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CONQUERING THE WORLD: THE COUNTERCULTURAL VICTORY
OF 1 JOHN IN GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXT

By

Ah Reum Kim
Wolfson College

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Conquering the World: The Countercultural Victory of 1 John in Greco-Roman Context

By Ah Reum Kim

Summary/Abstract: Many scholars have interpreted the central issue in the First Letter of John to be a concern over budding heresies which created a sectarian divide among members of the Johannine community. While there is little doubt that there has been some intra-Johannine conflict, it is questionable as to whether the author of 1 John is simply addressing heresy when he repeatedly asserts that the young men of the community have “conquered the evil one” (2:13, 14), or even more prominently, that the Johannine believer “conquers the world” (5:4–5). This thesis reexamines the contention expressed through the conquering language in 1 John within the context of the Greco-Roman world. The approach to this study is both exegetical and contextual, with a philological analysis of the First Letter of John, and an attempt to understand possible cultural implications by drawing on classical sources, extant material culture, and secondary scholarly literature. This study demonstrates that the contention in 1 John extends beyond the Johannine community and that the writer is presenting a consistent *countercultural* narrative: he is identifying the Johannine community as separate and *counter to* the predominant customs and norms of the broader Greco-Roman culture. The analysis will show that the writer is concerned about the influences of the Greco-Roman world, and that he exhorts his audience to hold onto the countercultural victory of the Johannine *pistis* (belief/faith) over and against the prevailing polytheism of the Greco-Roman culture.

Preface

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Introduction

The First Letter of John, though brief in content, has prompted volumes of exegetical and theological scholarship addressing the contention which permeates the rhetoric of the Letter. The sense of conflict is apparent not only in the Johannine author naming several opponents who must be “conquered,” including the evil one (2:13, 14; 3:12; 5:18, 19), antichrists (2:18, 22; 4:3), false prophets (4:1), and the world itself (5:4, 5), but also in the way he concludes with the warning: “little children, keep yourselves from idols” (5:21).¹ Many twentieth-century scholars including Rudolf Bultmann and Rudolf Schnackenburg interpreted the central issue in 1 John to be a concern over proper theology;² they presumed that the Johannine author is writing out of a concern for budding heresies which have created a sectarian divide among the members of the Johannine community. Indeed, a schism has apparently already taken place as the antichrists “went out” from the community (2:18). While there has been significant debate over what specific heresies these opponents might represent, the general consensus has been that the conflict in 1 John is primarily an intra-Johannine one contending over different understandings of Jesus.

The reference to the antichrists who “went out” offers little doubt that there has been some intra-Johannine conflict; it is questionable, however, whether the author of 1 John repeatedly asserts that the young men of the community have “conquered the evil one” (2:13, 14), or even more prominently, that the Johannine believer “conquers the world” (5:4–5) out of a desire to address heresy. The writer’s many references to “the world”³ and the evil one, antichrist, and false prophets being associated with “the world” (4:1–5; 5:19) suggest that the contention referenced in the Letter is more than an internal issue limited to theological disputes between current and former Johannine members.

The tendency toward this sectarian view of 1 John seems to be influenced by the presumption of a schism in the Fourth Gospel. Because of literary similarities, the First Letter

¹ All English translations of biblical writings are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) with minor adjustments where appropriate. Abbreviations are taken from the SBL Handbook (Society of Biblical Literature, *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta, Georgia: SBL Press, 2014)), and the Oxford Classical Dictionary (Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow, ed., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)).

² See for example Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, tr. by R. Philip O’Hara with Lane C. McGaughey and Robert Funk (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973); Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1992); cf. I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 14–22; Stephen Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1984), xxiv–xxv.

³ Cf. 1 John 2:2, 15 (3x), 16 (2x), 17; 3:1, 13, 17; 4:1, 3, 4, 5 (3x), 9, 14, 17; 5:4 (2x), 5, 19, cf. 2 John 7.

has often been interpreted based on the premise that it presupposes the Gospel. While I do not dispute this, scholarship on the First Letter appears to have been skewed by assumptions from John's Gospel. J. Louis Martyn has been influential to much of twentieth-century Johannine scholarship⁴ as one of the first to draw attention to the specific historical and social context of the Johannine community. He worked primarily on the Gospel of John, cautioning against any "timeless and placeless" reading of the text,⁵ and his monograph, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, framed future Johannine scholarship with its emphasis on the expulsion of Jewish Christians from the synagogue.⁶ Martyn worked closely with fellow Union Theological Seminary scholar Raymond Brown,⁷ who further engrained a sectarian view not only in relation to the Jews and Jewish Christians in John's Gospel but also in the Johannine Letters by grouping the antichrists, false prophets, and liars together as "hostile secessionists" who left the Johannine community.⁸ In his extensive scholarship on both the Gospel and the Letters, Brown postulated complex theories about the Johannine community and how it developed, for which he was criticized and led to his later simplifying his ideas.⁹ Yet, the sectarian approach established by Martyn and Brown prevailed, and subsequent scholarship has read the contention in 1 John as an intra-Johannine issue over opposing theological views of Jesus, even suggesting that the antichrists who "went out" from the community were those who decided to go back to the synagogue.¹⁰

This thesis reconsiders the contention of the First Letter, following increasing twenty-first century scholarship which examines New Testament texts in light of their broader cultural context.¹¹ In Pauline literature, the religious and political influence of the Roman empire has

⁴ See examples of Martyn's influence in John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6; Paul Anderson "Beyond the Shade of the Oak Tree: Recent Growth in Johannine Studies," *Expository Times* 119, no. 8 (2008): 367–8.

⁵ J. Louis Martyn, "The Salvation-History Perspective in the Fourth Gospel," PhD diss (Yale University, 1957), 87.

⁶ J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, Kentucky; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 46–66.

⁷ Serene Jones, "Union Mourns Professor Lou Martyn," *Union News*, 10 June 2015, <https://utsnyc.edu/union-mourns-professor-lou-martyn>.

⁸ Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John*, (The Anchor Bible. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1982), 127.

⁹ Anderson, "Beyond the Shade of the Oak Tree," 366.

¹⁰ Paul Anderson, "The Community that Raymond Brown Left Behind: Reflections on the Johannine Dialectical Situation," *Faculty Publications—College of Christian Studies* (2013): 275; Paul Anderson, "Antichristic Crises: Proselytization Back into Jewish Religious Certainty—The Threat of Schismatic Abandonment" in *Text and Community: Essays in Commemoration of Bruce M. Metzger*, Vol. 1, ed. J. Harold Ellens (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 217–40.

¹¹ See for example, Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, ed., *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); David E. Aune and Frederick E. Brenk, ed., *Greco-Roman Culture and the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

been addressed by scholars such as Richard Horsley¹² and N. T. Wright,¹³ with respondents such as John Barclay insisting that the imperial cult is not so prominent to the social, political, and religious context of the early Christian churches as the imperial cult was no single entity but a large range of practices by various kinds of people across the empire¹⁴ and therefore not making so forceful an impression on the cities' inhabitants as Wright suggests.¹⁵ While I agree that Wright takes things a step too far, Barclay is rightly criticized by Christoph Heilig as "too pessimistic" regarding the value of background.¹⁶ The imperial cult being an integral part of the cultural context across the empire, including the late first and early second centuries when 1 John is likely written, is precisely the point. The religious and political culture of the Greco-Roman world was as prevalent and integral as the internet is in most cities on the planet today. Any letter at any time can hardly be divorced from the cultural context within which it is written, and this thesis attempts to draw attention to the context to further illuminate what the writer of the First Letter might have intended and how the audience would have received its message, and reexamines the contention expressed through the conquering language in 1 John within the context of the Greco-Roman world.¹⁷

When referring to the "culture" of the Greco-Roman world, I mean "the distinctive ideas, customs, social behavior, products, or way of life of a particular nation, society, people, or period."¹⁸ Every writer comes from a culture, and thus, every text—possibly every *word*—can have cultural connotations. As an example, the word "trump" was an everyday part of my vernacular until 2015 when the word acquired an indelible cultural attachment to a specific person, which would provoke an image and even strong emotions whenever this word was

¹² See Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997).

¹³ See N. T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl*, ed. Richard A. Horsley, 160–83 (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000). Wright detects "echoes of Caesar" in Paul (N. T. Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives* (London: SPCK, 2005), 61–62, 70–71), drawing on the method of Richard Hays (Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989)).

¹⁴ John M. Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 345.

¹⁵ Barclay, *Pauline Churches*, 368.

¹⁶ Christoph Heilig, *Hidden Criticism?: The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 158.

¹⁷ The term "Greco-Roman" is admittedly problematic in that there are elements that are unique to the Greeks and to the Romans. However, the term is applicable to the culture of the early centuries CE which adopted a Hellenistic culture but existed under Roman rule. In that sense, it is both Greek and Roman, and the term Greco-Roman includes these attributes. There is also a convergence in the religion of the time in the deities which had Greek and Roman equivalents, and in the worship of the emperor, which was an expected part of the culture under the Roman Empire. Just as an overarching culture might be attributed to the United States or the United Kingdom which are made up of distinct cultures, the term "Greco-Roman" is applied to refer to the general religious and political culture of the time.

¹⁸ OED s.v. "culture."

used. For twenty-first century readers to truly understand the language and message of 1 John, the letter should be read within its cultural context. Thus, the approach to this study is both exegetical and contextual, with a philological analysis of the First Letter of John, and an attempt to understand possible cultural implications by drawing on classical sources, extant material culture, and secondary scholarly literature. Determining cultural connotations is admittedly limited by the material available and by the perspectives and biases of the sources themselves. Despite these limitations, however, the attempt to analyze the language of 1 John within its cultural context helps construct a better picture of what the Johannine writer is indeed trying to convey and how the audience may have responded.

When Christianity was still in its nascent stages, the audience to the First Letter of John would have been a small minority in the largely polytheistic culture of the Greco-Roman world. While there may have been some insular form of “Johannine culture,” many would have had to work and interact with those who did not prescribe to the same *pistis* (belief/faith)¹⁹ that had formed the Johannine community. For those who did not come from a Jewish background and were raised in an environment that regarded polytheistic worship and worship of the Roman emperor as the norm, the shift to the Johannine *pistis* may have been particularly challenging.

When examining the conquering language of 1 John, I was particularly intrigued by the distinct, substantive use of *pistis* (belief/faith) and *nikē* (victory) in the final chapter: “For everyone who is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that has conquered the world, our faith” (5:4). It prompted me to question: what does it mean to “conquer the world,” and how can this victory be “our *pistis*”? Moreover, because the conquered evil one, antichrists, and false prophets are all affiliated with “the world” (4:1–5; 5:19), I began to question previous scholarship which presumed that the conflict of the letter was primarily an intra-Johannine, theological debate.

Through this study, I will demonstrate that the contention in 1 John extends beyond the Johannine community and that the writer is presenting a consistent *countercultural* narrative:²⁰ he is identifying the Johannine community as separate and *counter to* the predominant customs and norms of the broader Greco-Roman culture. Thus, he uses conquering language to reflect

¹⁹ In 1 John 5:4, *pistis* is usually translated as “faith” in English (e.g. NIV, ESV, NLT, NKJV, NASB, CEV, NRSV), but could generally be translated as “belief,” “faithfulness,” “trust,” or a combination of these. The challenges of defining *pistis* will be addressed in section 4.2, but I will broadly connote “belief” when referring to *pistis*.

²⁰ April DeConick identifies the Gnostics as “countercultural” because they challenged religious convention in their orientation toward a transcendent God (April DeConick, *The Gnostic Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 4–5). The countercultural character of the Gnostics and the Johannine community may explain why some have aligned the two.

the battle of the Johannine *pistis* against the *pistis* of the Greco-Roman world and proclaims the *nikē* of *pistis* for those who believe in Jesus as the true Son of God. The first chapter will look at the *nikē* of 1 John in light of the associations of *nikē* in the Greco-Roman culture in order to have a better framework for the type of victory that the Johannine author is trying to convey. The most obvious cultural *nikē* is the goddess Nike, the personification of victory who appears frequently in the contexts of competition and war. Athletic and artistic competitions known as the *agōnes* were popularized from the early fifth century BCE but continued to flourish under the Roman Empire. If the *nikē* in 1 John is referring to a competition-based victory, then the writer would be like many other New Testament authors who use the popular metaphor. The chapter will then look at the cultural association of *nikē* in the context of war, and the military victories that were attributed to the victory goddess. The chapter will show that the combative language of the Johannine letter seems to align more closely with this type of victory.

Having identified the more militaristic undertones in 1 John, the second chapter will examine the nuances of the conflict with each of the opponents of the letter: the evil one, the antichrists, the false prophets, and the world. The chapter will identify what their monikers signify, whether these opponents are spiritual or literal, and how they are (or are not) being conquered by the Johannine believers. Because all of the opponents are related with “the world,” and the world itself is conquered by the Johannine believers in the victory proclamation (5:4), identifying “the world” is an integral part of this analysis. The discussion will include a helpful point of comparison in the conquering language of the Gospel of John. Jesus uses conquering language that is similar to that of 1 John when he tells his disciples that he has conquered the world (John 16:33, cf. 1 John 5:4). The allusions to violence in both Johannine battles suggest that the conflict with “the world” is not simply spiritual. This analysis will show that the conquering of the world in both John’s Gospel and 1 John involves conquering the literal Greco-Roman world as well.

Although the Johannine author proclaims that his readers are victorious conquerors (5:4–5), his language indicates that he has some concerns about the culture. The third chapter will look at two examples that reveal his countercultural narrative: the allusion to fear (4:18) and the warning at the close of the letter to “keep yourselves from idols” (5:21). Both references indicate that the writer is aware of the Greco-Roman culture and how it may affect his audience. This chapter will demonstrate that the reference to fear in direct opposition to love (4:18) is not referring to the positive Jewish conception of fear that includes a reverence for God. Instead, it suggests the more negative fear of the divine, which is discussed in the writings of historians

and philosophers in the Greco-Roman culture. Another indication of his countercultural narrative is the warning in the final verse to “keep yourselves from idols” (5:21). Because his underlying concern is the *pistis* of the Johannine community, the author gives a warning to be vigilant against any influences that might threaten their *pistis*. His final word is a countercultural message to avoid the idolatry of the polytheistic Greco-Roman world.

Finally, the fourth chapter will focus on the victory of *pistis* both in the Greco-Roman culture and in the letter of 1 John. In the culture, Roman soldiers achieve victory by encouraging their opposition to submit in a *pistis* to the Romans, and there are deliberate attempts by emperors to foster loyalty from their subjects by aligning themselves with the goddesses of Pistis/Fides and Nike/Victoria.²¹ This chapter will demonstrate that the writer of 1 John intentionally counters the culture of *pistis* to the emperor, who was often known as the *divi filius* (the son of god), with a repeated emphasis on Jesus as the *true* Son of God. The analysis will show that the writer is concerned about the influences of the Greco-Roman world, and that he is proclaiming a countercultural victory because he considers the prevailing culture to be a threat. Thus, the author emphasizes the true *pistis* that is proven through the testimony from people and from God, and he conveys the gravity of this battle against the culture by emphasizing the result of their *pistis*: eternal life.

²¹ For the sake of consistency, I will mostly refer to the gods and goddesses by their Greek names but will also include the Roman names when appropriate.

1. Victory in the Greco-Roman World

For the modern-day audience reading the letter of 1 John in English, the proclamation of victory in the final chapter would probably be received quite differently in comparison to its original audience. Firstly, readers today may not notice the distinct substantive of the noun “victory,” *nikē* (νίκη), which only appears once in the letter (and indeed in all the New Testament)²² (5:4):

For everyone who is born of God conquers the world. And this is the **victory** that has conquered the world, our faith.

ὅτι πᾶν τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ νικᾷ τὸν κόσμον· καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ **νίκη** ἡ νικήσασα τὸν κόσμον, ἡ πίστις ἡμῶν.

The declaration of *nikē* in the final chapter builds upon the verbal forms throughout the letter, but the nuances in English are lost because the verbal forms tend to look and sound quite different from the noun. A person does not “victor” over someone; they “conquer,” “overcome,” or perhaps, “defeat.” For the original Johannine audience, however, the word *nikē* would have stood out, not only because of its distinct usage in the letter, but also because there was a strong association of the word *nikē* with the victory goddess in the surrounding culture.

Nike (Roman: Victoria) is the personification of victory which was reinforced in literature and material culture from about the sixth century BCE to well into the fourth century CE. The goddess often appears in the context of athletic and artistic competition, indicating whom she favors by crowning wreaths on the victors. She also appears to be a significant figure in war as both military and political leaders attribute their victories to her regardless of their resources and strength. This chapter will consider the *nikē* of 1 John in the context of the cultural associations of the goddess Nike in order to identify more closely with the original Johannine community. This background can illuminate the nuances of the *nikē* that is proclaimed by the Johannine author including how he intends this victory to be achieved.

²² The noun *νίκη* (conquest), a later form for *νίκη*, appears four times in the New Testament, three of which reference LXX passages: Matt 12:20 (cf. Isa 42:3); 1 Cor 15:54–55 (cf. Isa 25:8; Hos 13:14), 57. However, the word *νίκη* does not appear in the LXX passages themselves. The passage in Matthew (12:20) may be a conflation of the Isaiah passage (42:3–4) to indicate that justice is being put forth “successfully” rather than “to victory.” In 1 Corinthians (15:54–55), the emphasis on victory is likely to emphasize the triumph over death as a result of the resurrection. Cf. Robert Kraft, “*Eis nikos* = Permanently/Successfully: 1 Cor 15.54, Matt 12.20,” in *Septuagintal Lexicography*, ed. Robert Kraft (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1975): 153–156; Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1997), 276–277. See also LSJ s.v. “νικάω” and “νίκη.” The word *νίκη* is often translated “victory” in English (cf. NIV, NRSV, ESV, NKJV, NASB). Thus, even though the words are indeed related, the distinctiveness of the *νίκη* in 1 John (5:4), and its cultural association to the goddess of the same name, would be lost to English readers of the NT.

1.1 Victory in Competition

The Agōnes

When referring to *nikē* in the Greco-Roman world, one likely context was the athletic and artistic competitions or festivals known as the *agōnes* (ἀγῶνες).²³ In its earliest forms, before the eighth century BCE, the events were smaller and centered around a shrine or sanctuary, but by the sixth and fifth centuries, the competitions became popularized Panhellenic events.²⁴ Some of the Panhellenic *agōnes*, like the Pythian Games, included music and art events,²⁵ but many, like the Olympic Games, were more oriented toward athletic competition. Each *agōn*, whether local or Panhellenic, was dedicated to a deity, but the Panhellenic festivals were especially momentous as they brought together people from multiple cities. Seeking *nikē* in the *agōnes* may have become increasingly popular because the competitions were a way to assert dominance and attain victory without the extreme losses of seeking victory in battle.²⁶

Although the *agōnes* had started with the Greeks, the Romans became just as passionate about the competitions.²⁷ The emperor Domitian established a regular *agōn* in Rome itself, the Capitoline Games, which was included in the list of Sacred Games that celebrated a deity, and was considered to be second only to the Olympics.²⁸ Herod the Great had also fostered the popularity of athletic competition in Judea with his building a hippodrome stadium in Caesarea

²³ The *agōnes* referred to athletic and artistic competitions, but the term *agōn* (ἀγών) and its derivatives could also denote the general struggle for survival and success, rivalry in philosophical and legal debates, opposition in war, and medical disputes. E.g. Hesiod, *Opera et Dies* 11–26, Polybius 9.32.4; Thucydides 2.89. Cf. LSJ s.v. “ἀγών.”

²⁴ Cf. Thomas Francis Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25; Stephen Instone and Antony Spawforth, “*agōnes*” in *OCD*.

²⁵ Pliny (the Elder), *Naturalis historia* 35.58; Plutarch, *Moralia* 674D–675B.

²⁶ Cf. Donald G. Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley and Sons, 2015), 6. Ironically, intense, violent fighting could be seen in the *agōnes*, notably in the *pancratation* (παγκράτιον) event in which every form of power possible was allowed to defeat the other contestant. Like the ultimate fighting championships of the modern day, *pancratation* contestants battled with a combination of wrestling, boxing and street fighting until one of the contestants could no longer continue or would formally indicate defeat. Cf. Xenophanes, *Fragments* 2.5; Pindar, *Nemean Odes* 5.52; Herodotus 9.105; David C. Young, *A Brief History* (Malden, Massachusetts; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 43. Another irony is that the Romans found a way to assert dominance in war without the need for bloodshed in the *pistis* to the Romans (see section 4.1).

²⁷ The Greeks tried to affirm their ethnic superiority by limiting participation to Greeks, but the festivals became a popular and active part of the Roman world as well. Cf. Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle*, 7.

²⁸ Cf. Suetonius, *Domitian* 4.4; *IG XIV*, 747 (an inscription about a first-century CE athlete winning at the Capitoline Games); cf. Stephen G. Miller, ed., *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 166, 171.

Maritima in the first century BCE.²⁹ Victory in the athletic context could therefore be seen amongst Greeks, Romans, and Jews.

When the *agōnes* victories were represented in literature and material culture, the depictions frequently included the goddess Nike with the winners. She can be seen, for example, in victory odes (ἐπινίκια)³⁰ from the fifth century BCE when the *agōnes* were gaining in popularity. These commissioned poems celebrated the winners by glorifying the events of the victory. The poems could then be set to music and performed at the victory party.³¹ The odes were a way for the champions to receive a more lasting glory through the Greek poets, “for the word lives longer than deeds.”³²

The lyric poet Pindar includes Nike in his descriptions of the winners of the *agōnes*. In a poem about the Nemean Games, one of the most prestigious Panhellenic festivals, Nike appears to embrace the winner:

Inherited Destiny decides the outcome of all deeds. Euthymenes, twice from Aegina did you fall into Nike’s arms and enjoy elaborate hymns.³³

Πότμος δὲ κρίνει συγγενῆς ἔργων πέρι πάντων. τὸ δ’ Αἰγίναθε δῖς,
Εὐθύμενες, Νίκας ἐν ἀγκώνεσσι πίτνων ποικίλων ἔψαυσας ὕμνων.³⁴

Pindar poetically describes how the athlete Euthymenes was victorious in two different games and fell into the arms of the goddess. Similarly, in a victory ode about the Isthmian Games, Pindar depicts a winner falling on the knees of Nike.³⁵ The inclusion of the goddess reflects much of the culture of the Greco-Roman world, in which religion is interwoven into every activity; in the context of athletics, the competitors may have the physical ability to win, but they cannot be victorious without the favor of the gods, and of Nike in particular.³⁶

Bacchylides, a contemporary of Pindar, describes Nike at the start of a victory ode about a winner from the Pythian Games:

²⁹ Josephus, *AJ* 15.341. Herod also constructed most of the public buildings at Nicopolis, the city founded to commemorate Augustus’ victory at Actium (Josephus, *BJ* 1.425; *AJ* 16.137); see Joseph Patrich, “Herod’s Hippodrome-Stadium at Caesarea and the Games Conducted Therein,” in *What Athens has to do with Jerusalem: Essays on Classical, Jewish, and Early Christian Art and Archaeology in Honor of Gideon Foerster*, ed. Leonard V. Rutgers (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 29–68.

³⁰ Cf. LSJ s.v. “ἐπινίκιος.”

³¹ Young, *A Brief History*, 67.

³² Pindar, *Nemean Odes* 4.6; cf. Young, *A Brief History*, 74.

³³ All English translations of classical literature are taken from the (digital) Loeb Classical Library with minor adjustments where appropriate.

³⁴ Pindar, *Nemean Odes* 5.42.

³⁵ Pindar, *Isthmian Odes* 2.26.

³⁶ Cf. Pindar, *Isthmian Odes* 5.8–11.

Nike, giver of sweetness, to you the father (son of Uranus) on his high bench (has granted glorious honor), so that in gold-rich Olympus you stand beside Zeus and judge the outcome of prowess for immortals and mortals: be gracious, daughter of thick-tressed, right-judging Styx; it is thanks to you that Metapontion, the god-honored city, is now filled with the celebrations and festivities of strong-limbed youths, and they sing the praises of the Pythian victor, the marvelous son of Phaiscus.

Νίκα γλυκύδωρε· κλυτὰν γὰρ σοὶ πατὴρ τιμὰν ἔδωκεν ὑψίζυγος
Οὐρανίδας ἐν πολυχρύσῳ τ' Ὀλύμπῳ Ζηνὶ παρισταμένα κρίνεις τέλος
ἀθανάτοισιν τε καὶ θνατοῖς ἀρετᾶς· ἔλλαθι, βαθυπλοκάμου κούρα Στυγὸς
ὀρθοδίκου· σέθεν δ' ἕκατι καὶ νῦν Μεταπόντιον εὐγυίων κατέχουσιν νέων
κῶμοί τε καὶ εὐφροσύνη θεότιμον ἄστυ· ὕμνεῦσι δὲ Πυθιονίκον παῖδα
θαητὸν Φαίσκου.³⁷

Before any other proclamation in the poem, Nike is honored *first*. She is not simply present when the athletes compete;³⁸ she can play the role of judge, determining which person will be victorious. She is more than an umpire; Nike decides the victory, and it is because of *her* that even a city, like the city of Metapontion above, will receive honor.³⁹

Extant material culture supports the descriptions of Nike in the victory odes. Just as the poems allude to her role in athletic victory, the visual depictions of winners in the *agōnes* include Nike's presence as well. A fifth century BCE Athenian *stamnos* (liquid container), for example, depicts victorious athletes offering sacrifices in honor of the gods, and a winged Nike hovering above them.⁴⁰ Similarly, on a Rhegium silver coin from the fifth century BCE, Nike is seen flying over Anaxilas, the tyrant of the city, and crowning him with a wreath after he wins a race at the Olympics.⁴¹ Finally, a terracotta *amphora* (jug) from c. 363 BCE shows Nike crowning a winner of a boxing match.⁴² Nike seems to have been the popular icon of victory associated with the games, and this fostered the popularity of the goddess among the Romans as well, who built their own temple to Nike/Victoria in 294 BCE.⁴³ According to Livy, people would throng to the temple at Palatine Hill bearing gifts for the goddess, and they would attend a banquet and games held in honor of the gods.⁴⁴ In the following year, the Romans wore laurel

³⁷ Bacchylides, *Victory Odes* 11.1.

³⁸ Cf. Bacchylides 3.5.

³⁹ Cf. also Bacchylides 12.5.

⁴⁰ British Museum no. 1839,0214.68; cf. descriptions of festival sacrifices in Pausanias 5.13.8–5.14.2.

⁴¹ J. Paul Getty Museum 93.AE.55.

⁴² Richard Rawles, "Early epinician: Ibycus and Simonides," in *Reading the Victory Ode*, ed. Peter Agócs, Chris Carey, and Richard Rawles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 22.

⁴³ Livy 10.33.9; cf. Stefan Weinstock, "Victor and Invictus," *The Harvard Theological Review* 50, no. 1 (1957): 215–218; Michael McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West*, Past and Present Publications (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 12.

⁴⁴ Livy 29.14.13.

wreaths for the first time at the games and presented each victor with a palm branch, another symbol of victory.⁴⁵ The crowns and palm branches that victors received at the *agōnes* were made of perishable leaves,⁴⁶ but they became a prize, which even the emperor would covet.⁴⁷

An Iconic Nike

The association of Nike with the *agōnes* was likely solidified through one of her most iconic images in material culture: the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, which showed Zeus seated on a throne with Nike uplifted in his right hand. The massive chryselephantine sculpture was a prominent representation of victory for several centuries in the city which hosted the Olympic Games, and was so impressive that it was later considered to be one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.⁴⁸ Pausanias describes the Nike who was prominently displayed not only in Zeus's right hand, but also in four more images of her around his throne:

The god sits on a throne, and he is made of gold and ivory. On his head lies a crown which is a copy of olive shoots. In his right hand he carries a Nike, which, like the statue, is of ivory and gold; she wears a ribbon and—on her head—a crown...The throne is adorned with gold and with jewels, to say nothing of ebony and ivory. Upon it are painted figures and wrought images. There are four Nikes, represented as dancing women, one at each foot of the throne, and two others at the base of each foot.

Καθέζεται μὲν δὴ ὁ θεὸς ἐν θρόνῳ χρυσοῦ πεποιημένος καὶ ἐλέφαντος· στέφανος δὲ ἐπίκειται οἱ τῇ κεφαλῇ μεμιμημένος ἐλαίας κλῶνας. ἐν μὲν δὴ τῇ δεξιᾷ φέρει Νίκην ἐξ ἐλέφαντος καὶ ταύτην καὶ χρυσοῦ, ταινίαν τε ἔχουσιν καὶ ἐπὶ τῇ κεφαλῇ στέφανον...ὁ δὲ θρόνος ποικίλος μὲν χρυσοῦ καὶ λίθοις, ποικίλος δὲ καὶ ἐβένῳ τε καὶ ἐλέφαντί ἐστι· καὶ ζῶα τε ἐπ' αὐτοῦ γραφῇ μεμιμημένα καὶ ἀγάλματά ἐστιν εἰργασμένα. Νῖκαι μὲν δὴ τέσσαρες χορευουσῶν παρεχόμεναι σχῆμα κατὰ ἕκαστον τοῦ θρόνου τὸν πόδα, δύο δὲ εἰσιν ἄλλαι πρὸς ἑκάστου πέζῃ ποδός.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Livy 10.47.3.

⁴⁶ Cf. Lucian, *Anacharsis, or Athletics* 9.

⁴⁷ Nero in 67 CE supposedly “won” at least 1,808 crowns of victory at multiple *agōnes*, cf. Suetonius, *Nero* 22–25; Miller, *Arete*, 165.

⁴⁸ Cf. Martin Price, “The Statue of Zeus at Olympia,” in *The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World*, ed. Peter A. Clayton and Martin J. Price, (New York: Dorset, 1989), 59–77.

⁴⁹ Pausanias 5.11.1–2. An imagined etching and watercolor version of Pheidias' celebrated statue at Olympia can be seen in the frontispiece of Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy's book, *Le Jupiter Olympien, Ou, L'art De La Sculpture Antique Considéré Sous Un Nouveau Point De Vue: Ouvrage Qui Comprend Un Essai Sur Le Goût De La Sculpture Polychorme, L'analyse Explicative De La Toreutique, Et L'histoire De La Statuaire En or Et Ivoire Chez Les Grecs Et Les Romains: Avec La Restitution Des Principaux Monuments De Cet Art Et La Démonstration Pratique Ou Le Renouveau De Ses Procédés Mécaniques* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1814). The work is entitled “Le Jupiter Olympien vu dans son trône.”

Seeing five Nike images on this statue alone would suggest the significance with which the Olympians regarded her, and the gold and ivory Nike in Zeus's right hand seems to offer a focal point for viewers to see the uplifted personification of victory. Notably both Nike and Zeus also wear crowns on their heads to symbolize their victory, and this may have contributed to the icon of crowns being attached to both Nike and to the *agōnes*.⁵⁰

The statue of Nike and Zeus in Olympia became an iconic image because of the popularity of the competitions in the city, which were originally held in honor of Zeus. During the Golden Olympic decade of the 470s BCE, a new temple was built in Olympia in honor of the deity,⁵¹ and in c. 435 BCE, the Eleans, the custodians of the Olympic Games,⁵² hired Phidias to design and install a cult statue within the temple because he was one of the most well-known Greek sculptors of the time. He had completed the impressive Athena Parthenos statue which also highlighted the goddess Nike in Athens a few years before (see more on this statue in the next section), and the Eleans seemingly wanted him to do an even greater work in Olympia.⁵³ Phidias seems to have satisfied his clients as he almost doubled his previous efforts, constructing a nearly 20-meter (65 ft.) display that was placed inside the immense new temple which was about 70 x 30 x 21 meters (230 x 98 x 69 ft.).⁵⁴ The sight was so grandiose that Strabo centuries later noted that the statue gave "the impression that if Zeus arose and stood erect he would unroof the temple."⁵⁵

The sheer expense and effort spent for the statue leave no question as to why it might be considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, but it was also an apparently beautiful and inspiring sight. In a discourse before the immense Olympic statue in 97 CE, Dio Chrysostom proclaimed, "Of all the statues which are upon the earth [it is] the most beautiful and the most dear to the gods," and he thought that whoever "stood before this image, would forget all the terrors and hardships that fall to our human lot."⁵⁶ According to Epictetus, some believed that it was "a misfortune to die without seeing [it]," and Quintilian commented, "This beautiful statue is even thought to have added something to the accepted religion."⁵⁷

⁵⁰ See more on Nike with crowns in section 1.2 and 4.1.

⁵¹ Ulrich Sinn, *Olympia: Cult, Sport, and Ancient Festival*, tr. Thomas Thornton (Princeton, New Jersey: M. Wiener, 2000), 56.

⁵² Cf. Thomas James Dunbabin, Robert J. Hopper, and Antony Spawforth, "Elis" in *OCD*.

⁵³ Cf. Rashna Taraporewalla, "Size Matters: The Statue of Zeus at Olympia and Competitive Emulation," in *Statue of Zeus at Olympia: New Approaches*, ed. Janette McWilliam et. al. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 42.

⁵⁴ Young, *A Brief History*, 60.

⁵⁵ Strabo, *Geography* 8.3.30.

⁵⁶ Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 12.25, 51–52.

⁵⁷ Epictetus *Discourses* 1.6.24; Quintilian 12.10.9.

Based on the writers above, there was a high regard for the Nike and Zeus at Olympia, and many people probably did see the statue as the Olympics were considered to be the most prestigious of the Panhellenic games, and competitors and spectators from both in and outside of the city would have had access to it. However, it seems doubtful that it would have been as inspiring and beautiful if the goddess were not there. In the male-dominated society, desirable abstract values such as victory were personified as beautiful female figures.⁵⁸ Thus, Nike is a source of inspiration toward the ideal, and the muscular, staid Zeus is representative of the power needed to reach it.

One can imagine the message she might convey: the god is literally holding victory in his hand. Nike is like the seal of assurance that Zeus holds power and victory over his opponents, and all who honor him will likewise have favor with him, and with Nike, to be victorious in their endeavors. Though the main figure of the statue is Zeus, Nike seems to be a major focus as it is the winged goddess who serves as a source of inspiration, conveying the image of victory and success that one can achieve. She is certainly a major reason, if not the primary reason, why the statue is revered so highly as “beautiful,” and causing people to “forget their hardships,” just as Quintilian and Dio Chrysostom suggested above.

The Nike images within the temple would be enough to convey the significance that was attributed to the goddess, but additional figures of her outside the temple further demonstrate her prominence. Pausanias comments that a golden Nike crowned the west pediment peak of the temple,⁵⁹ and a marble statue of the goddess was excavated at Olympia in 1875–76 along with parts of the base and an inscription. Known today as the Nike of Paionios, the statue dates to around 425–420 BCE, and it originally stood near the temple of Zeus on a triangular six-meter-high pillar.⁶⁰ The accompanying inscription says, “The Messanians and the Naupaktians dedicated this statue to Zeus Olympios from the spoils of the wars. Paionios of Mende made it, who also won the competition to make the akroteria of the temple.”⁶¹ The specific note that the sculptor Paionios won a competition seems appropriate in a city known for its competitions, and there is poetic logic in a victor sculpting the victory goddess.

⁵⁸ Emma Stafford suggests that, in the male-dominated society, extremes such as the Fates were represented in female form as “the other,” and desirable abstract values such as victory were represented as the desirable female. Cf. Emma Stafford, “Masculine Values, Feminine Forms: On the Gender of Personified Abstractions,” in *Thinking Men: Masculinity and Its Self-representation in the Classical Tradition*, ed. Lin Foxhall and John Salmon (London: Routledge, 1998), 53.

⁵⁹ Pausanias 5.10.4.

⁶⁰ Cf. Pausanias 5.26.1.

⁶¹ “Nike of Paionios,” University of Cambridge Museum of Classical Archaeology Databases, accessed 24 May 2021, <https://museum.classics.cam.ac.uk/collections/casts/nike-paionios>.

From the multiple Nikes placed in noteworthy places, one can see why someone would think of the goddess first when discussing *nikē* in the city of Olympia in fifth century BCE. Nike would have been a visible representation of victory, not only for the everyday resident of the city, but also for visiting competitors and spectators from all over the Greco-Roman world. She served as a source of inspiration, and her image ingrained the sense of the importance of victory to the culture. However, the prominence of Nike was not limited to one location or time period. The Statue of Zeus with Nike lasted for over 800 years,⁶² and it was probably as iconic and well-known as the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Statue of Liberty in New York, both of which have stood for less than 150 years.

As with many iconic statues both in antiquity and the modern-day, copies were made, and Pausanias notes a bronze image of Zeus holding a figure of Nike as one of the most noteworthy sights in the port city of Piraeus.⁶³ Another copy was found during a nineteenth-century excavation of a villa of the emperor Domitian from the first century CE in Rome, which is on display at the State Heritage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.⁶⁴ It is not surprising that the emperor would have made a copy, as he seems to have been fond of the *agōnes* (as mentioned above). Even this smaller version of the original is still an impressive sight at almost three-and-a-half meters (11.4 ft) tall. It likely represents the power of Zeus and the triumph of Nike that the emperor wanted to display and foster in his home.

The many references to Nike in material culture and literature seem to indicate that she had a close association with athletic, competitive victory for several centuries. Indeed, her connection was so solidified that she is still associated with athletic victory and success today.⁶⁵

Johannine Competition?

Because of the prevalence and popularity of the *agōnes*, it is understandable as to why the author of 1 John might want to allude to a competitive *nikē*. Several New Testament letters make references to the competitions as they were a palpable metaphor for the readers of the

⁶² In 475 CE, it was carried off to Constantinople by Emperor Theodosius I, where it was destroyed by a fire. Cf. Tom Stevenson, "The Fate of the Statue of Zeus at Olympia," in *Statue of Zeus at Olympia*, 167.

⁶³ Pausanias 1.1.3.

⁶⁴ "Statue of Jupiter," The State Heritage Museum, accessed 25 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3fiH79x>.

⁶⁵ Nike has appeared on almost every Summer Olympics medal since 1896 ("Olympic Medals," Olympics, accessed 16 June 2021, <https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/olympic-medals>). Nike is also in the name of a company known for athletic footwear, and it has produced sneakers that reference the goddess specifically ("Women's Air Force 1 Shadow: Goddess of Victory," Nike, accessed 16 June 2021, <https://www.nike.com/my/launch/t/womens-air-force-1-goddess-of-victory>; Ellie Abraham, "Nike Trainers Mocked Over Incorrect Use of Greek Lettering," *The Independent*, 9 June 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/nike-trainers-greek-letter-mythology-b1862636.html>).

time. The most obvious perhaps is the metaphor of running and boxing in 1 Corinthians (9:24–26):

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air.

Οὐκ οἶδατε ὅτι οἱ ἐν σταδίῳ τρέχοντες πάντες μὲν τρέχουσιν, εἷς δὲ λαμβάνει τὸ βραβεῖον; οὕτως τρέχετε ἵνα καταλάβητε. πᾶς δὲ ὁ ἀγωνιζόμενος πάντα ἐγκρατεύεται, ἐκεῖνοι μὲν οὖν ἵνα φθαρτὸν στέφανον λάβωσιν, ἡμεῖς δὲ ἄφθαρτον. ἐγὼ τοίνυν οὕτως τρέχω ὥς οὐκ ἀδήλως, οὕτως πυκτεύω ὥς οὐκ ἀέρα δέρων.

Corinth was the city that hosted the Isthmian Games, and so the Corinthians would have found the references to the *agōnes* to be familiar and compelling.⁶⁶ They would have recognized the language of *agōnizomai* (ἀγωνίζομαι) alluding to the struggle of the *agōnes*, and the individual competitors training for months, exerting tremendous effort for a victory that was represented by a perishable crown made of leaves (στέφανος, 1 Cor 9:25).⁶⁷ The metaphor emphasized the point about winning a prize as a result of discipline and self-control (similarly in 2 Tim 2:5).⁶⁸ References to running races and fighting appear in many other epistles as well (e.g. Gal 2:2, 5:7; Phil 2:16; 3:12–14; 2 Tim 4:7; Heb 12:1), indicating the popularity and relevance of the *agōnes* at the time.

The author of 1 John may have considered using an *agōnes* metaphor as well to declare his victory in the final chapter of the letter. However, the language he uses does not seem to relate with athletic and artistic competition. There is no reference to *agōnizomai* (ἀγωνίζομαι),⁶⁹ and there is no mention of running (τρέχω),⁷⁰ a prize (βραβεῖον),⁷¹ or a crown (στέφανος).⁷² Instead, the language in the Johannine letter suggests a different sort of victory.

⁶⁶ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 155.

⁶⁷ Cf. Lucian, *Anacharsis, or Athletics*, 9; Hays, *First Corinthians*, 156; F.W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1972), 214–215; Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Tyndale Press, 1969), 139.

⁶⁸ Jerome H. Neyrey, *Paul, in Other Words: A Cultural Reading of His Letters* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 144.

⁶⁹ The word ἀγωνίζομαι occurs at Luke 13:24; John 18:36; 1 Cor 9:25; Col 1:29; 4:12; 1 Tim 4:10; 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7.

⁷⁰ Cf. Gal 2:2; Phil 2:16; Heb 12:1.

⁷¹ The noun for “prize,” βραβεῖον, occurs only at 1 Cor 9:24 and Phil 3:14 in the NT.

⁷² The word στέφανος appears 25 times in the NT and can be translated “wreath” or “crown;” cf. LSJ s.v. “στέφανος.” See e.g. 1 Cor 9:25; 2 Tim 4:8; James 1:12; cf. 2 Tim 2:5; Rev 2:10. There is also the more ominous crown of thorns in Matt 27:29; Mark 15:17; John 19:2, 5.

