officer, the meaning caught by the NIV translation.

7 Regarding these metaphors, Zamfir (2022:77) writes that Paul and Timothy "identify as athletes of faith and soldiers of Christ (2, 3-6), ready to suffer hardship, without being ashamed of the chains of the Apostle".

> legal context to affirm the character and good reputation qualifying a person to be an officer of the court or endorsing a person's character before the court in a legal dispute, showing him to be worthy to be considered of an innocent verdict.

Through his meticulous study on idiomatic speech, Beale helps readers broaden their understanding of Paul's rhetorical purposes in this exhortation to Timothy.

In summary, Paul does use military language and imagery in his letters. The exhortation in 1 Timothy 1:18 is an example of fightin' words. Paul invokes "Fight the good fight of faith" as a metaphor for the Christian life, however, without any call for actually taking up arms in a militaristic sense. Unfortunately, some Christian nationalists have failed to understand that this is metaphorical language and have used weapons in a literal fight.[8]

5. AGONISTIC METAPHORS IN PAULINE LITERATURE

Athletic events were ubiquitous in the 1st century CE. They came to play a dominant role in the cultural life of the empire at that time. Newby (2005:1) states that athletic subjects were omnipresent in art and literature, which suggests

> the prominence of athletic activity in the contemporary world – both in the stadium and the gymnasium – and the ways that it could provide a cultural model with which to consider fundamental themes of human life such as fame, virtue, education, and the relationship between the present and the past.

The stadium thus became a primary structure in the architectural landscape of a Graeco-Roman polis. In the spirit of the times, Paul also used athletic metaphors to teach moral virtue. Two are prominent: boxing and running. Boxing was a popular sport in antiquity; however, the only Pauline reference is 1 Corinthians 9:26. In this instance, the *hapax legomenon* πυκτεύω is used in a figurative context, wherein Paul is drawing an analogy between his spiritual discipline and the discipline required to compete effectively in a boxing match.

Agonistic metaphors are mentioned in several Pauline letters. Winners in "sacred games" (ἱεροὶ ἀγῶνες), also called "crown games" (στεφανῖται ἀγῶνες),

8 One example is the occupation of the United States Capitol Building in Washington, DC, on 6 January 2021 by supporters of Donald Trump who were seeking to overthrow the results of the 2020 presidential election. Five people died, and many were injured, including some 174 police officers.

were awarded a victory wreath as a prize (Remijsen 2011:99-102). The length of the track (δρόμος) was one Olympic stadium (ca. 185m), standard for ancient stadiums (Wilson 2024b:226-227, 297). Paul mentions the stadium only once in his letters: οἱ ἐν σταδίῳ τρέχοντες (1 Cor. 9:24). Unfortunately, most of the English versions fail to translate στάδιον literally; instead, they use the gloss "race". A more contextual translation, informed by its agonistic background, is: "Don't you know that all the runners in the stadium run, but only one gets the prize (βραβεῖον)? So run to win" (CEB; see CSB) The stadium in Corinth hosted the famous Isthmian Games, one of the four Panhellenic Games held in Greece (Kajava 2002:171-175). Held biennially before and after the Olympic Games, the Isthmian Games were a significant sociocultural backdrop for Paul's time in Corinth (Acts 18:1-18; Winter 2001:276-278, 286).

Paul used another athletic term, συναθλέω, in his letter to the Philippians (1:27; 4:3). Regarding these texts, Kurek-Chomycz (2017) asks a question similar to that addressed in this instance. Do these texts evidence an athletic or military metaphor? After presenting the confusing variety of English translations of these verses, their treatment in scholarly literature is reviewed. Kurek-Chomycz (2017:297) goes on to deal with inscriptional evidence and the role of athletics in ancient Macedonia. In her ambiguous conclusion, after refusing to rule out this verb as a military image, she then continues:

> I have shown that, even with regard to ancient athletics, there are different ways of applying the imagery to the situation envisaged by Paul.[9]

Collins (2008:57), however, positively identifies this as athletic language. Noting Paul's predilection to use compound verbs with the prefix *syn-*, even creating neologisms, Collins further observes that the Philippians are in the same contest with Paul. The apostle appeals to Euodia and Syntyche to have one mind, for

> [i]n this sense, they are teammates with one another and with Paul in the struggle on behalf of the Christian life.[10]

9 Kurek-Chomycz's (2017:296) preferred translation for συναθλέω is "to strive (together/side by side)". However, this is too generic because striving could refer to any activity such as work or study. In English, we do not commonly use the verbal form of athletic. Therefore, the translation "athleticizing together", while catching Paul's sense, is awkward. In addition, her attempt to place the prefix συν- in the context of an association of athletes is unnecessary. Rather, Paul is exhorting his audience to approach the Christian life as athletes do their event in the stadium. For believers though, it is a "friendly" competition in which every competitor wins a wreath.