Although the noun *nikē* appears only once in 1 John (5:4), the verbal cognate occurs several times.⁷³ In each case, there is a distinct opponent: the evil one (2:13, 14); false prophets and antichrists (4:4; cf. 4:1–3); and the world (5:4–5). (These opponents will be examined further in sections 2.1–2.3.) The Johannine audience does not seem to be in competition with these opponents, racing against the false prophets or boxing the antichrists. Instead, the conquering language with these opponents, and especially with the evil one in 1 John,⁷⁴ suggests a combative fight that is more akin to the context of victory in military battle. We will now examine the concept of *nikē* in war, which was also represented in the Greco-Roman world by the victory goddess.

1.2 Victory in War

Nike with Artemis, Ares, and Athena

In addition to her association with the *agōnes*, the Nike who personified victory in the Greco-Roman culture also appeared frequently in the context of war. This is perhaps unsurprising as one of the earliest known references to the goddess is in reference to a battle.⁷⁵ In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, the goddess is described as the daughter of Pallas and Styx, and she is honored alongside her sisters Zelus, Cratos, and Bia (Rivalry, Supremacy, and Force, respectively) for siding with Zeus in the battle against the Titans.⁷⁶ As the god of thunder and lightning, Zeus has significant power on his own, but the depiction of Nike taking his side seems to imply an assured victory.⁷⁷ In the context of war, surely everyone would want victory to be on their side, and this may explain why Nike was also affiliated with the cult of other deities related to violence and warfare, most notably Artemis, Ares, and Athena.

The oldest extant sculpture of Nike shows her connection to Artemis, the goddess of the hunt. The sculpture, believed to date as early as 570 BCE, was found in 1887 on the Greek island of Delos, in front of the Temple of Artemis.⁷⁸ The inscription on the base of the sculpture attributes the work to “Archermos,” who appears to have been one of the first to depict the

⁷³ The verb νικάω (conquer) appears only in the first letter of John among the Johannine letters at 2:13, 14; 4:4; 5:4 (2x); 5:5 cf. the sole occurrence in John’s Gospel at 16:33 (see more on John 16:33 in section 2.3).

⁷⁴ See references to the evil one at 1 John 2:13, 14; 3:12; 5:18, 19; cf. references to evil at 1 John 3:12; 2 John 11; 3 John 11.

⁷⁵ Hesiod, *Theogony* 383–403.

⁷⁶ Hesiod, *Theogony* 383–403.

⁷⁷ The early association of the two deities may also explain why Zeus and Nike were depicted together in the Statue of Zeus at Olympia; they were already seen as a team.

⁷⁸ “Nike of Delos,” University of Cambridge Museum of Classical Archaeology Databases, accessed 27 May 2021, <https://museum.classics.cam.ac.uk/collections/casts/nike-delos>.

winged Nike.⁷⁹ The statue being found outside the Temple of Artemis shows that Nike was likely connected with the huntress goddess, who was known as a death-bringing deity.⁸⁰ If the audience of 1 John was in Ephesus, as is traditionally thought,⁸¹ then this connection may be especially relevant as the citizens of Ephesus in the first centuries CE believed that the key to understanding their city lay in the cult of the huntress goddess.⁸² There are inscriptions thanking Nike in Ephesus dating to the second and third centuries.⁸³ This could offer support for the connection between the goddesses and support Nike being significant to the culture.

The victory goddess appears to have had an even closer affiliation with Ares, the god of war. One Homeric hymn even calls Nike the daughter of Ares.⁸⁴ Their connection is understandable given that soldiers would want to achieve a victory in war, and both Greeks and Romans honored Nike alongside Ares and associated them together in their expeditions.⁸⁵ In the British Museum, a richly decorated scabbard called the “Sword of Tiberius” (c. 14–16 CE) shows the reigning Tiberius in divine guise enthroned and flanked by Nike and Ares.⁸⁶ Tiberius is shown receiving a statuette of Nike, symbolizing military successes in Germany, from Germanicus, his adopted son. The image celebrates concord in the imperial family and stable succession in leadership.

The association of the Nike and Ares can also be seen today in the Villa of Orbe-Boscéaz in Switzerland,⁸⁷ in which a series of second-century CE mosaics portray the days of the week. The mosaic for “Tuesday” displays a strong, muscular Ares sitting with spear, helmet, and shield and flanked on either side by the victory goddess Nike and Phobos, the god of fear. The imagery is appropriate because the Latin name for Tuesday, *dies Martis*, (literally “day of Mars”), is in honor of the war god Mars, the Roman equivalent of Ares. However, it is also a triumphant message to place Nike alongside Ares (and Phobos) in the mosaic. The image seems

⁷⁹ Cf. Aristophanes, *Birds* 573.

⁸⁰ Cf. Homer, *Odyssey* 11.171–173.

⁸¹ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, xxxii; cf. Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 17–19.

⁸² Mary Beard, John North, and S. R. F. Price, *Religions of Rome*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 360. The book of Acts also refers to fierce passion of the Ephesians to the goddess Artemis (Acts 19:24–41).

⁸³ IE IV 1069.2; 1077.2; cf. Guy MacLean Rogers, *The Mysteries of Artemis of Ephesos Cult, Polis, and Change in the Graeco-Roman World* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2012), 306, 435 n. 26.

⁸⁴ Homer, *Homeric Hymns* 8.4.

⁸⁵ E.g. Plutarch, *Sulla* 19.5; *Moralia* 9.873B; Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters* 6.243e.

⁸⁶ British Museum no. 1866,0806.1.

⁸⁷ Cf. Sophie Bujard, “La Mosaïque aux Divinités d’Orbe-Bosceaz (Suisse): une lecture à choix multiples,” in *La Mosaïque Gréco-romaine*, 9, Collection De L’École Française de Rome, 352, ed. Hélène Morlier (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2005), 227–234.

to portray a victorious Tuesday, one that inspires and conveys a sense of success over others (enemies) who are warned to fear this victory.

One of the most impressive displays of Nike in antiquity, especially before the Statue of Zeus was erected in Olympia, was the Nike housed in the Parthenon in Athens. The Athena Parthenos, a now lost gold and ivory sculpture, showed Nike's association with Athena, the goddess of wisdom and warfare. The immense statue is described by Pausanias:

The statue of Athena is upright, with a tunic reaching to the feet, and on her breast the head of Medusa is worked in ivory. She holds a statue of Nike about four cubits high, and in the other hand a spear; at her feet lies a shield and near the spear is a serpent.

τὸ δὲ ἄγαλμα τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς ὀρθόν ἐστιν ἐν χιτῶνι ποδήρει καὶ οἱ κατὰ τὸ στέρνον ἢ κεφαλὴ Μεδούσης ἐλέφαντός ἐστιν ἐμπεποιημένη· καὶ Νίκην τε ὅσον τεσσάρων πηχῶν, ἐν δὲ τῇ ἐτέρᾳ χειρὶ δόρυ ἔχει, καὶ οἱ πρὸς τοῖς ποσὶν ἄσπίς τε κείται καὶ πλησίον τοῦ δόρατος δράκων ἐστίν.⁸⁸

The statue of Athena was probably about 12.7 meters tall (41.6 ft) with a 1.8 meter (6 ft) Nike in her hand.⁸⁹ As the patron goddess of the city of Athens, Athena was valued and honored for her protection, but the Athenians' need to show that Nike was also on their side reveals her value. The towering figures undoubtedly left a lasting impression, and it is yet another visual display of the good fortune and success that the culture placed with Nike. The Athenians honored Athena as a goddess who knew warfare, having fought in many battles including the battle in which she sided with Zeus and Nike.⁹⁰ She was the patron saint and warrior, who would protect Athens and keep peace in the city.⁹¹

Like Olympia, Athens seems to have had several representations of Nike over the years, as a second-century CE marble head of Nike was found in a 1970 excavation on the slope of the Areopagus, just south of the Athens Agora.⁹² It may have been a copy of the Nike of Paionios (as discussed in the previous section) or a copy of the Nike from the Athena Parthenos. The inclusion of the victory goddess in the prodigious statue at Athens conveys a different

⁸⁸ Pausanias 1.24.7.

⁸⁹ Taraporewalla, "Size Matters," 41; Judy Barringer, "The Legacy of the Phidian Zeus at Olympia," in *Statue of Zeus at Olympia*, 63.

⁹⁰ Hesiod, *Theogony* 383–403. The depiction of this battle, including Zeus, Athena, and Nike fighting alongside one another, can be seen on the East frieze of the second-century BCE gigantomachy frieze from the Great Altar, which was excavated at Pergamum in the nineteenth century, and now resides at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin; cf. Pausanias 1.25.2; Evamaria Schmidt, *The Great Altar of Pergamon*, tr. Lana Jaek (London: Owen, 1965), 5–6, 29.

⁹¹ Cf. Erika Simon, *The Gods of the Greeks*, tr. Jakob Zeyl, ed. Alan Shapiro (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2021) 199–232.

⁹² Agora Museum, Athens. Inv. No. S 2354.

message to the viewers of the statue in comparison to the statue at Olympia. The Nike in Athens is a victory of war, which may offer greater confidence and reassurance to the Athenians and serve as a threat or warning to those who may try to attack the city. The message is that Nike is on the side of Athens, and so opponents should beware.

The Athena Parthenos did not survive antiquity, but remnants of the iconic image remain as it was copied to reflect power and victory in war for many years after. A silver coin from King Lysimachus (r. 305–281 BCE) of Thrace in Northern Greece, for example, which commemorates his conquests in Asia Minor, shows the Athena Parthenos with Nike crowning a wreath on the inscription of his name.⁹³ Coins from Domitian show Athena (Roman: Minerva) holding Nike,⁹⁴ and a one-meter version from third century CE called the Varvakeion Athena Parthenos indicates the popularity with which Athena and Nike continued for several centuries.⁹⁵ The smaller figures seem to act like “good luck charms” for individuals who desire good fortune and success in their homes and businesses,⁹⁶ but they may also have functioned as protection against enemies as the original Athena Parthenos did.

Nike in Battle

While Nike appeared alongside other deities such as Zeus, Artemis, Ares, and Athena, she also appears in material culture and literature as an icon of her own in the context of military battle. As with the *agōnes*, Nike became so associated with military victory that her image is still used in the modern day to represent victory in war.⁹⁷ One of the most well-known extant representations of Nike in war is the Nike of Samothrace, sometimes referred to as the Winged Victory of Samothrace, which is displayed in the Louvre Museum in Paris. The marble statue, which was discovered in the 19th century on the Greek island of Samothrace, dates to around 250–150 BCE and sits atop a base in the shape of the front of a ship, standing on a low pedestal,

⁹³ British Museum no. 1919, 0820.1.

⁹⁴ E.g. *RIC II², Part I* Domitian 61.

⁹⁵ “Varvakeion Athena Parthenos,” University of Cambridge Museum of Classical Archaeology Databases, accessed 27 May 2021, <https://museum.classics.cam.ac.uk/collections/casts/varvakeion-athena-parthenos>.

⁹⁶ Images of Nike appear to represent such fortune and success today. For example, the “Spirit of Ecstasy” ornament on the luxury Rolls Royce car bears a strong resemblance with the goddess.

⁹⁷ More recent statues of Nike can be seen all over the world today to represent victory in the United States, Canada, England, Germany, India and China. In San Francisco, she is part of the Dewey Monument that celebrates an 1898 victory of the Spanish-American war. In downtown Mexico City, an immense Nike covered in 24 karat gold overlooks bustling traffic as a part of the Monumento a la Independencia, which was built in 1910 to commemorate the centennial of the beginning of Mexico’s War of Independence.

totaling 5.6 meters (18.4 ft) high.⁹⁸ There were numerous naval battles during the Hellenistic period in the fight for control of the Aegean Sea, and thus battle fleets were a vital military resource. The monumental Nike was one of the offerings made at the sanctuary for the Great Gods of Samothrace,⁹⁹ to invoke protection against the threat of shipwreck or battle.

Nike is not portrayed as a violent goddess herself, fighting alongside soldiers. She is more akin to a figure of fate than to the many other deities who are brutal figures of war.¹⁰⁰ Nike is often portrayed in Greco-Roman literature as a silent portent, a sign in the midst of battle that either inspires soldiers to courage and assurance of victory, or ironically, drives them to gripping fear and assumed defeat. In *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch gives several accounts in which the victory goddess plays a defining portent in the context of war. In Plutarch's account of the life of Brutus, Nike is a portent that signals victory, but it is a victory for his enemies. In the Battle of Philippi in 42 BCE, Brutus and Cassius are about to fight Octavius and Antony. They all make their respective ceremonial purification rituals before battle, but Cassius is said to have signs of his downfall during his rites that relate specifically with the goddess Nike:

However, it was thought that Cassius had a baleful sign during the lustration; for the lictor brought him his wreath turned upside down. And it is said that before this, also, in a procession at some festival, a golden Nike belonging to Cassius, which was being borne along, fell to the ground, its bearer having slipped. And besides, many carrion birds hovered over the camp daily, and swarms of bees were seen clustering at a certain place inside the camp; this place the soothsayers shut off from the rest of the camp, in order to avert by their rites the superstitious fears which were gradually carrying even Cassius himself away from his Epicurean doctrines, and which had altogether subjugated his soldiers.

οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ σημεῖον ἐν τῷ καθαρμῷ μοχθηρὸν ἔδοξε Κασσίῳ γενέσθαι. τὸν γὰρ στέφανον αὐτῷ κατεστραμμένον ὁ ῥαβδοῦχος προσήνεγκε. λέγεται δὲ καὶ πρότερον ἐν θεᾷ τινὶ καὶ πομπῇ χρυσεὴν Κασσίου Νίκην διαφερομένην πεσεῖν, ὀλισθόντος τοῦ φέροντος. ἔτι δ' ὄρνεά τε σαρκοφάγα πολλὰ καθ' ἡμέραν ἐπεφαίνετο τῷ στρατοπέδῳ, καὶ μελισσῶν ὥφθησαν ἔσμοι συνιστάμενοι περὶ τόπον τινὰ τοῦ χάρακος ἐντός, ὃν ἐξέκλεισαν οἱ μάντις ἀφοσιούμενοι τὴν δεισιδαιμονίαν ἀτρέμα καὶ τὸν Κάσσιον αὐτὸν ὑποφέρουσιν ἐκ τῶν Ἐπικούρου λόγων, τοὺς δὲ στρατιώτας παντάπασιν δεδουλωμένην.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Cf. Andrew F. Stewart, *Art in the Hellenistic World: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 83–84.

⁹⁹ Cf. Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults in the Ancient World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), 49–67.

¹⁰⁰ E.g. Zeus with his thunderbolt, Poseidon with his trident, and Ares with his spear were all feared for their violent power.

¹⁰¹ Plutarch, *Brutus* 39.3–6.

Interestingly, Cassius has tried to adopt Epicurean doctrines that negated the idea of the afterlife, presumably in response to the superstitious fear permeating the culture (see more in section 3.1), and to likely assuage his own personal fears in battle. Yet, he has his own golden statue of Nike brought into war to help foster success, and when it falls to the ground, it is seen as a sign that Cassius will not acquire victory. Cassius and the soldiers are overtaken by the fear that they will lose because of the negative portent which indicates that Nike is not on their side. Note that the wreath or crown (στέφανος), which was usually connected to victory, was also turned upside down, indicating another negative sign of their impending defeat.

In the Battle of Pharsalus in 48 BCE, the goddess Nike appears to give a more active sign than the one in Philippi in which the bearer dropped a statue. Both Plutarch and Roman historian Cassius Dio mention the portents of victory surrounding the battle because of the unlikely win of Julius Caesar against Pompey the Great. Caesar was in the much weaker position with fewer soldiers and limited provisions, but in the temple of Nike at Tralles (now modern-day Turkey), a palm-tree is said to have shot up at the base of Caesar's statue.¹⁰² The palm tree appearing in Nike's temple is seen as a portent that Caesar will win the battle, and indeed he does. In Cassius Dio's account, the goddess is even recorded as having turned toward the image of Caesar, indicating his impending victory. The sign from Nike serves as the explanation as to how Caesar could have succeeded, when by all physical appearances, he would presumably have lost. Nike becomes the indicator of who will win the war.

In a similar account of Nike indicating the victor, Cassius Dio reports on the Battle of Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE, when Germanic tribes decimated the Roman legions under Augustus:

For a catastrophe so great and sudden as this, it seemed to him, could have been due to nothing else than the wrath of some divinity; moreover, by reason of the portents which occurred both before the defeat and afterwards, he was strongly inclined to suspect some superhuman agency. For the temple of Ares in the field of the same name was struck by lightning...and a statue of Nike that was in the province of Germany and faced the enemy's territory turned about to face Italy.

τό τε γὰρ πάθος οὐκ ἄνευ δαιμονίου τινὸς ὀργῆς καὶ μέγα οὕτω καὶ ἀθρόον ἐδόκει οἱ γεγονέναι καὶ προσέτι καὶ ὑπὸ τῶν τεράτων τῶν πρό τε τῆς ἥττης καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα συμβάντων δεινὴν ὑποψίαν ἐς τὸ θεῖον ἔσχευ. ὃ τε γὰρ τοῦ Ἄρεως ναὸς ὁ ἐν τῷ πεδίῳ αὐτοῦ ὢν ἐκεραυνώθη...καὶ Νίκης τι ἄγαλμα ἐν τε τῇ Γερμανίᾳ ὃν καὶ πρὸς τὴν πολέμιαν βλέπον πρὸς τὴν Ἰταλίαν μετεστράφη.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Plutarch, *Caesar* 47.1; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 41.61.4.

¹⁰³ Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 56.24.3–5.

Up until that point, Augustus had been a very successful emperor, annexing many regions and enlarging the Roman Empire. Yet, his failure to secure the region of Germania left him fearful that his enemies would come all the way to the city of Rome. The victory of his enemies, Augustus reasoned, was certainly related to the deities of Ares and Nike. Her statue had turned around to come against Italy, and this portent was an indication that there were supernatural forces at work.

Oftentimes the portents from the goddess Nike are more influential than the strength or skill of the soldiers themselves. Indeed, the morale of the presumed winners can completely shift to assumed losers simply based on a sign from her, as seen in Plutarch's biography of Sulla.

And it is said that about the time when Sulla was moving his armament from Italy, Mithridates, who was staying at Pergamum, was visited with many other portents from Heaven, and that a Nike with a crown in her hand, which the Pergamenians were lowering towards him by machinery of some sort, was broken to pieces just as she was about to touch his head, and the crown went tumbling from her hand to the ground in the midst of the theatre, and was shattered, whereat the people shuddered, and Mithridates was greatly dejected, although at that time his affairs were prospering beyond his hopes.

Λέγεται δὲ ὑπὸ τὰς ἡμέρας ἐκεῖνας ἐν αἷς ὁ Σύλλας ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας ἐκίνει τὸν στόλον, ἄλλα τε πολλὰ Μιθριδάτῃ διατρίβοντι περὶ τὸ Πέργαμον ἐπισκῆψαι δαιμόνια, καὶ Νίκην στεφανηφόρον καθιεμένην ὑπὸ τῶν Περγαμηνῶν ἐπ' αὐτὸν ἐκ τινων ὀργάνων ἄνωθεν ὅσον οὖπω τῆς κεφαλῆς ψάουσας συντριβῆναι, καὶ τὸν στέφανον ἐκπεσόντα κατὰ τοῦ θεάτρου φέρεσθαι χαμᾶζε διαθρυπτόμενον, ὥστε φρίκην μὲν τῷ δήμῳ, ἀθυμίαν δὲ πολλὴν Μιθριδάτῃ παρασχεῖν, καίπερ αὐτῷ τότε τῶν πραγμάτων ἐλπίδος πέρα προχωρούντων.¹⁰⁴

Plutarch is describing Nike's role as Sulla planned an attack against Mithridates VI of Pontus during the First Mithridatic War in early first century BCE. Before Sulla became dictator of the Roman Republic, he was a consul who was assigned to quell insurgents like Mithridates. Although Mithridates had a strong army, the support of many locals, and substantial riches to sustain his cause, his soldiers shuddered and lost all hope because of the portent from Nike. Mithridates was completely despondent, and he lost the war to Sulla. They all believed that the Romans retained their power because Nike indicated that they would win.

Though Sulla was a strong military leader, he did not ascribe his successes simply to his abilities. When he later won the Battle of Chaeronea in 86 BCE against Archelaus,

¹⁰⁴ Plutarch, *Sulla* 11.1.

Mithridates' general, Sulla "inscribed upon his trophies the names of Mars, Victory and Venus [Ares, Nike, and Aphrodite], in the belief that his success in the war was due no less to good fortune than to military skill and strength."¹⁰⁵ Like many others of the time, Sulla associated victory in battle with favor from the supernatural gods, and of Nike especially.

Nike in Power

Nike functioned as a quiet, ominous portent in Greco-Roman wars, but she was not a deity who was altogether devoid of power. She did not cast down lightning bolts like Zeus or shoot arrows like Artemis. Yet, the Greeks and Romans believed that Nike still had the power to affect their lives, and they therefore made sure to honor her lest they lose her favor. They honored her because they knew that she had the power to assign great victories or hand them over to death. An inscription on an altar of Zeus Eleutherios¹⁰⁶ shows the honor attributed to Nike and the distinction between her power and the work of Ares, the god of war:

When Greeks by Nike's power and work of Ares' hand
Drove forth the Medes, this common altar here they raised
Of Zeus, the god of Freedom, for Free Greece.

τόνδε ποθ' Ἑλλήνες Νίκης κράτει, ἔργῳ Ἄρης,
Πέρσας ἐξελάσαντες, ἐλευθέρῳ Ἑλλάδι κοινὸν ἰδρύσαντο
Διὸς βωμὸν Ἑλευθερίου.¹⁰⁷

Plutarch was critical of this account regarding the Greco-Persian wars (5th c. BCE) from the historian Herodotus, and he doubted the timing and motives for this inscription. However, the message within the inscription still indicates that the Greeks attributed military victory to the gods Nike and Ares. It is by her power and his hand that they were able to conquer their enemies. She was responsible for the Greek victory and thus deserved recognition.

Cassius Dio offers his perspective of history including the role that Nike played as a source of power to Roman leaders. In one description of Augustus Caesar, Cassius Dio writes about a statue of Nike that was taken from Tarentum which Augustus placed in the Curia Iulia, the Senate House in the city of Rome:

After finishing this celebration Caesar dedicated the temple of Minerva, called also the Chalcidicum, and the Curia Iulia, which had been built in

¹⁰⁵ Plutarch, *Sulla* 19.5.

¹⁰⁶ The altar of Zeus Eleutherios was at the center of the Festival of Freedom, a celebration held every four years to honor the Greek triumph over the Persians in fifth century BCE.

¹⁰⁷ Plutarch, *Moralia* 9.873B; cf. Herodotus, *The Persian Wars* 8.77.

honor of his father. In the latter he set up the statue of Nike which is still in existence, thus signifying probably that it was from her that he had received the empire.

Ἐπεὶ δὲ ταῦτα διετέλεσε, τό τε Ἀθήναιον τὸ Χαλκιδικὸν ὠνομασμένον καὶ τὸ βουλευτήριον τὸ Ἰουλίειον, τὸ ἐπὶ τῇ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ τιμῇ γενόμενον, καθιέρωσεν. ἐνέστησε δὲ ἐς αὐτὸ τὸ ἄγαλμα τὸ τῆς Νίκης τὸ καὶ νῦν ὄν, δηλῶν, ὡς ἔοικεν, ὅτι παρ' αὐτῆς τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐκτήσατο.¹⁰⁸

Having been built in his father's honor, the Curia was a very significant place for Augustus,¹⁰⁹ and according to Cassius Dio, the Roman leader placed a statue of Nike there because he attributed the goddess with his having won control of the Roman Empire. Augustus saw her power as the reason for why he won the battles; despite putting much of his own effort and skill into these wars, he regarded his victory as having come from her and through her. It was Nike who granted the empire, and so Augustus felt the need to have a statue set up in her honor in his most valued place. Cassius Dio mentions that the Nike statue was still existing in his time, demonstrating that well into the second century CE, the visual reminder of this important victory in Greco-Roman history remained for all to see.

Some Greco-Roman leaders took advantage of the power associated with Nike. Gaius Caesar, also known as Caligula, reigned as emperor from 37–41 CE, but as Cassius Dio reports, Caligula was seemingly more manipulative than his predecessor. Caligula exploited the people's fear of Nike's power to attain unrestrained personal power for himself.

Indeed, even before this he had been demanding that he be regarded as more than a human being, and was wont to claim that he had intercourse with the Moon, that Nike put a crown upon him, and to pretend that he was Zeus, and he made this a pretext for seducing numerous women, particularly his sisters

ἡξίου μὲν γὰρ καὶ πρότερον ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον νομίζεσθαι, καὶ τῇ Σελήνῃ συγγίγνεσθαι καὶ ὑπὸ τῆς Νίκης στεφανοῦσθαι ἔλεγε, Ζεὺς τε εἶναι ἐπλάττετο, καὶ κατὰ τοῦτο καὶ γυναιξὶν ἄλλαις τε πολλαῖς καὶ ταῖς ἀδελφαῖς μάλιστα συνεῖναι προεφασίσσατο¹¹⁰

The image of Nike bestowing a crown appears again as a symbol of victory and success from the goddess. By insisting that he had the favor of the gods and that Nike especially had bestowed power to him, Caligula tried to garner approval from the people and further their

¹⁰⁸ Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 51.22.1–2.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. the inscription called the *Fasti Maffeiiani* that reports Augustus dedicating an altar of Victory in the senate house (Dessau, *ILS* 8744).

¹¹⁰ Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 59.26.5.

inclination to see him as a demi-god or god himself (see more on divine rulers in section 4.1), even though he was a wicked and corrupt leader.

If Nike had the power to win wars and assign seemingly unexpected leaders to rule, then the people of the Greco-Roman world surely had to submit to her whims. It is no wonder that she was simultaneously pursued and feared by soldiers engaged in battle and politicians who sought to rule. Those who were able to curry her favor could expect great military victory and immense political power, while those without Nike on their side suffered powerlessness and even the consequence of death in battle.

The Johannine Battle

Nike as the representation of victory in the Greco-Roman world was clearly well-established in the context of war. She was seemingly so well-regarded that both military leaders and emperors attributed their victories to her. In the pursuit of *nikē* in 1 John, the writer seems to allude to a similar context of victory in war in which the readers are engaged in a type of Johannine battle. The readers are portrayed as conquerors facing several opponents including “the evil one” (2:13, 14; 3:12; 5:18, 19), antichrists (2:18, 22; 4:3), false prophets (4:1) and even the world itself (5:4–5). The militaristic undertone is particularly evident in the first appearance of the verbal cognate νικάω (conquer, 2:13b):¹¹¹

I am writing to you, **young men**, because you have conquered the evil one.

γράφω ὑμῖν **νεανίσκοι**, ὅτι νενικήκατε τὸν πονηρόν

It is specifically the young men (νεανίσκοι), who have conquered “the evil one” (ὁ πονηρός), and the designation suggests some sort of combat as the “young men” would be those of military age.¹¹² More of this battle will be explored in the next section.

One challenge to understanding the nature of the battle is that the *nikē* of 1 John is identified with *pistis* (5:4):

For everyone who is born of God conquers the world. And this is the **victory** that has conquered the world, our **faith**.

¹¹¹ Cf. the recapitulation in the succeeding verse.

¹¹² Judith Lieu, *I, II, & III John: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2008),

ὅτι πᾶν τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ νικᾷ τὸν κόσμον· καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ
νίκη ἡ νικήσασα τὸν κόσμον, ἡ πίστις ἡμῶν.

One might presume that a fight related with *pistis* might involve a mental or spiritual battle over what the combatants believe. Indeed, references to the word “spirit” (πνεῦμα)¹¹³ in the letter do support that there is a spiritual element to the Johannine conflict. However, there are also several references to murder¹¹⁴ and death¹¹⁵ which may suggest that there is a more literal cost involved.

The severity of these references indicates the extreme nature of the battle that is being fought in 1 John. Although the writer offers assurances that the Johannine community are ultimately triumphant over their opponents (2:13–14; 5:4–5), he also gives several warnings throughout his letter (e.g. 2:15–18; 4:1; 5:21) which evoke a sense of foreboding and caution that this victory is not easily won or sustained. The confrontational and conquering language throughout 1 John suggests that there is indeed a battle that the Johannine community must face to achieve their *nikē* of *pistis*. Therefore, like a general to his soldiers, the Johannine teacher writes to his spiritual children to point out the underlying threats and to suggest the proper response when they encounter their opponents.

¹¹³ Cf. 3:24; 4:1, 2, 3, 6, 13; 5:6, 8.

¹¹⁴ Cf. 3:12 (2x), 15 (2x).

¹¹⁵ Cf. 3:14 (2x); 5:16 (3x), 17.

2. The Conquered

The sense of battle in 1 John is clearly demonstrated through the many opponents that the Johannine community must face: the evil one (2:13, 14; 3:12; 5:18, 19), antichrists (2:18, 22; 4:3; cf. 2 John 7), false prophets (4:1), and the world itself (2:15–17; 3:1, 13; 5:4, 5, 19). While the nature of the battle with each opponent differs in the level of physical or spiritual conflict that they have with the Johannine community, all of the opponents appear to be associated with the “world” (κόσμος, 4:1, 3; 5:19), suggesting that the fundamental battle of 1 John is ultimately between the Johannine believers and the world. This chapter will examine the identity of these opponents, the nuances of each fight, and the battle overall that is taking place in 1 John in order to fully understand the nature and implications of the Johannine victory.

2.1 The Evil One

The first named opponent in 1 John is “the evil one” (ὁ πονηρός) who is described in three different chapters as a significant enemy to the Johannine believers (2:13, 14; 3:12; 5:18, 19).¹¹⁶ The specific identity of the evil one is not readily obvious at first, as the concept of “the evil one” including the Greek article does not appear in many books of the New Testament,¹¹⁷ and there are sometimes no definitive referents for clarification.¹¹⁸ It is possible that the evil one is simply a personification of evil.¹¹⁹ However, the evil one is likely to be representative of the spiritual archopponent of God, who is part of a longstanding biblical tradition of the devil or Satan operating as a source of opposition (e.g. 1 Chron. 21; Job 1–2; Zech 3).¹²⁰ The First Letter of John has the most frequent references to “the evil one” in the New Testament, and so the sense of spiritual battle would be prominent if the identity of the opposing figure is indeed the archopponent of God.

Although the words “demon” (δαίμωνιον) and “Satan” (Σατανᾶς) are absent from the Johannine epistles, the references to the “devil” (διάβολος, 1 John 3:8, 10) and the Genesis 4 allusion to Cain and his having come from the evil one (3:12) seem to indicate that the identity

¹¹⁶ Evil is also mentioned in the context of evil *deeds* in 1 John 3:12 and 2 John 11.

¹¹⁷ Πονηρός as a singular substantive with the article occurs 16 times, of which three are obviously not Satan (Luke 6:45; Rom 12:9; 1 Cor 5:13). Matt 5:39 suggests a more generic “evil person.” The remaining may be referring to Satan or the devil: Matt 5:37; 6:13; 13:19, 38; John 17:15; Eph 6:16; 2 Thess 3:3; 1 John 2:13, 14; 3:12; 5:18, 19. Cf. Thomas Farrar and Guy Williams, “Diabolical Data: A Critical Inventory of New Testament Satanology,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 39, no. 1 (2016): 43–44.

¹¹⁸ One possible exception might be Matt 13:38 which is closely aligned with “the devil” (ὁ διάβολος) in v. 39.

¹¹⁹ Smalley, *I, 2, 3 John*, 75.

¹²⁰ Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 89.

of the evil one is likely not a human being currently living in the Greco-Roman world. Like the majority of other references to “the evil one,” the most likely identity of this enemy in 1 John is the spiritual archopponent known as “the devil.” In examining the battle of 1 John, one objective is to determine why the writer feels it necessary to mention this figure multiple times. The analysis below will demonstrate that the writer is warning about the evil one throughout the letter to ensure that the readers are vigilant about the opposing spiritual force that is operating in the world. He does not want them to respond in fear; the author reassures his readers that they are conquerors of the evil one with their *pistis*.

The Young Men Conquer the Evil One

The first clear indication of battle in 1 John is the writer’s declaration of decisive victory over the evil one (see *Figure 1*). The Johannine author repeats: “you have conquered the evil one” (νενικήκατε τὸν πονηρόν, 2:13, 14), using the perfect tense, suggesting that the enemy has been defeated already and is therefore no longer any cause for concern. The evil one is not portrayed as a domineering and fearsome figure. On the contrary, there are no details about him here. Instead, the first mention of the evil one seems to function as an assurance that the Johannine believers are already on the victorious side. He repeats: “you have conquered the evil one” (νενικήκατε τὸν πονηρόν) to convey a definitive victory which is intended to provoke confidence in his readers.

As mentioned in the previous section, the assurance of the conquered evil one is addressed specifically to the “young men” (νεανίσκοι),¹²¹ who are the first conquerors mentioned in the letter, with subsequent named conquerors being the “little children” (τεκνία, 4:4), “everyone who is born of God” (πᾶν τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, 5:4), and “the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God” (ὁ πιστεύων ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, 5:5). The first conquerors of the Johannine letter being the “young men” is appropriate in that the young men would be of military age and would be the ones most associated with fighting if it were a literal battle with the evil one.¹²² Despite the specific address, however, the writer is not trying to say that the younger members of the community are the *only* ones who have conquered the evil one. In a three-part rhetorical address (2:12–14), the author uses cyclical and poetic

¹²¹ In Johannine literature, νεανίσκος appears only at 1 John 2:13, 14. Other references occur at Matt 19:20, 22; Mark 14:51, 16:5 (interestingly in reference to a spiritual figure, an angel at Jesus’ tomb); Luke 7:14; Acts 2:17, 5:10, 23:18, 22. Cf. also νεανίας at Acts 7:58, 20:9, 23:17.

¹²² Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 90. Cf. Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, 4.72; Plutarch, *Moralia* 237.

language that acts like a lyrical poem,¹²³ to build an emphatic recapitulation of having conquered the evil one (vv. 13–14) as a result of knowing Jesus (vv. 12, 13) and knowing the Father (v. 14).

Figure 1

1 John 2:12–14	
12. I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.	Γράφω ὑμῖν, τεκνία, ὅτι ἀφέωνται ὑμῖν αἱ ἁμαρτίαι διὰ τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ.
13. I am writing to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, ¹²⁴ because you have conquered the evil one.	γράφω ὑμῖν, πατέρες ὅτι ἐγνώκατε τὸν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς. γράφω ὑμῖν νεανίσκοι, ὅτι νενικήκατε τὸν πονηρὸν.
14. wrote to you, children, because you have known the Father. I wrote to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I wrote to you, young men, because you are strong and the word of God remains in you, and you have conquered the evil one.	ἔγραψα ὑμῖν, παιδία, ὅτι ἐγνώκατε τὸν πατέρα. ἔγραψα ὑμῖν, πατέρες, ὅτι ἐγνώκατε τὸν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς. ἔγραψα ὑμῖν, νεανίσκοι, ὅτι ἰσχυροὶ ἐστε καὶ ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ὑμῖν μένει καὶ νενικήκατε τὸν πονηρὸν.

In the first part of the address (v. 12), the relational teacher speaks to his “little children” (τεκνία), a vocative form seen almost exclusively in 1 John,¹²⁵ to help explain why he is writing this letter¹²⁶ and to draw attention to what he is about to say.¹²⁷ At first glance, it appears to be a tripartite address to the children (τεκνία/παιδία), fathers (πατέρες), and young men (νεανίσκοι). However, the address of τεκνία is more likely referring to the entire community as the writer has already utilized it at the start of the chapter (2:1). The specific address to the fathers and young men are speaking to the older and younger generations respectively. In this

¹²³ Although not technically a poem, the lyrical language prompts many English translations to present the three-part address in verse form (cf. NIV, ESV, NRSV, NLT, NKJV, ISV, CEV).

¹²⁴ Some versions (e.g. NRSV, CEV) translate νεανίσκοι as the more inclusive “young people,” and although the writer probably does not intend to exclude female members, “young men” is a better counterpart to “fathers.” It also complements the “you are strong” (ἰσχυροὶ ἐστε, 2:14), reflecting the sense of military conquering (although a literal violent military conquering is not intended by the author).

¹²⁵ The vocative τεκνίον occurs only eight times in the New Testament: seven times in 1 John (2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21) and once when Jesus is addressing his disciples in John 13:33. There are notable similarities with 1 John in that the teacher of John’s Gospel is speaking with a sense of urgency to his disciples about a new command and of the importance of loving one another (John 13:34–35; cf. 1 John 2:8, 10). The writer of the letter appears to prefer τεκνίον to παιδίον (child), which is much more common in the New Testament (appears 52 times), but in 1 John appears only twice in the vocative neutral plural (παιδία, 2:14, 18). (Cf. παιδίον in John 4:49; 16:21; 21:5). Other relational terms of address in 1 John include ἀδελφοί (brothers) in 3:13 and ἀγαπητοί (beloved) at 1 John 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11. Cf. 3 John 2, 5, 11.

¹²⁶ Cf. the references to the present tense “I am writing to you” (γράφω ὑμῖν) in 2:1, 7, 8, 12, 13; and the aorist “I wrote/I have written to you” (ἔγραψα ὑμῖν) in 2:14 (3x), 21, 26; 5:13.

¹²⁷ This is especially true the last verse of the letter (5:21), which starts with the vocative τεκνία to alert the audience to his final warning.

series of assurances, the author's first assurance to the general community is that their sins are forgiven because of Christ, which he has already alluded to previously (1:7–9; 2:1–2) and is clearly a concern later in the letter (3:4–9; 4:10; 5:16–18) because sin is involved in the battle that they face (cf. 3:8; 5:18–19). Just as he addressed his τέκνία in 2:1, the writer wants to remind them to avoid sin, and to recognize that, if they do sin, they are able to be forgiven because of Christ's sacrifice. The forgiveness for sin that they enjoy is not on account of their own efforts but on account of Jesus and his deeds (cf. 3:23; 5:13).

As is often the case with little children, the readers are passive recipients of what has been done for them, and the forgiving in the perfect tense indicates that this is a completed past act.¹²⁸ His children can be confident that, because of what Christ has done, and because they have entered into a relationship with Christ already through their *pistis*, they can be secure in knowing that their sins are forgiven. Thus, a Johannine believer should not “walk in darkness” (ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ περιπατεῖ, 2:11), but walk in the light, behaving like Jesus in their words and actions (2:8–11; cf. 1:5, 7).

When addressing the community for the second time in v. 14, the writer switches from τέκνία (v. 12) to παῖδιά (v. 14), a common New Testament term for “children,”¹²⁹ further supporting the idea that he is speaking to the community as a whole. This time, he does not address the issue of sin (as v. 12) but chooses instead to say: “you have known the Father” (ἐγνώκατε τὸν πατέρα). The language transitions well as it continues the theme of “knowing” from the previous verse and seamlessly transitions to the recapitulation to the fathers.

When the writer addresses the “fathers” (πατέρες), he says the same phrase (vv. 13, 14): “you have known him who is from the beginning” (ἐγνώκατε τὸν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς). Addressing the fathers separately aligns with the hierarchical values of both Jewish and Greco-Roman culture which divide communities by age,¹³⁰ and he follows the typical household code of addressing the older or more senior group first.¹³¹ It is possible that the “fathers” are a specific group of people, such as the elders (πρεσβύτεροι) of the community.¹³² However, the writer has been

¹²⁸ Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 88.

¹²⁹ While the general noun παῖδιον appears in several places in the NT (e.g. Matt 2:13, 20; Mark 5:39, 40; Luke 1:59, 66; 1 Cor 14:20; Heb 2:13, 14), the vocative παῖδιά appears exclusively in Johannine literature: John 21:5; 1 John 2:14, 18.

¹³⁰ See distinctions between older and younger people in 1 Kings 12; Ps 148:12; Prov 20:29; Lam 5:14; Ezek 9:6; Joel 2:28; Zech 8:4–5. In the NT: Acts 2:17 (quoting Joel 2:28); 1 Tim 5:1–2; Titus 2:1–6; 1 Pet 5:1–5. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 1.3; Plutarch, *Moralia* 237D; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 21.3; Josephus, *BJ*, 1.25.1; Philo, *On the Account of the World's Creation*, 103–105.

¹³¹ Cf. James Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, Blackwell Ancient Religions, (Malden, Massachusetts; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 117. Interestingly, some New Testament writers list the junior group first: Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:22–6:9.

¹³² Cf. elders mentioned in other letters: 1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Pet 5:1, 5.

speaking quite generally throughout the letter to his “little children” (2:1, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21), and the letter does not imply any gradation of seniority and experience (cf. 2:20, 27).¹³³ Indeed, the word “elder” in the Johannine epistles is only used for the writer himself.¹³⁴ Thus, it seems likely that the “fathers” is referring to the older members of the Johannine community. The writer does not designate the different age groups to reinforce division and hierarchy as proliferated in the culture and tradition at large. On the contrary, he is trying to promote cohesion in recognizing what would normally be clear divisions according to cultural background, but seeing them collectively as his children, one community.¹³⁵

The repeated address to the fathers is almost identical (vv. 13, 14) with the only difference being the present tense “I am writing” (γράφω, 2:13), and the aorist tense “I wrote” (ἔγραψα, 2:14) in the recapitulation to emphasize confidence in the knowledge of a secure relationship with “him who is from the beginning” (τὸν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς). The reference to knowing him who is “from the beginning” (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, vv. 13, 14) hearkens back to the start of the letter (1:1) and the earlier reference to the command that they had from the beginning (2:7), the command to love one another (cf. 3:11) which was given by Jesus at the start of their Johannine *pistis* (John 13:34).¹³⁶

The declaration to the fathers is even more personal in using the masculine pronoun (1 John 2:13, 14) in contrast to the neuter (1:1) or the command they had from the beginning (2:7). The message that the older generation have definitively known “*him* who is from the beginning” places emphasis on the *person*. That person is likely referencing God or Jesus, but more likely refers to Jesus because the writer has already addressed all of the “children” as having known the Father (v. 14) and then establishes the fathers as knowing Jesus. The verb “you have known” (ἐγνώκατε) in the perfect tense in both verses (vv. 13, 14) underscores the confident possession and relationship which is rooted in the past.¹³⁷ This is appropriate to the older community who may have had an earlier *pistis* in Jesus as the son of God, and therefore, have had a longer relationship with him.

To complete the three-part address, the Johannine leader asserts to the young men, the first named victors of 1 John, that they have conquered the evil one (vv. 13, 14). As representatives of the “soldiers” of the Johannine community in their twenties and thirties, they

¹³³ Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 87.

¹³⁴ Cf. 2 John 1; 3 John 1.

¹³⁵ Cf. Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 87.

¹³⁶ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 129. Cf. later in 1 John when the theme of “sin” and “beginning” also come together in reference to the devil who has been sinning from the beginning (3:8).

¹³⁷ Smalley, *I, 2, 3 John*, 77.

may be the fighters who are “on the front lines of battle” in the sense that they face more conflicts related with the evil one (see more in section 2.3). Despite the militaristic message, their conquering is not meant to be a physically violent victory. The emphasis is on *knowing*. “You have known” (ἐγνώκατε) is declared three times (once in v. 13, twice in v. 14). Knowing “him who is from the beginning” (τὸν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, vv. 13, 14) that was addressed to the fathers, and the children *knowing* the Father (v. 14), underlines that the thematic importance has been on relationship with God. The implication here is that this relationship leads to conquering the evil one, and this is addressed to the young men, not because victory can only be achieved by the younger generation, but because they are the age group that embodies those who would be soldiers if they were in a literal battle. Later in the letter, we see that every member of the Johannine community, the τέκνία, are addressed in conquering the opposition (4:4 cf. 5:4–5), and thus, the fight is not simply for the “young men.” They are the initial named conquerors given to reinforce the sense of Johannine battle.¹³⁸

The author of 1 John does not explain what it means to conquer the evil one. However, the variations in the recapitulation (v. 14) offer some indication of the nature of the battle against him. The variations are more than just for rhetorical interest, as has been suggested.¹³⁹ In the final word to the “young men,” the author adds that they are “strong” (ἰσχυρός) and that “the word of God remains in you” (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ὑμῖν μένει). The second variation would be an especially unusual addition to “strong” if it were there to simply avoid tedium.

The writer of 1 John uses the word “strong” only once (v. 14),¹⁴⁰ which seems a little surprising as it might be expected to appear more frequently in a letter that involves Johannine conquerors and several significant adversaries. The word has been used as a title (ὁ ἰσχυρός) for God,¹⁴¹ and as a reference to Satan (Luke 11:21, cf. 11:18). Although we cannot definitively say that the Johannine author is trying to convey a specific point with the declaration “you are strong” (ἰσχυροὶ ἐστε), the reference to the strength of the conquerors may indicate the strength and endurance needed in the spiritual fight against the evil one,¹⁴² who presumably has

¹³⁸ However, there may also be the implication that the young ones face more challenges because of their greater engagement with “the world.” See more in section 2.3.

¹³⁹ E.g. Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 90.

¹⁴⁰ The word ἰσχυρός does not appear elsewhere in the Epistles or Gospel, but elsewhere can refer to physical (e.g. Matt 12:29; Luke 11:21, 22) or abstract strength (e.g. Mark 1:7; 2 Cor 10:10, Heb 6:18) in the NT.

¹⁴¹ In the LXX, ἰσχυρός appears some 160 times to refer to strength and power in nature, people or armies, and also to describe the might of God (e.g. Deut 10:17; Josh 4:24; Neh 1:5; 2 Macc 1:24; Dan 9:4). It is also used substantively as a title for the Lord (ὁ ἰσχυρός, e.g. 2 Sam 22:31, 32, 33; 23:5; Job 22:13; 33:29; 34:31).

¹⁴² Cf. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 122.

significant strength of his own, and is therefore not an easy enemy to defeat.¹⁴³ In an encouragement appropriate from the Johannine mentor to his spiritual children, he is indicating that it is because of their spiritual strength that they had a decisive victory against the evil one, and the encouraging implication is that they continue to have that strength now for current and future battles (as we will discuss further below).

The second additional variation, “the word of God remains in you” (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ὑμῖν μένει), suggests the way in which the Johannine conquerors are able to fight their enemy. They know that the word of God is Jesus who remains in them (cf. 1:1, 10; 2:24, 27; 3:9, 24; 4:13, 15), and it is through their *pistis* in Jesus that they are able to defeat the evil one. When they embraced *pistis* in Jesus, the word of God remained in them, and they were able to conquer the evil one. There is an inner strength, having internalized the word of God that has allowed them to be victorious.

The Evil One and the Murderer

Although the perfect tense in chapter two (νενικήκατε, 2:13–14) suggests that the evil one has already been conquered, the next reference to this opponent seems to indicate that there is still some sort of threat attached to him. This time, the Johannine believers are not fighting against the evil one, but potentially becoming like him (3:11–12):

For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous.

Ὅτι αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἀγγελία ἣν ἠκούσατε ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, ἵνα ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους, οὐ καθὼς Κάϊν ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ ἦν καὶ ἐσφαξεν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ χάριν τίνος ἐσφαξεν αὐτόν; ὅτι τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ πονηρὰ ἦν τὰ δὲ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ δίκαια.

The language seems extreme as the writer stresses the importance of loving one another and then gives the severe counterexample of murdering another. This indicates the immense gravity of what the writer is trying to convey to his readers about the Johannine battle in which they are engaged.

¹⁴³ Jesus himself did not have easy encounters with the devil (cf. Matt 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13).

The author reminds his audience about what they have heard “from the beginning” (ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, 3:11), language that he used earlier in the letter to refer to their *pistis* (1:1; 2:7, 24), and in relation to their conquering the evil one (2:13, 14). He has also previously alluded to the importance of loving others (2:10; 3:10), but the writer now declares that their loving one another is central to the message of their *pistis*.¹⁴⁴ As a counterexample, he tells the Johannine believers that they should not be like Cain, who “was from the evil one and murdered his brother” (ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ ἦν καὶ ἔσφαξεν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ, 3:12). In other places in the letter, exhortations are followed by positive examples that are introduced with καθὼς (2:6, 27; 3:3, 7; cf. John 15:12), but here the writer alludes to the extreme negative example of the Genesis narrative of fratricide (Gen 4).

The language describing Cain who was “from the evil one” (ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ) and doing evil deeds (ἔργα πονηρὰ) parallels the language a few verses before (see *Figure 2*):

Figure 2

1 John 3:8	1 John 3:11–12
The one who commits sin is from the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστίν, ὅτι ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς ὁ διάβολος ἁμαρτάνει· εἰς τοῦτο ἐφανερώθη ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα λύσῃ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ διαβόλου.	For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother’s righteous. Ὅτι αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἀγγελία ἣν ἠκούσατε ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, ἵνα ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους, οὐ καθὼς Κάϊν ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ ἦν καὶ ἔσφαξεν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ χάριν τίνος ἔσφαξεν αὐτόν; ὅτι τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ πονηρὰ ἦν τὰ δὲ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ δίκαια.

The message and personhood of Jesus is “from the beginning” (ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, 3:11, cf. 1:1; 2:7, 13, 14, 24), which contrasts the devil who has been sinning “from the beginning” (ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, 3:8). However, Cain who was “from the evil one” (ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ, 3:12), is representative of the sinner who is “from the devil” (ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου, 3:8, cf. 3:10). Cain committed murder because “his works were evil” (τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ πονηρὰ ἦν, 3:12), and this is similar to “the works of the devil” (τὰ ἔργα τοῦ διαβόλου, 3:8). The language suggests that “the evil one” is at least connected to “the devil,” and that they are likely to be synonymous with one another.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Cf. John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Sacra Pagina Series 18 (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2002), 233; Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 197.

¹⁴⁵ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 168, 184; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 189.

If the evil one is indeed referring to the devil, the sense of contention between the Johannine community and the evil one is clear (3:10):

The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: everyone who does not do what is right is not from God, nor the one who does not love his brother.

ἐν τούτῳ φανερά ἐστὶν τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὰ τέκνα τοῦ διαβόλου· πᾶς ὁ μὴ ποιῶν δικαιοσύνην οὐκ ἐστὶν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ.

The parallel of the “children of God” (τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ) versus the “children of the devil” (τὰ τέκνα τοῦ διαβόλου) not only underscores the relational language that the Johannine teacher uses in addressing his audience as τέκνία (children, 3:7), but also further reinforces the sense of opposition and conflict in the letter. The writer refers to the Johannine readers, who are the children of God, and contrasts them to the children of the devil, which includes Cain who was from the evil one/devil (3:12; cf. 3:8, 10).

God’s children are to parallel Cain’s brother who did righteous deeds (3:12). The deeds of Cain’s brother being identified as righteous (δίκαιος) acts as a contrasting parallel to the language in the verses prior in which the children of the devil do not do what is righteous (δικαιοσύνη, 3:7–10). This theme of righteousness is evident throughout this section (2:29–3:12) especially, as it starts and ends with the emphasis on what is “right” (δίκαιος). Moreover, the emphasis on “the children” (τὰ τέκνα) of God as distinct from “the children” of the devil simultaneously reminds the audience that children naturally resemble their father. They have a filial likeness and derive their character and values from their parent. If they are truly *children* of God, their actions should reflect God’s love and justice (3:7, 10–12, 14–18).

The emphasis of the writer is now clear: the Johannine children should reflect God’s character. However, the allusion to Cain specifically is a curious one. Of all possible examples, the writer chooses to mention Cain as the one who is “from the evil one.” Certainly, the story about Cain and his brother would have been well-known to those of a Jewish background. However, it was also probably familiar to members of the Johannine community who came from a non-Jewish background as well, considering that the story is one of the first scriptural narratives.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Smalley says that the allusion to Cain and Abel is unusual because it is the *only* direct reference to the Jewish scriptures in a work that is so close to the Fourth Gospel where more allusions are apparent. He admits that the reason for this is that there were likely more pagan influences at this time (Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 183–184). Indeed, the sole clear reference to the Jewish scriptures indicates that the Greco-Roman culture is

One might expect that the writer of 1 John would take a more victorious stance while mentioning the evil one, as he did in the earlier references (2:12–14), and focus on *Abel* as the righteous one¹⁴⁷ while pointing to Cain as the example of greed or unbelief (cf. Jude 11). However, Abel’s name is not mentioned, and thus he does not seem to be the primary focus. Instead, Cain who is “from the evil one” and his evil deeds are the center of attention in comparison to his brother’s righteous deeds (3:12). Therefore, the writer seems to have chosen this illustration for a specific purpose.

The Johannine author may have thought this to be the ideal narrative for two main reasons: one is that Cain and Abel are literal brothers, and the other is that the “evil” brother chooses to murder. In the context of exhorting the audience to love one another, the counterexample being the murder of a familial brother may seem extreme. However, it may shed some light on what kind of issues the audience was facing in terms of conflict between family members and what temptations they may have had in resorting to violence.

The writer reinforces the severity of the conflict in the succeeding verse (3:13):

Do not be astonished, brothers, if the world hates you.

μὴ θαυμάζετε, ἀδελφοί, εἰ μισεῖ ὑμᾶς ὁ κόσμος.¹⁴⁸

The author prepares the readers to expect the world (κόσμος) around them to hate (μισέω) them, and the example of Cain might imply that this hate from the world could include hatred from family members. Yet, the Johannine audience is exhorted not to be like Cain who was from the evil one (3:12). Thus, the emphasis is not that other brothers in the world might hate the Johannine believer. The emphasis is that the Johannine believer may be like the murderous brother.

The writer repeats the issue of hate once more, as a contrast to loving others, to underscore his point (3:14–15):

We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. The one who does not love remains in death. Everyone who **hates**

more prevalent, and that this illustration was probably carefully chosen to indicate a specific point about fratricide.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. similarly in other places such as 4 Macc 18:11; Matt 23:35; Heb 11:4 (Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 144).

¹⁴⁸ See similar language of the world hating the disciples (John 15:18–19), and when Jesus in praying for his disciples: “the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world” (ὁ κόσμος ἐμίσησεν αὐτούς, ὅτι οὐκ εἰσὶν ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου, John 17:14). Such anticipation in the New Testament elsewhere implies eschatological expectation of persecution (e.g. Matt 10:22; 24:9). However, there is no suggestion of literal persecution from the world in 1 John, except perhaps here from a specific family member (3:11–15). This verse will be further explored in section 2.3.

a brother is a murderer, and you know that every murderer does not have eternal life remaining in them.

ἡμεῖς οἶδαμεν ὅτι μεταβεβήκαμεν ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου εἰς τὴν ζωὴν, ὅτι ἀγαπῶμεν τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς· ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν μένει ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ. πᾶς ὁ **μισῶν** τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἀνθρωποκτόνος ἐστίν. καὶ οἶδατε ὅτι πᾶς ἀνθρωποκτόνος οὐκ ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον ἐν αὐτῷ μένουσαν.

What would cause a Johannine reader to hate so much that they might become like Cain, a murderer to his own family member? Because the Johannine members see one another as siblings (3:13), perhaps the author is addressing hatred toward another member of the Johannine community. The example of Cain murdering his brother was rooted in jealousy because the brother's deeds were righteous and received favor from God (3:12, cf. Gen 4:4–5). This may imply that there could be jealousy in the Johannine community that is so severe that it could even lead someone to violence. Another possibility is that, if the world is inclined to hate them (3:13), a mutual hatred has developed out of the distance felt when Johannine members chose *pistis* in Jesus over the *pistis* of the world around them.

While all of the above could be of concern to the author, the context of the passage seems to suggest still *another* possible answer. The hatred between family members may be related to finances and charitable compassion (3:17):

But whoever has a worldly livelihood and may see his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God remain in him?

ὅς δ' ἂν ἔχη τὸν βίον τοῦ κόσμου καὶ θεωρῇ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ χρεῖαν ἔχοντα καὶ κλείσῃ τὰ σπλάγχνα αὐτοῦ ἀπ' αὐτοῦ πῶς ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ μένει ἐν αὐτῷ;

Those who have a “worldly livelihood” (τὸν βίον τοῦ κόσμου, literally “the life of the world”) are expected to demonstrate God's love by helping others, and probably referring especially to those within the Johannine community. Earlier in the letter, he had mentioned this worldly life (βίος, 2:16) in reference to the problem of worldly pride, which will be explored in section 2.3. Both references suggest that money should not be a source of pride or covetousness.

What the Johannine readers are actually expected to do with the livelihood that they have is to extend it graciously to others. Supporting the poor and vulnerable was already deeply ingrained in scriptural tradition (eg. Lev 25; Deut 15), and thus, those of a Jewish background would have been familiar with this value. Moreover, most people during the first and second

centuries in the Roman Empire were living close to the breadline, but it would not require extravagant wealth for someone to help another through finances or food.¹⁴⁹

A person who did not have *pistis* in Jesus may not have appreciated a Johannine family member giving away their hard-earned food and money to another person. They would likely resent, hate, and maybe even resort to violence against their own family members. The repeated reference to murder (σφάζω, twice in 3:12) or murderers (ἀνθρωποκτόνος, twice in 3:15)¹⁵⁰ underscores the extremity with which the world around them, including family members, might hate the Johannine believers when they act in the love and compassion of God because those who are from the evil one live by a different standard. The Johannine audience might want to be “like Cain” (3:12) and feel inclined to respond to violence with violence.

However, the author reminds his readers of the countercultural message to love one another (3:11), which is fundamental to their *pistis*. This includes sharing their livelihood. Indeed, they should be willing to lay down their lives for one another (τίθημι τὴν ψυχὴν, 3:16), language that is exclusive to 1 John and the Fourth Gospel.¹⁵¹ In other Greek usage, it means to put oneself on the line and not sacrifice it,¹⁵² but here we can see that both can apply as one is expected to put themselves on the line to financially sacrifice for others. The Johannine community should almost *expect* for the world to hate them (3:13), and some people may even want to kill them, but they are not to retaliate in kind and be like Cain themselves (3:12). Cain is the counterexample of how they are to live, as he is representative of those in the world who are from the evil one and may be inclined to violence. However, the Johannine community are expected to reflect the central message of their *pistis* in Jesus, and reflect God’s character with the countercultural response of generosity and love (3:10, 11, 13, 16, 17).

The Evil One Threatens Pistis

The evil one is not mentioned again until almost the very close of 1 John. As the writer makes his concluding remarks, he alludes to the evil one, indicating his concerns for the Johannine community. In an emphatic three-fold series of “we know” declarations (5:18–20), the writer appears to use the first-person plural to join in as part of the community of Johannine

¹⁴⁹ Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 151.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. similarities with John 8:44 in which Jesus accuses the Jews of coming from their father, the devil (cf. 1 John 3:8–10), who is a murderer (cf. 1 John 3:15) and their choosing to do his desires (cf. 1 John 2:16).

¹⁵¹ Cf. John 10:11, 15, 17; 13:37, 38; 15:13; 1 John 3:16.

¹⁵² Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 149.

believers. In a sense of solidarity, he proclaims again what they all know together as part of their victorious *pistis* against the world (cf. 5:4), and against the evil one (cf. 2:13–14).

The reference to the evil one in the concluding chapter is initially presented like the first references in chapter two, from a more positive, victorious stance (5:18):

We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them.

Οἶδαμεν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει, ἀλλ' ὁ γεννηθεὶς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ τηρεῖ αὐτὸν καὶ ὁ πονηρὸς οὐχ ἅπτεται αὐτοῦ.

The believers are seemingly untouchable by the evil one, but the fact that they need protection indicates that the threat of the evil one is a reality. Their protector is “the one who was born of God” (ὁ γεννηθεὶς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ), presumably Jesus himself.¹⁵³ Jesus could be directly protecting them with intention, or the evil one is not able to touch them because they remain in God/Christ (2:6, 14, 24, 28; 3:6, 9, 24; 4:13, 15, 16) and the evil one only has power over those of the world (i.e. those who do not have *pistis* in Jesus as the Son of God).

In John’s Gospel, the only mention of the evil one is indeed in relation to protecting his disciples; as Jesus prays to the Father, he says in John 17:15: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one” (οὐκ ἐρωτῶ ἵνα ἄρῃς αὐτοὺς ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου, ἀλλ' ἵνα τηρήσῃς αὐτοὺς ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ). In a sense, the evil one as the devil (cf. 3:8, 10), and Jesus as “the one born of God,” as he is the Son of God (cf. 3:8; 4:15; 5:5), are the counterparts who are in strife.¹⁵⁴ The evil one is part of the opposition toward the Johannine community, but he is also the weaker counterpart to “the one who is born of God” who is protecting them. The evil one may not be able to exert any power directly over the Johannine believers, but the evil one’s authority extends over the world itself (5:19), and the Johannine community still has to interact with the world as they are still surrounded by it and living in it. Therefore, the evil one still poses a threat, and they still have to contend with this enemy.

The fact that the author brings up the evil one several times throughout the letter indicates that the evil one who exerts power over the world is still a concern. More than a literal threat, the evil one is a threat to their *pistis*, as seen through the emphasis of what the Johannine audience “knows” in the second chapter: they know the Father and know Jesus who is “from

¹⁵³ Cf. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 303; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 252.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. the temptation narrative in which Jesus and the devil are opponents: Matt 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13.

the beginning” (2:13–14). This emphasis on what they “know” is recapitulated in the final three-fold rhetorical declaration at the conclusion of the letter. As seen above, the first “we know” (οἶδαμεν; 5:18) mirrors the emphasis on sin (cf. 2:12) and offers a sense of assurance to the Johannine community.

The second “we know” then delineates the Johannine community from the rest of the world around them (5:19):

We know that we are God’s children, and that the whole world lies under the power¹⁵⁵ of the evil one.

οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐσμεν καὶ ὁ κόσμος ὅλος ἐν τῷ πονηρῷ κεῖται.

The writer asserts that the Johannine members are God’s children, echoing the battle of the children of God versus the children of the devil (3:10) and Cain who was representative of the devil (3:12). However, this second “we know” is less reassuring than the first (cf. 5:18). The author acknowledges that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one, and this statement serves to caution the Johannine audience and call them to a greater awareness of what separates them from the world. Although the evil one has been conquered through their *pistis* in Jesus (2:13–14), the evil one is not powerless and seems to persist with some authority and control in the world.

The final “we know” reflects the author’s central message, that the Johannine believers must hold onto the victory they have already attained over the evil one by holding onto their *pistis* (5:20):¹⁵⁶

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is **true**; and we are in him who is **true**, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the **true** God and eternal life.

οἶδαμεν δὲ ὅτι ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ἦκει καὶ δέδωκεν ἡμῖν διάνοιαν ἵνα γινώσκομεν τὸν **ἀληθινόν**, καὶ ἐσμεν ἐν τῷ **ἀληθινῷ** ἐν τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ. οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ **ἀληθινὸς** θεὸς καὶ ζωὴ αἰώνιος.

¹⁵⁵ Translated literally, this could read “the whole world lies in the evil one,” but the author is more likely trying to convey the authority and control that the evil one has over the entire world (cf. Yarbrough, *I–3 John*, 317; Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 231).

¹⁵⁶ Cf. 1 John 2:13–14; 5:4–5.

Although the word *pistis* is not used here, the emphasis that the *true* God is Jesus, the Son of God, in contrast to the world around them that does not believe this as true, is something that the writer has reiterated throughout the epistle.¹⁵⁷

There is a clear sense of battle between truth and lie in the letter (cf. 1:6; 2:27), and a stark sense of division between the two (2:21):

I have written to you not because you do not **know the truth**, but because you **know** it, and [know] that **every lie is not from the truth**.¹⁵⁸

οὐκ ἔγραψα ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐκ **οἶδατε τὴν ἀλήθειαν** ἀλλ' ὅτι **οἶδατε** αὐτὴν καὶ ὅτι πᾶν **ψεῦδος ἐκ τῆς ἀληθείας** οὐκ ἔστιν.

In contrast to the truth (ἀλήθεια), the words “lie” (ψεύδομαι, 1:6), “liar” (ψεύστης, 1:10; 2:4, 22; 4:20; 5:10) and “deceive, lead astray” (πλανᾶω, 1:8; 2:26; 3:7) permeate the letter. Indeed, the word “liar” (ψεύστης) is used more frequently in 1 John than elsewhere in the New Testament,¹⁵⁹ emphasizing the writer’s main concern that *pistis* in the truth is his main concern, and that he does not want to see his “little children” to succumb to the world and its desires which are under the power of the evil one (cf. 2:15–17; 5:19). The “liar” is the one who does not obey God’s commands (2:4), denies that Jesus is the Christ (2:22), does not love their fellow Johannine brothers and sisters (4:20), and is equated with the antichrist (2:22).

The writer draws hard lines in the dichotomy between truth versus lie as they cannot be compromised. He knows what is at stake if the Johannine audience succumbs to the polytheistic culture that subscribes to the fundamental lie, which is that the concept of the “divine son” is more affiliated with the emperor than with Jesus (see more in 4.1 and 4.2). The Johannine community is to retain their *pistis*, which is counter to the world that is under the power of the devil, the evil one. The people who do not have the same *pistis* in Jesus as the Son of God and acknowledge him as the true God may be hostile to them (3:13), but they must not be like Cain and follow the evil one (3:12). As they hold onto the victory that they have already achieved by remain in the word, that is Jesus (2:14), he protects them, and they are untouchable to the world and to the powers of the devil (5:20).

Yet, the Johannine readers should not be complacent as the final warning to “keep themselves from idols” (5:21) suggests. The evil one is still a threat, as they can seemingly still act like Cain who was from the evil one (3:12). Though the evil one has been conquered

¹⁵⁷ See “true” (ἀληθινός) at 1 John 2:8; 5:20 and “truth” (ἀλήθεια) at 1:6, 8; 2:4, 21; 3:18, 19; 4:6; 5:6; cf. 2 John 1-4; 3 John 1, 3, 4, 8, 12.

¹⁵⁸ The word in brackets helps to smooth out the translation in English.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. John 8:44, 55; Rom 3:4; 1 Tim 1:10; Titus 1:12.

through their *pistis* in Jesus (2:13, 14), who protects them (5:18), the Johannine writer throughout his letter indicates that the idols of the world are still under the power of the evil one, and the believers must therefore remain vigilant and contend with this persistent underlying threat in their words and actions of loving others rather than resorting to hate and violence (cf. 3:11–15). The author warns the community not to act like Cain who was of the evil one, and a child of the devil (3:8–10, 12), but to hold onto their *pistis* in Jesus and allow their character to reflect their identity as children of God (3:10).

2.2 The Antichrists and False Prophets

The previous section discussed the first named enemy in 1 John, the evil one, who is the spiritual archopponent pervading the culture and threatening to undermine the *pistis* of the Johannine community. The second opponent is named soon after the first: the antichrist (ἀντίχριστος). The term “antichrist” appears only within the Johannine letters (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7) in the New Testament,¹⁶⁰ and this enemy is often presumed to be a spiritual figure who may be synonymous with the devil, Satan, and the beast in Revelation 13.¹⁶¹ Indeed, the reference to “the spirit of the antichrist” (τὸ [πνεῦμα] τοῦ ἀντίχριστου, 1 John 4:3) might seem to support this view; perhaps the antichrist is a spiritual figure embodied in a physical form, an idea which has certainly been proliferated in subsequent writings beyond the New Testament¹⁶² and has entered the modern-day culture in which political figures are accused of being “the antichrist.”¹⁶³ However, the contexts around the discussion of the antichrist in 1 John seem to indicate that this opponent is not really a spiritual demon, or even the counter figure of Jesus Christ. The term “antichrist” might appear to imply that this enemy is somehow at a comparable level to Jesus Christ, and that the battle is between Jesus and the antichrist.¹⁶⁴ However, the way in which the writer is warning about antichrists whom the Johannine audience have encountered in the past, and may continue to encounter in the future, suggests that these opponents are more likely the human counter figures to the Johannine believers.

¹⁶⁰ Later writers utilized the term “antichrist;” for example, the earliest patristic reference comes from Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians* 7.1, which depends on 1 John (4:2–3).

¹⁶¹ Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 210; cf. discussion in Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 333–336.

¹⁶² Cf. *Sibylline Oracles* 3.63–74; *Ascension of Isaiah* 4.1–18.

¹⁶³ Cf. “One in Four Americans Think Obama May Be the Antichrist,” *The Guardian*, 2 Apr 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/02/americans-obama-anti-christ-conspiracy-theories>, and Sarah Jones, “Here’s How We’d Really Know that Trump is the Antichrist,” *New York Magazine*, 21 Aug 2019, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/08/heres-how-wed-really-know-that-trump-is-the-antichrist.html>.

¹⁶⁴ As with the evil one, the relationship between the antichrist and Jesus might appear to be comparable to the confrontations between the devil and Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13).

As discussed in the previous section, the writer of 1 John has been concerned that the members of the Johannine community may succumb to the temptations that surround them in the world (see more on the identity of the world in the next section). After the exhortation to not love the world (2:15–17), he writes with even greater urgency, employing the vocative “Children” (Παῖδιά) once again (cf. 2:14) to call his disciples to attention, and to caution them about another foe in addition to the evil one (2:18):

Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour.

Παῖδιά, ἐσχάτη ὥρα ἐστὶν καὶ καθὼς ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἀντίχριστος ἔρχεται καὶ νῦν ἀντίχριστοι πολλοὶ γεγόνασιν, ὅθεν γινώσκομεν ὅτι ἐσχάτη ὥρα ἐστίν.

The writer warns that it is the “last hour” (ἐσχάτη ὥρα),¹⁶⁵ a phrase that he repeats, and one that is mentioned only in this verse within the Johannine letters, and indeed, only in the New Testament with this exact phrasing. Because the “last hour” does not have the definite article, it could be referring to the general character of the period, or perhaps some short period of time. However, given the eschatological associations with “hour” (ὥρα, e.g. John 2:4; 4:23; 16:2; cf. Luke 22:53), and the similar associations elsewhere in the New Testament about the prophesied “last days” (ἐσχάται ἡμέραι, e.g. Acts 2:17 quoting Joel 2:28; cf. Heb 1:2; 1 Pet 1:20), many scholars adopt the view that “last hour” is referring to an eschatological period of time.¹⁶⁶ The Johannine leader indicates that his audience is already familiar with the concept of an antichrist coming in the last hour or is at least familiar with the idea that an antichrist exists and that it has been foretold as a figure that will come. The writer confirms that many antichrists have indeed come, and this is considered to be the proof that the last hour is here.

The undertone of the warning is urgent and ominous with the declaration of the last hour and the confirmation that the anticipated antichrists have already come.¹⁶⁷ Because of the reference to the “evil one” a few verses before (2:13, 14), one might assume that the antichrist is either a similar spiritual being or that “antichrist” is perhaps another word to identify “the evil one.” However, the word “antichrist” does not always appear with the definite article

¹⁶⁵ “The last hour” does not have the article in Greek but could be translated with the definite article; cf. Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Text with Notes*, 2nd ed, ed. F. F. Bruce (Abingdon: Marcham Manor Press, 1966), 69; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 148 n. 1.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Smalley, *I, 2, 3 John*, 95–96; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 148; Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 99; Ruben Zimmerman, “Eschatology and Time in the Gospel of John,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, ed. Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 298.

¹⁶⁷ The perfect tense for “have come” (γεγόνασιν), indicates the past completed event. At the time that the author is writing, several antichrists have already appeared.

(2:18), and the succeeding plural of “antichrists” seems to indicate that the anticipated antichrist is not a specific spiritual enemy like the devil or Satan who could be considered the evil counterpart to Jesus Christ.

If there was any confusion about the identity of the antichrists, the writer in the next verse makes clear that the antichrists that he is talking about are not spiritual figures but people who used to be a part of the Johannine community (2:19):

They went out **from us**, but they were not **from us**; for if they were **from us**, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made known that none of them are **from us**.

ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐξῆλθαν ἀλλ' οὐκ ἦσαν ἐξ ἡμῶν· εἰ γὰρ ἐξ ἡμῶν ἦσαν, μεμενήκεισαν ἂν μεθ' ἡμῶν· ἀλλ' ἵνα φανερωθῶσιν ὅτι οὐκ εἰσὶν πάντες ἐξ ἡμῶν.

The sense of conflict is clear as the author draws a line between the believers in Christ and the antichrists, the people who left the Johannine community. The repeated acknowledgment that the antichrists are those who are not “from us” (ἐξ ἡμῶν), which is mentioned four times in the single verse, emphasizes the distinction between the two groups. The antichrists did not remain in the community, and their leaving was evidence that they are fundamentally different from the Johannine community. To designate the people who left as “antichrists” may seem extreme, as they could have been called “deserters” or “abandoners.” However, the nomenclature reveals the concerns of the writer, who would deem the title appropriate for those who tout a message that counters the Johannine belief in Jesus as the Son of God. These antichrists may have been friends and perhaps even relatives, but they are no longer simply ex-members of the community. They are the opposition who left because they deny the *pistis* of Jesus as the Son of God. The author of 1 John calls them “*antichrists*”¹⁶⁸ to demonstrate the severity of the difference between these opponents and the Johannine believers: they do not believe in Jesus as the Christ, and they are therefore representative of what is *against* Christ.

The antichrists are not just those who abandoned the group, or those who passively believe in something different. They are described as an active threat against the truth, and therefore a threat to the group, as the writer continues in his concerns about the antichrists (2:20–23):

¹⁶⁸ The prefix anti- usually means opposite or against; cf. LSJ s.v. “ἀντί.” Other similar examples: speak against or contradict (ἀντιλέγω; cf. Herodotus, *The Persian Wars* 9.42); withstand or resist (ἀντιβαίνω; cf. Demosthenes, *On the Crown* 18.186); and opposing force to force (ἀντίβιος; Homer, *Iliad* 1.304.)

But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you have known. I have written to you not because you do not know the **truth**, but because you know it, and [know] that every **lie** is not from the **truth**. Who is **the liar** but **the one who denies** that Jesus is the Christ? This is **the antichrist, the one who denies** the Father and the Son. No **one who denies** the Son has the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.

καὶ ὑμεῖς χρίσμα ἔχετε ἀπὸ τοῦ ἁγίου· οἴδατε πάντες. οὐκ ἔγραψα ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐκ οἴδατε τὴν **ἀλήθειαν** ἀλλ' ὅτι οἴδατε αὐτὴν καὶ ὅτι πᾶν **ψεῦδος** ἐκ τῆς **ἀληθείας** οὐκ ἔστιν. Τίς ἐστὶν ὁ **ψεύστης** εἰ μὴ ὁ **ἀρνούμενος** ὅτι Ἰησοῦς οὐκ¹⁶⁹ ἐστὶν ὁ Χριστός; οὗτος ἐστὶν ὁ **ἀντίχριστος ὁ ἀρνούμενος** τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὸν υἱόν. πᾶς ὁ **ἀρνούμενος** τὸν υἱὸν οὐδὲ τὸν πατέρα ἔχει, ὁ ὁμολογῶν τὸν υἱὸν καὶ τὸν πατέρα ἔχει.

The sense of contention is amplified as the author of 1 John distinguishes the Johannine believers from the antichrists. The believers are those who know the truth while the antichrist is identified as the one who lies (ὁ ψεύστης) and the one who denies (ὁ ἀρνούμενος) that Jesus is the Christ. This time (2:22) the definite article is used to demonstrate the defining character of an antichrist; the antichrist is a title that can be given to anyone who lies and denies the truth about Jesus. “The one who denies” (ὁ ἀρνούμενος) is particularly emphasized, as the designation appears three times within two verses (2:22, 23), demonstrating the writer’s concern about the active role that the antichrist can play.

The one who denies Jesus as the Christ is a threat, and the Johannine teacher wants to ensure that his disciples do not succumb to the lies of the antichrists who deny the truth about Jesus. He explains (2:26–28):

I have written these things to you concerning **those who would deceive** you. As for you, the anointing that you received from him **remains** in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is **true** and is not a **lie**, and just as it has taught you, **remain** in him. And now, little children, **remain** in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.

Ταῦτα ἔγραψα ὑμῖν περὶ **τῶν πλανώντων** ὑμᾶς. καὶ ὑμεῖς τὸ χρίσμα ὃ ἔλαβετε ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, **μένει** ἐν ὑμῖν καὶ οὐ χρεῖαν ἔχετε ἵνα τις διδάσκη ὑμᾶς, ἀλλ' ὥς τὸ αὐτοῦ χρίσμα διδάσκει ὑμᾶς περὶ πάντων καὶ **ἀληθές** ἐστὶν καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν **ψεῦδος**, καὶ καθὼς ἐδίδαξεν ὑμᾶς **μένετε** ἐν αὐτῷ. Καὶ νῦν, τέκνια, **μένετε** ἐν αὐτῷ, ἵνα ἐὰν φανερωθῇ σχῶμεν παρρησίαν καὶ μὴ αἰσχυνθῶμεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ.

¹⁶⁹ The literal translation would be the “one who denies that Jesus is not the Christ,” but it should be noted that the second clause “Jesus is not the Christ” is an indirect quotation referring to what “the one who denies” is saying. To avoid confusion in English, the verse is translated without the “not” in the latter clause.

The writer uses yet another participle to underscore the fundamental characteristic of the antichrists: the deceivers (πλανῶντες, v. 26).¹⁷⁰ The central reason for his concern is clear; he is writing because he is worried that the antichrists will deceive the Johannine community into believing a message that is counter to Jesus as the son of God. Because the antichrists were formerly a part of the community, and the Johannine members may still socialize, work with, or even live with some of the antichrist deceivers, the warning is understandably justified. The Johannine teacher urges his disciples to resist the lies and remain (μένετε, v. 27) in the truth, an imperative which he repeats in verse 28 after using the vocative “little children” (τεκνία, cf. 2:1, 12) once again to call them to attention. The contention is clear in the battle of what to believe, and the Johannine believers must maintain an active resolve in keeping in the truth about Jesus and not allowing deceivers to sway them away from Christ and leave the community just as the antichrists did. They must not become antichrists themselves.

The writer mentions the antichrist one final time in the letter with the additional emphasis on the conflict between spirits (4:3):

And every **spirit** that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the **spirit of the antichrist**, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already **in the world**.

καὶ πᾶν πνεῦμα ὃ μὴ ὁμολογεῖ τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἐστίν· καὶ τοῦτο ἐστὶν τὸ τοῦ ἀντίχριστου, ὃ ἀκηκόατε ὅτι ἔρχεται, καὶ νῦν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἐστὶν ἤδη.

The theme of the “spirit” (πνεῦμα) is woven throughout the letter, but especially in chapter four, where it is mentioned eight times.¹⁷¹ The writer talks about the spirit in different contexts, framed positively in relation to God and the truth (3:24; 4:2, 6, 13; 5:6, 8), negatively in relation to false prophets and deceit (4:1, 3, 6), or more generally as a holistic term (4:1). Seen collectively, the term “spirit” indicates the source of the inspiration,¹⁷² and it is unsurprising that the writer would refer most frequently to the spirit of God because he wants the Johannine believers to be inspired by the truth. At the same time, he does not want them to be naïve.

The reality is that there is also “the spirit of the antichrist” (τὸ [πνεῦμα]¹⁷³ τοῦ ἀντίχριστου, 4:3), which could be referring to a specific demon, but because the antichrists are

¹⁷⁰ The concern over deception is also seen in 1 John (1:8; 3:7), cf. deceivers similarly equated with the antichrist (2 John 7).

¹⁷¹ The word “spirit” (πνεῦμα) appears twelve times in the letter at 3:24; 4:1 (2x), 2 (2x), 3, 6 (2x), 13; 5:6 (2x), 8.

¹⁷² Cf. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 204.

¹⁷³ The πνεῦμα appears earlier in the verse.

human beings who have left the Johannine community, the reference to the antichrist spirit is likely a more general statement about anything or anyone which does not inspire the truth about the incarnation and divinity of Jesus. The spirit of the antichrist is the counter to the spirit of God (τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ θεοῦ)¹⁷⁴ mentioned previously (4:1–2):

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for **many false prophets have gone out into the world**. By this you know **the Spirit of God**: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God

Ἀγαπητοί, μὴ παντὶ πνεύματι πιστεύετε, ἀλλὰ δοκιμάζετε τὰ πνεύματα εἰ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστίν, ὅτι **πολλοὶ ψευδοπροφητῶντες ἐξεληλύθασιν εἰς τὸν κόσμον**. ἐν τούτῳ γινώσκετε **τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ θεοῦ**: πᾶν πνεῦμα ὁ ὁμολογεῖ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστίν

In contrast to the spirit that confesses that Jesus has come in the flesh, the spirit of the antichrist counters this message and denies the incarnation of the divine Jesus (cf. 4:3).

The spirit of the antichrist is identified as already “in the world” (ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, 4:2), and the writer of the letter emphasizes the importance of discerning between the different spirits that are “of God” or “of the antichrist” because there is another opponent that is against the truth about Jesus Christ: the false prophets. Although false prophets (ψευδοπροφητῶντες, 4:1) appears only once among the Johannine letters, the terminology is seemingly more common than the designation of “antichrist,” as “false prophets” appear in other New Testament books, including in the Gospels where Jesus himself warned about them.¹⁷⁵ In 1 John, the “many false prophets” (πολλοὶ ψευδοπροφητῶντες, 4:1) relates back to the “many antichrists” (ἀντίχριστοι πολλοὶ) mentioned a couple chapters before (2:18). Just as antichrists “went out” (ἐξῆλθαν, 2:19) from the Johannine community and now operate in the spirit of the antichrist that is already “in the world” (ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, 4:2), so false prophets have “gone out into the world” (ἐξεληλύθασιν εἰς τὸν κόσμον, 4:1) in a spirit that is not of God and are declaring a message that is not from God. The positioning of the antichrists and false prophets as being out in the world reinforces the negative view of “the world” (κόσμος) which has been alluded to in previous verses (cf. 2:2, 15, 16, 17; 3:1, 13, 17) and builds the sense of tension between the Johannine community and the opponents who are associated with the world (see more on “the world” in section 2.3).

¹⁷⁴ Cf. “spirit of God” (τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ θεοῦ) at Matt 3:16; 1 Cor 2:11; 3:16 and with the anarthrous θεοῦ at Rom 8:9 and 1 Cor 7:40.

¹⁷⁵ “False prophets” appears ten other times in Matt 7:15; 24:11, 24; Mark 13:22; Luke 6:26; Acts 13:6; 2 Pet 2:1; Rev 16:13; 19:20; 20:10.

Conquering the Docetists?

Much scholarly discussion surrounding the antichrists and false prophets has historically presumed that the tension in the Letter reflects an intra-Johannine conflict centered on the issue of heresy. The polemic of 1 John has been seen to be arguing against the dualism of gnostic teaching which separated the “spiritual” from the realities of the world.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, based on the premise that 1 John presupposes the Gospel of John, the conflict has been assumed to be related to the dispute over the common tradition of the Gospel in which the opponents are reading the Fourth Gospel under gnostic presuppositions; the result is an intra-Johannine schism based on docetic christology,¹⁷⁷ that is, seeing the human figure of Jesus as mere appearance. Raymond Brown in his extensive commentary on the Epistles contributed significantly to this view.¹⁷⁸ He refrained from identifying the antichrists specifically as docetists, and instead referred to them as “secessionists” who caused a schism in the Johannine community because they promoted a dualistic christology that negated the saving significance of Jesus’ life and death and the connection between the preexistence and suffering of Jesus as the Christ.¹⁷⁹

It is understandable as to why some scholars have supposed the conflict in 1 John to be related to docetism as some of the rhetoric appears to stress the material corporeality of Jesus: “every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (4:2b). The second letter adds further support: “those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist” (2 John 7). In addition to the references about Jesus’ flesh, the initial description of the antichrists is often cited as evidence for the Johannine writer’s argument against docetism (2:22–23):

Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.