10 Arnold (2014:166-168) similarly views these verses in Philippians as athletic metaphors, not military ones.

The second "good fight" text is found 1 Timothy 6:12: ἀγωνίζου τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα τῆς πίστεως. Brändl (2006:367) notes:

> If an increase in agonistic metaphors can already be observed in the Epistle to the Colossians, this applies particularly to the Pastoral Epistles, which take up the agonistic vocabulary in five contexts, sometimes extensively.

The cities mentioned in the letters to Timothy – Ephesus (1 Tm. 1:3; 2 Tm. 1:18; 4:12); Thessalonica (2 Tm. 4:10); Troas (2 Tm. 4:13), along with Corinth and Miletus (2 Tm. 4:20) – all had stadiums hosting athletic competitions.[11] Arichea and Hatton (1995:153) write about the verse's usual translation: "In the present case both the verb *fight* and the noun *fight* come from the same root and are both used in athletics." Louw and Nida (1989:§50.1) provide an athletic meaning for ἀγωνίζομαι: "to compete in an athletic contest, with emphasis on effort" and "a race involving competition and struggle" (Louw & Nida 1989:§50.4). This follows the initial, primary meaning that other lexicons such as Liddell *et al.* (1968:s.v.), Bauer *et al.* (2000:s.v.), and Friberg *et al.* (2005:s.v.) provide, namely that ἀγωνίζομαι suggests athletic competition.[12]

According to Beale (2022:217-218),

> [a] number of commentators think ἀγωνίζομαι + ἀγών in these two passages is a metaphor expressing only an athletic idea (of wrestling or running a race) and not that of warfare.[13]

Citing 34 ancient sources, Beale (2022:218) argues again that the idiomatic phraseology, in this instance, better refers to a struggle in war or in a legal context. However, he does concede that "[t]he redundant wording is also used in an athletic context (3x), which could be the origin of the other idiomatic uses" (Beale 2022:218). Beale (2022:214, 204) is more equivocal regarding the translation of 1 Timothy 6:12: "better than 'fight the good fight of faith' is 'struggle the good struggle of faith'", which for him "underscores the personal, persevering nature of the fight". For Beale, Paul is ever the patriotic soldier.

11 For Thessalonica, see Adam-Velleni (2003:264-265); for the rest, see İlhan (2006:97-101).

12 The cognate συναγωνίσασθαί is used in Romans 15:30. The usual English translations "join" (NIV, NRSVUE, NET) and "strive" (CEB, ESV, NKJV) rather weakly describe the agonising action to which Paul is inviting his audience. An agonistic context is suggested in a translation such as "exercising yourselves with me in prayers to God in my behalf".

13 Beale (2022:218 n. 32) does provide a bibliography of several commentaries that argue for an agonistic interpretation.

While the translation of ἀγωνίζομαι as "fight" or "struggle" is lexically possible (see John 18:36),[14] it is unlikely for several reasons.[15] In the texts reviewed above, Paul has the linguistic terminology necessary to convey a militaristic metaphor, if desired. In addition, the use of agonistic language in the New Testament is predominantly related to athletic metaphors. Witherington (2006:293 n. 471) writes that,

> in view of the vocabulary about running just used (flee … pursue), I suspect that Paul has something other than fighting in mind here.

Therefore, a more contextual translation for 1 Timothy 6:12 is: "Compete in the noble competition of faith and receive the eternal life to which you were called".[16] Notably, Paul's exhortations to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:18 and 6:12 comprise an *inclusio* in the letter,[17] one using a military metaphor, the other an athletic one.

Agonistic language is used two other times in the Pastorals, both in 2 Timothy. As mentioned in the discussion of military metaphors, 2 Timothy 2:5 is part of a threefold analogy wherein the second is an athletic one: ἐὰν δὲ καὶ ἀθλῇ τις, οὐ στεφανοῦται ἐὰν μὴ νομίμως ἀθλήσῃ. The two verbs used, in this instance, are agonistic: ἀθλέω, to compete as an athlete or in a competition, and στεφανόω, to receive the victor's wreath (see Bauer *et al.*:s.v.; Louw & Nida:§50.2, 57.122). English translations uniformly capture the athletic imagery in the verse. A contextual translation using the subjunctive thus reads: "If anyone competes as an athlete, he will not receive the victory wreath unless he competes according to the rules.".