The docetists not only deny that Jesus is the Christ, but they also deny the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist,¹⁸⁰ and so the author could be viewed as combatting docetism with

¹⁷⁶ Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, 38–41; Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 141–143.

¹⁷⁷ Klaus Wengst, *Der erste, zweite und dritte Brief des Johannes* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1978), 25; Brown, *Epistles of John*, 69–71.

¹⁷⁸ Regarding his influence, cf. Anderson, “The Community that Raymond Brown Left Behind,” 275.

¹⁷⁹ Brown, *Epistles of John*, 75–85.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Udo Schnelle, *Antidocetic Christology in the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 68; Urban C. Von Wahlde, *Gnosticism, Docetism, and the Judaisms of the First Century: The Search for the Wider*

references to water and blood toward the end of the letter (5:6–8). Thus, it appears that the Johannine author is among those including Ignatius, Irenaeus and others who were combatting docetic belief in the early centuries.¹⁸¹

One challenge to this presumption is that δόξα and δοκέω are not mentioned in the First Letter when docetism is associated with these words.¹⁸² Though they both appear in the Fourth Gospel,¹⁸³ and could be read to contribute toward docetic belief, δόξα and δοκέω being absent from the Johannine Letters makes it problematic to assume that the antichrists and false teachers are representatives of a specific heresy or that the author's primary purpose in addressing the conflict is to combat the issue of docetism.¹⁸⁴ Moreover, the Gospel and the Letters have been interpreted as both docetic¹⁸⁵ and anti-docetic,¹⁸⁶ suggesting that the evidence in both the Gospel and Letters may not be so self-evident when examining the texts alone.¹⁸⁷ This also explains why Brown and others are hesitant to identify the opponents as docetists specifically.¹⁸⁸

The confusion over the rhetoric in the Letters which appears to address some concern over docetism is resolved when read within the cultural context. A docetic understanding of Jesus is likely a Hellenistic syncretism which has been transmitted into the Johannine community.¹⁸⁹ Particularly for those in the community who came from a non-Jewish background, a docetic inclination would be a default understanding about Jesus as Greco-Roman deities never became incarnate, and they would therefore struggle to imagine the Johannine conception of divine incarnation.¹⁹⁰ The tendency toward docetic thinking would be a natural extension of the more familiar concept of divine epiphany, reflected in Greco-Roman

Context of the Johannine Literature and Why It Matters (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 65 n. 10; Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John*, tr. Linda M. Maloney, ed. Harold Attridge (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 73, 183.

¹⁸¹ Cf. Ignatius *Smyrn.* 5.2, *Trall.* 10; Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* 1.26.1.

¹⁸² Cf. Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 75 n. 74; Stefan Mulder, "Early Christian Christology Contextualised: The Graeco-Roman Context of 'Christian' Docetism," MA thesis (University of Groningen, 2016), 7.

¹⁸³ δόξα appears at John 1:14 (2x); 2:11; 5:41, 44 (2x); 7:18 (2x); 8:50, 54; 9:24; 11:4, 40; 12:41, 43 (2x); 17:5, 22, 24; δοκέω appears at John 5:39, 45; 11:13, 31, 56; 13:29; 16:2; 20:15.

¹⁸⁴ Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 75 n. 74.

¹⁸⁵ Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 26, 66, 70.

¹⁸⁶ Udo Schnelle, *Die Johannesbriefe* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2010), 138–146.

¹⁸⁷ Von Wahlde, *Gnosticism, Docetism, and the Judaisms of the First Century*, 61.

¹⁸⁸ E.g. Brown, *Epistles of John* 363–77; Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 22–23.

¹⁸⁹ Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 70.

¹⁹⁰ See further discussion in George van Kooten, "Bleeding Blood, Not Ichor—Christ the 'Gottmensch'" in *Gott: exegetische, theologische und religionswissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, ed. Jan Doehorn, Rainer Hirsch-Luipold, and Ilinca Tanaseanu-Doebler (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), forthcoming.

art and literature in which divine beings could appear in forms that they temporarily inhabit.¹⁹¹ If the antichrists of the First Letter are being labelled as such for their inclination toward docetism, then these antichrists who are “in the world” (4:3) and touting what is “from the world” (4:5) have adapted the understanding of divine epiphany in the surrounding culture and presented a Johannine christology that mirrors the view that is in the Greco-Roman world.¹⁹² Thus, the Johannine writer is using countercultural language to differentiate these opponents from the community and warns his audience to distinguish between truth and error (4:6), the error being the adaptation of the cultural norm from the Greco-Roman world to accept a docetic Jesus.

Reading the “docetic” language of 1 John in light of the Greco-Roman world not only helps explain the reference to Jesus’ flesh (4:2), but also helps reveal the true nature of the overall conflict permeating the letter. If the primary conflict in 1 John were an intra-Johannine theological dispute, and the antichrists have already left (2:19), then presumably, there should no longer be any concern. Indeed, Paul Anderson’s suggestion of what happens to the antichrists after they leave the Johannine community would seem to support this. Assuming the expulsion of Jewish Christians from the synagogue in the Gospel of John,¹⁹³ Anderson proposes that the group of seceding antichrists are Jewish family and friends who likely *returned* to the local synagogue out of loyalty to “the Father” and Jewish monotheism and out of a desire to be back among the majority of their ethnic community which had the appeal of religious certainty over and against the fledgling community of believers in Jesus as the Christ.¹⁹⁴ This explanation, however, would not justify the extreme label of “antichrists” for Jewish family and friends who wanted to return to the synagogue. Moreover, the sense of urgency about the antichrists and false prophets who are “in the world” (4:3) does not appear to be limited to simply “the Jewish world” or Jewish ethnic community. The contention which began *internally* within the community has clearly shifted *externally* as the Johannine believers continue to encounter their opponents “in the world” and will have to “test the spirits” (4:1) to discern whether they are indeed an opponent who must be “conquered” (4:4). The following

¹⁹¹ Cf. Verity Platt, *Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁹² Cf. George van Kooten, “Christ and Hermes: A Religio-Historical Comparison of the Johannine Christ-Logos with the God Hermes in Greek Mythology and Philosophy” in *Im Gespräch mit C.F. Georg Heinrici: Beiträge zwischen Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Marco Frenschkowski and Lena Seehausen (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 305–6.

¹⁹³ Cf. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 46–66.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Anderson, “The Community that Raymond Brown Left Behind” 275; Anderson, “Antichristic Crises: Proselytization Back into Jewish Religious Certainty,” 217–40.

section will examine the final opponent, “the world,” and how it reflects contention with the Greco-Roman world.

2.3 The World

The final conquered opponent of 1 John is the one that appears most frequently in the letter: the “world” (κόσμος). One may think that “world” is a very general term, and it would therefore not be surprising to find it commonly used. Interestingly, out of the more than 180 occurrences of the word “world” in the New Testament, more than half are found in the Gospel of John and Johannine letters. In the slight letter of 1 John alone, “world” appears an unexpected 23 times within four chapters (“world” does not appear in chapter one).¹⁹⁵ Like its usage in the Gospel of John, “world” in 1 John appears in what could be considered positive and neutral contexts (e.g. 4:9, 14, 17). However, the majority of references appear in a predominantly negative context. As noted in previous sections, the world is often aligned with the other named opponents: the evil one, antichrists, and false prophets (e.g. 4:1, 3; 5:19), but especially in the final chapter, the world itself is portrayed as being an opponent, which the Johannine believers must conquer (5:4, 5). This section will now look at the contention with the world itself, and investigate the nature and necessity of conquering this opponent.

The Desires of the World

We have previously discussed the young men who were conquerors of the evil one (2:13, 14; see section 2.1). However, the address to the young men as conquerors is immediately followed with an exhortation not to love the world, suggesting that the address to the young people may also be appropriate as they are those who may interact most with the culture around them. They may need to be strong internally (2:14) to conquer the temptations in the Greco-Roman world (2:15–17):

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the pride of life—is not from the Father but from the world. And the world along with its desire is passing away, but the one who does the will of God remains forever.

Μὴ ἀγαπᾶτε τὸν κόσμον μηδὲ τὰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ. ἔὰν τις ἀγαπᾷ τὸν κόσμον, οὐκ ἔστιν ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ πατρὸς ἐν αὐτῷ· ὅτι πᾶν τὸ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, ἡ ἐπιθυμία

¹⁹⁵ 1 John 2:2, 15 (3x), 16 (2x), 17; 3:1, 13, 17; 4:1, 3, 4, 5 (3x), 9, 14, 17; 5:4 (2x), 5, 19. cf. 2 John 7.

τῆς σαρκὸς καὶ ἡ ἐπιθυμία τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν καὶ ἡ ἀλαζονεία τοῦ βίου, οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου ἐστίν. καὶ ὁ κόσμος παράγεται καὶ ἡ ἐπιθυμία αὐτοῦ, ὁ δὲ ποιῶν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.

Though the young men have conquered the evil one with their *pistis* in Jesus as the Son of God (2:14), here we see that the world is on the definitively opposing side of the battle, and subsequent references to the world are similarly in a negative context (e.g. 3:13; 4:3–5; 5:4–5, 19).

This contrasts the typical nuance of the word in the Greco-Roman culture as the root meaning of κόσμος is order and arrangement with positive overtones of coherence, beauty, and structure.¹⁹⁶ For example, Herodotus uses the word κόσμος to refer to people sitting in a particular order:

When they had sat down in **order** one after another, Xerxes sent Mardonius and put each to the test by questioning him if the Persian ships should offer battle.

ὥς δὲ **κόσμῳ** ἐπεξῆς ἴζοντο, πέμψας Ξέρξης Μαρδόνιον εἰρώτα ἀποπειρώμενος ἐκάστου εἰ ναυμαχίην ποιέοιτο.¹⁹⁷

In this context, the κόσμος has a nuance of structure and arrangement. Another context of κόσμος could be in relation to ornaments, as seen in Plutarch:

Accordingly, now that it was completely finished and had received all the **ornaments** that belonged to it, Publicola was ambitious to consecrate it.

ὥς οὖν ἀπείργαστο τελέως καὶ τὸν προσήκοντα **κόσμον** ἀπεῖχεν, ἦν τῷ Ποπλικόλῳ φιλοτιμία πρὸς τὴν καθιέρωσιν.¹⁹⁸

Finally, in Josephus, the word κόσμος is seen in reference to items of beauty: “the bearer of women’s apparel of great price” (κόσμον τε φέρων γυναικεῖον πολυτελῆ).¹⁹⁹ These examples demonstrate some of the diverse, positive connotations of κόσμος in the culture.

The positive perception of κόσμος may help explain why the author of 1 John may have framed the world as the opposing “other.” As he explains (2:15–17), the culture of the Greco-Roman world lives by a different standard of values and desires which are counter to the values and desires that the Johannine community are meant to adopt. The young people may have been more susceptible and tempted to succumb to these worldly values, and they therefore have

¹⁹⁶ Cf. LSJ s.v. κόσμος.

¹⁹⁷ Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, 8.67.

¹⁹⁸ Plutarch, *Publicola*, 14.

¹⁹⁹ Josephus, *AJ* 1.250

to contend “on the front lines” of the Johannine battle with the κόσμος, which appears to have a force and character of its own.²⁰⁰

When the author forbids loving the world (2:15), he is not necessarily rejecting a comfortable life or societal success. Rather, he is pointing out that love of the world is incompatible with love of the Father (ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ πατρὸς). The Greek is ambiguous in that it could be referring to “love from” or “love for” God (cf. ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ in 2:5). However, most likely it is the objective genitive love for the Father, which parallels loving the world. Unlike John’s Gospel, in which the disciples are “in the world” (ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, 16:33; 17:11) and are meant to go out into the world (cf. John 17:18), 1 John tends to be more ambivalent (4:4, 17), recognizing that the Johannine community by necessity needs to have some interaction with the world, but implies that there should also be a level of distance. The writer warns about the dangers of the world and its values so that their *pistis* may not be swayed.

Like the threefold declaration just before (2:12–14), another rhetorical triple is utilized (2:16), but in contrast to the aforementioned positive declarations, the descriptions about what is “in the world” is wholly negative and in direct opposition to the Father. The writer of 1 John explains that what is ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ is “the desire of the flesh, and the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life” (ἡ ἐπιθυμία τῆς σαρκὸς καὶ ἡ ἐπιθυμία τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν καὶ ἡ ἀλαζονεία τοῦ βίου). His description reflects the values sought after in the Greco-Roman world. The word “desire” (ἐπιθυμία) itself is not necessarily negative; elsewhere in the New Testament, it is sometimes seen in a positive context (Luke 22:15; Phil 1:23; 1 Thess 2:17; Titus 2:12). Far more frequently, however, ἐπιθυμία is seen in a negative context,²⁰¹ and sometimes in a more sexual one (e.g. Rom 1:24; 6:12; 1 Thess 4:5).

The negative potential of ἐπιθυμία was acknowledged in the surrounding culture:²⁰² Thucydides and Epictetus contrasted acting from desire with doing so by foresight, reflecting the philosophical notion that desire needed to be controlled because it was a threat to the rational mind.²⁰³ Desire, and specifically sexual desire, in the Greco-Roman world was associated with the goddess Aphrodite (Roman: Venus),²⁰⁴ and the specific designation of the desire of the “flesh” (σάρξ, 1 John 2:16) suggests that he is referring to sexual desire as well.

²⁰⁰ Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 93.

²⁰¹ E.g. Mark 4:19; John 8:44; Rom 7:8; Eph 4:22; Col 3:5; 1 Tim 6:9; 2 Tim 2:22; 3:6; 4:3; Titus 3:3; Jas 1:14–15; 1 Pet 1:14; 4:3; 2 Pet 1:4; 3:3; Jude 1:16, 18.

²⁰² Cf. also negative Jewish desire: Psalm 106 (LXX 105):14 when the Israelites tested God in the wilderness because of their desire, and the roving desire perverting the innocent mind in Wisdom 4:12.

²⁰³ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 6.13; Epictetus, *Discourses*, 2.18.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Plutarch, *Moralia*, 757B; Apollodorus, *The Library* 3.12; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1149b15–16.

This is not definitively the case, as the word σάρξ, like ἐπιθυμία, is not always used in a negative context in the New Testament,²⁰⁵ including in John's Gospel (e.g. John 1:14; 6:53; 17:2) and even in 1 John which refers to Jesus having come "in the flesh" ἐν σαρκὶ (4:2).

However, σάρξ does appear in a negative context in John's Gospel (6:63) and in the New Testament in general.²⁰⁶ One related note is that σάρξ is distinct from the word "body" (σῶμα), which does not appear in the Johannine epistles, but does appear in John's Gospel (2:21; 19:31, 38, 40; 20:12), mostly in reference to Jesus' physical body. The different nuances of the words may complicate our understanding of what is being said in 1 John with regard to loving the world (2:15–17), but the combination of ἐπιθυμία and σάρξ in the New Testament as "a desire of the flesh" (ἡ ἐπιθυμία τῆς σαρκὸς) demonstrates a clearly negative pattern (e.g. Rom 13:14; Gal 5:16; Eph 2:3; 1 Pet 2:11; 2 Pet 2:10, 18).

In addition to his concern about the desire of the flesh, the writer notes the more bemusing "desire of the eyes" (ἡ ἐπιθυμία τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν). It is possible that he may have the biblical precedents in mind such as when Eve sinfully desired to eat of the fruit that was a delight to her eyes (Gen 3:6), or it may have a sexual connotation (as in Matt 5:28; 2 Pet 2:14). The eyes alone are simply an organ of sense, and does not necessarily imply that a blind person, for example, would not be able to experience a sinful temptation. Instead, the emphasis on the ἐπιθυμία of the eyes suggests that there is a perversion²⁰⁷ and a selfishness that is not concerned with loving others but is inspired by a love of what they see in the world for the purpose of personal fulfillment.

Finally, the author cautions against the pride of life (ἡ ἀλαζονεία τοῦ βίου), which is interesting, firstly, because the word ἀλαζονεία is seen only in two books of the New Testament (1 John 2:16; James 4:16; cf. the adjective in Rom 1:30; 2 Tim 3:2).²⁰⁸ It can mean pride or arrogance, particularly in reference to feigning and giving a false pretension.²⁰⁹ The implication is that the pride in 1 John is decidedly negative, just like the desires of the flesh and the eyes. This pride is specifically of "life" (βίος), which appears ten times in the NT,²¹⁰ of which two are in 1 John (2:16; 3:17). It is significant that βίος, used with a negative nuance

²⁰⁵ E.g. Matt 16:7; Mark 10:8; Luke 3:6; 24:39; Acts 2:26; Rom 1:3; 2 Cor 4:11; Eph 2:14; 1 Tim 3:16; Philm 16; Heb 5:7.

²⁰⁶ E.g. Rom 7:5; 8:6; 1 Cor 5:5; Gal 5:19; 6:8; Phil 3:3; Jas 5:3; Jude 7–8; Rev 17:16; 19:18.

²⁰⁷ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 84.

²⁰⁸ Similar words might be "haughtiness" (ὕπερηφανία, Mark 7:22), or perhaps the more popular "boasting" (καύχησις, e.g. Rom 3:27; 1 Cor 15:31; 2 Cor 1:12; 1 Thess 2:19; Jas 4:16), which can be seen in a positive context as well.

²⁰⁹ LSJ s.v. ἀλαζονεία. In the LXX, it appears as a boastful display of power and success (2 Macc 9:8; 15:6), of wisdom (Wis 17:7; 4 Macc 8:19), and of wealth (Wis 5:8).

²¹⁰ Cf. Mark 12:44; Luke 8:14; 43; 15:12, 30; 21:4; 1 Tim 2:2; 2 Tim 2:4.

in association with the world, is not the same as the ζωή of 1 John (1:1–2; 2:25; 3:14, 15; 5:11–13, 16, 20), which is affiliated with eternal life in Christ. Specifically, the pride of life (ἡ ἀλαζονεία τοῦ βίου) seems to suggest the love of possessions and wealth. It is a challenge to interpret because it may be misunderstood in light of the world’s livelihood (τὸν βίον τοῦ κόσμου, 3:17). However, the Johannine believers still need to survive and earn money for their livelihood (see more below). At the same time, they should not adopt the world’s perspective in having pride in their finances and value money in the same manner as the culture.

The writer of 1 John may not be indicating precisely that the desire of the flesh is sexual, that the desire of the eyes is covetousness, and that the pride of life is wealth. However, it is reasonable to say that these were all related to the Greco-Roman culture. The fact that ἐπιθυμία and ἀλαζονεία appear only once (2:16) while the words “flesh” (σάρξ), “eyes” (ὀφθαλμοί) and “life” (βίος) appear elsewhere²¹¹ further highlights the focus on the “desire” and “pride” which are a part of the opposition to the world. The writer makes clear that such desire (and pride) “is not from the Father but from the world” (οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς ἀλλ’ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου ἐστίν), and they are therefore supposed to avoid them if they are to truly remain a part of the Johannine community.

The world (as a collective entity) along with its desires “is passing away” (παράγεται, 2:17), a parallel echo of the darkness passing away (ἡ σκοτία παράγεται, 2:8). These are values reflective of a temporary world with fleeting desires while one who does the will (θέλημα) of God remains forever (2:17). One can see the dichotomy presented in the choice of the θέλημα of God versus the ἐπιθυμία of the world (cf. similar dichotomy in 1 Pet 4:2). The writer seems to redirect the focus, to remind his readers not to dwell on worldly, selfish, and temporary ἐπιθυμία that is passing away (παράγεται), but to focus on the will (θέλημα) of God and remain forever (μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα). This reinforces the sense of division between the Father and the world (2:15) and underlines the sense of conflict between the young men and the evil one (2:13–14), which the writer then expands in subsequent references to the opposing enemy (3:12; 5:19).

By framing the world as an “other” that is full of temptation and pride that leads to sin, the author of 1 John is demonstrating his countercultural message against the world around the Johannine community. He emphasizes that this polytheistic world that indulges in temporary fulfillment of their desires is separate and distinct from the Johannine God and those of the

²¹¹ Besides 1 John 2:16, the word “σάρξ” appears (in reference to Jesus coming in the flesh) in 4:2, cf. 2 John 7; “ὀφθαλμοί” appears at 1 John 1:1; 2:11 and “βίος” appears at 3:17.

Johannine community who are meant to reflect his will (2:17). Thus, the writer warns his readers not to covet the Greco-Roman world (2:15) lest they begin to reflect the love of the culture rather than the Johannine love of God.

Contention with the World

While the temptations of the Greco-Roman world may seem attractive, the writer also indicates that the world is not simply a passive object of desire. The Johannine believers may expect to face active contention and conflict with the world (3:13):

Do not be astonished, brothers, if the world **hates** you.

μη θαυμάζετε, ἀδελφοί, εἰ **μισεῖ** ὑμᾶς ὁ κόσμος.

The world is personified as having an emotion and hating (μισέω) the Johannine believers. “Hate” appears elsewhere in the letter, but in the other three occurrences (2:11; 3:15; 4:20), the emphasis is on the believer, who should not hate, and is instead called to love (see also section 2.1). The world itself is doing the hating (3:13), conveying a hostility, which could even lead to murdering one’s brother (3:12, 14).

The writer seems to prepare the believers for the world to hate them. As discussed above, the false prophets, antichrists, and the evil one are all associated with the world, and thus, the Johannine community should not be surprised when they face contention with this world of people who do not have the same *pistis*. The writer suggests that hostility may even come from a family member who does not have a *pistis* in Jesus as the Son of God (cf. 3:12 and discussion in 2.1), and the Johannine believers should not be surprised if they experience hatred from them as well.

In the following chapter, we see another personification of the world in which the world is portrayed as part of the opposition (4:5):

They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world **listens** to them.

αὐτοὶ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου εἰσὶν, διὰ τοῦτο ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου λαλοῦσιν καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτῶν **ἀκούει**.

The personified world listens (ἀκούω)²¹² to “them,” which is referring to the antichrists and false prophets who are not a part of the Johannine community (cf. 4:1–4). The world is once again portrayed as an enemy who is not only the source of opponents who are “from the world” (ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου) but “what they say is from the world” (τοῦτο ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου λαλοῦσιν), and the broader community of the general public is swayed by the words of the antichrists and false prophets. This Greco-Roman world listens to those who actively tout a different *pistis* that is false and against Christ (anti-Christ, see also section 2.2). The author is reinforcing his point that the Greco-Roman world and its *pistis* are separate from the Johannine community, and it should therefore not be surprising when anyone from this world not only hates the Johannine believers (3:13) but also does not listen to them (4:6).

In the final chapter, the writer of 1 John depicts the Greco-Roman world as the conquered adversary to the Johannine believers (5:4–5):

For everyone who is born of God **conquers the world**. And this is the victory **that has conquered the world**, our faith. Who is **the one who conquers the world** except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

ὅτι πᾶν τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ **νικᾷ τὸν κόσμον**· καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ νίκη **ἡ νικήσασα τὸν κόσμον**, ἡ πίστις ἡμῶν. τίς ἐστὶν δὲ **ὁ νικῶν τὸν κόσμον** εἰ μὴ ὁ πιστεύων ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ;

In the climax of the letter, which proclaims victory over the world, the Johannine believers who are born of God and believe that Jesus is the Son of God are the conquerors, and the world of antichrists, false prophets, and nonbelievers is the defeated enemy. Central to this victory is the difference of *pistis*, of faith, or what is believed. *Pistis* in Jesus as the divine Son of God (5:5) is not only what distinguishes the Johannine community from the world, but the *pistis* itself seems to conquer the world (5:4).

The world as the conquered enemy makes particular sense if we acknowledge the polytheistic culture of the Greco-Roman world that prevailed at the time of this letter in the first and second centuries CE. The Johannine community would have been a very small minority in this culture, and one can imagine how members might have struggled in their daily lives at work or even at home to remain in their belief of Jesus as the Son of God when the culture touted the emperor as the divine son and acknowledged multiple gods and goddesses

²¹² The verb (ἀκούω) is often translated “to hear,” but in English, the word “listens” offers a deeper connotation of paying attention to what is heard. This verb in 1 John occurs at 1:1, 3, 5; 2:7, 18, 24 (2x); 3:11; 4:3, 5, 6 (2x); 5:14, 15; cf. 2 John 6; 3 John 4.

in every aspect of life. The sense of battle against several opponents, including the world itself, which the writer has described throughout 1 John, becomes clear when one considers the level with which the Johannine believers had to contend with the tendencies, temptations, and beliefs of the culture.

Conquering the World in John's Gospel

To better understand the contention between “the world” (κόσμος) and the Johannine believers, it is helpful to look at John's Gospel, which is often referenced by scholars in relation to 1 John²¹³ because of the close similarities in the language of conquering the world (1 John 5:4–5; John 16:33 (see *Figure 3*)). The victory proclamations are prominent within the texts because the verb for “conquer” (νικάω), only appears once in John's Gospel (16:33) and the distinct substantive for “victory” (νίκη) appears only once in 1 John (5:4).

Figure 3

John 16:33	1 John 5:4–5
I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!	For everyone who is born of God conquers the world . And this is the victory that has conquered the world , our faith. Who is the one who conquers the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?
ταῦτα λελάληκα ὑμῖν ἵνα ἐν ἐμοὶ εἰρήνην ἔχητε· ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ θλίψιν ἔχετε· ἀλλὰ θαρσεῖτε, ἐγὼ νενίκηκα τὸν κόσμον .	ὅτι πᾶν τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ νικᾷ τὸν κόσμον · καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ νίκη ἡ νικήσασα τὸν κόσμον , ἡ πίστις ἡμῶν. τίς ἐστὶν δὲ ὁ νικῶν τὸν κόσμον εἰ μὴ ὁ πιστεύων ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ;

In John's Gospel, Jesus is speaking to his disciples, foretelling his impending suffering and death. In preceding chapters, Jesus has also alluded to the persecution that the disciples will face,²¹⁴ and he tells them that some will even kill the disciples as part of their worship to God (16:2). Now Jesus mentions their suffering again (v. 33), telling them that they will face persecution in the world. Jesus may have been concerned with the future failure of faith by the

²¹³ Cf. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 276; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 270; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 229; Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 207 n. 132; Jörg Frey, “Dualism and the World in the Gospel and Letters of John,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, 285.

²¹⁴ Cf. John 14:27 and 15:20. In 15:20, the verb for “persecute” (διώκω) is akin to “pursuit,” which is different from the noun for “persecution” (θλίψις) in 16:33, which is more akin to “pressure.” However, the overall message of needing peace in the midst of difficulty is consistent. Cf. LSJ, s.v. “διώκω” and “θλίψις.”

disciples when they fled at his capture.²¹⁵ He knew that they would despair and perhaps assume failure when their teacher was crucified and when they themselves would face persecution. The disciples could easily assume defeat if Jesus had not foretold what would happen. They had already been questioning Jesus' divinity (16:30), and it would have appeared that he was definitely not from God if he was captured by the Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers and killed on the cross. It would seem that Jesus had been defeated by the Jews and the Romans, and that he was not truly the Christ. Thus, Jesus tells them that he is saying all of these things (his discourse, not just the things from the previous verse) so that they would have peace in the midst of their troubles (v. 33). Though it may appear that Jesus has been defeated, they could be confident that he has achieved victory. Much like in 1 John, the purpose of such warnings is not to scare the disciples; on the contrary, Jesus is trying to reassure them. He tells his disciples to take courage, knowing that he has "conquered the world."

The context of John's Gospel is of literal persecution, but as we have seen in previous sections, the believers of 1 John face their own form of persecution from the evil one, antichrists, and false prophets who are in the world. The tension between the two factions can be so intense that it may even result in murderous violence (1 John 3:12, 15). In John's Gospel, Jesus is certain of a murderous outcome that is prompted by certain Jewish leaders who are angry of his claim that he is the Son of God (John 19:7), and which will be carried out by the Roman soldiers who are under the authority of the emperor (see more on this below). The persecution against the *disciples* would also likely involve Roman soldiers. Thus, when Jesus talks about having peace in the midst of literal persecution, and taking courage in knowing that he has conquered the world, this opposition which he is conquering must include the Roman imperial world. Rome is the ultimate power in the culture and would be a primary source of fear for Jesus' followers.

The Ruler of this World

One indication that the conquered κόσμος includes the immediate Greco-Roman world is with the references to "the ruler of this world" (ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου τούτου) in John's

²¹⁵ Matt. 26:56 and Mark 14:50–52 explicitly refer to the disciples fleeing when Jesus is captured. Luke 22:54 cites Peter following at a distance. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, however, the Gospel of John does not explicitly mention the fleeing of the disciples. In John 18, Simon Peter and "another disciple" are noted as following Jesus, and Jesus does say that the disciples will be scattered and leave him alone (John 16:32), but as with much of John's Gospel, the main focus is on Jesus himself.

Gospel (12:31; 14:30; 16:11).²¹⁶ Many scholars equate this ruler with “the devil,” or “Satan,”²¹⁷ and indeed the comparison is understandable given that the words “devil” (διάβολος) and “Satan” (Σατανᾶς) are also mentioned in the Gospel of John (“devil” in 6:70; 8:44; 13:2; “Satan” in 13:27). However, there are no direct encounters with the devil or with evil spirits in the Fourth Gospel;²¹⁸ all references to Jesus performing exorcisms is omitted,²¹⁹ and the temptation narrative is missing in the Gospel of John in comparison to each of the Synoptic Gospels which not only include the confrontation (Matt 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13), but also mention “the devil” or “Satan” more frequently than in the Gospel of John.²²⁰

If “the ruler” (ὁ ἄρχων) was meant to primarily refer to the devil or Satan, the temptation narrative would be the ideal inclusion in John’s Gospel to demonstrate the tension and ultimate loss of the ruler to Jesus. Instead, the references to the devil and Satan in John’s Gospel are in relation to people: to Judas Iscariot (6:70; 13:2, 27) or in relation to the Jews (8:44). Thus, “the ruler of this world” may perhaps be *influenced* by the devil, just as with Judas Iscariot and the Jews, but is more likely referring directly to a human being, and specifically a representation of the ruler of the Greco-Roman world. The emperor as the literal

²¹⁶ Technically, the construction in 14:30 is slightly different (ὁ τοῦ κόσμου ἄρχων) as it does not include “this.” However, many English translations (e.g. NIV, NLT, ESV, CEV, NRSV, NKJV) tend to keep “the ruler of *this* world” in 14:30 for the sake of consistency with the other two occurrences.

²¹⁷ E.g., Lieu, *I, II, & III John*; George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987); Raymond Brown, *The Gospel of John I–XII*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966); Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010); Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015). Earlier scholars like David Rensberger seem to avoid discussing the ruler even though he himself writes about politics in John because of the overwhelming majority at the time that identified the ruler exclusively with Satan. However, he does identify Pilate as a likely representation of the hostile Roman state. Cf. David Rensberger, *Overcoming the World: Politics and Community in the Gospel of John* (London: SPCK, 1989), 90; N. T. Wright and J. P. Davies, “John, Jesus, and ‘The Ruler of This World’: Demonic Politics in the Fourth Gospel?,” in *Conception, Reception, and the Spirit: Essays in Honor of Andrew T. Lincoln*, ed. J. Gordon McConville and Lloyd K. Pietersen (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), 76 n. 21.

²¹⁸ Cf. Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 136.

²¹⁹ The word “demon” (δαίμόνιον) is used in John in the context of Jews accusing Jesus of being possessed by a demon (7:20; 8:48, 49, 52; 10:20). In 10:21, δαίμόνιον appears in the context of those who believe that Jesus does not have a demon. The word “demon” does not appear in the Johannine epistles showing further consistency between the Gospel and Letters that conflict between the conquering Jesus and evil spirits is not the focus, but rather the more literal conflict with the Greco-Roman world.

²²⁰ Matthew mentions “the devil” or “Satan” a total of 10 times (“διάβολος” at Matt 4:1, 5, 8, 11; 13:39; 25:41; “Σατανᾶς” at 4:10; 12:26 (2x); 16:23), Mark 6 times (“διάβολος” does not appear, “Σατανᾶς” at 1:13; 3:23 (2x), 26; 4:15; 8:33), and Luke 10 times (“διάβολος” at 4:2, 3, 6, 13; 8:12; “Σατανᾶς” at 10:18; 11:18; 13:16; 22:3, 31) in comparison to 4 times in the Gospel of John (“διάβολος” at 6:70; 8:44; 13:2; “Σατανᾶς” at 13:27). Cf. the Johannine epistles where the word “Σατανᾶς” does not appear, but “διάβολος” appears four times at 1 John 3:8 (3x), 10, as noted in the previous section.

ruler over the Greco-Roman world in which Jesus and his disciples live is the likely conquered counterpart to the kingdom rule of Jesus.²²¹

Three times Jesus makes reference to “the ruler of this world” (ὁ ἄρχων²²² τοῦ κόσμου τούτου) (12:31; 14:30; 16:11) who is evidently a part of the κόσμος that Jesus is conquering (as we shall see later in 16:33). In all three instances, Jesus is speaking in the context of internal and external conflict, in which the ruler is the embodiment of the opposition. When Jesus first mentions “the ruler of this world” (12:31), he is speaking to a crowd while admittedly experiencing his own internal conflict about his impending death. He says that his “soul is troubled” (12:27),²²³ and he seems tempted to ask God to save him from his future suffering.²²⁴

Despite his troubled soul, however, Jesus proclaims his first declaration of the ruler’s defeat (12:31):

Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.

νῦν κρίσις ἐστὶν τοῦ κόσμου τούτου, νῦν ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου τούτου ἐκβληθήσεται ἔξω·

Modern readers familiar with New Testament texts might assume that the ἄρχων being “driven out” is Satan falling from heaven in Luke (10:18), or the great dragon “who is called the Devil

²²¹ Cf. also those who identify “the ruler of this world” as the emperor: Tom Thatcher, *Greater than Caesar: Christology and Empire in the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress, 2009), and George van Kooten, “Bildung, Religion, and Politics in the Gospel of John: The Erastic, Philhellenic, Anti-Maccabean, and Anti-Roman Tendencies of the Gospel of ‘the Beloved Pupil,’” in *Scriptural Interpretation at the Interface between Education and Religion*, ed. Florian Wilk (Themes in Biblical Narrative 22; Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019), 171. Wright and Davies, “John, Jesus and ‘The Ruler of This World,’” identify the ruler with Satan and the emperor. Carter views Pilate as the ruler of the world (Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations*. (New York; London: T & T Clark, 2008), 290–299), but Pilate himself is obviously not a powerful ruler who needs to be conquered. He seems to be swayed by the crowds (John 19:12–16) rather than being a strong ruler over them. Pilate *represents* the ruler, who is the emperor and the more likely counterpart to Jesus.

²²² The word ἄρχων can refer to “ruler,” “authority,” or “official.” Cf. LSJ, s.v. “ἄρχων.” Some scholars prefer to translate ἄρχων as “prince” (e.g., Beasley-Murray, *John*, 213; Brown, *The Gospel of John*, I–XII, 468), and draw comparisons to “the rulers of this age” (τῶν ἀρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου) seen for example in 1 Corinthians (2:6, 8). Cf. the “authorities” (John 3:1, 7:26, 48; 12:42) being obvious human authorities, giving even more support to “the ruler of this world” in the Gospel of John as referring to a human being. Cf. Francis Moloney, who views the Jews as the representatives and slaves of a “prince of evil” (*The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina Series 4 (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998), 354–355).

²²³ When Jesus says that his soul is “troubled,” the verb here (ταράσσω) literally means “to stir” or “disturb” (cf. LSJ, s.v. “ταράσσω”). It is used in four other instances in the Gospel of John to reference Jesus or the disciples being troubled by their current or impending circumstances (11:33; 13:21; 14:1, 27). (The verb ταράσσω also occurs in reference to water being “stirred up.” (5:7)) Death is related to all of these “disturbances,” whether it is Lazarus’ death (11:33), Jesus’ death (12:27; 13:21), or the disciples’ deaths (or possibly a combination of both Jesus and the disciples’ deaths) (14:1, 27). See also Beasley-Murray, *John*, 249.

²²⁴ In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus in Gethsamane *does* ask the Father for his impending suffering and death to be taken away (Matt 26:36–46; Mark 14:32–42; Luke 22:39–46).

and Satan” being thrown down to the earth in the book of Revelation (12:9).²²⁵ Indeed, there seems to be some overlap between Luke and Revelation as “the Satan” (ὁ Σατανᾶς) is clearly named in both cases. However, in Luke, Jesus is responding to some of his disciples who are amazed that demons submit to them (10:17), and the aorist participle for “fall” (πεσόντα, 10:18) seems to indicate that Jesus watched Satan fall in the past.

By contrast, in John’s Gospel, the verb ἐκβληθήσεται (will be driven out) is in the future tense; the ruler is about to be driven out. Thus, it seems presumptive to equate “the ruler of this world” in John with the Satan of Luke and Revelation. Jesus in John’s Gospel says that the ruler is *about* to be driven out (12:31) because Jesus anticipates his suffering and death at the hand of the Romans. Yet, he knows that his death is the reason that he came (12:27), and that this is all a part of the judgment of the world, with its culture of polytheism and the emperor as the divine son (*divi filius*)²²⁶ (this will be discussed further in section 4.1). The dominant culture which promotes a *pistis* in the emperor as the divine ruler of the world will be driven out by Jesus, the true divine son, who supersedes the ruler of the Greco-Roman world with his own kingship.²²⁷

When Jesus mentions the ruler for a second time, it is a part of the Farewell Discourse (chapters 14–17) in which Jesus is giving his final words to his disciples. He has previously washed his disciples’ feet (13:1–19), and foretold Judas Iscariot’s betrayal (13:21–30) and Peter’s denial (13:36–38), but knowing that his time with them is limited, Jesus says (14:30–31):

I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this²²⁸ world is coming. He has no claim over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.

οὐκέτι πολλὰ λαλήσω μεθ' ὑμῶν, ἔρχεται γὰρ ὁ τοῦ κόσμου ἄρχων· καὶ ἐν ἐμοὶ οὐκ ἔχει οὐδέν, ἀλλ' ἵνα γινῶ ὁ κόσμος ὅτι ἀγαπῶ τὸν πατέρα καὶ καθὼς ἐντολήν ἔδωκεν μοι ὁ πατήρ, οὕτως ποιῶ. ἐγείρεσθε ἄγωμεν ἐντεῦθεν.

Jesus tells his disciples that their conversation will shortly come to an end because the ruler of this world is “coming.” The use of the verb “to come” (ἔρχομαι) gives the sense that there is something tangible on its way, which is underlined in the fact that Jesus says immediately after,

²²⁵ Cf. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 213.

²²⁶ Cf. Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 208–210.

²²⁷ Jesus’ kingly entry into Jerusalem occurs just before (12:12–19) in which the Pharisees were concerned that the culture was already shifting toward Jesus.

²²⁸ The τοῦτου does not appear here in comparison to the other references to the ruler, but for the sake of consistency, I will retain the “this” in the translation.

“rise, let us be on our way” (ἐγείρεσθε ἄγωμεν ἐντεῦθεν, 14:31).²²⁹ Jesus knows that his arrest is imminent, and these captors who are “coming” will include the Roman σπεῖρα (John 18:3, 12), the tactical unit or cohort of soldiers,²³⁰ along with their officer, the χιλιάρχος, who together represent the authority of the emperor, the ruler of the Greco-Roman world.²³¹ The Roman soldiers are necessary because the Jewish leaders are not able to arrest Jesus without the approval of the ruling government. The soldiers not only capture Jesus but actively mock and torture him (John 19:1–3; cf. Matt 27:27–31; Mark 15:16–20). The Roman soldiers also cast lots for Jesus’ clothing, just as they might with the spoils of war (John 19:23–25).

Despite the threat of the coming ruler represented through the Roman soldiers, Jesus does not mention his opposition to incite his disciples to military violence.²³² Jesus knows that the disciples feel troubled over what their teacher is saying (14:1, 27) and that it may seem as though the ruler of the world is conquering Jesus as he is captured, tortured, and killed by the Romans. However, the disciples can be reassured that the ruler may have power and authority over the current Greco-Roman world but has no power or authority over Jesus (14:30). Instead of being fearful and intimidated, the disciples can respond with peace; this peace is not “as the world gives” (14:27). Jesus’ clarification makes sense if he is speaking about the conception of peace in Greco-Roman culture which would associate εἰρήνη (Greek) or *pax* (Latin) with an absence of fear, a treaty of peace, or the goddess of peace.²³³ In contrast to the peace that they might see in the world around them, Jesus offers a peace that they may have even when they are without their teacher (cf. 14:3, 18–19, 28) and even as they face persecution themselves (16:33).

When Jesus mentions the ruler of this world for the third and final time in John (16:11), he is describing the events after he “goes away” and “the Advocate” (παράκλητος) comes (16:7). At that time, the ruler will have already been condemned (16:11) and judgment will have been executed against the ruler. Jesus is foretelling the victorious results so that, as they

²²⁹ Cf. Wright and Davies, “John, Jesus, and ‘The Ruler of This World’,” 81.

²³⁰ LSJ, s.v. “σπεῖρα.”

²³¹ In comparison to the Synoptic Gospels, John’s Gospel portrays the Romans with an indifference which demonstrates an anti-Roman sentiment (van Kooten, “*Bildung*, Religion, and Politics in the Gospel of John,” 171–172).

²³² Peter later foolishly reacts violently by cutting off the right ear of the high priest’s slave in the presence of the Roman soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police (18:10–12). He could have easily started a full riot. Cf. Wright and Davies, “John, Jesus, and ‘The Ruler of This World’,” 85.

²³³ Cf. LSJ, s.v. “εἰρήνη.” Eirene/Pax is the goddess of peace, the daughter of Zeus and Themis (Hesiod, *Theogony* 902). The senate was commissioned to erect an *Ara Pacis*, an altar of peace, in Rome to celebrate the establishment of the age of peace, which was completed in 9 BCE. It still remains today with its own museum at the *Museo dell’Ara Pacis* in Rome. Cf. Stefan Weinstock, “Pax and the ‘Ara Pacis’,” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, no. 50, Parts 1 and 2 (1960): 44–58.

face imminent conflict from those in the culture around them, the disciples will not despair. Jesus offers encouragement through his conquering message (16:33):

I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”

ταῦτα λελάληκα ὑμῖν ἵνα ἐν ἐμοὶ εἰρήνην ἔχητε. ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ θλίψιν ἔχετε· ἀλλὰ θαρσεῖτε, ἐγὼ νενίκηκα τὸν κόσμον

Jesus is acknowledging that the time that he has been describing is coming and has already begun (16:32) in which the persecution of both Jesus and his disciples is imminent. The ruler may appear to win as Jesus is tortured and killed by the Romans and his disciples face persecution from their surrounding culture. However, Jesus wants his disciples to remember that, as they face persecution, they can have peace knowing that Jesus has actually conquered the world, and the ruler of it, through his death on the cross, which is a part of the judgment that overthrows the current kingdom ruled by the emperor.

The Jews may be considered the instigators of this persecution, but the actual executors are the Romans, who act under the power and authority of the emperor.²³⁴ The Jewish leaders were certainly aware of who was ruling their world. They were already concerned that the Romans would come and destroy the Jews and their temple because Jesus was causing so much commotion by performing miracles (11:48). They acknowledge the emperor as the ultimate authority in the process of their trying to condemn Jesus. When Pilate, as another representative of the emperor, and the only one with the power to allow for Jesus’ crucifixion, does not find any legal case against Jesus, the Jews assert (19:12b):

If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.

Ἐὰν τοῦτον ἀπολύσῃς, οὐκ εἶ φίλος τοῦ Καίσαρος· πᾶς ὁ βασιλέα ἐαυτὸν ποιῶν ἀντιλέγει τῷ Καίσαρι.

Pilate sees the impending riot and questions the crowd again about whether Jesus should really be killed, to which the chief priests answer: “We have no king but the emperor.” (οὐκ ἔχομεν βασιλέα εἰ μὴ Καίσαρα, 19:15). Even the Jews recognize the authority of the emperor as he is

²³⁴ For more on Roman persecution, see Richard J. Cassidy, *John's Gospel in the New Perspective: Christology and the Realities of Roman Power* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 56–59.

the ruler and king over the Greco-Roman world. They too have chosen to submit to the Roman imperial ideology of the world and proclaim their loyalty to the Roman emperor.²³⁵

However, as Jesus has pointed out in all three instances of his mentioning the “ruler,” Jesus is not threatened, and in fact, the only reason why the Romans have any authority or power is because it has been granted to them from above (19:11). “The ruler of this world” is the lesser counterpart to Jesus, who overrules and supersedes the *divi filius* as the true Son of God,²³⁶ and the Savior of the World (4:42 cf. 1 John 4:14), another title used for Roman rulers.²³⁷ For the Gospel writer, the use of such monikers that were used for the emperor is a bold political statement²³⁸ while simultaneously underlining the difference between the rule of the emperor in the Greco-Roman world versus the rule of Jesus Christ over all of creation (see more in section 4.1).

Jesus entered into Jerusalem in a kingly manner,²³⁹ which was the counterpoint to the culture of triumphant Roman conquerors who would enter the city through the Triumphal Gate to the cheers of Roman people.²⁴⁰ In the everyday Greco-Roman world, all would see the emperor as the ruler of the world, but Jesus shows through his kingly entry and declaration of conquering the current world that he is the ruler who will uproot (12:31), overpower (14:30), and supplant (16:11) the current ἄρχων. As Jesus clarifies to Pilate, the emperor may rule the current world, but his kingdom is not derived from the Greco-Roman world and thus his followers do not need to fight against the ruler in the same way that the Romans might conquer others (18:36). Like the conquering of the Greco-Roman world in 1 John, the conquering of the world and its ruler in John’s Gospel is one that counters the prevailing culture with a distinct Johannine *pistis*.

As we have seen, “the ruler of this world” being identified with the emperor in John’s Gospel indicates that the conquering of the world (16:33) is a contention against the polytheistic world under the Roman Empire. We shall see that the contention against the Greco-Roman world persists in the First Letter of John as well, and that the Johannine author presents a consistent countercultural narrative to his audience because of his concern over their *pistis*.

²³⁵ Cf. Gerhard van den Heever, “Finding Data in Unexpected Places (or: From Text Linguistics to Socio-rhetoric): Towards a Socio-Rhetorical Reading of John’s Gospel,” *Neotestamentica* 33, no. 2 (1999): 358.

²³⁶ Cf. “son of God” (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) in John 1:34, 49; 3:18; 5:25; 11:4, 27; 19:7; 20:31.

²³⁷ “Savior of the World” (ὁ σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου) was not a common first-century Jewish or Samaritan messianic designation, but it was a title used for Roman rulers from Julius Caesar to Hadrian and later emperors. Craig R. Koester, “‘The Savior of the World’ (John 4:42),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109, no. 4 (1990): 666–667.

²³⁸ Cf. Thatcher, *Greater than Caesar*, 136.

²³⁹ John 12:12–19; cf. Matt 21:1–11; Mark 11:1–11; Luke 19:28–40.

²⁴⁰ Cf. Beard, North and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 44.

3. A Countercultural Letter

Having determined that the conquering language in both 1 John and the Gospel of John reflect a contention against the “world,” and that the “world” in the Gospel is clearly an allusion to the polytheistic world under the Roman Empire, this chapter will now examine further the contention with the world in 1 John, and demonstrate that the Johannine author is also making allusions to the Greco-Roman world and its polytheistic beliefs that dominated the culture of the time. His concern about the prevailing culture continues to be evident throughout the brief letter particularly in the reference to fear that is incompatible with love (4:18), and in the concluding exhortation to his readers to keep themselves from idols (5:21). Through his acknowledgement of the culture, he is not only demonstrating his awareness of the culture but also framing a countercultural narrative against it. The Johannine teacher wants to convey to his spiritual children that they should not be naïve or complacent in their *pistis* and that conquering the world also means contending against the polytheistic culture that surrounds them in the Greco-Roman world.

3.1 *Against the Culture of Fear*

In the earlier chapters of his letter, the writer of 1 John alludes to some concern about the culture when he exhorts his disciples to resist the desires of the Greco-Roman world (2:15–17), and clarifies that this resistance is not to be a violent one, which might be an expected response in the culture when facing conflict (3:11–15).²⁴¹ Instead, he emphasizes the importance of responding with love (1 John 3–4).²⁴² His emphasis on love is especially apparent in his discourse in chapter 4 as the cognates of “love” (i.e. ἀγαπητός, ἀγαπάω, ἀγάπη) appear more than thirty times within the few verses (4:7–21). Amid this exhortation to love, however, the author suddenly and prominently addresses the issue of fear (4:18):

There is no **fear** in love, but perfect love casts out **fear**; for **fear** has to do with punishment, and **whoever fears** has not been perfected in love.

φόβος οὐκ ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ ἀλλ' ἡ τελεία ἀγάπη ἔξω βάλλει τὸν φόβον, ὅτι ὁ φόβος κόλασιν ἔχει, ὁ δὲ φοβούμενος οὐ τετελείωται ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ.

The reference to fear stands out because it is mentioned four times and only in this sole verse in all of the Johannine epistles. Moreover, it is declared as an antithesis in which fear cannot

²⁴¹ See also section 2.1.

²⁴² The importance of love is alluded to previously in 1 John 2:5, 10.

exist in love and is instead forcefully cast out in the presence of love, evoking more of the contentious language that permeates the letter.

Positive Jewish Fear?

The author offers little explanation as to what he means in placing fear as the incompatible antithesis to love, but the lack of explanation would make sense if the issue of fear was obvious to the audience of the letter. In the case of 1 John, love is associated with God; indeed, twice he says that “God *is* love” (ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν, 4:8, 16). However, fear being placed in opposition to love seems to indicate that this is not the same sort of fear seen often in the New Testament and in the LXX which has positive connotations.

The reverential fear of God, which appears several times in the New Testament,²⁴³ is seen in the Gospel of Luke, in which Mary, the pregnant mother of Jesus, sings a song of praise (1:49–50):

For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

ὅτι ἐποίησεν μοι μεγάλα ὁ δυνατός. καὶ ἅγιον τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ,
καὶ τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ εἰς γενεὰς καὶ γενεὰς τοῖς **φοβουμένοις** αὐτόν.

In her song, Mary does not appear to suggest that generations of people are terrified of God. On the contrary, earlier on, she says, “my spirit rejoices in God my savior” (καὶ ἠγαλλίασεν τὸ πνεῦμα μου ἐπὶ τῷ θεῷ τῷ σωτῆρι μου, v. 47). Her song is out of extreme joy, and she is thankful for the “great things” (v. 49) God has done for her and for the mercy he has shown to generations of people who have demonstrated their reverence for him (v. 50).

In a few instances in the New Testament, there is the sense of serving God “with fear and trembling” as seen in Philippians (2:12–13):²⁴⁴

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with **fear and trembling**; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Ὡστε ἀγαπητοί μου, καθὼς πάντοτε ὑπηκούσατε, μὴ ὡς ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ μου μόνον ἀλλὰ νῦν πολλῷ μᾶλλον ἐν τῇ ἀπουσίᾳ μου, μετὰ **φόβου καὶ τρόμου** τὴν ἑαυτῶν σωτηρίαν κατεργάζεσθε· θεὸς γάρ ἐστιν ὁ ἐνεργῶν ἐν ὑμῖν καὶ τὸ θέλειν καὶ τὸ ἐνεργεῖν ὑπὲρ τῆς εὐδοκίας.

²⁴³ Cf. Acts 10:2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26; 2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 5:21; 6:5; Col. 3:22; 1 Pet. 1:17.

²⁴⁴ Cf. 2 Cor. 7:15; Eph. 6:5.

This could be misunderstood to mean that God is like a scary, demanding dictator and that the people need to be trembling in fear when they serve him. However, the same phrasing is used in 2 Corinthians (7:15–16):

And his heart goes out all the more to you, as he remembers the obedience of all of you, and how you welcomed him **with fear and trembling**. I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.

καὶ τὰ σπλάγχνα αὐτοῦ περισσοτέρως εἰς ὑμᾶς ἐστὶν ἀναμνησκομένου τὴν πάντων ὑμῶν ὑπακοήν, ὥς **μετὰ φόβου καὶ τρόμου** ἐδέξασθε αὐτόν. χαίρω ὅτι ἐν παντὶ θαρρῶ ἐν ὑμῖν.

This is referring to the way in which the Corinthians received Titus. They were welcoming him, and both Paul and Titus are happy about this. Thus, this fear and trembling does not appear to be a negative fear, but instead suggests the humility with which people serve others.

In the Septuagint, “fear and trembling”²⁴⁵ appears in a Psalm (55:5):

Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.

φόβος καὶ τρόμος ἦλθεν ἐπ’ ἐμέ καὶ ἐκάλυψέν με σκότος

In this context, the “fear and trembling” is indeed a negative sentiment. However, this is not about fear and trembling because of a negative fear of God. The psalmist is fearful because of wicked enemies who are bringing trouble against him (cf. vv. 2, 12). The psalmist is not fearful of God in a negative sense; he actually cries out to God for help, and he has confidence that God will save him (v. 16).

Fear in relation to God in the LXX often uses the same Greek cognates (φόβος, φοβέω, φοβέομαι) as the fear of 1 John, but the fear of God in the Jewish context is continually presented as a positive reverential fear of the Lord. This type of fear is so significant to the Jewish community that it is mentioned in almost every book of the LXX.²⁴⁶ For example, in the final chapter of Joshua, all of the tribes of Israel gather together, and Joshua says to them (24:14):

²⁴⁵ Cf. Judges 7:3

²⁴⁶ Some of the many examples include: Gen. 22:12; Exod. 9:30; Deut. 6:24; 2 Sam 23:3; 1 Chron. 16:25; Prov. 1:7; Eccl. 8:12; Isa. 50:10. Verses such as Gen. 20:11 and Exod. 18:21 further support the positive fear of the divine with the use of the Greek word, θεοσεβεία, which can be translated as “fear of God” or “reverence toward God.” See Georg Bertram, “θεοσεβής, θεοσεβεία,” *TDNT*, 3:123–128.

Now therefore **fear the Lord**, and serve him in sincerity and in righteousness; put away the foreign gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.

καὶ νῦν **φοβήθητε κύριον** καὶ λατρεύσατε αὐτῷ ἐν εὐθύτητι καὶ ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ καὶ περιέλεσθε τοὺς θεοὺς τοὺς ἀλλοτρίους οἷς ἐλάτρευσαν οἱ πατέρες ὑμῶν ἐν τῷ πέραν τοῦ ποταμοῦ καὶ ἐν αἰγύπτῳ καὶ λατρεύετε κυρίῳ

The allusion to serving God in sincerity and righteousness indicates the positive context in which Joshua is calling the people to serve God.

Fearing God is affiliated with wisdom and insight into knowing and understanding him,²⁴⁷ and experiencing his love and mercy. Rather than placing fear and love in contrast to one another as 1 John does, the positive Jewish concept of fearful reverence actually aligns fear with love, as in Deuteronomy (10:12):

“So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only **to fear the Lord your God**, to walk in all his ways, **to love** him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul”

καὶ νῦν ἰσραὴλ τί κύριος ὁ θεός σου αἰτεῖται παρὰ σοῦ ἀλλ' ἢ **φοβεῖσθαι κύριον τὸν θεόν σου** πορεύεσθαι ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ὁδοῖς αὐτοῦ καὶ **ἀγαπᾶν** αὐτὸν καὶ λατρεύειν κυρίῳ τῷ θεῷ σου ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ψυχῆς σου

While the Johannine letter places fear and love in conflict with one another, the verbal forms of fear and love are placed in parallel to one another in Deuteronomy because fearing God from a Jewish perspective is affiliated with loving God and serving him. For the Jews, fear of the divine denotes a reverence and respect for the God to whom they belong.

One possible outlier among the plethora of verses that present a positive fear of God in the LXX is Psalm 119:120 (118:120 LXX). Initially, the psalmist seems to have a negative fear of God and divine judgment:

My flesh trembles for **fear** of you, and **I am afraid** of your judgments.

καθήλωσον ἐκ τοῦ **φόβου** σου τὰς σάρκας μου ἀπὸ γὰρ τῶν κριμάτων σου **ἐφοβήθην**

Like many other psalms, however, the speaker is discursive with his emotions; in prior verses, the psalmist says that he loves God's law but hates double-minded people and the wicked of

²⁴⁷ Cf. Prov. 9:10.

the earth.²⁴⁸ His overall attitude toward God continues to be one of reverence and respect, not negative, overwhelming fear. Though the psalmist may feel a momentary flash of negative fear regarding God's judgment, he still loves God and honors his law. Thus, this psalm is yet another example of the positive Jewish association of fear and love.

In contrast to the psalmist who experiences a simultaneous love and fear of God, the writer of 1 John asserts that they are mutually exclusive (4:18).

There is no **fear** in love, but perfect love casts out **fear**; for **fear** has to do with punishment, and **whoever fears** has not been perfected in love.

φόβος οὐκ ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ ἀλλ' ἡ τελεία ἀγάπη ἔξω βάλλει τὸν φόβον, ὅτι ὁ φόβος κόλασιν ἔχει, ὁ δὲ φοβούμενος οὐ τετελείωται ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ.

The negative fear in the first Johannine epistle cannot be the positive, fearful reverence for God seen so frequently in the Jewish context. If the Jewish conception of divine fear was applicable to 1 John, then the “fear of God” would actually be a discordant “fear of *love*” because 1 John says that God *is* love (4:8, 16). Fear of love could arguably make sense in a Jewish context if the author of 1 John were addressing a fearful reverence of the God who embodies, reflects, and expresses love. However, the positive Jewish conception of fear cannot be the same negative fear of divine judgment in 1 John (4:18) that is cast out in the presence of love and is instead a marker of someone who has not been perfected in love. Because the writer of 1 John asserts to the Johannine community that fear is “cast out” (ἔξω βάλλω) when they remain in the perfect love of God, he is more likely addressing the fear of the divine that was well-entrenched in the Greco-Roman culture.

Fearing the Gods in the Greco-Roman World

The reference to fear being cast out (4:18) is more readily understandable when viewed in light of the Greco-Roman culture because the writer of 1 John discusses love and fear in the context of divine judgment (4:16b–17):

God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God, and God remains in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness **on the day of judgment**, because as he is, so are we in this world.

Ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστὶν, καὶ ὁ μένων ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ ἐν τῷ θεῷ μένει καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἐν αὐτῷ μένει. ἐν τούτῳ τετελείωται ἡ ἀγάπη μεθ' ἡμῶν, ἵνα παρρησιάωμεν

²⁴⁸ Ps. 119:113, 119 (118:113, 119 LXX).

ἔχωμεν ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῆς κρίσεως, ὅτι καθὼς ἐκεῖνος ἐστὶν καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐσμεν
ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ τούτῳ.

The idea of having boldness on the day of judgment would have been a radical statement (which will be addressed below) for those living in the Greco-Roman world, which tended to fear divine judgment and retribution.

The earliest writers of Greek tragedies presented divine judgment in the context of moral law in which the human being would receive divine retribution based on how they acted on earth. For example, Aeschylus presents the story of Agamemnon, who becomes fearful when his wife Clytemnestra spreads extravagant cloths for Agamemnon to walk on. He says that the gods alone deserve such honors, and he hopes that the gods will not strike him from afar for accepting honor for himself.²⁴⁹ Agamemnon was fearful of the divine judgment that he would receive for his actions. In *Eumenides*, divine judgment is portrayed even more directly as the goddess Athena appears as the president of the court of Athenian citizens and administers her judgment over the people.²⁵⁰ The goddess offers her judgment before a literal courtroom context, which evokes a clear visual image of the authority of the deity.

Among the most fearsome representatives of divine judgment in Greco-Roman culture were the Erinyes, sometimes called the Furies or Eumenides, who were based on the theater of Aeschylus, but remained popular in Greek, Etruscan and Roman art and were mentioned well into the second and third centuries CE.²⁵¹ They were often portrayed as terrifying divine beings dressed in black with snakes in their hair who would torment convicted criminals even in the afterlife in Hades.²⁵² One could easily understand why these beings would promote a culture of fear in the Greco-Roman world and how they would contribute to a fear of divine judgment in general.

Fear itself was personified in the god Phobos (Roman: Timor or Pavor), who is often mentioned alongside his brother Deimos (Roman: Formido or Metus), the personification of terror and dread.²⁵³ As their names suggest, they are fearsome deities, considered to be the sons of Ares, the war god,²⁵⁴ and they are described as participants in battle, hitching up their

²⁴⁹ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 921, 946–947.

²⁵⁰ Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 582–584, 794–807.

²⁵¹ Pausanias 8.25, 42; Quintus Smyrnaeus 8, 243.

²⁵² Aeschylus, *Choephoroe* 1048–1050; *Eumenides* 48f, 175–178, 339–340; Pausanias 1.28.6. Cf. Herbert Jennings Rose, B. C. Dietrich, and Alan A. D. Peatfield, “Erinyes” in *OCD*.

²⁵³ Cf. Homer, *Iliad* 4.440; 11.37; Hesiod, *The Shield* 195, 463; Dionysius Halicarnassus, *On Literary Composition* 16.46, 64; Philostratus of Athens, *Heroicus* 25.7.6. In the LCL, Phobos is sometimes translated as “Fear” or “Rout” in English, and Deimos is translated as “Dread” or “Terror.”

²⁵⁴ Homer, *Iliad* 4.440; in Hesiod, *Theogony* 933–935, they are the sons of Ares and Aphrodite.

father's horses²⁵⁵ and driving his chariot.²⁵⁶ The association with battle seems to suggest that fear and terror are useful forces in intimidating opponents; the reactions that they evoke lead to victory in war. The Spartans tried to ally themselves with fear by honoring Phobos and creating a cult, which is well attested at Sparta from as early as the seventh or sixth century BCE.²⁵⁷ The fear god had a sanctuary there,²⁵⁸ and he was institutionalized, not only to curry his favor in war, but also to reinforce the fear that citizens were supposed to have of the law, scaring them into obedience.²⁵⁹

War heroes were noted as honoring Phobos. According to Plutarch, Alexander the Great sacrificed to Phobos before his victory at the Battle of Guagamela in 331 BCE, just as Theseus had done before his victory against the Amazons.²⁶⁰ By sacrificing to Phobos on the eve of battle, the leaders hoped to divert any force that could destroy their soldiers while directing spiritual forces toward their enemies.²⁶¹ In Selinus, a fifth century BCE inscription commemorates a victory in which Phobos is thanked alongside Zeus and Athena for saving the city.²⁶² Fear in this sense could therefore be viewed positively, as association with Phobos had the potential for victory. Unlike the Jewish association of reverential fear of God, however, Phobos is not beloved. He is only beneficial in the sense that he is useful in his function of assisting his father Ares in battle and intimidating the enemy camp.

The references to the physical descriptions of Phobos indicate that he not a revered deity of beauty, but a terrifying figure meant to repulse those who see him. He is described in various forms, but he is said to be the least beautiful of the gods,²⁶³ and is often depicted as part of a shield motif. He is a dragon-like figure with bright eyes of fire on the shield of Heracles;²⁶⁴ he resembles a lion on the shield of Agamemnon;²⁶⁵ and he is described as crowning the aegis of Athena, another deity associated with warfare.²⁶⁶ Phobos was probably

²⁵⁵ Homer, *Iliad* 15.119.

²⁵⁶ *Shield of Heracles* 463.

²⁵⁷ Nicholas Richer, "Personified Abstractions in Laconia: Suggestions on the Origins of Phobos," in *Personification in the Greek World*, ed. Emma Stafford and Judith Herrin (Hampshire, Great Britain: Ashgate, 2005), 112; Maria Patera, "Reflections on the Discourse of Fear in Greek Sources," in *Unveiling Emotions II: Emotions in Greece and Rome: Texts, Images, Material Culture*, ed. Angelos Chaniotis and Pierre Ducrey (Stuttgart, Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013), 113. Interestingly, the Spartans were also known for their athleticism, which may have been related to their wanting to stay in shape for war. Cf. Nigel Jonathan Spivey, *The Ancient Olympics*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 26–27.

²⁵⁸ Plutarch, *Agis and Cleomenes* 8.3.

²⁵⁹ Patera, "Reflections," 113–114.

²⁶⁰ Plutarch, *Alexander* 31.9; *Theseus* 27.2.

²⁶¹ Cf. Patera, "Reflections," 114–115.

²⁶² *Syll.*³ 1122.

²⁶³ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists* 1.188.

²⁶⁴ *Shield of Heracles* 144, 195.

²⁶⁵ Pausanias 5.19.4.

²⁶⁶ Homer, *Iliad* 5.739.

depicted on shields as a way to harness his power of fear and to intimidate any opponents.²⁶⁷ The imagery on the shields that are meant to protect soldiers would simultaneously induce fear and intimidation to the enemy camp, as if Phobos was a force that had chosen one side in the battle.

In addition to the descriptions of Phobos represented on shields, other extant material culture offers some insight into the perception of fear in the Greco-Roman culture. An inscription on an oenochoe (wine jug) from Berlin dating to around 530 BCE identifies Phobos, who is shown in anthropomorphic form driving Ares's chariot. The inscription is helpful in cases of other similar imagery in which the charioteers are not named, and may suggest that the unnamed figures are Phobos as well.²⁶⁸ If they are indeed representations of the fear god, then it would further demonstrate his cultural significance and potential influence. Although some of the figures in material culture cannot be verified, the relevance of Phobos seems to have persisted for several centuries. Not only does he appear in Greco-Roman literature (as indicated above), but he is also mentioned, for example, in a second-century CE funerary inscription from Cilicia. Phobos is named alongside Atë (goddess of ruin and folly)²⁶⁹ and Moira (goddesses of fate and destiny),²⁷⁰ probably to indicate that they are guardians of the tomb and to ward off those who might try to rob the site.²⁷¹ The naming of the deities serves as a warning of the dire consequences that would befall any tomb raiders.

Phobos and the other gods and goddesses of the Greco-Roman world were feared because they were thought to have supernatural power and authority, which they would exert in the human world. People were therefore simultaneously motivated to seek their favor and intimidated into living a moral life so that they might avoid divine judgment as a consequence. Yet, the deities were also believed to be capricious, and they were sometimes portrayed as interfering in human affairs without a clear rationale or sense of moral justice.²⁷² Herodotus, for example, demonstrates divine determinism in which the gods are recognized as those who

²⁶⁷ Cf. Stephen Scully, "Reading the Shield of Achilles: Terror, Anger, Delight," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 101 (2003): 32.

²⁶⁸ Cf. Harvey A. Shapiro, *Personifications in Greek Art: The Representation of Abstract Concepts, 600-400 B.C.*, (Zurich: Akanthus, 1993), 210-212.

²⁶⁹ Atë is the daughter of Zeus who was expelled from Olympus to bring harm to men (Homer, *Iliad* 19.90-94, 126-131; cf. Hesiod, *Theogony* 230).

²⁷⁰ Cf. Homer, *Iliad* 19.87f; Hesiod, *Theogony* 904f, 217; Aeschylus, *Prometheus Vincit* 516.

²⁷¹ Patera, "Reflections," 113 n. 24.

²⁷² Cf. J. Gwyn Griffiths, *The Divine Verdict: A Study of Divine Judgement in the Ancient Religions*, *Studies in the History of Religions* 52 (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1990), 70.

decide what is just;²⁷³ at the same time, they are described as interfering on a whim, just as the god Apollo intervenes so that his favorite Croesus can avoid just punishment for his actions.²⁷⁴

In Plutarch, the *Lives* are meant to be case histories of crime and punishment in which humans bring about their own punishment or receive just punishment through supernatural means.²⁷⁵ However, Plutarch also mentions the role of *tychē* (τύχη, “fate” or “fortune”)²⁷⁶ several dozen times in his writings, even writing an entire essay on the subject.²⁷⁷ Fortune is personified in the goddess Tyche (Roman: Fortuna), perhaps the most capricious of all the gods.²⁷⁸ She is believed to govern human affairs,²⁷⁹ and therefore has significant power, even being attributed with the hegemony of Rome.²⁸⁰ Although she can bring about good fortune, she is also known for suddenly bringing bad fortune, and subsequently, Tyche is viewed as dangerous and unpredictable.²⁸¹ Given her unpredictability, it is understandable as to how she might contribute to the fear of the gods.

The Greco-Roman Response to Fear

Because the culture of the Greco-Roman world consisted of capricious gods inducing fear through their unpredictable divine judgment, it may have prompted a desire for human beings to have some semblance of control over their lives. Different attempts seem to have been made in response to the culture of divine fear so that human beings might try to reduce the unknown and unpredictable. Thucydides, for example, seems to exert some level of control or rationality in his account of the Peloponnesian War in which the gods are more conspicuous because they are largely absent.²⁸² On the surface, his history appears to be more “scientific” without the input of the spiritual beings.²⁸³ However, Thucydides does mention the role of

²⁷³ Herodotus 8.106.

²⁷⁴ Herodotus 1.87, 91.

²⁷⁵ Frederick E. Brenk, *In Mist Apparelled: Religious Themes in Plutarch's Moralia and Lives*, Mnemosyne, Bibliotheca Classica Batava, Supplementum 48 (Lugduni Batavorum: Brill, 1977), 256–275.

²⁷⁶ LSJ, s.v. “τύχη.”

²⁷⁷ E.g. Plutarch, *Pyrrhus* 13.1; *Dion* 26.7, 51.4; *Caesar* 9.1; *Lucullus* 29.5; *Brutus* 50.5; *Crassus* 21.1; *Otho* 13.3. He wrote an entire essay on the subject of *tychē* in *Moralia* 97C–100.

²⁷⁸ Cf. Griffiths, *The Divine Verdict*, 87–88; Noel Robertson and B. C. Dietrich, “Tyche” in *OCD*

²⁷⁹ Cf. Angelos Chaniotis, “Empathy, Emotional Display, Theatricality, and Illusion in Hellenistic Historiography,” in *Unveiling Emotions II*, 57.

²⁸⁰ Plutarch, *Moralia* 316C–326C; cf. Polybius 1.63.9.

²⁸¹ E.g. Thucydides 6.11.6; Polybius 15.6.8, 30.10.1, 39.8.2.

²⁸² Cf. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, Sather Classical Lectures; volume 41 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 137.

²⁸³ Thucydides was at one time considered more “scientific” by some scholars in comparison to the history of Herodotus who seemed to have distorted or invented some of his material, but Thucydides is also suspected of fabricating his history. Cf. Virginia J. Hunter, *Thucydides: The Artful Reporter* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1973).

tychē in his writings (6.11.6), which may suggest that he still reflects some of the culture of divine intervention.

The sense of divine fear in the culture instigated different aversive responses. The Stoics ironically exerted control with their sense of determinism, which negated the idea of free will in a person's life, and so the idea of divine punishment or reward was not a major concern.²⁸⁴ They were able to ease their fears by accepting beforehand that they did not determine whatever happened to them. Epictetus reflects this strategy:

When you see someone weeping in sorrow, either because a child has gone on a journey, or because he has lost his property, beware that you be not carried away by the impression that the man is in the midst of external ills, but straightway keep before you this thought: "It is not what has happened that distresses this man (for it does not distress another), but his judgment about it."

Ὅταν κλαίοντα ἴδῃς τινὰ ἐν πένθει ἢ ἀποδημοῦντος τέκνου ἢ ἀπολωλεκότα τὰ ἑαυτοῦ, πρόσεχε μή σε ἡ φαντασία συναρπάσῃ ὥς ἐν κακοῖς ὄντος αὐτοῦ τοῖς ἐκτός, ἀλλ' εὐθὺς ἔστω πρόχειρον ὅτι "τοῦτον θλίβει οὐ τὸ συμβεβηκός (ἄλλον γὰρ οὐ θλίβει), ἀλλὰ τὸ δόγμα τὸ περὶ τούτου."²⁸⁵

Epictetus says that it is the *perspective* which is of greater concern than the event itself. If people have the right judgment or perspective, then they will experience tranquility. The Stoic philosophy views life as a cycle of material recurrence: referring to the lives of men, Seneca says: "Born from nothingness, they go back to nothingness."²⁸⁶ The Stoics are able to find peace in knowing that there is nothing to look forward to, but also nothing to fear as well, including any fear of the gods.

The Epicureans, by contrast, developed a different perspective. They tried to allay their fears by rejecting the idea that the gods exerted any influence and by rejecting the concept of the afterlife for human beings. They rewrote the cultural norm and believed gods to be calm and placid beings who would not conceive of anger against humans or a desire to harm them.²⁸⁷ One can understand the appeal of the Epicurean perspective. Rather than being fearful of the gods, who could not be controlled, and being fearful of death and divine judgment in the afterlife, which could not be avoided, one could adopt the idea that the gods were pleasant

²⁸⁴ The Old Stoics, however, did view punishment from retribution as a warning to others. Cf. John M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 83.

²⁸⁵ Epictetus, *Encheiridion* 16.

²⁸⁶ Seneca the Younger, *De Tranquillitate Animi* 15.4.

²⁸⁷ Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 6.68f.

beings and that they would not interfere with human life. People could enjoy their lives without the fear of the divine.

However, the Epicurean ideals were criticized as a reaction to *deisidaimonia* (δεισιδαιμονία), an extreme fear of the gods, often translated as “superstition” in English, which was significant enough in the culture for both Greek and Roman writers to comment on it. Plutarch devoted an essay to *deisidaimonia*, admonishing those who took their fear of the divine to the extreme:

Superstition, as the very name (dread of deities) indicates, is an emotional idea and an assumption productive of a fear which utterly humbles and crushes a man, for he thinks that there are gods, but that they are the cause of pain and injury.

τὴν δεισιδαιμονίαν δὲ μηνύει καὶ τοῦνομα δόξαν ἐμπαθῇ καὶ δέους ποιητικὴν ὑπόληψιν οὖσαν ἐκταπεινοῦντος καὶ συντρίβοντος τὸν ἄνθρωπον, οἰόμενον μὲν εἶναι θεούς, εἶναι δὲ λυπηροὺς καὶ βλαβερούς.²⁸⁸

Plutarch denigrated superstition as emotional rather than rational, and he was critical of those who adopted the perspective of the gods as the source of pain.²⁸⁹ Simultaneously, he disapproved of the other extreme, the Epicurean response of rejecting the fear of the gods entirely and presuming that divine judgment did not exist.

In the essay, *That Epicurus Actually Makes a Pleasant Life Impossible*, Plutarch addresses the Epicurean view:

For Epicurus supposes that fear of punishment is the only motive to which we can properly appeal in deterring from crime. It follows then that we should cram them even fuller of superstitious dread and bring to bear on them the joint array of celestial and terrestrial terrors and chasms and alarms and apprehensions if they are to be shocked by all this into a state of greater honesty and restraint. For they are better off avoiding crime for fear of the next world than committing crimes and spending their lives in insecurity and apprehension.

οὐ γὰρ Ἐπίκουρος ἄλλω τινὶ τῆς ἀδικίας οἴεται δεῖν ἀπείργειν ἢ φόβῳ κολάσεων. ὥστε καὶ προσεμφορητέον ἐκείνοις τῆς δεισιδαιμονίας καὶ κινητέον ἐπ’ αὐτοὺς ἅμα τὰ ἐξ οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς δείματα καὶ χάσματα καὶ φόβους καὶ ὑπονοίας εἰ μέλλουσιν ἐκπλαγέντες ὑπὸ τούτων ἐπιεικέστερον

²⁸⁸ Plutarch, *Moralia* 165C.

²⁸⁹ Peter van Nuffelen argues that Plutarch is trying to correct the misconception of the divine world among the superstitious: instead of worshiping the gods as tyrants, the people should recognize the benevolence of the gods who desire to grant peace and wealth. Van Nuffelen expands on Plutarch’s idea of benevolent hierarchy in Peter van Nuffelen, *Rethinking the Gods: Philosophical Readings of Religion in the Post-Hellenistic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2011), 157–175.

ἔχειν καὶ πραότερον. λυσιτελεῖ γὰρ αὐτοῖς τὰ μετὰ τὸν θάνατον
φοβουμένοις μὴ ἀδικεῖν ἢ ἀδικοῦσιν ἐπισφαλῶς ἐν τῷ βίῳ διάγειν καὶ
περιφόβως.²⁹⁰

Although Plutarch did not approve of the extreme fear of the gods, he said that superstitious dread was preferable to the opposite Epicurean extreme of negating divine judgment entirely. Plutarch would actually promote superstitious dread in those that adopted the Epicurean response. He encouraged a more negative fear of the gods because he thought that it was better to avoid crime for fear of divine punishment rather than living in the insecurity of not believing in an afterlife. Plutarch believed that Epicurean ideals promoted atheism, but he was wrong because the Epicureans did believe in the existence of the gods; they just tried to discount the *fear* of the gods which prevailed in the culture.²⁹¹ Plutarch indicates that both responses of *deisidaimonia* and the Epicurean view do not reflect the majority,²⁹² but they seem to have gained enough popularity for Plutarch to write his critical essays to correct those who might wish to adopt either view.

Plutarch was not alone in his criticisms of the extreme responses to divine fear in the culture. Cicero, a few decades earlier, was similarly critical of the Epicureans and their response to superstition in his *De Natura Deorum* (On the Nature of the Gods):

For the doctrines of all these thinkers abolish not only superstition, which implies a groundless fear of the gods, but also religion, which consists in piously worshipping them.

Horum enim sententiae omnium non modo superstitionem tollunt in qua inest timor inanis deorum, sed etiam religionem quae deorum cultu pio continetur.²⁹³

Cicero condemned the Epicureans for rejecting the fear of the gods because the rejection of this fear was essentially rejecting the gods themselves. Like Plutarch, he acknowledged that the fear could develop into an extreme, fearful superstition, but it did not mean that the fear should be rejected completely.²⁹⁴

²⁹⁰ Plutarch, *Moralia* 1104B.

²⁹¹ For most of antiquity, Epicureans were considered to be “the atheists,” but Epicurus himself was actually fiercely critical of atheists. Cf. Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016), 173–177.

²⁹² Plutarch, *Moralia* 1104B–C.

²⁹³ Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 1.117–118.

²⁹⁴ It should be noted that *superstitio* is not considered to be completely synonymous with *deisidaimonia*. While both terms did refer to the excessive and demeaning behavior towards the gods, *deisidaimonia* did not usually include magic or the practices of foreigners. Cf. Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 225. Cicero, however, is clearly similar to Plutarch in that he is criticizing the Epicurean perspective on the fear of the gods.

Cicero confronted Epicurus's claim that he could detach himself from such fears:

Epicurus however does actually think that the gods exist, nor have I ever met anybody more afraid than he was of those things which he says are not terrible at all, I mean death and the gods.

Ille vero deos esse putat, nec quemquam vidi qui magis ea quae timenda esse negaret timeret, mortem dico et deos.²⁹⁵

According to Cicero, Epicurus may have purported to be free from superstition and fear, but in actuality, Epicurus himself suffered from a severe fear of the gods. In response, Epicurus developed a philosophy which promoted the absence of divine judgment to allay his own extreme fear of death. Cicero's explanation is plausible because fear of the divine was indeed a part of the culture and was likely promoted in Athens, where Epicurus may have been raised. According to Diogenes Laertius, who passionately defended Epicurean thought, Epicurus was a citizen of Athens,²⁹⁶ which was known for its cult worship including a prominent cult of the war god Ares,²⁹⁷ who, as seen above, was also closely affiliated with his son Phobos, the god of fear. Epicurus probably noticed that some, including himself, were consumed by the fear of death and fear of divine wrath, and in a countercultural response, determined that no one had to fear the gods because man did not exist after death.

The Johannine Response to Fear

With this background of fear in mind, we now turn back to the fear in the First Letter of John (4:18):

There is no **fear** in love, but perfect love casts out **fear**; for **fear** has to do with punishment, and **whoever fears** has not been perfected in love.

φόβος οὐκ ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ ἀλλ' ἡ τελεία ἀγάπη ἔξω βάλλει τὸν φόβον, ὅτι ὁ φόβος κόλασιν ἔχει, ὁ δὲ φοβούμενος οὐ τετελείωται ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ.

As we have established, this fear is not the Jewish conception of divine reverence that aligns love with fear for God. This fear is clearly a reference to the culture of fear in the Greco-Roman world which sometimes went to the extremes of superstitious *deisidaimonia* or the other extreme of negating the fear of the divine altogether.

²⁹⁵ Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 1.86.

²⁹⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 10.1.

²⁹⁷ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.8.4.

While the Stoics and Epicureans offered their responses to the fear of the divine in the culture, the writer of 1 John proclaims another countercultural response, which embraces love and results in boldness on the day of judgment (4:17):

Love has been perfected among us in this: that **we may have boldness on the day of judgment**, because as he is, so are we in this world.

ἐν τούτῳ τετελείωται ἡ ἀγάπη μεθ’ ἡμῶν, ἵνα **παρρησίαν ἔχωμεν ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῆς κρίσεως**, ὅτι καθὼς ἐκεῖνος ἐστὶν καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐσμεν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ τούτῳ.

The writer explains that those who embrace the perfect love²⁹⁸ of God may have “boldness” (παρρησία), a word that he uses three other times in the letter in having boldness before Jesus or God (2:28;²⁹⁹ 3:21), and in making requests to him (5:14). The idea of boldness “on the day of judgment” (ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῆς κρίσεως), a phrase which appears only once (1 John 4:17) in Johannine literature,³⁰⁰ would have been a radical idea in the context of the culture because, as we have seen, judgment in the culture was often perceived as belonging to the gods who had supernatural powers.

One was not supposed to be bold before the gods in the Greco-Roman world because it operated in a culture of honor and shame.³⁰¹ The cultural expectation would be honor or shame before the gods based on a person’s behavior. The writer of 1 John seems to allude to this aspect of the culture in his initial reference to boldness in which he contrasts boldness to being ashamed (αἰσχύομαι)³⁰² before Jesus (2:28):

And now, little children, remain in him, so that when he is revealed we may have boldness and not be put to shame before him at his coming.

Καὶ νῦν, τέκνιά, μένετε ἐν αὐτῷ, ἵνα ἐὰν φανερωθῇ σχῶμεν παρρησίαν καὶ μὴ αἰσχυνοῦμεν ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ.

²⁹⁸ The idea of perfect love or being perfected in love is seen in at 1 John 2:5; 4:12, 17, 18.

²⁹⁹ In 2:28, Jesus is not named, and the verse simply says, “before him at his coming” (ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ), but this is likely a reference to Jesus’ second coming. Cf. παρουσία at Matt 24:27, 37, 39; 1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thess 2:19; 3:13.

³⁰⁰ References to a “day of judgment” appear elsewhere in the NT at Matt 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36; 2 Pet 2:9; 3:7; cf. Jude 6. Jewish apocalyptic literature contains the concept of a judgment day (cf. Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 246), but as demonstrated above, the fear of the divine being incompatible with love (1 John 4:18) indicates that the allusion to fear is more likely a reference to the Greco-Roman culture of fear of divine judgment.

³⁰¹ Cf. Zeba Crook, “Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 591–611; John G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, The Nature of Human Society (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966).

³⁰² Cf. αἰσχύομαι at Luke 16:3; 2 Cor 10:8; Phil 1:20; 1 Pet 4:16.

In this verse, the author had called his spiritual disciples to attention again with the vocative “little children” (τεκνία, cf. 2:1, 12), and he had exhorted them to remain “in him” (ἐν αὐτῷ), referring to their *pistis* in Jesus.