Agonistic language is also found in 2 Timothy 4:7 – τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα ἠγώνισμαι, τὸν δρόμον τετέλεκα, τὴν πίστιν τετήρηκα. In this instance, language is used in the first phrase similar to 1 Timothy 6:12, albeit with a change of tense. The verse is usually translated as "I have fought the good fight, I have

14 In another domain, Louw and Nida (1989:§39.29) also provide the glosses "to struggle, to fight".

15 Beale makes the important point that the adjective καλός is used twice in this instance: once related to Timothy's struggle, the other regarding his confession before many witnesses (μαρτύρων). He assumes that a forensic context is in view since the following verse 13 describes Jesus making a good confession before Pontius Pilate. But witnesses might also suggest spectators at athletic games (see Heb. 12:1).

16 Pfitzner (1967:178, 179 n. 1) calls this a "command to carry on the good contest of faith", stating further in a note: "There is no need to contest the presence of an athletic metaphor here or in II Tim 4 :7, as do Moulton and Milligan." These authors, according to him, "prefer the military picture behind this pale use of athletic termini".

17 Beale (2022:209) also notes the use of an *inclusio* in this instance, although he puts it at 1 Timothy 6:15.

finished the race, I have kept the faith" (NRSVUE, NIV, ESV).[18] Williams (1999:271) takes exception to this, stating that this verse "should not be restricted to the combative sports, much less made into a military metaphor". He prefers this translation: "I have competed in the good contest.".[19] While its use in 1 Timothy was as an imperative directed to Timothy, the author, in this instance, describes his own spiritual journey in agonistic terms.[20] By translating *ἀγωνίζομαι* as "fight", English versions again introduce a mixed metaphor, combining militaristic with agonistic language. A more contextual translation is: "I have competed in the noble competition, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.".[21]

The language and imagery parallels, in part, Paul's message to the Ephesian elders in Miletus: *ἐμαυτῷ ὡς τελειῶσαι τὸν δρόμον* (Acts 20:24). In this instance, the NIV translates as "my only aim is to finish the race".[22] What Paul was saying agonistically and prospectively in Miletus, he now describes retrospectively in the final days of his life.[23] Pfitzner (1967:183) notes in this verse a final agon text that presents Paul's apostolic service as an athletic metaphor with the three phrases stating essentially the same thing:

> the first in the general picture of the Agon (Phil 1:30, Col 2:1, I Thess 2:2), the second in the more explicit picture of the runner (I Cor 9 :24, Gal 2 :2, Phil 2:16, 3:14), the third in a non-metaphorical explanation of the significance of the first two images.

18 Although Arichea and Hatton (1995:245) observe that this is again a metaphor from the arena of athletics, nevertheless, they write: "A literal translation would of course be ambiguous and would refer to any athletic event. 'I have fought well' (CEV) is a good translation model". This article argues that this is not a good model.

19 Witherington (2006:293) suggests the translation "Contest the good contest". Even though both "contest/contest" and "compete/competition" reflect the cognate noun and verb forms found in the Greek text, "compete/competition" is preferred. In contemporary English, "contest" is usually not used for athletics but for an event such as a beauty or fishing contest. As confirmation, see the announcement on the 2024 Paris Olympics website: "Competition schedule for the Olympic Games".

20 Pfitzner (1967:77) notes: "But considering the popularity of the image in Paul's own writings, Acts 20:24 could well be a reminiscence of actual words of Paul, and II Tim 4:6ff. a genuine autobiographical statement."

21 While Mounce (2000:580) vacillates between militaristic and agonistic languages in his exposition of this verse, Witherington (2006:369) notes that Paul uses his favourite athletic metaphor again, "probably meaning 'run the good race' (not 'fought the good fight')".

22 The ESV and NRSVUE translate as "course" in this instance, which only vaguely suggests an agonistic meaning. In English, "finish my course" could imply the completion of a unit of education. With Acts 13:25, these are the only three places in the New Testament where *δρόμος* is used.

23 The use of three perfect active indicative verbs in 2 Timothy 4:7 emphasises that fact, with the final two being alliterative: *τετέλεκα* and *τετήρηκα*.

Beale (2022:229) concludes his article, saying that

> [t]he redundant wording of 2 Tim 4:7, identical to that of 1 Tim 6:12, would seem to develop the idiom of 1 Tim 1:18 in the same fourfold manner as has 1 Tim 6:12, and clearly combines it with an athletic sense.

However, in his discussion of 1 Timothy 6:12, he minimises it as an athletic metaphor and relates it to a militaristic/juridical one. The repetition of such language in 2 Timothy 4:7 even more firmly places 1 Timothy 6:12 in an agonistic context.