The writer of 1 John wants the Johannine believers to know that if they remain in Jesus, they can have boldness (παρρησία) and not be put to shame (μὴ αἰσχυνθῶμεν) when they stand before him on the eschatological day of divine judgment. Although the “day of judgment” (ἡμέρα κρίσεως) only appears once in 1 John (4:17), the similar language of boldness (παρρησία) and the Johannine believers being “before him at his coming” (ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ) indicates that the day of divine judgment is likely being referenced in chapter two as well (2:28).³⁰³ This further supports that the writer has the culture in mind in chapter four as he delineates the differences between the Johannine community and the world around them, and the subsequent contention that results from their differences. While much of the Greco-Roman culture is fearful of divine punishment (4:18), the Johannine believers who remain in God may be bold before him on the day of judgment (2:28; 4:17).

The writer of 1 John refers to a future eschatology multiple times in the letter (cf. 2:18, 28; 3:2; 4:17),³⁰⁴ and he offers an explanation as to why the Johannine believers may have boldness on the day of judgment: “because as he is, so are we in this world,” (ὅτι καθὼς ἐκεῖνος ἐστὶν καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐσμεν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ τούτῳ, 4:17). As the believers remain in the perfect love of God (4:18), they are “as he is” (καθὼς ἐκεῖνος ἐστὶν), meaning they resemble the life of Jesus, being bold and unafraid of the temptations and intimidations of the Greco-Roman world (4:18 cf. 2:15–17).³⁰⁵ While most others in the culture fear authorities on earth and in the heavens, the Johannine writer asserts that his disciples do not have to fear. They do not have to be afraid of coming before God on the day of judgment when they are remaining in God (2:28; 4:15, 16) and they can be like Jesus who was bold on earth and be fearless of whatever tries to intimidate them in the Greco-Roman culture.

We have discussed Phobos who was representative of the fear in the culture and how he often appeared in the context of military battle. The writer of 1 John offers a counter to this as well, as he is alluding to a different kind of battle with the world in which fear has no place within the perfect love of God. Declaring fear as incompatible with love in 1 John (4:18) makes sense if the author is alluding to the conception of divine fear in Greco-Roman culture. The

³⁰³ Cf. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 169.

³⁰⁴ Cf. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 258.

³⁰⁵ Cf. παρρησία of Jesus at John 7:26; 10:24; 16:25, 29; 18:20. See also section 2.3. and Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 223.

writer draws a contrast between fear of punishment and perfection in love, and the aspect of fear especially as the antithesis to love demonstrates that he is referring to the fear of the divine which was a regular part of the Greco-Roman world. Because the members of the Johannine community are living and working in the broader society, it is not surprising that the writer of 1 John would allude to this fear-based culture. The declaration of fear being cast out in the love of God may have resonated especially for those who were raised in this social norm of divine fear before they became members of the Johannine community.

Through the allusion to the negative fear of the gods, the Johannine author demonstrates his countercultural narrative in which the Johannine audience is contending against the ideals of the Greco-Roman culture. He assures his readers that they do not have to dwell on the fear that prevails in the world around them; as they remain in the love of God (3:17; 4:16), respond with love (e.g. 3:11, 14, 23; 4:7, 11, 12), and allow themselves to be perfected in love (4:12, 17, 18), that fear from the culture will be cast out.

3.2 *Avoiding the Idols*

A Confusing Ending?

The writer's awareness and concern for the culture is perhaps most evident in the way that he concludes his letter. The fifth chapter is triumphant in that it proclaims the victory over the world (5:4) and the assurance of eternal life for the Johannine believers (5:11, 13, 20), but the ending statement is not a note of cheer; it is a final warning (5:21):

Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

Τεκνία, φυλάξατε ἑαυτὰ ἀπὸ τῶν εἰδώλων.

The writer of 1 John tells his spiritual children to keep themselves, literally, “from the idols” (ἀπὸ τῶν εἰδώλων), and the use of the definitive article suggests that both the writer and the readers knew what “the idols” meant.³⁰⁶ Many scholars interpreting the letter, however, have found the ending to be confusing, arguing that it seems abrupt and discordant with the previous material.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 627.

³⁰⁷ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 255; Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 234; Brown suggests ten different possibilities, but himself believes that the reference to idols is referring to those who left the Johannine community (Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 627–629).

For many modern readers, the ending to 1 John is confounding because it does not have the standard formal doxology or concluding farewell, which is present in the other two Johannine letters (cf. 2 John 13; 3 John 15). Some scholars have postulated over why the author would have chosen to end the First Letter in this manner when they read the epilogue quite positively.³⁰⁸ Having given such encouraging declarations that God hears the requests of the Johannine community (5:14–15), and that they are protected from the evil one (5:18), the writer seems to end his pastoral letter in an unexpectedly negative tone with a warning about idols.

From a dramatical standpoint, it would have made more sense to end with the assertion proclaimed just before (5:20):³⁰⁹

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

οἶδαμεν δὲ ὅτι ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ἦκει καὶ δέδωκεν ἡμῖν διάνοιαν ἵνα γινώσκομεν τὸν ἀληθινόν, καὶ ἐσμεν ἐν τῷ ἀληθινῷ ἐν τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ. οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἀληθινὸς θεὸς καὶ ζωὴ αἰώνιος.

The verse would end a sequence of three declarations of what “we know” (vv. 18–20), asserting the shared convictions and intentions of the Johannine community. Some choose to interpret the ending statement itself (5:21) in a positive light, stating that it encourages the readers to go out and implement the message of 1 John, and that it is also an encouragement to embrace the true God while rejecting the false idols.³¹⁰

The central debate regarding the final statement of 1 John is determining what is meant by “the idols” (τὰ εἰδώλα). Identifying its referent would help explain why the author would have chosen to end his letter with this warning. However, the difficulty is that “the idols” (τὰ εἰδώλα) appears only once (1 John 5:21) among John’s Gospel and the Johannine Letters, and only a few times elsewhere in the New Testament.³¹¹ Thus, it is challenging for modern readers to discern precisely what the Johannine teacher is trying to caution against.

³⁰⁸ Many scholars view the epilogue (5:13–21) positively, as a section on “Christian certainties” or “assurances of faith.” Cf. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 242; R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, Interpreting Biblical Texts (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 273. Lieu interestingly separates out 5:4–13 from 5:14–21 and entitles the latter section “Exercising the Privileges of Life” to argue that it is not an awkward epilogue or appendix but a summation and exhortation of faithful adherence to what has preceded. Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 220.

³⁰⁹ Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 234.

³¹⁰ Cf. Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 214; Daniel Akin, *I, 2, 3 John*, The New American Commentary 38 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 215.

³¹¹ The word εἰδωλον appears at Acts 7:41, 15:20; Rom. 2:22; 1 Cor. 8:4, 7; 10:19; 12:2; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Thess. 1:9; and Rev. 9:20.

Scholars have suggested a myriad of possibilities. The use of the aorist imperative with the definite article for “idols” might suggest that there is a specific issue that the writer of 1 John is trying to address rather than a general problem of idols. If that were the case, then perhaps the εἰδῶλα could be a shorthand for the food sacrifices (εἰδωλόθυτα, cf. 1 Cor 8:1, 4, 7, 10; Rev. 2:14, 20), which are addressed as a problem in other New Testament texts.³¹² Another suggestion is that the warning has a specific political focus with regard to enforced apostasy in the Empire, and that the Johannine author is writing his letter to encourage the community to face the possibility of martyrdom.³¹³ A third possibility is a metaphorical interpretation, which would understand “the idols” as a reference to sin, either in general or specifically in relation to the sin of apostasy.³¹⁴

The vast majority of commentators on 1 John have chosen to take a conceptual view of the τὰ εἰδῶλα, assuming its referent to be existent only in the mind, such as false teachings, false beliefs, and false conceptions of God.³¹⁵ Even though all other occurrences of the term εἰδωλον in the New Testament relate to the polytheistic religion of the Greco-Roman culture, these scholars regard “the idols” of 1 John to be an anomaly because they do not detect any cultural allusions in the letter. Thus, a concluding warning about Greco-Roman gods would seem sudden and out of place. Instead, the scholars who hold a conceptual view of the idols tend to read 1 John as a letter focused entirely on the internal ecclesial issues of the Johannine community, and they see “the idols” as a graphic expression of “false gods” in antithesis to the “true God” emphasized three times in the verse before (5:20).³¹⁶

With this conceptual interpretation, “the idols” would be identified with Christological heresies that are assumed in the letter (2:22; 4:2-3, 15; 5:1, 5, 6), and the “antichrist,” for example, would be considered an “idolater” who is promoting a heretical Christology.³¹⁷ Some

³¹² Cf Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 328–330.

³¹³ Cf. M. J. Edwards, “Martyrdom and the ‘First Epistle’ of John,” *Novum Testamentum* 31, Fasc. 2 (Apr 1989): 164–171.

³¹⁴ Cf. Wolfgang Nauck, *Die Tradition und der Charakter des ersten Johannesbriefes: zugleich ein Beitrag zur Taufe im Urchristentum und in der alten Kirche* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1957), 136–138; Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 263–264.

³¹⁵ Terry Griffith, *Keep Yourself from Idols a New Look at 1 John*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series 233 (London; New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 14. Examples of scholars who hold this view: F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1978), 128; Rudolf Bultmann takes εἰδῶλα in the sense of false gods (1 Cor. 8:4, 7; 1 Thess. 1:9) (*The Johannine Epistles*, 90ff.); William Loader, *The Johannine Epistles*, Epworth Commentaries (London: Epworth, 1992), 80; David Rensberger, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 144–145; Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 202; Marianne Meyers Thompson, *1–3 John*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 38; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 255–256; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 309–310. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 628.

³¹⁶ Griffith, *Keep Yourself from Idols*, 14.

³¹⁷ Griffith, *Keep Yourself from Idols*, 15.

scholars like J. N. Suggit try to appeal to a classical Greek meaning of εἶδωλον (as we shall see further below) as a “phantom,” and interpret the final warning of 1 John (5:21) to be about the heresy of Docetism. The concluding statement could then be equated to “keep yourselves away from ghosts.”³¹⁸ The difficulty with the conceptual interpretation of idols is that it is driven by general theological interpretation, and there is no evidence that the idols are “untrue mental images.”³¹⁹ If the term εἶδωλον is indeed in opposition to “the true God” in the penultimate verse (5:20), then the primary referent would need to be a Greco-Roman image to bridge the interpretation between “idols” and “false teachings.”³²⁰

A line of interpretation that is frequently acknowledged but also frequently set aside is the interpretation of the “idols” as graven images of the Greco-Roman gods. This interpretation has rightly been reconsidered.³²¹ It is very plausible that the “idols” of 1 John are referring to the material culture which displayed ubiquitous images of the gods in public, commercial, and domestic areas of life. This section will examine the concept of the “idol” (εἶδωλον) in the culture and in biblical literature to demonstrate that the concluding warning of 1 John (5:21) is consistent with the conquering language against the many opponents outlined in his letter. Just as the reference to divine fear alludes to the conception of fear in the culture (4:18), the final warning against idols at the end of the letter (5:21) is another indication that the writer of 1 John is presenting a countercultural narrative to his audience.

The Greco-Roman “Idol”

The term εἶδωλον within the Greco-Roman world itself did not have the negative sense that is apparent in 1 John. This is unsurprising as worshipping other gods was not an issue within the polytheistic culture replete with statues and manmade artifacts. The statues were not considered to be the gods and goddesses themselves, but material culture did identify with the deities, who could come down temporarily to embody statues and even animals in an epiphanic form.³²² Because devotion to one deity was not required, no one would have been bothered by anyone worshipping multiple gods or even adding to the polytheistic culture (cf. Acts 17:23). Thus, the Greco-Roman nuance of εἶδωλον is not the same type of Johannine εἶδωλον that

³¹⁸ J. N. Suggit, “1 JOHN 5:21: TEKNIΑ, ΦΥΛΑΞΑΤΕ ΕΑΥΤΑ ΑΠΟ ΤΩΝ ΕΙΔΩΛΩΝ,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 36 no. 2 (Oct 1985): 389.

³¹⁹ Griffith, *Keep Yourself from Idols*, 15.

³²⁰ Griffith, *Keep Yourself from Idols*, 17.

³²¹ See Julian Hills, ““Little children, keep yourselves from idols”: 1 John 5:21 Reconsidered,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (1989): 285–310.

³²² See Platt, *Facing the Gods*.

clearly relates with some negative form of idolatry. Instead, the Greco-Roman εἶδωλον tends to have a more neutral connotation in relation to a soul, phantom, or image.

In some earlier Greek usage, the word εἶδωλον appears to represent an unsubstantiated form.³²³ For example, Aeschylus called the loyalty of friends “a shadowy phantom” (εἶδωλον σκιᾶς).³²⁴ However, εἶδωλον often appears to represent a phantom that is similar to a soul or a ghost.³²⁵ In the *Odyssey*, for example, εἶδωλον is used in reference to the souls of men:

Son of Laertes, sprung from Zeus, Odysseus of many devices, stubborn man, what deed yet greater than this will you devise in your heart? How did you dare to come down to Hades, where dwell the unheeding dead, the *eidōla* of men outworn?

διογενὲς Λαερτιάδη, πολυμήχαν' Ὀδυσσεῦ, σκέτλιε, τίπτ' ἔτι μείζον ἐνὶ φρεσὶ μήσεαι ἔργον; πῶς ἔτλης Ἄιδόσδε κατελθέμεν, ἔνθα τε νεκροὶ ἀφραδέες ναίουσι, βροτῶν εἶδωλα καμόντων;³²⁶

In this context, the rhetorical questions from Achilles to Odysseus might suggest a negative undertone. However, the word εἶδωλον itself does not have a negative nuance, and is instead simply representative of the men who now live in the realm of the dead.

In the writings of Pindar, the word εἶδωλον similarly appears in reference to the soul:

The body of all men is subject to overpowering death, but a **living *eidōlon*** of life still remains, for it alone is from the gods. It slumbers while the limbs are active, but to men as they sleep, in many dreams it reveals an approaching decision of things pleasant or distressful.

σῶμα μὲν πάντων ἔπεται θανάτῳ περισθενεῖ, ζῶν δ' ἔτι λείπεται **αἰῶνος εἶδωλον**· τὸ γάρ ἐστι μόνον ἐκ θεῶν· εὕδει δὲ πρᾶσσόντων μελέων, ἀτὰρ εὐδόντεσσιν ἐν πολλοῖς ὀνείροις δείκνυσι τερπνῶν ἐφέρποισαν χαλεπῶν τε κρίσιν.³²⁷

However, Pindar adds the dimension of a “living *eidōlon*” (αἰῶνος εἶδωλον), referring to a “living image” that resembles an eternal soul. The living *eidōlon* continues to remain active while men sleep, and it can contribute to both positive and negative encounters in dreams.

The sense of a negative εἶδωλον could be argued in Platonic discourse, in which the concept of the εἶδωλον is applied to the subordinate designation of “unreal” objects:

³²³ LSJ s.v. “εἶδωλον.”

³²⁴ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 839.

³²⁵ Cf. Homer, *Iliad* 5.451; *Odyssey* 4.796.

³²⁶ Homer, *Odyssey* 11.476.

³²⁷ Pindar, *Fragments* 131.3; cf. Plutarch, *Letter of Consolation to Apollonius* 35.120C.

While the body is a semblance which attends on each of us, it being well said that the bodily corpses are *eidōla* of the dead, but that which is the real self of each of us, and which we term the immortal soul, departs to the presence of other gods.

τὸ δὲ σῶμα ἰδαλλόμενον ἡμῶν ἐκάστοις ἔπεσθαι, καὶ τελευτησάντων λέγεσθαι καλῶς **εἰδῶλα** εἶναι τὰ τῶν νεκρῶν σώματα, τὸν δὲ ὄντα ἡμῶν ἕκαστον ὄντως, **ἀθάνατον** εἶναι **ψυχὴν** ἐπονομαζόμενον, παρὰ θεοῦς ἄλλους ἀπιέναι δώσοντα λόγον³²⁸

The physical world contrasts the “real” world of ideas which reflects absolute truth and beauty. The immortal soul (ἀθάνατος ψυχή) is considered to be the “true self” that is separated from the body (σῶμα), and the body later becomes a phantom image (εἰδῶλον) of the dead.³²⁹

Some writings use εἰδῶλον for a reflected image, as in a mirror or when reflected in the water.³³⁰ Aristotle says:

The most skillful judge of dreams is the man who possesses the ability to detect likenesses; for anyone can judge the vivid dream. By likenesses I mean that the mental pictures are like *eidōlois* in water, as we have said before. In the latter case, if there is much movement, the reflection is not like the original, nor the *eidōla* like the real object.

Τεχνικώτατος δ' ἐστὶ κριτὴς ἐνυπνίων ὅστις δύναται τὰς ὁμοιότητας θεωρεῖν· τὰς γὰρ εὐθυονειρίας κρίνειν παντός ἐστιν. λέγω δὲ τὰς ὁμοιότητας, ὅτι παραπλήσια συμβαίνει τὰ φαντάσματα τοῖς ἐν τοῖς ὕδασι **εἰδώλοις**, καθάπερ καὶ πρότερον εἶπομεν. ἐκεῖ δέ, ἂν πολλὴ γίνηται ἡ κίνησις, οὐδὲν ὁμοία γίνεται ἢ ἔμφασις καὶ τὰ **εἰδῶλα** τοῖς ἀληθινοῖς.³³¹

Like Pindar above, Aristotle talks about the εἰδῶλον in the context of dreams, and like Plato, he suggests the distinction between what is real and what is a reflection of the real.

Cassius Dio seems to adopt a similar use of the word εἰδῶλον with regard to phantom figures. He refers to several supernatural events after the Battle of Alexandria in 30 BCE:

Meanwhile comets were seen and dead men's *eidōla* appeared, the statues frowned, and Apis bellowed a note of lamentation and burst into tears.

κάν τούτῳ καὶ ἀστέρες κομῆται ἐωρῶντο, καὶ νεκρῶν **εἰδῶλα** ἐφαντάζετο, τὰ τε ἀγάλματα ἐσκυθρώπασε, καὶ ὁ Ἄπις ὀλοφυρτικόν τι ἐμυκήσατο καὶ κατεδάκρυσε.³³²

³²⁸ Plato, *Laws* 959b.

³²⁹ Cf. similarly Plato, *Phaedo* 66c.

³³⁰ Cf also Plato, *Sophist* 266b.

³³¹ Aristotle, *On Prophecy in Sleep* 464^b9.

³³² Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 51.17.5

Dio frequently uses εἶδωλον to refer to ghosts or phantoms in his writings,³³³ and this may suggest that both Greeks and Romans commonly understood the term in this way. However, the word εἶδωλον does seem to be used in reference to literal images as well, as seen in Herodotus:

Along with these Croesus sent, besides many other offerings of no great mark, certain round basins of silver, and a golden female *eidōlon* three cubits high, which the Delphians assert to be the statue of the woman who was Croesus' baker.

ἄλλα τε ἀναθήματα οὐκ ἐπίσημα πολλὰ ἀπέπεμψε ἅμα τούτοισι ὁ Κροῖσος, καὶ χεύματα ἀργύρεα κυκλοτερέα, καὶ δὴ καὶ γυναικὸς εἶδωλον χρύσειον τρίπηχυν, τὸ Δελφοὶ τῆς ἀρτοκόπου τῆς Κροΐσου εἰκόνα λέγουσι εἶναι.³³⁴

Interestingly, a golden female statue called an εἶδωλον is among the offerings given to Delphi. This would have interesting implications for the εἶδωλα in 1 John if the worshippers of the polytheistic culture also called the statues “εἶδωλα.” The Johannine author could simply be using the term that was also used in the culture to refer to the representations of the gods.

A similar type of εἶδωλον appears in the writings of Dionysius of Halicarnassus:

And lest the people should feel any scruple at having neglected their traditional sacrifices, he [Hercules] taught them to appease the anger of the god by making *eidōla* resembling the men they had been wont to bind hand and foot and throw into the stream of the Tiber, and dressing these in the same manner, to throw them into the river instead of the men, his purpose being that any superstitious dread remaining in the minds of all might be removed, since the semblance of the ancient rite would still be preserved. This the Romans continued to do every year even down to my day a little after the vernal equinox.

ἵνα δὲ μηδὲν εἴη τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἐνθύμιον, ὥς πατρίων ἡλογηκόσι θυσιῶν, διδάξει τοὺς ἐπιχωρίους ἀπομειλιττομένους τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ μῆνιν ἀντὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, οὓς συμποδίζοντες καὶ τῶν χειρῶν ἀκρατεῖς ποιοῦντες ἐρρίπτουν εἰς τὸ τοῦ Τεβέριος ῥεῖθρον, εἶδωλα ποιοῦντας ἀνδρείκελα κεκοσμημένα τὸν αὐτὸν ἐκείνοις τρόπον ἐμβαλεῖν εἰς τὸν ποταμόν, ἵνα δὴ τὸ τῆς ὀνείας ὅ τι δὴ ποτε ἦν ἐν ταῖς ἀπάντων ψυχαῖς παραμένον ἐξαιρεθῇ τῶν εἰκόνων τοῦ παλαιοῦ πάθους ἔτι σωζομένων. τοῦτο δὲ καὶ μέχρις ἐμοῦ ἔτι διετέλουν Ῥωμαῖοι δρῶντες ὁσέτη μικρὸν ὕστερον τῆς ἐαρινῆς ἰσημερίας.³³⁵

³³³ E.g. Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 37.25.2; 63.16.2; 67.19.2.

³³⁴ Herodotus, *The Persian Wars* 1.51.

³³⁵ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1.38.2–3.

When Dionysius refers to the εἰδωλα, he is talking about the effigies of men, which are given to Saturn (Greek: Cronus) instead of real human sacrifices to appease the anger of the god and to release the superstitious dread they have in their minds (see more on the culture of fear in section 3.1). According to Dionysius, the Romans do this every year even in his time when the Roman Empire is in its nascent stages. The εἰδωλα here are not images of the gods, but they are related to the worship of the gods.

In the final example, we see that Dionysius does indeed use the term εἰδωλα to refer to statues of the gods.³³⁶

We have seen many other *eidōla* also of these gods in ancient temples and in all of them are represented two youths in military garb.

πολλὰ δὲ καὶ ἄλλα ἐν ἱεροῖς ἀρχαίοις εἰδωλα τῶν θεῶν τούτων ἐθεασάμεθα,
καὶ ἐν ἅπασιν νεανίσκοι δύο στρατιωτικὰ σχήματα ἔχοντες φαίνονται.

The examples of Herodotus and Dionysius demonstrate that the term εἰδωλα could be used not only of manmade effigies, but also in reference to the statues of the gods in Roman temples. It is notable that Dionysius's description about the εἰδωλα in the temples also includes the description of the young men who are military guards. The Greek word for "young men" (νεανίσκοι) is the same term that the author of 1 John uses to address the first Johannine conquerors who defeat the evil one (2:13, 14, see also section 2.1). This further supports that the Johannine author is alluding to the culture with his usage of εἰδωλα and νεανίσκοι which are terms related to polytheistic worship.

As we have seen, the word εἰδωλον in the Greco-Roman culture seems to be applied often to the intangible, such as a phantom or soul, but it can also refer to tangible, manmade images. These εἰδωλα would not have been seen negatively among Greeks and Romans in the same way that Jews and Christians might view them, but there seems to have been some overlap in the terminology in that εἰδωλα could be applied to the material culture of worship in the Greco-Roman world.

Jewish Idolatry

Because the warning of idols at the end of 1 John is decidedly more negative than the Greco-Roman usage of εἰδωλον, we should now consider the Jewish sense of εἰδωλον which

³³⁶ Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1.68.2. Dionysius also refers to bronze statues of animals as εἰδωλα (1.59.5), and like other writers, he refers to the more ghostly figures (cf. 1.77.2; 6.13.4; 7.68.4; 10.2.3).

seems to align with the sentiments of the Johannine author.³³⁷ In the Septuagint, the word εἶδωλον appears 91 times,³³⁸ which suggests that there is a Semitic influence to the idols of 1 John.³³⁹ Taken on its own, the contrast between “the true God” (5:20) and the idols would not be surprising because the term “idol” (εἶδωλον) was a standard Jewish and subsequently Christian way of referring to the deities other than the one God they worshipped.³⁴⁰

The fundamentally negative notion of an idol in the Jewish context is exemplified in the second commandment of the Decalogue (Exo. 20:4; cf. Deut 5:8):

You shall not make for yourself an **idol**, whether in the image of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

οὐ ποιήσεις σεαυτῷ εἶδωλον οὐδὲ παντὸς ὁμοίωμα ὅσα ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ ἄνω
καὶ ὅσα ἐν τῇ γῇ κάτω καὶ ὅσα ἐν τοῖς ὕδασι ὑποκάτω τῆς γῆς.

As with the first commandment which forbids associating with other gods (Exo 20:3), the second commandment underlines the relationship between Yahweh and the people of Israel by delineating specifications of how Yahweh *is* to be worshipped.³⁴¹ The prohibition in worship to Yahweh is in the use of manmade idols that reflect the image of anything in creation on earth, and also anything “in the heaven above” (ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ ἄνω) suggesting celestial objects such as stars, as well as spiritual or mythopoeic creatures, such as a deity or angelic figure. Using crafted images to provide a concrete center for worship was a common practice to all of Israel’s neighbors,³⁴² and so the commandment against these “idols” demonstrates the distinction of worship between the people of Israel and the other nations.

In Numbers, the word εἶδωλον seems to underscore the gods being from other nations (25:2):

They invited the people to the sacrifices of their **idols**, and the people ate of their sacrifices and bowed down to their **idols**.

καὶ ἐκάλεσαν αὐτοὺς ἐπὶ ταῖς θυσίαις τῶν εἰδώλων αὐτῶν καὶ ἔφαγεν ὁ λαὸς τῶν θυσιῶν αὐτῶν καὶ προσεκύνησαν τοῖς εἰδώλοις αὐτῶν.

³³⁷ For more a Jewish interpretation of the idols of 1 John (5:21), cf. Griffith, *Keep Yourself from Idols*, and Hills, “‘Little children, keep yourselves from idols.’”

³³⁸ E.g. Gen 31:19; Lev. 19:4; Num 33:52; 2 Kings 23:24; 1 Chron 16:26; 2 Chron 34:7; Ps 135:15 (LXX 134:15); Isa 30:22; Jer. 16:19; Hos 8:4.

³³⁹ Painter, *I, 2, and 3 John*, 327; Yarbrough, *I–3 John*, 323.

³⁴⁰ Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 234.

³⁴¹ Cf. John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary 3 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), 285.

³⁴² Durham, *Exodus*, 286.

The Israelites in this context are having sexual relations with Moabite women and the Moabite gods are labelled “idols.” In Hebrew, **עֲלֵלִים** reflects the general term for “gods,”³⁴³ but in Greek, the use of εἰδωλον makes clear that this is a foreign god, and that the Israelites are engaged in the worship of a god that is not the Israelite god. Moreover, this worship to a foreign idol is encouraged through interaction with others who were not a part of their community. The Moabite women are instigators toward the worship of the idols.

A similar narrative is presented with respect to King Solomon whose downfall is the result of foreign women who worshipped idols (1 Kings 11:2):

From the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the sons of Israel, “You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you; lest they incline your heart to follow their **idols**”; Solomon clung to these in love.

ἐκ τῶν ἐθνῶν ὧν ἀπεῖπεν κύριος τοῖς υἱοῖς ἰσραὴλ οὐκ εἰσελεύσεσθε εἰς αὐτούς καὶ αὐτοὶ οὐκ εἰσελεύσονται εἰς ὑμᾶς μὴ ἐκκλίνωσιν τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν ὀπίσω **εἰδώλων** αὐτῶν εἰς αὐτοὺς ἐκολλήθη σαλωμων τοῦ ἀγαπῆσαι.

Like the Israelite men who had sexual relations with the Moabite women, King Solomon falters in his relationship with the God of Israel because of his relationship with foreign women. These women lead the Israelite men into worshipping their gods, which are labelled “idols.” The designation of “idol” underscores the negative sense that these are “other” gods and not the “true” God.

There are several scripture references that allude to “idols” that are a part of material culture. For example, in the book of Genesis (31:19):

Now Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father’s **idols**.

Λαβαν δὲ ὄχρετο κεῖραι τὰ πρόβατα αὐτοῦ· ἔκλεψεν δὲ Ραχὴλ τὰ **εἰδωλα** τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῆς.

The εἰδωλα here are the small statues of the household gods that Rachel steals presumably for inheritance or headship rights for her husband, or for protection on her journey to Canaan.³⁴⁴

In Leviticus, the Israelites are forbidden from *making* “idols” (19:4):

Do not pursue **idols** or make cast images for yourselves: I am the Lord your God.

³⁴³ HALOT s.v. “עֲלֵלִים.”

³⁴⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 292.

οὐκ ἐπακολουθήσετε **εἰδώλοις** καὶ θεοὺς χωνευτοὺς οὐ ποιήσετε ὑμῖν ἐγὼ
κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν.

This verse reflects the sentiment that the Israelites should not make any idols of their own because the only true god is the God of Israel. The neighboring nations may have manmade images to represent the gods, but the Israelites should not covet these images and make such idols of their own. The idols that are made by man are not considered to be gods because they are from material that has no spiritual power or authority, as seen in Isaiah (37:19):

And have hurled their **idols** into the fire, though they were no gods, but the work of human hands—wood and stone—and so they were destroyed.

καὶ ἐνέβαλον τὰ **εἰδωλα** αὐτῶν εἰς τὸ πῦρ οὐ γὰρ θεοὶ ἦσαν ἀλλὰ ἔργα
χειρῶν ἀνθρώπων ξύλα καὶ λίθοι καὶ ἀπώλεσαν αὐτούς

The idols are the work of human hands, and therefore not really gods at all, and they can be destroyed without consequence.

Outside of the LXX, we see other Jewish writers demonstrate a similar sentiment regarding the εἰδωλα. Josephus, in his *Jewish Antiquities* reflects a negative view of the idols as he writes about wicked Israelite kings:

This king was shockingly arrogant and lawless in his conduct toward God, worshipping **idols** and adopting many unseemly foreign practices, but to the people of Israel he was the cause of innumerable benefits.

οὗτος ὁ βασιλεὺς τὰ μὲν εἰς τὸν θεὸν ὑβριστῆς καὶ παράνομος δεινῶς
ἐγένετο **εἰδωλά** τε σεβόμενος καὶ πολλοῖς ἀτόποις καὶ ξένοις ἐγχειρῶν
ἔργοις, τῷ δὲ λαῷ τῶν Ἰσραηλιτῶν μυρίων ἀγαθῶν αἴτιος ὑπῆρξε.³⁴⁵

Josephus criticizes the wickedness of Jeroboam (cf. 2 Kings 14:23) and includes his worshipping of foreign idols as one indication of his failure to be a faithful king of Israel. His designation of the idols is consistent with the LXX passages that identify the foreign gods as “idols.”

Interestingly, Philo seems to reflect a Jewish sentiment against the Greco-Roman sentiment of the idols:

But not only wealth and glory and the like are **idols** and unsubstantial shadows, but also all those personages, which the myth-makers have invented and spread delusion therewith, building up their false imaginations

³⁴⁵ Josephus, *AJ* 9.205. Cf. 9.99; 9.243; 9.273; 10.50; 10.65; 10.69. Josephus does, however, use the Greco-Roman concept of εἰδωλον as well (cf. Josephus, *BJ*, 5.513).

into a stronghold to menace the truth, and staging as by machinery new gods, in order that the eternal and really existing God might be consigned to oblivion.

Ἀλλ' οὐ μόνον πλοῦτος καὶ δόξα καὶ τὰ τοιοῦτα εἰδῶλα καὶ ἀμενηναὶ σκιαί, ἀλλὰ καὶ πάντες, οὓς οἱ μυθογράφοι διαπλάσαντες ἐξετύφωσαν ἐπιτειχίσαντες τὰς ψευδεῖς δόξας κατὰ τῆς ἀληθείας, θεοὺς καινοὺς ὥσπερ ἀπὸ μηχανῆς εἰσαγαγόντες ἔνεκα τοῦ τὸν αἰδίου καὶ ὄντος θεοῦ λήθῃ παραδοθῆναι.³⁴⁶

By referring to the εἰδῶλα in relation to unsubstantial shadows (εἰδῶλα καὶ ἀμενηναὶ σκιαί), Philo is alluding to the Greco-Roman conceptions of idols as shadows (as discussed above), and he reflects the negative Jewish conception of worshipping an idol that is not the true God. Philo as a Jew in the Greco-Roman world reflects a similar perspective to the Johannine author. The warning about the idols at the end of 1 John (5:21) resembles the negative Jewish conception of idols because he is making a countercultural argument *against* the polytheistic culture of the Greco-Roman world.

Warning against the Idols in 1 John

The writer of 1 John is consistent with both the Jewish conception of the idols and many New Testament texts that reflect a countercultural perspective against the idols of the Greco-Roman culture. The admonition at the end of the First Letter of John is not unusual as many New Testament writers similarly offer words of caution before they conclude their letter.³⁴⁷ The caution against the “idols” in 1 John would have become commonplace as it had been a part of Christian polemic, and converts from non-Jewish backgrounds would have internalized the vocabulary of “idols” as well (cf. 1 Cor. 12:2).³⁴⁸

In the New Testament in general, εἰδῶλον seems to refer to deities worshipped by Gentile nations, appearing most frequently in 1 Corinthians with regard to food offered to idols (8:4, 7; 10:19; 12:2), that is, food offered to Greco-Roman deities.³⁴⁹ The exception is Stephen in the book of Acts who refers to the ancient Israelites making a sacrifice to an “idol” (7:41;

³⁴⁶ Philo, *On the Special Laws* 1.28.

³⁴⁷ Other NT epistles that similarly address concerns and offer admonition in the final lines: e.g. Rom 16:17–20; 1 Cor. 16:13–14; 2 Cor. 13:5, 10; Gal 6:17; Eph 6:10–20; 2 Col 4:5; 1 Thess 5:22; 2 Thess 3:6–15; 1 Tim 5:20; Titus 3; Phile 21; Heb 13:9, 22; James 5; 1 Pet 5:8; 2 Pet 3:17; 2 John 10–11; 3 John 11; Jude 17–23.

³⁴⁸ Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 235.

³⁴⁹ Cf. Gordon D. Fee, “Εἰδωλόθυτα Once Again: An Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 8–10,” *Biblica* 61, no. 2 (1980): 183.

cf. Exo 32).³⁵⁰ This is referring to a golden statue of a calf, which may have been related to the widespread fertility cult of bull worship in the ancient Near East.³⁵¹ The other references to idols are clearly related to Greco-Roman worship:³⁵² the book of Acts makes a clear reference to Gentile Christians abstaining from what is “polluted by idols” (15:20),³⁵³ the letter to the Romans includes a reference to abhorring idols and robbing temples (2:22),³⁵⁴ 1 Thessalonians lauds the turning away from idols (1:9),³⁵⁵ and the final reference in Revelation alludes to idolatry in the form of material culture, worshipping statues made of metal, stone, or wood (9:20). The general New Testament usage of “idol” appears to support that the writer of 1 John may also be referring to manmade idols, such as the representations of the deities seen ubiquitously in the material culture of the Greco-Roman world.

In the epilogue of 1 John (5:13–21), the writer recapitulates the concern over sin, which is mentioned in every chapter of the letter,³⁵⁶ and he reminds the readers of their opponent, the evil one who is operating in the world and has power over the “whole world” (5:18–19, cf. 2:13–14; 3:12).³⁵⁷ Thus, the author is not entirely positive at the end of his letter, as other scholars have suggested,³⁵⁸ and it is unsurprising that he would choose to conclude with a

³⁵⁰ The demand from the Israelites to “make gods for us” (ποιήσον ἡμῖν θεοὺς) in Acts 7:40 is an indication of explicit participation in polytheism which violated the first commandment (Exo 20:3–4). Notably Josephus omits discussion of the golden calf incident in his history of the nation, probably because his primary readers were polytheists. Cf. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 298.

³⁵¹ Moses Aberbach and Leivy Smolar, “Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86, no. 2 (Jun 1967): 135; cf. T. Worden, “The Literary Influence of the Ugaritic Fertility Myth on the Old Testament,” *Vetus Testamentum* 3, Fasc. 3 (Jul 1953): 273–297.

³⁵² Cf. Griffith, *Keep Yourself from Idols*, 14.

³⁵³ It is likely that the limitations are to keep relations from becoming strained between Jews and Gentiles, and the prohibition relates to participating in Greco-Roman cult worship. Cf. Bock, *Acts*, 506; Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Carlisle, U.K.: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1998), 462–465.

³⁵⁴ Jewish religion in the first century was threatened by Hellenism, particularly because the dispersion of Jews throughout pagan society led to increased need to avoid pagan practices. It is unclear what is meant by robbing temples, but usage of cognate ἱερόσυλος occurs in Acts 19:37 in reference to Paul not being a temple robber and in the LXX at 2 Maccabees referring to the robbing of the Jerusalem Temple. Cf. Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 163. Stealing, adultery, and idolatry in Rom. 2:21–22 relate to the Decalogue (Exo 20:4–5, 14, 15; Deut 5:8–9, 18, 19) and may have been part of a Jewish polemic against idolatry (cf. Rom 1:23). Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38A (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1988), 114.

³⁵⁵ Cf. F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary 45 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), 17–18; Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 62–63.

³⁵⁶ In chapter five, sin is mentioned seven times within three verses: the noun ἁμαρτία at 5:16 (2x), 17 (2x) and verbal forms of ἁμαρτάνω at 5:16 (2x), 18. The word ἁμαρτία also occurs at 1 John 1:7, 8, 9 (2x); 2:2, 12; 3:4 (2x), 5 (2x), 8, 9; 4:10; see also ἁμαρτάνω at 1:10; 2:1 (2x); 3:6 (2x), 8, 9.

³⁵⁷ See also section 2.1.

³⁵⁸ Cf. the positive perspectives in Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 242; Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, 273.

strong warning. The exhortation to keep away from idols (5:21) is consistent with the tone of contention against the world outside the Johannine community (see section 2.3), which permeates throughout the letter. Moreover, it emphasizes the primary pastoral concern about conquering the beliefs of the Greco-Roman polytheistic culture which undermines and threatens their *pistis* in the incarnate Jesus.

The writer of 1 John calls the readers to attention a final time with the vocative “little children” (Τεκνία), an address he has used six times before to indicate his relational but also instructional tone.³⁵⁹ The address might also be a reminder of their being born of God (cf. 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18) and being God’s children (τέκνα θεοῦ).³⁶⁰ After the encouraging first-person plural (5:18–20), in which the author affirmed what “we know” as a collective Johannine community protected by God, the vocative address of “little children” now distances the readers, snapping them to attention to receive the final injunction that reveals his main concern.³⁶¹

The pastoral leader tells them to “keep yourselves” (φυλάξατε ἑαυτὰ) which could also be translated “guard yourselves,”³⁶² or perhaps more helpfully for modern audiences, “keep away” (as in the NLT).³⁶³ The imperative is one of a handful of imperatives from the teacher (cf. 2:15, 28; 3:1, 7, 13; 4:1), most of which exhort the readers to be mindful of potential threats to the community. The use of the reflexive pronoun (5:21) places the emphasis on the personal action of the Johannine readers;³⁶⁴ each member of the community has their own responsibility, and the concluding injunction is to keep away from a threat, “the idols,” which, like the other named threats in the letter, is presumably not a threat that is within the Johannine community. Just as they were warned to not love the world (2:15) and to not believe the false prophets (4:1), the final statement warns against the attraction or power of idols.³⁶⁵ The Johannine believers need to avoid and guard against the idols in the Greco-Roman culture of the time.

³⁵⁹ See τεκνία at 1 John 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4. Cf. the similar vocative, παῖδια, at 2:14, 18.

³⁶⁰ The word τέκνον appears in the Johannine letters in different contexts (such as God’s children, the children of the devil, or the elect lady’s children) in 1 John 3:1, 2, 10 (2x); 5:2; 2 John 1, 4, 13; 3 John 4.

³⁶¹ Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 234.

³⁶² LSJ s.v. “φυλάσσω.” For φυλάσσω ἀπό, cf. Luke 12:15; 2 Thess. 3:3; *Testament of Reuben* 4:8.

³⁶³ The verb φυλάσσω appears only in 5:21 in the Johannine letters (cf. Jesus’ disciples being guarded in the world at John 12:25, 47; 17:12). The verb is synonymous with τηρέω, which also occurs with the preposition ἀπο (James 1:27), but it may be significant that τηρέω with ἀπο in the LXX occurs only at Prov. 7:5, while φυλάσσω with ἀπο appears several times, often warning against contact with dangerous or defiling objects or people (Deut. 23:9 (23:10 LXX); Josh 6:18; 1 Sam 21:4 (21:5 LXX); Ps 18:23 (17:24 LXX); Ezek 33:8. Cf. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 323 n. 2.

³⁶⁴ Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, 197.

³⁶⁵ Cf. Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 234.

In the Dead Sea Scrolls, sin and idolatry are closely linked and therefore, “keep yourselves from idols” may appear to be synonymous with “keep yourselves from sin.”³⁶⁶ Indeed, this is a tempting conclusion as “sin” (ἁμαρτία) has been mentioned before this final warning (1 John 5:16–18). However, the association of sin and idolatry does not mean that idolatry is a synonym for sin. The adoption of false gods or false conceptions of God is usually associated with sin, and so the writer could be urging his readers to have nothing to do with false ideas of God and the accompanying sins. While the writer of 1 John does express concern about sin and the false understandings of God, he seems to mention idols as his final statement because it reinforces his broader concern: the things in the world that threaten their *pistis*. The focus at the end of 1 John is about knowing the true God, who is Jesus Christ, the Son of God (especially 5:1, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 20). What is at stake is eternal life (vv. 11, 13, 20), and the writer wants them to remember that the idols out there in the world are not the true Son of God. In that regard, “keep yourselves from idols” could be synonymous with “keep yourselves from the world,” but he uses the word “idols” to emphasize the point that they are not the true God (ὁ ἀληθινὸς θεὸς, 5:20).