6. AGONISTIC LANGUAGE IN MARTYRDOM ACCOUNTS

It is interesting to note that this agonistic interpretation is borne out in martyrdom accounts from the intertestamental and postapostolic periods. During the persecution begun by Antiochus Epiphanes, the elderly Eleazar endured torture until death. Regarding his behaviour, the author of 4 Maccabees writes: "Like a noble athlete (ἀθλητὴς) the old man, while being beaten, was victorious (ἐνίκα) over his torturers" (4 Macc. 6:10). Describing the Jewish mother and her seven sons who were tortured and killed like Eleazar, the author casts their actions in agonistic language: "Eleazar was the first contestant, the mother of the seven sons entered the competition, and the brothers contended" (NRSVUE; Ελεαζαρ δὲ προηγωνίζετο ἡ δὲ μήτηρ τῶν ἑπτὰ παίδων ἐνήθλει οἱ δὲ ἀδελφοὶ ἠγωνίζοντο (4 Macc. 17:13). He calls the tyrant their antagonist (ἀντηγωνίζετο[24]), noting that "Reverence for God was victor and gave the crown to its own athletes" (ἐνίκα τοὺς ἑαυτῆς ἀθλητὰς στεφανοῦσα (4 Macc. 17:14-15).

In the early church, the vocabulary of martyrdom became the stadium or arena, and not the battlefield. Fox (1986:436) points out that,

> [i]n Christian texts, martyrs were idealized as athletes and prize-fighters in a supernatural combat … Christians transposed the imagery of the earthy arena and its pagan games to their own martyrs' combats with Satan.

Polycarp's martyrdom occurred in the stadium of Smyrna, and through his endurance he received the imperishable crown (στέφανον; M.Pol. 19.2). The account of the martyrs of Lyon and Vienne introduces their struggle as a competition: "Gaul was the country that served as the stadium (στάδιον)

24 The negative form of ἀγωνίζομαι is used only in this instance and in Hebrews 12:4.

for these events" (Eusebius Hist. Eccl. 5.1.1). Athletic imagery is sprinkled throughout, with this noteworthy summary:

> For plaiting a wreath (στέφανον) of various colors and of all kinds of flowers, they presented it to the Father. It was proper therefore that the noble athletes (ἀθλητὰς), having endured a great competition (ἀγῶνα) yet was grandly victorious, should receive the great imperishable wreath (στέφανον) (Eusebius Hist. Eccl. 5.1.36).

The agonistic interpretation advanced, in this instance, used athletic tropes well known to Jewish and Christian authors in antiquity.[25]

7. CONCLUSION

This article pointed out the toxic environment engendered when fightin' words are brandished in contemporary political discourse using biblical texts. While acknowledging that 1 Timothy 1:18 legitimately invokes a militaristic metaphor, English translations of 1 Timothy 6:12 and 2 Timothy 4:7 fail to reflect the agonistic metaphor in the Greek text. Using the suggested agonistic translations, two texts with fightin' words are eliminated.[26]

But how do we escape the endless cycle of politicising Scripture and biblicising politics? The political theorist, Chantal Mouffe (2000:15, 16), proposes a democratic political model using agonistic pluralism rather than militaristic confrontation:

> Envisaged from the point of view of 'agonistic pluralism', the aim of democratic politics is to construct the 'them' in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but an 'adversary', i.e. somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question. This is the real meaning of liberal democratic tolerance, which does not entail condoning ideas that we oppose or being indifferent to standpoints that we disagree with, but treating those who defend them as legitimate opponents.

She suggests that having an "adversary" does not eliminate antagonism since that adversary is still an enemy. However, he or she is a legitimate enemy with whom we have common ground because we share liberty and equality, the

25 Kurek-Chomycz (2017:288 n.25) makes a similar point related to her discussion "that early Christian interpreters were likely to understand Philippians 1.27 against the background of ancient athletics".

26 This new reading would also minimise devotional reflections on 1 Timothy 6:12 such as that by the Christianity.com editorial staff (2022): "How do we 'fight the good fight' from 1 Timothy 6:12?"

ethico-political principles of liberal democracy. Mouffe (2000:16) goes on to speak of the result of this process almost in religious terms:

> To accept the view of the adversary is to undergo a radical change in political identity. It is more a sort of conversion than a process of rational persuasion ... Compromises are, of course, also possible; they are part and parcel of politics; but they should be seen as temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation.

The kingdom of God that Jesus prayed would come on earth as it is in heaven did not involve establishing an alternate government. Instead all empires and governments are to be the object of subversion because they are centred in human power and authority.[27] Thus, the alternate kingdom preached by Jesus and his followers is not to be established by militaristic fighting but by agonistic struggle through witness and prayer.

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