In the surrounding culture, the readers of 1 John would see purported deities in their daily lives in the forms of statues, images on buildings, and imprints on their coins, and the majority of people in the Greco-Roman world would not believe what they believe. However, that belief (*pistis*) is precisely what separates them from the rest of the world, and by the very nature of believing in Jesus as the Son of God, they are overcoming the prevailing culture full of idols that demand their attention on a regular basis. There is a battle of *pistis* between the Johannine community and the *pistis* in the culture, and conquering the world would involve a battle in which the Johannine believer was constantly fighting against the overwhelming majority of polytheistic worshippers.

I. Howard Marshall says, “Nowhere in the letter has John spoken of the danger of worship of the material images and false gods whose cults flourished in the world of his readers.”³⁶⁷ Indeed, the writer does not directly mention material culture or speak of worshipping other deities as in other places in the New Testament.³⁶⁸ However, the warning would not necessarily have to *negate* the inclusion of Greco-Roman deities of the culture as

³⁶⁶ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 255.

³⁶⁷ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 256.

³⁶⁸ For example, Acts 17:29; Rom. 1:23; 1 Cor. 8:5ff, 10:14; 1 Thess. 1:9; Rev. 13:15.

some scholars have suggested.³⁶⁹ The writer does not have to address the deities directly because it was an obvious part of the culture. His primary concern is not about the ubiquitous images of the gods and goddess in the surrounding culture; the main issue is about ensuring that the readers keep their victorious *pistis* in Jesus and that they do not allow it to be swayed by any idol in their surroundings, including the culture of worship that they see at the markets, temples, and neighbors' houses in their everyday life.

Endings of letters are important, as they are often the most memorable, and it is the final opportunity to convey the writer's message.³⁷⁰ In the case of 1 John, the author wants the final word to be about idols and to emphasize that his disciples should avoid them. This could be warning about idols in general, that is, anything that would detract them away from acknowledging Jesus as the true God (cf. 5:20). However, the conquering language and the allusions to the culture throughout the letter suggest that he may be referring more specifically to the Greco-Roman deities represented in material culture.

To end the letter with a cautionary exhortation indicates that the ultimate concern for the writer is about the culture and its influences that would sway the Johannine audience from their victorious *pistis* (5:4–5). The injunction to keep themselves from these idols places an urgency on what the readers should avoid. The concluding warning about the idols (5:21) offers even greater support that the Johannine writer is crafting a countercultural narrative because he is concerned about the dominant culture of the time that did not share the core *pistis* of the Johannine community. He gives this concluding warning to ensure that they continue to resist the influences of the Greco-Roman world, and to continue to conquer the culture through their *pistis* in Jesus as the incarnate Son of God.

³⁶⁹ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 255. Other scholars admit the possibility of the community being warned against the idols so common in first-century religion in the culture: e.g., Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters*, 273; Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 324; Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 329–330.

³⁷⁰ Cf. Morna D. Hooker, *Endings: Invitations to Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 2.

4. Conquering the World with *Pistis*

As we have seen, the author of 1 John frames his letter in a countercultural narrative because of his concern about the *pistis* of his readers. The sections below will now examine the associations of *pistis* in the culture, including the *pistis* that led to Roman victory and the expected *pistis* of the people to the emperor, who was known as the *divi filius*, the divine son. Then the study will turn to the *pistis* language of 1 John to demonstrate that the author deliberately frames his letter in a countercultural narrative which subjugates the Greco-Roman culture to the victorious Johannine *pistis*.

4.1 *Pistis and Greco-Roman Victory*

Pistis of the Romans

The writer of 1 John portrays the Johannine believers as the conquerors of his letter (2:13, 14; 5:4, 5), but in the culture of the Roman Empire, the soldiers operating under the authority of the emperor would have been representative of the conquerors of the time;³⁷¹ it was the clout of military victories that allowed Rome to come into power. The domination of the Empire was actually the fruit of a consistent rise to power that escalated during the Middle Republic, and the Roman military was able to achieve victory in part because of a strategy which involved a *pistis* to the Romans.

The Greek historian Polybius was fascinated that Rome had come to dominate the Mediterranean in such a short period of time, and he wrote his *Histories* to help explain the phenomenon. In his accounts, he notes that the “*pistis* of the Romans” (εἰς τὴν Ῥωμαίων πίστιν) was a vital and practical element of their achieving victory. In this *pistis*, other nations subjugated themselves, entrusting their nation to their Roman conquerors. Polybius’s narratives about the battles involving *pistis* demonstrate that the culture of Roman military victory was, in part, established through *pistis*.

In the account of the Illyrian campaign, Polybius describes the Romans setting sail with two hundred ships in 229 BCE.³⁷² Gnaeus, one of the Roman consuls, stops at the island of Corcyra, and, according to Polybius:

³⁷¹ As we have seen in section 1.2, the soldiers and the emperor also looked to the goddess Nike to achieve their military victories.

³⁷² Polybius 2.11.1–8. Cf. Erich Gruen, “Greek Πίστις and Roman *Fides*,” *Athenaeum* NS 60 (1982): 62.

The Corcyreans were much relieved to see the Romans arrive, and they gave up the Illyrian garrison to them with the consent of Demetrius. They unanimously accepted the Romans' invitation **to place themselves under their protection**, considering this the sole means of assuring for the future their safety from the violence of the Illyrians. The Romans, having admitted the Corcyreans **to their friendship**, set sail for Apollonia, Demetrius in future acting as their guide.

οἱ δὲ Κερκυραῖοι τὴν παρουσίαν τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἀσμένως ἰδόντες, τὴν τε φρουρὰν παρέδωκαν τῶν Ἰλλυριῶν μετὰ τῆς τοῦ Δημητρίου γνώμης, αὐτοὶ τε σφᾶς ὁμοθυμαδὸν ἔδωκαν παρακληθέντες **εἰς τὴν τῶν Ῥωμαίων πίστιν**, μίαν ταύτην ὑπολαβόντες ἀσφάλειαν αὐτοῖς ὑπαρχειν εἰς τὸν μέλλοντα χρόνον πρὸς τὴν Ἰλλυριῶν παρανομίαν. Ῥωμαῖοι δὲ προσδεξάμενοι τοὺς Κερκυραίους **εἰς τὴν φιλίαν** ἔπλεον ἐπὶ τῆς Ἀπολλωνίας, ἔχοντες εἰς τὰ κατάλοιπα τῶν πραγμάτων ἡγεμόνα τὸν Δημήτριον.³⁷³

The Corcyreans were supposedly relieved to see the Romans arrive because they wanted to have protection from the violence of the Illyrians, and the Corcyreans therefore unanimously accept the invitation to the “*pistis* of the Romans” (εἰς τὴν Ῥωμαίων πίστιν),³⁷⁴ and the Romans, having admitted them “to their friendship” (εἰς τὴν φιλίαν),³⁷⁵ set sail for Apollonia, where the next people group is also received into their *pistis*.

One may wonder to what extent the Corcyreans were truly relieved to see the Romans, but Polybius suggests that the Corcyreans were actively encouraged to give themselves into the “*pistis* of the Romans,” which is translated above³⁷⁶ as “to place themselves under their protection.” This *pistis* relationship is seemingly not a demand for the Corcyreans to completely subjugate themselves to the Romans and surrender everything in their possession.³⁷⁷ Instead, it is portrayed in a positive light, albeit an obviously asymmetrical one, in which there seems to be a form of mutual benefit: the Corcyreans gain military security against the Illyrians, and the Romans gain “friendship” (φιλία), that is, assistance for future battles in the area.³⁷⁸ The Romans subsequently take other communities into their *pistis* including Epidamnus and Issa.³⁷⁹

Though Polybius describes such aforementioned events in which the *pistis* to the Romans appears to be more positive and mutually beneficial, he also includes accounts in

³⁷³ Polybius 2.11.5–7.

³⁷⁴ Polybius 2.11.5.

³⁷⁵ Polybius 2.11.7. Cf. another association of φιλία and πίστις at 3.100.3.

³⁷⁶ As noted in the introduction, all translations of classical texts are from the digital LCL with minor adjustments where appropriate.

³⁷⁷ Cf. Gruen, “Greek Πίστις and Roman *Fides*,” 62.

³⁷⁸ Demetrius, who gave up Corcyra, later guides the Romans in conquering other cities (Polybius 2.11.3–7).

³⁷⁹ Polybius 2.11.10, 12.

which the Romans appear to take a harsher tone with those who refuse their *pistis*, as described in the narrative of the Roman leader Flaminius lecturing the Aetolians in 197 BCE:

Flaminius said that they ought not to take any of the other towns, but only Phthiotic Thebes. For the Thebans, when on approaching the town with his army he demanded that they should **submit to Rome**, had refused. So that, now that they had been reduced by force of arms, he had a right to decide as he chose about them.

ὁ δὲ Τίτος τῶν μὲν ἄλλων οὐκ ἔφη δεῖν οὐδεμίαν, Θήβας δὲ μόνον τὰς Φθίας· Θηβαίους γὰρ ἐγγίσαντος αὐτοῦ μετὰ τῆς δυνάμεως καὶ παρακαλοῦντος σφᾶς εἰς τὴν Ῥωμαίων πίστιν οὐ βουλευθῆναι· διὸ νῦν, κατὰ πόλεμον ὑποχειρίων ὄντων, ἔχειν ἐξουσίαν ἔφη βουλεύεσθαι περὶ αὐτῶν ὡς ἂν προαιρῇται.³⁸⁰

On the one hand, the cities which have accepted the *pistis* of the Romans seem to receive beneficence and guardianship, and they are considered untouchable by any other group that might threaten them lest the intruders come under the wrath of the Romans as well.³⁸¹ On the other hand, those who refuse the *pistis* of the Romans appear to be left extremely vulnerable, as they are subject to utter destruction, not only from the Romans but also from any other potential conqueror. Thus, receiving the *pistis* of the Romans seems to be an almost unavoidable choice for the smaller nations and is clearly an effective strategy for the Roman conquerors who can achieve military victory with little to no loss of life or resources.

In one of the most well-known accounts to modern scholars from Polybius, there is an added dimension to the *pistis* of the Romans. Polybius presents what he interprets as a cultural misunderstanding between Greek *pistis* and Roman *fides* during Rome's campaign against the Aetolians in 191 BCE.³⁸² After the battle of Thermopylae in which the Seleucid king Antiochus III had to return to Asia, the Aetolians were left in Greece to battle against the Romans, who went on to another victory at Heraclea Trachinia.³⁸³ Phaeneas, the military commander of the Aetolians, decides that a delegation should go to Manius Acilius Glabrio, the Roman general, to beg for an armistice. The Aetolian leaders including Phaeneas himself attempt to discuss with Glabrio at length, but Polybius says that they are cut short because Glabrio claimed to be

³⁸⁰ Polybius 18.38.5–6.

³⁸¹ Cf. Polybius 18.38.9.

³⁸² Polybius 20.9, cf. Livy 36.27. Cf. Gruen, "Greek Πίστις and Roman *Fides*," 50; Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 97.

³⁸³ Heraclea Trachinia was a colony founded by the Spartans in 426 BCE that was forced to join the Aetolian Confederacy in 280 (cf. Paus. 10.20.9). For the siege by the Romans, see Livy 36.22.5–24.12.

too busy dealing with the plunder from Heraclea. Glabrio agrees to a temporary ten-day armistice and sends them back accompanied by Lucius Valerius Flaccus to oversee the process.

Flaccus is unsympathetic to the Aetolians who try to speak about former alliances with the Romans. He blames the Aetolians for their current situation and advises them to place themselves in the *pistis* of the Romans, but the whole situation is misunderstood, Polybius claims, because of a different understanding between Greek *pistis* and Roman *fides*:

The Aetolians, after some further observations about the actual situation, decided to refer the whole matter to Glabrio, committing themselves “**to the faith**” of the Romans,³⁸⁴ not knowing the exact meaning of the phrase, but deceived by the word “**faith**” as if they would thus obtain more complete pardon. But with the Romans to commit oneself to the **faith** of a victor is equivalent to surrendering at discretion.

οἱ δ' Αἰτωλοὶ καὶ πλείω λόγον ποιησάμενοι περὶ τῶν ὑποπιπτόντων ἔκριναν ἐπιτρέπειν τὰ ὅλα Μανίῳ, δόντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὴν Ῥωμαίων πίστιν, οὐκ εἰδότες τίνα δύναμιν ἔχει τοῦτο, τῷ δὲ τῆς πίστεως ὀνόματι πλανηθέντες, ὥς ἂν διὰ τοῦτο τελειότερου σφίσιν ἐλέους ὑπάρξοντος. παρὰ <δὲ> Ῥωμαίοις ἰσοδυναμεῖ τό τ' εἰς τὴν πίστιν αὐτὸν ἐγχειρίσαι καὶ τὸ τὴν ἐπιτροπὴν δοῦναι περὶ αὐτοῦ τῷ κρατοῦντι.³⁸⁵

Polybius presents the situation as a case of cultural misunderstanding, explaining that *pistis* to the Greeks and *fides* to the Romans had different connotations. Polybius explains that, because they had been allies in the past, the Greeks believed that committing “to the *pistis* of the Romans” would engender more sympathy and mercy because of their humility in submitting to the Romans. However, the Romans equated *pistis/fides* to unconditional surrender, and the misunderstanding between Greek *pistis* and Roman *fides* led to the subjugation of the Aetolians in which Glabrio did not hesitate in making harsh demands and threatening to put the Aetolian ambassadors in chains.³⁸⁶

There has been significant debate from modern scholars about this interaction, particularly regarding the issue of whether Greeks and Romans actually understood *pistis* and *fides* differently and whether *pistis/fides* to the Romans was equal to *deditio* (unconditional surrender). Erich Gruen in his well-known article, “Greek Πίστις and Roman *Fides*,” was especially influential to later scholarship, as he pointed out that there is seemingly no other

³⁸⁴ It is interesting that the LCL translation for εἰς τὴν Ῥωμαίων πίστιν here is “‘to the faith’ of the Romans” when other sections have been translated as “to place themselves under their protection” (2.11.5), “submit to Rome” (18.38.5) or “surrendered to the Romans” (18.38.9), probably because of Polybius’ emphasis on the cultural misunderstanding of the word *pistis/fides*.

³⁸⁵ Polybius 20.9.10–12; cf. Livy 36.27.

³⁸⁶ Polybius 20.10.5–9.

author, earlier or later, who questions the mutual intelligibility of *pistis/fides* between Greek and Latin speakers.³⁸⁷ Moreover, Polybius himself indicates at other points of his *Histories* that *pistis* to the Romans implied some mutual expectation of leniency.³⁸⁸ One of these interactions involved the same Phaeneas who six years prior had been informed by Flaminius regarding Roman obligations toward cities which entered into Rome's *pistis/fides*.³⁸⁹ Thus, Phaeneas would have already known the implications of surrendering to the Romans, and he likely would have discussed these at length with Flaccus before agreeing to do so.³⁹⁰

Gruen explains that the likely reason for Phaeneas' shock and confusion at the whole situation was more likely related to the extreme nature of Glabrio's demands,³⁹¹ as Phaeneas himself interrupts Glabrio and says, "But what you demand, O General, is neither just nor Greek."³⁹² Gruen postulates the likely contributing factor of Glabrio's hot-tempered personality and underhanded motivations. Just as Glabrio had been enraged against the city of Chalcis but was allayed by an intervention from Flaminius,³⁹³ he also seemed to have exploded against Phaeneas and his comments and needed to be mollified by Flaccus.³⁹⁴ Indeed, Glabrio being a *novus homo*³⁹⁵ with a history of successful negotiations was probably motivated to be strategic and potentially manipulative here as well. Even Polybius remarks that Glabrio was intending to scare his opponents with his words and actions.³⁹⁶ Thus, Glabrio's behavior might have been more of an act that backfired when the Aetolians became even angrier and refused to meet to discuss Rome's demands.³⁹⁷

Because this seems to be the sole extant narrative of cultural misunderstanding regarding *pistis/fides*, Gruen's argument that Hellenic and Roman attitudes of *pistis/fides* were mutually intelligible makes sense and has been widely accepted by scholars today.³⁹⁸ However,

³⁸⁷ Gruen, "Greek Πίστις and Roman *Fides*," 63; cf. Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 98.

³⁸⁸ E.g., Polybius 2.11.5–10; 3.100.3; 18.38.5.

³⁸⁹ Polybius 18.38.3–9; Livy 33.13.6–12.

³⁹⁰ Flaccus is also the one who comes to the defense of the Aetolians when Glabrio threatens to put the envoys in chains (Polybius 20.10.10; cf. Livy 36.26.7, 36.28.8); cf. Gruen, "Greek Πίστις and Roman *Fides*," 59.

³⁹¹ Gruen, "Greek Πίστις and Roman *Fides*," 67. Cf. Polybius 20.11.6–9.

³⁹² Polybius 20.11.6. Cf. Livy 36.28.4 in which Phaeneas is noted as saying, "What we did was to entrust ourselves to your good faith, not put ourselves in slavery."

³⁹³ Plutarch, *Flaminius* 16.1–2.

³⁹⁴ Polybius 20.10.7–10.

³⁹⁵ I.e. the first man of a family to reach the senate or the first man of a senatorial family to reach the consulship. Cf. *Bellum Africum* 57; Cicero, *De officiis* 1.138. See also Henriette van der Blom, *Cicero's Role Models: The Political Strategy of a Newcomer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and T. P. Wiseman, *New Men in the Roman Senate, 139 BC–AD 14*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

³⁹⁶ Polybius 20.10.7.

³⁹⁷ Polybius 20.10.12–16; cf. Livy 36.28.9–36.29.1 in which the Aetolians actually reject the demands. Gruen, "Greek Πίστις and Roman *Fides*," 56, 67.

³⁹⁸ Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 98.

it still does not explain why Polybius would have offered a cultural explanation to this particular situation when Polybius himself had discussed the *pistis* to the Romans elsewhere (as mentioned above). Polybius would have been an ideal observer of such linguistic and cultural nuances between the Greeks and Romans, having been an Achaean himself who also spent significant time in Rome.³⁹⁹ Indeed, his awareness of the cultural differences would probably have been observed from his youth, having been a hipparch (cavalry commander) of the Achaean Confederacy in 170 BCE⁴⁰⁰ just like his father, Lycortas of Megalopolis, who had (unsuccessfully) been working towards equality with Rome for many years.⁴⁰¹

Thus, it is unclear as to why Polybius would present the issue as a cultural misunderstanding. It is suggested that Polybius was fully aware of what he was doing and that his point was not about asserting that Greek and Latin speakers genuinely understood *pistis* and *fides* differently but that Phaeneas and Glabrio were *pretending* to misunderstand one another for political reasons.⁴⁰² Both leaders wanted to get the best possible deal: Phaeneas was motivated to receive clemency for the Aetolians, and Glabrio was motivated to acquire *deditio* and to dictate his own terms so that he could add to his accomplishments and rise in political power.⁴⁰³

For the purposes of this research, Polybius is valuable in understanding how *pistis/fides* operated in the context of Roman military victories. Both Greeks and Romans experienced the *pistis* of the Romans from opposite ends, as the conquered and the conquerors, respectively. Not all Greeks may have seen themselves as “the conquered ones,” and not all Romans may have seen themselves as “conquerors,” but both sides would probably have acknowledged that there was an asymmetrical relationship in which the Romans were ultimately the ones in power. The *pistis* of the Romans for the purposes of Roman victory and rule was a significant strategy that helped develop the culture that led to the Roman Empire.

Pistis to the Roman Empire

³⁹⁹ After the Romans triumphed over the Macedonians at Pydna in 168 BCE, Polybius was among a thousand prominent Achaeans deported to Rome and subsequently detained without trial (cf. Polybius 30.13.6–11; Livy 45.31.9–11; Pausanias 7.10.7–11; Zonaras 9.31). He was able to befriend powerful Romans such as Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus, whom Polybius mentored in preparing Scipio for his public career (cf. Plutarch, *Moralia* 199f).

⁴⁰⁰ Polybius 28.6.9.

⁴⁰¹ Cf. Pausanias 9.9.4; Plutarch, *Philopoemen* 21. See also R. M. Errington, *Philopoemen* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); Arthur M. Eckstein, “Polybius, Phylarchus, and Historiographical Criticism,” *Classical Philology* 108, no. 4 (2013): 314–38.

⁴⁰² Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 98.

⁴⁰³ Cf. Gruen, “Greek Πίστις and Roman *Fides*,” 67.

In the first century CE, Rome seems to have continued to achieve victory through an emphasis on *pistis*. The writings of Josephus reveal that the Romans used their strong military to solidify their domination in the Roman Empire. Josephus was a Pharisee, and thus a religious and well-educated Jew, but in his writings, he indicates that his intended audience is not necessarily the Jewish community. When he explains that he is a Pharisee, he compares his training to the Greek Stoic school⁴⁰⁴ suggesting that he is writing for a Hellenistic audience.⁴⁰⁵ Josephus also indicates this in his use of *pistis*, commonly using the intellectual Greek meaning referring to “loyalty,” rather than the religious Jewish meaning referring to the faith of the people or the faithfulness of God.⁴⁰⁶ Though he comes from a different background to Polybius, Josephus is similar in that he was a historian who chose to write about Rome after he was captured as a prisoner of war.⁴⁰⁷ Josephus not only became friendly with some powerful Romans, but he later sided with Rome against his own people, reaping the benefits of his betrayal which included Roman citizenship and a house that was a former lodging of Vespasian.⁴⁰⁸ Josephus was familiar with Polybius’ work,⁴⁰⁹ and was therefore aware of the idea of the *pistis* of the Romans, but he himself also experienced the concept firsthand and references several times the fate of cities which did or did not choose to enter into the *pistis* of the Romans.

The language varies slightly between the two historians; while Polybius most often speaks about entering into the *pistis* **of** the Romans (εἰς τὴν Ῥωμαίων πίστιν), Josephus talks about *pistis* **to/with** the Romans (τὴν πρὸς Ῥωμαίους πίστιν). It could be argued that entering into the *pistis* of the Romans might suggest a nuance of subjugation in which the conquered people group place themselves under Rome, while *pistis* to/with the Romans could suggest a more positive narrative of partnership. Indeed, in comparison to Polybius, Josephus does seem to present a more positive narrative overall about the relationships between Rome and other nations. Regardless of any underlying nuances, however, the similarities between Josephus and Polybius demonstrate that there was a continued culture of *pistis* in the Roman military context for several centuries not only during the Roman Republic, but into the Roman Empire as well.

⁴⁰⁴ Josephus, *Vit.* 12.

⁴⁰⁵ Cf. Dennis R. Lindsay, *Josephus and Faith: Πίστις and Πιστεύειν as Faith Terminology in the Writings of Flavius Josephus and in the New Testament* (Leiden; New York: E. J. Brill, 1993), 185.

⁴⁰⁶ Lindsay, *Josephus and Faith*, 185–187.

⁴⁰⁷ Cf. Josephus, *Vit.* 351.

⁴⁰⁸ Josephus, *Vit.* 416, 423.

⁴⁰⁹ Josephus, *AJ* 12.135–137, 358–359.

In *Jewish Antiquities*, which relays the history of the Jews to Greek readers, Josephus writes about an edict of Claudius in 41 CE regarding the strife between Jews and Greeks in the city of Alexandria. In response to a petition from Agrippa and Herod, Claudius grants the Jews the right to observe their customs:

I very gladly consented, not merely in order to please those who petitioned me, but also because in my opinion the Jews deserve to obtain their request **on account of their loyalty and friendship to the Romans**. In particular, I did so because I hold it right that not even Greek cities should be deprived of these privileges, seeing that they were in fact guaranteed for them in the time of the divine Augustus. It is right, therefore, that the Jews throughout the whole world under our sway should also observe the customs of their fathers without let or hindrance.

ἥδιστα συνεχώρησα οὐ μόνον τοῦτο τοῖς αἰτησαμένοις με χαριζόμενος, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοὺς ὑπὲρ ὧν παρεκλήθην ἀξίους κρίνας **διὰ τὴν πρὸς Ῥωμαίους πίστιν καὶ φιλίαν**, μάλιστα δὲ δίκαιον κρίνων μηδεμίαν μηδὲ Ἑλληνίδα πόλιν τῶν δικαίων τούτων ἀποτυγχάνειν, ἐπειδὴ καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ θεοῦ Σεβαστοῦ αὐταῖς ἦν τετηρημένα. καλῶς οὖν ἔχειν καὶ Ἰουδαίους τοὺς ἐν παντὶ τῷ ὕφ' ἡμᾶς κόσμῳ τὰ πάτρια ἔθῃ ἀνεπικωλύτως φυλάσσειν.⁴¹⁰

Claudius grants the Jews in Alexandria the right to religious tolerance because of the Jews' *pistis* to the Romans. This religious tolerance toward Jews throughout the Roman world may seem ironic because Claudius was also known for expelling the Jews from Rome.⁴¹¹ However, the expulsion in Rome, from Claudius' perspective, was likely more about his concern over the political disturbances rather than a concern about religion.⁴¹²

In the immediate context of Jews in Alexandria, Claudius grants religious tolerance because he feels that the Jews deserve it; they have historically demonstrated their loyalty (πίστις) and friendship (φιλία). The use of the word "friendship" might initially appear to undermine the sense that this is a serious *pistis* relationship between the Romans and the Jews. However, the word "friendship" was often used in a military context,⁴¹³ and therefore it is not an indication that this *pistis* was a lighthearted one. The context in Alexandria actually involved the threat of violence because the Greeks under the approval of Caligula had been violent against the Jews when they had refused to acknowledge the emperor as a god.⁴¹⁴ Josephus

⁴¹⁰ Josephus, *AJ* 19.288–290.

⁴¹¹ Cf. Acts 18:2; Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4.

⁴¹² Cf. Leonard Victor Rutgers, "Roman Policy towards the Jews: Expulsions from the City of Rome during the First Century C.E.," *Classical Antiquity* 13, no. 1 (Apr 1994): 66.

⁴¹³ E.g. Josephus, *AJ* 8.163, 8.261, 18.96; cf. Josephus, *BJ* 1.181, 1.391; Polybius 1.16.6, 2.32.2, 2.58.5, 3.77.5.

⁴¹⁴ Josephus, *AJ* 19.284.

explains that Claudius grants the Jews their deserved benefit of religious tolerance because they had lived in the area from centuries before when they supported Alexander the Great against the Egyptians, and remained loyal subjects when Augustus established the Roman empire.⁴¹⁵

This account shows Rome's high value for *pistis*, as something that could reap a reward. The steadfastness of keeping *pistis* would create a sense of obligation on the part of the Romans to the extent that Jews would not have to worship the emperor as a god because it contradicted their own religious views. *Pistis* surpassed worship of the emperor because *pistis* for the Romans was not really about religious belief but rather about devotion and loyalty. The Jews in this case had proven their loyalty to Rome, and so their worship of the emperor was not necessary.

For the Romans, *pistis* was important because it ultimately meant keeping the peace, as seen in *Jewish War*. Josephus recounts an event during the time of the emperor Nero in 66 CE when Cestius, the Roman governor of Syria, dispatches the tribune Neapolitanus to Jerusalem to determine why there had been some fighting in the city:

Having traversed the city and satisfied himself as to the amenable temper of the inhabitants, Neapolitanus went up to the Temple. Here he called the multitude together, highly commended them for their **loyalty to the Romans** and earnestly exhorted them **to keep the peace**; then, after paying his devotions to the sanctuary of God from the permitted area, he returned to Cestius.

ὁ δ' ὥς διοδεύσας πεῖραν ἱκανὴν ἔλαβεν τῆς πραότητος αὐτῶν, εἰς τὸ ἱερὸν ἀναβαίνει. ἔνθα συγκαλέσας τὸ πλῆθος, καὶ πολλὰ μὲν εἰς πίστιν αὐτοὺς τὴν πρὸς Ῥωμαίους ἐπαινέσας, πολλὰ δὲ εἰς τὸ τηρεῖν τὴν εἰρήνην προτρεψάμενος καὶ τοῦ θεοῦ προσκυνήσας ὅθεν ἐξῆν τὰ ἅγια, πρὸς Κέστιον ἐπανήκει.⁴¹⁶

Neapolitanus had been sent to Jerusalem because the procurator Gessius Florus had accused the Jews of revolt, while the Jews insisted that they had remained loyal to Rome and that Florus was the one who had unfairly attacked them.⁴¹⁷ After verifying that everything seemed to be under control, Neapolitanus commends the Jews for their *pistis* to the Romans and exhorts them “to keep the peace” (εἰς τὸ τηρεῖν τὴν εἰρήνην).

“Keeping the peace” in the *pistis* to the Romans is actually about avoiding violence. When the initial *pistis* is extended, the threat of violence is imminent. Once *pistis* is established,

⁴¹⁵ Josephus, *AJ* 19.281–282; cf. *BJ* 2.487; *Ap* 2.42.

⁴¹⁶ Josephus, *BJ* 2.341.

⁴¹⁷ Josephus, *BJ* 2.333.

however, the goal is to have no more fighting and death. Further violence is to be avoided as much as possible. That is why keeping the *pistis* is so important to both the Jews and the Romans. If *pistis* was indeed broken, as Florus suggested, then the consequences would be severe. Rebellion toward the emperor might inspire further rebellion from other cities, which would be a threat to the entire Empire; Rome would be highly motivated to eliminate anyone who broke their *pistis* to the Romans. Thus, the Jews assure Neapolitanus that they have kept their *pistis*, and Neapolitanus demonstrates Rome's respect for the Jews by going to the temple to worship their god, staying in the outer court where Gentiles are allowed.

The Romans eventually did destroy the temple in Jerusalem. Ironically, Josephus was the commander of Galilee during this time. However, in the First Jewish Revolt against Rome (66–74 CE), he played an ambiguous role in which he was meant to be a Jewish leader, but after his capture, ended up serving the Romans. In *The Life*, Josephus tries to defend his actions in an address to the Jewish leader, Justus of Tiberias.⁴¹⁸ Josephus contrasts the two largest cities of Galilee, Sepphoris and Justus' native city of Tiberias,⁴¹⁹ which Josephus writes were models of those who had kept their *pistis* to Rome (Sepphoris) versus those who had not (Tiberias). Josephus compliments the pro-Roman Sepphoris, saying:

Now, Sepphoris, situated in the heart of Galilee, surrounded by numerous villages, and in a position, without any difficulty, had she been so inclined, to make a bold stand against the Romans, nevertheless decided **to remain loyal to her masters.**⁴²⁰

ἀλλὰ Σέπφωρις μὲν ἐν τῷ μεσαιτάτῳ τῆς Γαλιλαίας κειμένη καὶ περὶ αὐτὴν κώμας ἔχουσα πολλάς, καὶ τι καὶ θρασύνεσθαι δυναμένη πρὸς Ῥωμαίους, εἶπερ ἠθέλησεν, εὐχερῶς, διεγνωκυῖα **τῇ πρὸς τοὺς δεσπότας ἐμμένειν πίστει.**⁴²¹

Josephus says that, practically speaking, it would have made sense for Sepphoris to rebel because the city had a lot of support nearby. However, the Jews there chose to remain loyal to Rome.

By contrast, Josephus says to Justus regarding the city of Tiberias:

⁴¹⁸ Josephus, *Vit.* 345–354.

⁴¹⁹ In the New Testament, Tiberias is mentioned in the context of significant events, but only appears in the Gospel of John (6:1, 23; 21:1).

⁴²⁰ The word “master” (δεσπότης) does not necessarily have the same negative connotation that modern readers might associate with it today as with the English connotation to the word “despot.” Cf. LSJ, s.v. “δεσπότης.” As seen in this context, Josephus is speaking positively about the city and their *pistis* to Rome.

⁴²¹ Josephus, *Vit.* 346.

With no Jewish city in the vicinity, might easily, had it so desired, have **kept faith with the Romans**. You were a populous community and well supplied with arms. But, you maintain, it was I who was responsible for your revolt at that time.

μηδεμιᾶς δὲ πόλεως Ἰουδαίων παρακειμένης, εἰ ἤθελεν **τὴν πρὸς Ῥωμαίους πίστιν φυλάττειν**, ῥαδίως ἐδύνατο. καὶ γὰρ πολὺς ἦτε δῆμος καὶ ὅπλων ἠύπορεῖτε. ἀλλ', ὥς σὺ φῆς, αἴτιος ὑμῖν ἐγὼ τότε.⁴²²

Justus and Josephus seemingly blame one another for the troubles that have happened with Tiberias,⁴²³ which had recently been ousted by Sepphoris as the capital of Galilee. The central problem was a bitter animosity between Jews and Greeks in multiple cities including Gadara, Hippos, and Scythopolis, against which Justus had led violent raids. These conflicts, however, could not take place without involving the Romans.⁴²⁴ Thus, Josephus points to *pistis* being broken as the central issue. The people of Tiberias experienced the problems that they did because they had broken their *pistis* to the Romans.

Josephus was critical of both Greeks and Jews with regard to their *pistis*. When he describes what happened at Scythopolis, he points to the lack of *pistis* on the part of the Greeks in the city. Josephus along with other Jewish leaders had hoped that the Romans would come and help quell the revolution by Jewish rebels.⁴²⁵ However, Cestius and the Roman army were defeated in 66 CE, and this led to even further chaos because the rebels hoped to defeat the Romans completely. Cities in Syria panicked and began to kill all Jewish residents, even women and children. However, Josephus says that the Greek natives of Scythopolis were the worst offenders as they had no sense of *pistis* toward their Jewish neighbors:

They compelled their own Jewish residents to bear arms against their compatriots, which we are forbidden to do, and with their assistance engaged and defeated the invaders; and then, **after the victory, with no thought of the allegiance due to fellow-citizens and confederates**, put them all, to the number of many thousands, to the sword.

τοὺς παρ' αὐτοῖς Ἰουδαίους ἐβιάσαντο κατὰ τῶν ὁμοφύλων ὅπλα λαβεῖν, ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἡμῖν ἀθέμιτον, καὶ μετ' ἐκείνων συμβαλόντες ἐκράτησαν τῶν ἐπελθόντων· ἐπειδὴ δ' ἐνίκησαν, ἐκλαθόμενοι **τῆς πρὸς τοὺς ἐνοίκους καὶ συμμάχους πίστεως** πάντα αὐτοὺς διεχρήσαντο πολλὰς μυριάδας ὄντας.⁴²⁶

⁴²² Josephus, *Vit.* 349–350.

⁴²³ Cf. Josephus, *Vit.* 37, 41.

⁴²⁴ Cf. Tessa Rajak, “Justus of Tiberias,” *The Classical Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (Nov 1973): 352.

⁴²⁵ Josephus, *Vit.* 23.

⁴²⁶ Josephus, *Vit.* 26–27.

When rebels attacked Scythopolis, the Jews who already lived in the city helped the native Greeks to fight against the invading Jews, their own ethnic brethren. After the rebels were defeated, however, the Greeks turned on their own Jewish neighbors and killed all of the Jews who had just fought alongside them. They had no *pistis*—no sense of loyalty—and Josephus was appalled by the Greeks’ lack of compassion and *pistis* toward the neighbors who had just supported them.

Josephus’ high regard for *pistis* may be reflective of the culture at large, or may be influenced by what appears to be the Romans’ strong value for *pistis*. As seen above, the Romans clearly regarded *pistis* between themselves and other cities as important. However, Josephus indicates that they also had a clear expectation for *pistis* amongst the Romans themselves. This was especially true in the context of the *pistis* between soldiers. *Pistis* was valued so highly that it was considered more important than a victory itself. Josephus offers his eyewitness perspective of the importance of *pistis* when Titus, who would later become emperor, besieged Jerusalem in 70 CE. During the siege, some Jews managed to trick some of the Roman soldiers to come close to the gates.⁴²⁷ Without awaiting any orders, the soldiers had gone to the gates, expecting the Jews to open them because they had supposedly wanted peace, but instead, the feigning Jewish soldiers attacked the unsuspecting Romans. Titus had been suspicious of the Jews’ behavior because he had invited them to terms through Josephus the day before. He had told the soldiers to remain where they were, but the men who were closest to the front had not yet heard. Without waiting for orders, they made the mistake of going ahead and falling straight into a trap.

The scheme was not completely successful as the Roman soldiers managed to get away. However, Titus was furious, and he reprimanded them, pointing to *pistis* among the Jews as the reason they were able to dupe some of the Romans:

Their schemes are further favored by fortune because of their obedience and their mutual loyalty and confidence

ἔπεται δ’ αὐτῶν ταῖς ἐνέδραις καὶ τύχῃ διὰ τὸ πειθήνιον καὶ τὴν πρὸς ἀλλήλους εὐνοίαν τε καὶ πίστιν⁴²⁸

Titus recognized that the Jews kept their *pistis* to one another; even though the Jews were the ones who were besieged, and thus on the more vulnerable side, their *pistis* had allowed them to achieve a small victory over their powerful enemy.

⁴²⁷ Josephus, *BJ* 5.109f.

⁴²⁸ Josephus, *BJ* 5.122.

Regarding his own soldiers, however, Titus says that they are a disgrace because they had broken their *pistis*. He even goes so far as to say:

These rash adventurers shall learn forthwith that, among Romans, even a victory without orders given is held dishonorable.

γνώσεσθαι γε μὴν αὐτίκα τοὺς ἀπανθαδισαμένους ὅτι καὶ τὸ νικᾶν παρὰ
Ῥωμαίοις δίχα παραγγέλματος ἀδοξεῖται.⁴²⁹

Titus suggests the high value with which the Romans regard their *pistis*. He implies that other nations may not value *pistis* as highly; as long as the victory is won, *pistis* may not matter. Or perhaps, the victory could make up for the fact that *pistis* was broken. However, Titus declares that, for the Romans, *pistis* is even more important than the victory itself. Even if the Romans had succeeded in this case, he would still be upset because the rogue soldiers had broken their *pistis* to him.

Despite the failings of some of his soldiers, Titus eventually does succeed in the siege of Jerusalem, and the Romans destroy the city because the Jews supposedly fail to demonstrate their *pistis* to Rome. As a result, all of Jerusalem's valuables are taken, and the most valued place, the temple, is completely destroyed.⁴³⁰ When he returns to Rome, Titus is given a triumph, a parade of honor, which Josephus describes in detail. Included in the procession ritual are statues of the victory goddess:

After these, and last of all the spoils, was carried a copy of the Jewish Law. Then followed a large party carrying **statues of Nike**, all made of ivory and gold. Behind them drove Vespasian, followed by Titus.

ὁ τε νόμος ὁ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἐπὶ τούτοις ἐφέρετο τῶν λαφύρων τελευταῖος.
ἐπὶ τούτοις παρήεσαν πολλοὶ **Νίκης ἀγάλματα** κομίζοντες· ἐξ ἐλέφαντος
δ' ἦν πάντων καὶ χρυσοῦ ἢ κατασκευή. μεθ' αὐτῶν Οὐεσπασιανὸς ἤλαυνε
πρῶτος καὶ Τίτος εἶπετο.⁴³¹

The inclusion of Nike is appropriate to the celebration as she is often associated with the military (as seen in section 1.2) and is a visual representation of the victory itself. Josephus specifically notes that she is made of valuable material, ivory and gold, and it is not one, but several statues⁴³² of the goddess that accompany the celebration. It is interesting that there are

⁴²⁹ Josephus, *BJ* 5.125.

⁴³⁰ Josephus blames the Jews, however, for the destruction of the temple, cf. Josephus, *BJ* 6.166–167.

⁴³¹ Josephus, *BJ* 7.150–152.

⁴³² The LCL translation uses “images,” but ἀγάλματα might more helpfully be translated “statues.” Cf. LSJ, s.v. “ἄγαλμα.”

multiple statues of her being carried by several people. This could indicate that she is a visual representation of the belief of assured victory, or perhaps the Romans are showing the extent of their victory by including multiple statues of her. In either case, the message is that the Romans had the favor of the gods, and they demonstrated this by including statues of Nike and of many other gods as well.⁴³³ After Titus' death, the procession was commemorated by being carved into the Arch of Titus, which remains in Rome to this day.⁴³⁴

Pistis/Fides, Nike/Victoria, and the Emperor

We have seen that the concept of *pistis/fides* was important to the Romans. The word *fides* itself was an ambivalent and open norm with no fixed definition, and thus it appeared in a variety of contexts, mostly with a positive nuance that could connote trust, confidence, trustworthiness, loyalty, and fidelity to one's word.⁴³⁵ However, *fides* often held moral implications with an expectation of magnanimity, honesty, and impartiality, and a man of *fides* was expected to fulfill his duties and to do the right thing of his own accord without succumbing to external pressure.⁴³⁶

The Romans' high regard for *fides* is reflected in the way they honored the goddess Pistis/Fides, the personification of good faith. Roman historian Livy writes about Numa Pompilius (715–673 BCE), Rome's pious second king, establishing her cult:

He also established an annual worship of Fides, to whose chapel he ordered that the flamens should proceed in a two-horse hooded carriage, and should wrap up their arms as far as the fingers before sacrificing, as a sign that faith must be kept, and that even in men's clasped hands her seat is sacred.

Et Fidei sollemne instituit. Ad id sacrarium flamines bigis curru arcuato vehi iussit, manumque ad digitos usque involuta rem divinam facere, significantes fidem tutandam sedemque eius etiam in dexteris sacratam esse.⁴³⁷

⁴³³ Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.136–137.

⁴³⁴ The Jewish spoils—the table of shew bread, incense cups, and trumpets—as borne in the procession can still be seen on the inner side of the Arch.

⁴³⁵ Gérard Freyburger, *Fides: étude Sémantique Et Religieuse Depuis Les Origines Jusqu'à L'époque Augustéenne*, (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1986), 16.

⁴³⁶ John M. Barry, "Fides in Julius Caesar's *Bellum Civile*: A Study in Roman Political Ideology at the Close of the Republican Era," PhD diss. (University of Maryland, College Park, 2005), 5, 22.

⁴³⁷ Livy, *History of Rome* 1.21.4. Cf. Plutarch, *Numa* 16.

Clasped hands became a ubiquitous symbol for good faith, reflecting the relational nature of trust between two parties having faith in one another. Clasped hands would appear as imagery on coins, often along with images of the goddess Fides.⁴³⁸

When Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus writes about Numa establishing the Pistis/Fides cult, he adds that Numa had established the cult because other gods had been sufficiently worshipped:

But that Pistis, than which there is nothing greater nor more sacred among men, was not yet worshipped either by states in their public capacity or by private persons. As the result of these reflections he, first of all men, erected a temple to the Public Faith and instituted sacrifices in her honor at the public expense in the same manner as to the rest of the gods. And in truth the result was bound to be that this attitude of good faith and constancy on the part of the State toward all men would in the course of time render the behavior of the individual citizens similar. In any case, so revered and inviolable a thing was good faith in their estimation, that the greatest oath a man could take was by his own faith, and this had greater weight than all the testimony taken together.

Πίστιν δέ, ἥς οὔτε μείζον οὔτε ιερώτερον πάθος ἐν ἀνθρώποις οὐδέν, οὐπω σεβασμῶν τυγχάνειν οὔτ' ἐν τοῖς κοινοῖς τῶν πόλεων πράγμασιν οὔτ' ἐν τοῖς ἰδίοις. ταῦτα δὲ διανοηθεὶς πρῶτος ἀνθρώπων ἱερὸν ἰδρύσατο Πίστεως δημοσίας καὶ θυσίας αὐτῇ κατεστησατο, καθάπερ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις θεοῖς, δημοτελεῖς. ἔμελλε δὲ ἄρα σὺν χρόνῳ τὸ κοινὸν τῆς πόλεως ἦθος πιστὸν καὶ βέβαιον πρὸς ἀνθρώπους γενόμενον τοιούτους ἀπεργάσασθαι καὶ τοὺς τῶν ἰδιωτῶν τρόπους. οὕτω γοῦν σεβαστὸν τι πρᾶγμα καὶ ἀμίαντον ἐνομίσθη τὸ πιστόν, ὥστε ὅρκον τε μέγιστον γενέσθαι τὴν ἰδίαν ἐκάστῳ πίστιν καὶ μαρτυρίας συμπάσης ἰσχυροτάτην.⁴³⁹

Both Livy and Dionysius not only reflect the importance with which Pistis/Fides was regarded in Greco-Roman history but they also indicate that *pistis/fides* was considered sacred. *Pistis/fides* was valued for oneself, between men, and also before the gods. As a result, the goddess Pistis/Fides became an icon of trust and loyalty in the context of relationships.

The cult of Pistis/Fides was important for the Romans especially because the divine-human *fides* was woven into every aspect of the Roman public life and even some parts of the domestic life. We have already seen that *pistis/fides* to the Romans was important in the military context, and the goddess Pistis/Fides was said to sanction *pistis/fides* in war and preside over treaties, oaths, and contracts.⁴⁴⁰ When a temple to the goddess was erected on

⁴³⁸ Seth William Stevenson, *A Dictionary of Roman Coins: Republican and Imperial* (London: George Bell, 1889), 385–387.

⁴³⁹ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2.75.

⁴⁴⁰ Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 127; Freyburger, *Fides*, 231–238, 282–298.

Capitoline Hill in Rome around the third century BCE, the walls were said to have been covered with texts of international treaties as she was the patron of diplomatic relations.⁴⁴¹

Fides to the emperor was particularly valued and promoted throughout the Empire. Roman legions were granted the title of *pia fidelis* (pious and faithful) when they showed exceptional loyalty to an emperor during his bid for power or when he was putting down a revolt.⁴⁴² The title was akin to a reward from an emperor for such loyalty, and demonstrates the significance with which the emperors valued *fides* in their soldiers. Emperors needed this loyalty so that they could trust their soldiers to help maintain power.

Many emperors understandably took advantage of the association of the benevolent Fides who was also connected with wealth and power, and imprinted her on their coins. The emperors Galba, Vespasian, and Domitian were some of the emperors who had coins of Fides and the words Fides Publica(e) imprinted on them to foster loyalty among the people.⁴⁴³ The emperors also imprinted Nike/Victoria⁴⁴⁴ along with Fides on their coins to demonstrate the *pistis/fides* which led to victory in the Empire. The connection is seen on the coins of emperors such as Marcus Aurelius and Septimius Severus which were imprinted with the image of the goddess Fides holding a small Nike in her right hand.⁴⁴⁵ The emperor took advantage of the military associations of Nike and coupled her with Fides to convey a message of good faith and loyalty between the soldiers and their ruler.⁴⁴⁶ The coins seem to reinforce the notion that trust was necessary for victory, and that Fides and Nike, as overseers of society, could grant (and withdraw) their blessing.

Pistis to the Divi Filius

Pistis/fides to the Roman Empire was encouraged through the perception of the emperor as the *divi filius*, the divine son, a title which was often used to designate the emperor. The conception of the emperor as the *divi filius* initially began when the Roman senate officially recognized Julius Caesar as *Divus Iulius* (the divine Julius) almost two years after his

⁴⁴¹ Freyburger, *Fides*, 266.

⁴⁴² Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 82.

⁴⁴³ *RIC P* Galba 135; *RIC II², Part I* Vespasian 301; *RIC II², Part I* Domitian 215.

⁴⁴⁴ In Latin, Nike was known as Victoria, but for consistency and readability, I will refer to the victory goddess primarily as “Nike,” and refer to *Pistis/Fides* primarily as Fides because she is operating within the mostly Roman context.

⁴⁴⁵ *RIC III* Marcus Aurelius 997; *RIC IV* Septimius Severus 651. Nike could be seen on coins from as early as fifth century BCE (Rawles, “Early Epinician,” 22, 23). See also the Zeus with Nike in his right hand mentioned in section 1.1, and the Athena with Nike in her right hand in section 1.2.

⁴⁴⁶ Cf. Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 84.

assassination.⁴⁴⁷ Octavian, as the adopted son of Caesar, then called himself *divi filius* or *divi Iuli filius* (son of the divine Julius) to garner support and perpetuate favor from the people. He had already been trying to legitimize his being Caesar's heir so that he might distinguish himself as worthy of sole leadership of Rome. By hosting funeral games in honor of Caesar in 44 CE, Octavian strategically sought the support of the army veterans and the *plebs* (general Roman citizens) by evoking Caesar's memory.⁴⁴⁸ A comet supposedly flew over these games, and Octavian declared it as a sign that he was meant to be the next Roman ruler.⁴⁴⁹ He later displayed the "celestial sign" on coins that he issued,⁴⁵⁰ and from as early as 40 BCE, Octavian issued coins from the Roman mint imprinted with the words *divi filius*.⁴⁵¹ The *divi filius* title was not only written on coins, but was also disseminated on inscriptions and monuments as part of official titulature.⁴⁵²

The divine status of Caesar, and Octavian's claim that he was therefore *divi filius*, was simultaneously foreign to the political and religious Roman elite, and appealing because of the strong Roman tradition of the relationship between political leaders and the gods.⁴⁵³ When the *divus* title was first granted to Julius Caesar, in some ways, it was not such a radical step because he had received honors that were akin to the status of a god even while he was alive.⁴⁵⁴ He had a priest (*flamen*) for his cult,⁴⁵⁵ was allowed to adorn his house with a pediment to look like a temple, and place his own image in formal processions of images of the gods. Soon after

⁴⁴⁷ Cf. Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 208–210.

⁴⁴⁸ Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, Jerome Lectures, Sixteenth Series, tr. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 34.

⁴⁴⁹ Cf. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 2.93–4; Seneca the Younger, *Natural Questions* 7.17.2; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 45.6.4–7.1; John T. Ramsey and A. Lewis Licht, *The Comet of 44 BC and Caesar's Funeral Games*, American Classical Studies 39, (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1997), 155. Ironically, the Romans usually viewed comets as a sign of misfortune (cf. Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.11.18; 2.28.60). Previous Roman political discourse had incorporated celestial events, but Octavian made the comet into an icon for apotheosis. When the emperor Vespasian many years later saw a comet on his deathbed, he joked that he was turning into a god (Suetonius, *Life of Vespasian* 23.4).

⁴⁵⁰ E.g. a silver denarius of Augustus from c. 19–18 BCE shows the emperor on one side, and the comet of 44 BCE and the words *divus Iulius* (the divine Julius) on the reverse (*RIC I²* Augustus 37A).

⁴⁵¹ Lily Ross Taylor, *Divinity of the Roman Emperor*, American Philological Association Monograph Series 1, (Middletown, Connecticut: American Philological Association, 1931), 130.

⁴⁵² Taylor, *Divinity of the Roman Emperor*, 106.

⁴⁵³ From at least the second century BCE, Roman generals and governors received various forms of divine honors from eastern cities. However, it was not clear even to the Romans about what exactly happened in apotheosis and to what degree a deified human related with established gods like Zeus/Jupiter and Ares/Mars. Cf. Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 3.49–50; Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 141–148.

⁴⁵⁴ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 140.

⁴⁵⁵ Cf. Cicero, *Philippic* 2.110–11, a speech delivered in 44 BCE.

his death, he was also given altars, sacrifices, and a temple, all markers of divine status. He received a formal decree of deification in 42 BCE, making him *divus* Julius.⁴⁵⁶

The senate as a motley unwieldy body of a thousand members, some of whom were freedmen and of provincial stock, were initially unsure about Octavian.⁴⁵⁷ After many years, however, Octavian strategically used the title of *divi filius* to advance his political position and overcome rivals in the senate. He was officially conferred the title of “Augustus” in 27 BCE, and became the first of many emperors who were known as *divi filius*. After his death, Augustus was promoted to divine status as well and was supposedly witnessed ascending to heaven.⁴⁵⁸

Not all emperors were granted apotheosis by the senate after their death, and thus, the title of *divi filius* could not be applied to all emperors,⁴⁵⁹ but many of the succeeding emperors, including Tiberius, Nero, and Domitian proliferated the title during their reigns. Like Augustus, these three emperors similarly stamped the *divi filius* title on coins they issued, and they often included the victory goddess Nike/Victoria on these coins as well.⁴⁶⁰ The coins helped propagate their message as divine sons because Roman coins were in use, not only in Rome, but also across Africa, Greece, and Gaul, and Roman soldiers throughout the Empire were paid with the imprinted coins.⁴⁶¹

The religious dominance of the emperors can be seen in the landscape of Roman religion which changed radically under the Empire; almost half of the twenty or so new state temples built between the reigns of Augustus and Constantine were dedicated to deified emperors, and most of these temples were large and conspicuous.⁴⁶² The temples reflected the monumental prominence of the Roman emperors which was promoted in the Greco-Roman culture, and the imperial cult was regarded as important because it was tied to political, social, and economic structures. For example, at the festivals that honored the emperor, the struggles of competitors to win, the fight for honorific positions, and the concern for social status presupposed and enhanced the importance of the imperial cult.⁴⁶³ The cult of the emperor

⁴⁵⁶ It is controversial as to whether Caesar officially became a Roman god before his death as Roman writers and modern scholars offer different and often contradictory views, but he was nevertheless clearly granted a degree of divine status (Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 141).

⁴⁵⁷ Taylor, *Divinity of the Roman Emperor*, 150.

⁴⁵⁸ Suetonius, *Augustus* 100.4; Cassius Dio 56.46.2; *Inscriptiones Italiae* xiii.2, p. 510.

⁴⁵⁹ Cf. Georg Wissowa, *Religion Und Kultus Der Römer*, Second edition (München: Beck, 1912), 596–597.

⁴⁶⁰ See e.g. *RIC I² Tiberius* 5; *RIC I² Nero* 10; *RIC II², Part 1 Domitian* 63 which all have “*divi f*” inscribed on them. They also all have the image of the goddess Nike/Victoria.

⁴⁶¹ Michael Crawford, “coinage, Roman,” in *OCD*.

⁴⁶² Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 253.

⁴⁶³ Simon Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 130–132.

helped enforce order and consolidate the social and political hierarchies as well as ensure that the subjects of Rome would submit to the authority of the emperor and not participate in subversive activities.

The association of the emperors as divine became an assumed part of the culture especially among the Greeks because they would refer to the emperor as “god” (θεός) even when he was alive. They did recognize the strict distinction between *divus* (one who posthumously received official divine status through recognition from the senate) and *deus* (an immortal who had never experienced a mortal existence) in Rome, and there was no readily available translation of *divus* into Greek.⁴⁶⁴ Therefore, Greek speakers employed the word θεός, and all of the first century CE emperors were called θεός even though they were not all *divi* or *divi filius*, indicating that θεός was probably applied broadly to the emperor throughout the Empire by all social classes.⁴⁶⁵ Even in the stricter culture of distinct terms in Rome, Domitian apparently demanded to be addressed as *dominus et deus noster* (our master and god) in his effort to reinforce the divinity and authority of the emperor.⁴⁶⁶ Thus, the culture under the Roman Empire in the early centuries recognized and propagated the conception of the emperor as “god” or as “the son of god,” and a failure to recognize the divine son could have been interpreted as subversive, not only in a political sense, but potentially in a religious sense as well.

4.2 A Countercultural Battle over Pistis

In light of this cultural context that achieves victory through a *pistis* to the Romans and proliferates a *pistis* in the emperor as the divine son, we now turn to the Johannine community that was situated within this culture and examine the letter that proclaims another *pistis* victory. Through this analysis, it will become clear that the author of 1 John is deliberately countering the notions of *pistis* in the wider culture, and proclaiming a countercultural victory of *pistis* so that the Johannine believers can be assured in the truth of their *pistis* and remain vigilant against anything from the culture that might threaten to sway them from it.

Emphasizing Pistis in 1 John

⁴⁶⁴ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 75; John Scheid, “deus, divus” in *OCD*.

⁴⁶⁵ Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 41–42; cf. Wissowa, *Religion Und Kultus Der Römer*, 596–597.

⁴⁶⁶ Suetonius, *Domitian* 13.2; Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus* 2.3, 52.2.

Because the noun *pistis* appears only once (1 John 5:4) among the Johannine letters and the Gospel of John, one could presume that *pistis* is not a major concern in Johannine literature in comparison to every other book of the New Testament where the noun *pistis* appears more than once. However, verbal forms appear many times in John's Gospel and nine times in 1 John (3:23; 4:1, 16; 5:1, 5, 10 (3x), 13), and the adjectival form occurs in the letters as well (1 John 1:9; 3 John 5; cf. John 20:27). In conjunction with the conquering language throughout the letter, which expresses the author's concerns about what is "from the world" (1 John 2:16; 4:5) and "in the world" (2:15, 16; 4:3, 4; cf. 4:1), and the concluding warning about idols, we see that the fundamental battle in 1 John is the battle over *pistis*. The conquering language and *pistis* language that he has utilized several times in the short five chapters of the letter come together in the victory of *pistis* proclaimed in the final chapter (5:4):

For everyone who is born of God **conquers the world**. And this is the **victory** that has **conquered the world**, our **faith**.

ὅτι πᾶν τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ **νικᾷ τὸν κόσμον**· καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ **νίκη** ἡ **νικήσασα τὸν κόσμον**, ἡ **πίστις** ἡμῶν.

The writer poses the Johannine believers as Johannine conquerors because he wants them to fight against the *pistis* of the Greco-Roman world, and he assures that the *pistis* of the culture cannot compare to the strength and power of the Johannine *pistis*.

The challenge of defining *pistis* has been contentious in scholarship, partially because *pistis* in the Greco-Roman world had multiple and layered meanings including "belief," "trust," and "loyalty."⁴⁶⁷ As seen above, I have followed most English translations⁴⁶⁸ and left the translation of *pistis* as "faith" (5:4). The word "faith" is probably commonly used for this verse in English because it more readily reflects a spiritual nuance in comparison to the word "belief."⁴⁶⁹ However, the writer of 1 John would likely not have objected to *pistis* as "belief" or even "trust" or "loyalty," as all of these would encompass what he is trying to emphasize: the distinction between what the Johannine community believes and what beliefs prevail in the

⁴⁶⁷ The issue of *pistis Christou* especially has been highly debated (cf. Matthew C. Easter, "The *Pistis Christou*: Main Arguments and Responses in Summary," *Currents in Biblical Research* 9, no. 1 (Sep 2010): 33–47). Teresa Morgan's book *Roman Faith and Christian Faith* has been helpful in trying to bridge the gap between the *pistis* in New Testament texts and the *pistis* as understood by classicists looking at the Greco-Roman context. Cf. LSJ s.v. "πίστις."

⁴⁶⁸ E.g. NIV, ESV, NLT, NKJV, NASB, CEV, NRSV.

⁴⁶⁹ *OED* s.v. "belief," and "faith." The word "belief" in English seems to have a broader range. For example, someone might have certain government beliefs or beliefs about education, but with religious belief, the word "faith" might also be used. By contrast, if one referred to government faith or faith in education, the connotation would either suggest religious faith in those contexts or the degree of trustworthiness.

culture of the Greco-Roman world. By looking at the *pistis*-related verses in 1 John, the contention between the two and its relation to the conquering language of the letter becomes clear.

The first allusion to *pistis* appears in chapter one, in which the writer uses the adjective πιστός to refer to the one who is faithful (1:9).

If we confess our sins, he who is **faithful** and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

ἐὰν ὁμολογῶμεν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, **πιστός** ἐστὶν καὶ δίκαιος, ἵνα ἀφῇ ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας καὶ καθαρίσῃ ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἀδικίας.

In this verse, the writer is referring to God as the faithful one,⁴⁷⁰ and he appears to use this pattern of identifying God with the concepts that he wishes his disciples to embody as well.⁴⁷¹ Just as the writer establishes God in connection with light (1:5, 7) righteousness (2:1, 29), and love (4:8, 16), the association of *pistis*, and in this case, the first reference to the concept, is with God himself.

The next allusion to *pistis* appears two chapters later, in which the author emphasizes the importance of what the readers should believe (3:23):

And this is his command, that **we should believe** in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he gave a command to us.

καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἐντολὴ αὐτοῦ, ἵνα **πιστεύσωμεν** τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους, καθὼς ἔδωκεν ἐντολὴν ἡμῖν.

Chapter three in particular is saturated with verbs in the first-person plural, emphasizing the Johannine community as a whole, including their collective identity as children of God (e.g. 3:1, 2), their obligation to respond in love for one another (3:11, 14), and their willingness to even lay down their lives for one another (3:16). The subjunctives earlier in the chapter (3:1, 11) may emphasize the sense of urgency in the letter.⁴⁷² They lead to the final aorist subjunctive verb of the chapter (πιστεύσωμεν, 3:23), which is also the first time the verb πιστεύω is used in 1 John.

⁴⁷⁰ Cf. Deut 7:9; 32:4 (LXX) where God's character is also described as πιστός (Lieu, *I, II & III John*, 58).

⁴⁷¹ Cf. the many references to "remain" (μένω) in God/Jesus (2:6, 24, 27, 28; 3:6, 24; 4:13, 15, 16) which emphasize his point about the disciples reflecting the attributes of God.

⁴⁷² Variation among manuscripts in verb tense and its implications have been debated, but the overall emphasis on the importance of belief and love are evident (cf. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 462; Lieu, *I, II & III John*, 159).

The importance of their *believing* is conveyed with the declaration that it is a command (ἐντολή) from God.⁴⁷³ He underlines the significance of the command by referring to it four times within three verses (3:22–24).⁴⁷⁴ The Johannine believers, along with the writer himself, *must* believe, and he specifies what they are all believing *in*; the Johannine community should believe in the name of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. The dative construction (πιστεύσωμεν τῷ ὀνόματι) is unique as elsewhere the letter uses εἰς with the accusative τὸ ὄνομα. There is probably no fundamental difference in meaning, but the explicit reference to believing in the name of Jesus conveys the significance of his character, personhood, and authority.⁴⁷⁵ The writer also recapitulates the necessity of loving one another, which he will reference again with regard to *pistis* in the next chapter (see more below).

In contrast to the collective first-person address about the necessity of believing in Jesus, the next *pistis*-related verse uses a second-person imperative to declare what *not* to believe (4:1):

Beloved, **do not believe** every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Ἀγαπητοί, μὴ παντὶ πνεύματι **πιστεύετε**, ἀλλὰ δοκιμάζετε τὰ πνεύματα εἰ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστίν, ὅτι πολλοὶ ψευδοπροφῆται ἐξεληλύθασιν εἰς τὸν κόσμον.

The two verses about what the Johannine community should believe (3:23) and what they should not believe (4:1) being so close to one another and in direct opposition to one another underscores one of the primary reasons the author is writing his letter: he wants them to retain their *pistis* in Jesus and guard against anything, particularly from the Greco-Roman culture, that threatens this *pistis*. He draws the distinction between what the Johannine community *should* believe and what they *should not* believe, because he recognizes the contention between them, and the author wants to ensure that the Johannine readers acknowledge the correct *pistis* and not be swayed by the false prophets, antichrists, the evil one, or any cultural influence that might cause them to believe otherwise (see also section 2.1–2.3).

⁴⁷³ “Command” (ἐντολή) occurs at 1 John 2:3, 4, 7 (3x), 8; 3:22, 24; 4:21; 5:2, 3 (2x); cf. 2 John 4, 5, 6 (2x). The plural appears eight times in the Johannine letters, and the singular appears ten times. In the immediate context, verse 23 is in the singular (as opposed to the plural in verses 22 and 24) which may convey the fundamental divine command to believe in Jesus (and to respond with love). The frequent use of “command” amplifies the sense of urgency and obligation. Cf. also Smalley, *I, 2, 3 John*, 207.

⁴⁷⁴ The sense of importance increases as the indirect imperative of verse 22 becomes a direct imperative in verse 23 (Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, 58).

⁴⁷⁵ Smalley, *I, 2, 3 John*, 208; Lieu, *I, II & III John*, 158. Cf. also believing εἰς τὸ ὄνομα at John 1:12; 2:23; 3:18, a construction which is not seen elsewhere in the NT.

The author of 1 John returns to the first-person plural in chapter four, in which he gives his discourse on love (4:7–5:3). In the middle of this discourse, he makes another allusion to what they believe (4:16):

So we have known and **believed** the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God, and God remains in them.

καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐγνώκαμεν καὶ **πεπιστεύκαμεν** τὴν ἀγάπην ἣν ἔχει ὁ θεὸς ἐν ἡμῖν.
Ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν, καὶ ὁ μένων ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ ἐν τῷ θεῷ μένει καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἐν αὐτῷ μένει.

This time, the verb is in the perfect tense, “we have believed” (**πεπιστεύκαμεν**),⁴⁷⁶ indicating a completed action in which the content of what is believed is the love that God has for the Johannine community. While the previous emphasis was on believing in the name of Jesus, he remains appropriate to the focus of the exhortation and states that the Johannine community has already known and already believed in the love of God because they could not be Johannine Christians without it; love was the reason why God had sent Jesus to earth (4:10; cf. John 3:16). The verse is a reminder of what they have already believed in the past which has distinguished them from those who do not know or believe in the love of God and are more consumed with fear instead (cf. 4:18, see also section 3.1).

The final chapter underlines the Johannine writer’s primary concern as he alludes to *pistis* six times. The beginning verse of the chapter sets the stage before his climax on the importance of *pistis* (5:4–5) with the first in a series of participles about those who believe (5:1):

Everyone who **believes** that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.

Πᾶς ὁ **πιστεύων** ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ Χριστὸς, ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται, καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἀγαπῶν τὸν γεννήσαντα ἀγαπᾷ τὸν γεγεννημένον ἐξ αὐτοῦ.

This verse echoes the previous reference to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God (3:23, cf. 5:1, 5)⁴⁷⁷ and draws a parallel to the one who loves the parent (God) and the child (other believers). The aim in the latter phrase is to establish the evidence that a person who believes in Jesus and loves God is also expected to love other children of God who also believe in Jesus as the Son of God.⁴⁷⁸ Thus, believing in Jesus as the Christ has implications for a person’s

⁴⁷⁶ Cf. similar language in John 6:69.

⁴⁷⁷ See more on the son of God below.

⁴⁷⁸ Cf. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 227.

identity (being a child who is born of God), which in turn also has implications for how that person should respond (loving others, cf. 5:2).

Having alluded to the importance of what is believed in previous verses, and the contention between those who believe in Jesus as the Son of God and those who do not (3:23; 4:1), the writer makes a clear and distinct proclamation on the importance of *pistis* (5:4):

For everyone who is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that has conquered the world, our **faith**.

ὅτι πᾶν τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ νικᾷ τὸν κόσμον· καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ νίκη ἢ νικήσασα τὸν κόσμον, ἡ **πίστις** ἡμῶν.

Thus far, he has utilized conquering language and discussed what is believed, but in this verse, he equates the two in declaring that the victory itself is “our *pistis*” (ἡ πίστις ἡμῶν). The writer uses the first-person plural possessive to emphasize that the Johannine community, including the writer himself, collectively conquers the world with *pistis*. He makes sure to distinguish that he is referring to “our *pistis*,” which conveys the subtext of “not *their pistis*,” that is, the *pistis* of the Greco-Roman world. While the verbs for “believe” and “conquer” have been seen previously throughout the letter, the noun *pistis* appearing for the first and only time, and identifying “our *pistis*” as *nikē*, also in noun form for the first and only time, acts like a neon sign, drawing attention to the victory proclamation.

Immediately after, the writer of 1 John poses a rhetorical question to reinforce the importance of the victorious *pistis* (5:5):

Who is the one who conquers the world except **the one who believes** that Jesus is the Son of God?

τίς ἐστὶν δὲ ὁ νικῶν τὸν κόσμον εἰ μὴ ὁ **πιστεύων** ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ;

The question echoes the previous participle (5:1) that identified the characteristics of a Johannine believer as one who *believes* in Jesus as the Son of God, and in believing this, the Johannine believer is also identified as “the one who conquers the world” (ὁ νικῶν τὸν κόσμον).⁴⁷⁹ The two participles placed in parallel to one another, and in conjunction with the victory proclamation in the previous verse, emphasizes the Johannine identity as believers who

⁴⁷⁹ The question here also balances rhetorical question of 2:22: “Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?” Cf. Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 229.

have *pistis* in Jesus as the Son of God that also signifies their identity as conquerors of the Greco-Roman world, which adopts a different *pistis*.

In the next few verses, the writer of 1 John highlights the importance of testimony for *pistis* (see more on testimony below), and the participles appear again to define the distinction that the author has been reiterating throughout the entire letter in the contention between the one who believes and the one who does not believe (5:10):

The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. **The one who does not believe** in God has made him a liar because **he has not believed** in the testimony which God has testified concerning his Son.

ὁ πιστεύων εἰς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ ἔχει τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἐν αὐτῷ,⁴⁸⁰ ὁ μὴ πιστεύων τῷ θεῷ ψεύστην πεποίηκεν αὐτόν, ὅτι οὐκ ἐπίστευκεν εἰς τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν μεμαρτύρηκεν ὁ θεὸς περὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ.

Similarly to the previous chapter in which he emphasized the importance of not believing in every spirit (4:1), the writer of 1 John separates the Johannine believer from “the one who does not believe,” for that person makes God a “liar” (ψεύστης), a word he has used to delineate conflict several times before, especially in 1:10 where he also references God being made a liar.⁴⁸¹ The declaration of God as liar seems extreme, and although it may not be as incendiary to its audience as it might sound to a person reading it in English today,⁴⁸² the writer of 1 John makes the point to show the implications of the one who believes versus the one who does not. There is the distinction not only in the content of their *pistis* (what is believed), but also that the “liar” does not have the same *pistis* because he has not believed in the testimony from God himself. The perfect tense of the verbs (πεποίηκεν, ἐπίστευκεν, μεμαρτύρηκεν) underscore that God has already given his testimony in the past, and the writer seems to allude to those (such as the antichrists who left the community, 2:19) who have already chosen not to believe and have therefore designated God as a liar.

The final allusion to *pistis* is at the start of the epilogue in which the author gives the concluding reason for his writing (5:13):⁴⁸³

I have written these things **to you who believe** in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

⁴⁸⁰ The well-attested variant, “in him” can only mean “in himself,” indicating the internalization of God’s testimony (Lieu, *I, II & III John*, 218).

⁴⁸¹ See also 1 John 1:10; 2:4, 22; 4:20; cf. John 8:44, 55. The word ψεύστης appears most frequently in 1 John among New Testament texts.

⁴⁸² Cf. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 84–85.

⁴⁸³ Cf. the frequent references to the reason why he is writing: “We write” (γράφομεν, 1:4), “I write to you” (γράφω ὑμῖν, 2:1, 7, 8, 12, 13 (2x)) or “I wrote/I have written to you” (ἔγραψα ὑμῖν, 2:14 (3x), 21, 26).

Ταῦτα ἔγραψα ὑμῖν ἵνα εἰδῆτε ὅτι ζωὴν ἔχετε αἰώνιον τοῖς **πιστεύουσιν** εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ.

This time, the author does not include himself in using the first-person plural to emphasize the collective group (cf. 3:23; 4:16), and he does not focus on the identity of each individual (e.g. 5:5, 10, cf. 5:1). Instead, the dative plural participle distinguishes the writer from his audience. The reason for his writing is his concern over what they believe. He wants to remind and assure his disciples about their *pistis* and the implications for their *pistis*. They will have eternal life because of what they believe.

From the verses above, and especially with their concentration in the final chapter, it is clear that the core concern of 1 John is the Johannine *pistis* and the contention against those in the Greco-Roman world who believe in a different *pistis*. The fundamental battle is a battle over *pistis*, and thus, the writer repeatedly emphasizes the importance of what *pistis* the audience believes and exhorts and assures his disciples of why they should retain this *pistis*.

Pistis in the Son of God

In the battle over *pistis* in 1 John, the writer emphasizes that the victorious *pistis* is specifically in Jesus as “the Son of God” (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, 5:5):

Who is **the one who conquers the world** except **the one who believes** that Jesus is the **Son of God**?

τίς δὲ ἐστὶν ὁ **νικῶν τὸν κόσμον** εἰ μὴ ὁ **πιστεύων** ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ **υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ**;

Nikē, *pistis*, and “the Son of God” come together as the conqueror of the Greco-Roman world is also the one who has *pistis* in Jesus as the Son of God. As we have discussed, the word *nikē* would likely evoke the imagery and associations of the goddess Nike who was a prominent part of the culture for both Greeks and Romans for many centuries.⁴⁸⁴ However, we have seen that Nike was also affiliated with the emperor and that the title of “the son of god” would also evoke a reference to him. Before Jesus was the renowned Son of God, the first well-known figure to receive that title during the Roman Empire was the emperor.⁴⁸⁵ Having demonstrated

⁴⁸⁴ See more in section 1.1 and 1.2.

⁴⁸⁵ Peppard, *The Son of God*, 4.

that the Greco-Roman culture advocates *pistis* in the emperor as the *divi filius*, we can see that the Johannine author is making a countercultural proclamation against this Greco-Roman *pistis*.

In the short letter of 1 John, the word “son” (υἱός) appears 22 times,⁴⁸⁶ all in reference to Jesus, and of the 22 occurrences, the phrase “son of God” (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) appears seven times. Although the word “son” appears in every chapter of the letter, 10 of the references are concentrated in the final chapter in which believing in Jesus as the Son of God is emphasized, and where the writer of 1 John declares the *pistis* victory. One could argue that the emphasis on “the son” is simply to refer to the incarnation of Jesus. If that were so, then a reader might expect the words “flesh” (σάρξ) or “body” (σῶμα) in the letter, as in the Gospel of John, where the emphasis on “son” and “Son of God” is also apparent.⁴⁸⁷ While “flesh” (σάρξ) appears 13 times in John’s Gospel, often regarding the flesh of Jesus,⁴⁸⁸ the only two instances of “flesh” in 1 John are in reference to the “desire of the flesh” (ἡ ἐπιθυμία τῆς σαρκὸς) in the world (2:16, see also section 2.3), and identifying spirits which confess that Jesus has come “in the flesh” (ἐν σαρκί, 4:2).⁴⁸⁹ This brief reference is the only direct allusion to the incarnation in 1 John.⁴⁹⁰

The word “body” (σῶμα) similarly does not appear in the Johannine Letters,⁴⁹¹ although it appears a number of times in John’s Gospel referring to the literal body of Jesus.⁴⁹² The reference to the incarnation of Jesus in 1 John 4:2 demonstrates that the author *does* consider it important, but it is not necessarily the focus of the contention over *pistis* in the letter. Instead, the writer of 1 John frequently emphasizes the importance of believing in Jesus as the “son of God.”

The Johannine author frames the “son of God” as the key source of conflict in the battle over *pistis*. He refers to the Son in the first two chapters (1:3, 7; 22, 23, 24), but the first time

⁴⁸⁶ See “son” (υἱός) at 1 John 1:3, 7; 2:22, 23 (2x), 24; 3:8, 23; 4:9, 10, 14, 15; 5:5, 9, 10 (2x), 11, 12 (2x), 13; 20 (2x); cf. 2 John 3, 9. “Son of God” (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) appears at 1 John 3:8; 4:15; 5:5, 10, 12, 13, 20.

⁴⁸⁷ Of the 55 occurrences of υἱός in John’s Gospel, υἱὸς θεοῦ appears 9 times at John 1:34, 49; 3:18; 5:25; 10:36; 11:4, 27; 19:7; 20:31.

⁴⁸⁸ Cf. John 1:14; 6:52, 53, 54, 55, 56.

⁴⁸⁹ Cf. 2 John 7 where deceivers do not confess that Jesus has come “in the flesh.” Flesh (σάρξ) appears in most books of the NT, (but not in 1 and 2 Thess, 2 Tim, Titus, and 3 John), and often in a negative context (e.g. Matt 26:41; Rom 13:14; Gal 5:19; 1 Pet 2:11; Rev 17:16). Among the Gospels, σάρξ appears much more frequently in the Gospel of John than in the Synoptic Gospels, probably because of the Christological emphasis on the incarnation in John’s Gospel.

⁴⁹⁰ A few verses later, the writer makes a related reference to the incarnation in God sending his son “into the world” (4:9, cf. John 3:16).

⁴⁹¹ “Body” (σῶμα) also appears in almost every NT book, but does not appear in 2 Thess, 1 and 2 Tim, Titus, Phile, 2 Pet, and the Johannine letters. Many of the references to σῶμα in the NT refer to the human body in general, as opposed to the human body of Jesus.

⁴⁹² Cf. John 2:21, 19:31, 38 (2x), 40; 20:12. The word σῶμα seems to be used in John’s Gospel mostly to refer to Jesus’ body after the crucifixion.

he mentions the “son of God” is in chapter three, when he places the son of God in direct opposition to the devil (3:8):

The one who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. **The Son of God** was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.

ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστίν, ὅτι ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ὁ διάβολος ἁμαρτάνει· εἰς τοῦτο ἐφανερώθη ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα λύσῃ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ διαβόλου.

As with much of the conquering language that we have seen in this letter, the author speaks from the place of triumph, and depicts the son of God as the conqueror. The son of God is the destroyer of the opposition, who is the devil. The language of the devil sinning “from the beginning” (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς) hearkens back to the prologue which referred to what was “from the beginning” (1:1), the fathers who know him who is “from the beginning” (2:13, 14), and what the readers heard “from the beginning” (2:24).⁴⁹³ All of the references relate to Jesus, but he is not named directly. Instead, he is a figure associated with “the beginning.” It is also notable that the name “Jesus” and the word “Christ” do not appear in chapter three until much later on in verse 23. In the immediate context of 3:8, the figure who was “from the beginning” is now given the title of “the Son of God” who is revealed on earth as the countering conqueror to the devil who has been sinning “from the beginning.” The purpose of the Son of God is to triumph over the devil and destroy his works.

The next time the writer mentions the Son of God is in the middle of his discourse on love in chapter four (4:14–15):

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his **Son as the Savior of the world**. God remains in those who confess that Jesus is **the Son of God**, and they remain in God.

καὶ ἡμεῖς τεθεάμεθα καὶ μαρτυροῦμεν ὅτι ὁ πατὴρ ἀπέσταλκεν τὸν υἱὸν **σωτῆρα τοῦ κόσμου**. ὃς ἐὰν ὁμολογήσῃ ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστίν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, ὁ θεὸς ἐν αὐτῷ μένει καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν τῷ θεῷ.

Here we see two titles that were used for the emperor: the Savior of the World (1 John 4:14; cf. John 4:42)⁴⁹⁴ and the Son of God. Verse 15 is also the first time that Jesus is directly referred

⁴⁹³ See also section 3.3 for more on 2:13–14.

⁴⁹⁴ Cf. Koester, “Savior of the World,” 666–667 regarding “Savior of the World” (ὁ σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου) as a title used for Roman emperors.

to as “the Son of God” (although he is referred to as “the Son” previously at 1:3, 7; 3:23; cf. 2:22).

The conquering message here is not in a direct conflict (as with the devil in 3:8). Instead, the emphasis is on the importance of remaining (μένω), which the author mentions six times in 4:12–16. The tension is between those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and therefore remain in God (4:15), and those who do not remain in God (cf. 4:8, 18, 20). The reference to the Son of God is in the midst of the love discourse (4:7–5:3) to help identify true Johannine believers: one indication is the confession of Jesus as the Son of God (4:14–15), and the other is the demonstration of the love of God (4:7, 11, 12). These indications guide the readers in discerning who is from God and who is from the world (cf. 4:1–6).

It is striking that in the final chapter of 1 John, the author concentrates the language of sonship. The word “son” is mentioned ten times in chapter five, of which the remaining five occurrences of “the Son of God” appear. Having alluded to the contention between the Son of God and the devil (3:8) and the conflict between Johannine believers and those of the world in chapter four, the first declaration of sonship in the final chapter is in the context of victory (5:5):

Who is **the one who conquers the world** except **the one who believes** that Jesus is the **Son of God**?

τίς δὲ ἐστὶν ὁ νικῶν τὸν κόσμον εἰ μὴ ὁ πιστεύων ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ;

“The one who conquers the world” and the “one who believes” are placed in parallel to one another to demonstrate that the Johannine conqueror is the believer who specifically has *pistis* in the Son of God. The Greco-Roman culture also encouraged *pistis* in the *divi filius*,⁴⁹⁵ as the imperial cult was implemented throughout the Roman Empire. However, the writer makes clear with his rhetorical question, which presumes an obvious response, that the Johannine conqueror is victorious over the world when they have *pistis* specifically in *Jesus* as the Son of God, and no one else.

The author uses the identity of “the one who believes” (ὁ πιστεύων) again with regard to the Son of God, but with a slight adjustment (5:10):

⁴⁹⁵ Cf. the centurion identification of Jesus as the Son of God relating with the emperor in the Gospel of Mark (Adela Yarbro Collins, “Mark and His Readers: The Son of God among Greeks and Romans,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 93, no. 2 (Apr 2000): 85–100).

The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. The one who does not believe in God has made him a liar because he has not believed in the testimony which God has testified concerning his Son.

ὁ πιστεύων εἰς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ ἔχει τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἐν αὐτῷ, ὁ μὴ πιστεύων τῷ θεῷ ψεύστην πεποίηκεν αὐτόν, ὅτι οὐκ ἐπίστευκεν εἰς τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν μεμαρτύρηκεν ὁ θεὸς περὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ.

The Johannine believer is not just “the one who believes” (ὁ πιστεύων) *that* (ὅτι) Jesus is the Son of God, alluding to the content of their *pistis*; the believer is “the one who believes in the Son of God” (ὁ πιστεύων εἰς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ). Believing in the Son of God, and specifically *Jesus* as the Son of God, is a core part of their identity as Johannine believers, which is attested by the testimony of the Spirit within them (5:6, 10 cf. 4:13). The statement offers reassurance to those who might waver in their *pistis* and reminds them of their distinction from “the one who does not believe in God” (ὁ μὴ πιστεύων τῷ θεῷ).

In the final three references to the Son of God, we see a similar emphasis on “life” (ζωή) and specifically “eternal life” (ζωὴ αἰώνιος). Just before his epilogue, the author underlines the conflict of *pistis* between the Johannine believers and the ones who do not believe in the Son of God, with the added dimension of “life” (5:12):

The one who has the Son has life; **the one who does not have the Son of God** does not have life.

ὁ ἔχων τὸν υἱὸν ἔχει τὴν ζωὴν, ὁ μὴ ἔχων τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν ζωὴν οὐκ ἔχει.

The verb “to have” (ἔχω) being used four times in the verse emphasizes the sense of identity and the testimony of *pistis* within believers. “The one who believes in the Son of God” (ὁ πιστεύων εἰς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ, 5:10, cf. 5:1, 5) and is “the one who conquers” (ὁ νικῶν, 5:5), is also “the one who has the Son [of God]” (ὁ ἔχων τὸν υἱὸν [τοῦ θεοῦ]). It may sound a bit awkward to *have* the Son, but it underscores the sense of the internalized *pistis* in the Johannine believer-conquerors, and the testimony of the Spirit within them (5:6–10). It is also consistent with the Johannine message to “remain” (μένω).⁴⁹⁶

The added dimension is the distinction of having “life” (ζωή). The Johannine believer-conqueror who has the Son also *has* life (ἔχει τὴν ζωὴν), while “the one who does not have the Son of God” does not *have* life. He then clarifies that this “life” is “eternal life,” a connection

⁴⁹⁶ The writer of 1 John emphasizes the importance to remain (μένω), especially to remain in God/Jesus (2:6, 24, 27, 28; 3:6, 24; 4:13, 15, 16) cf. other occurrences of μένω at 1 John 2:10, 14, 17, 19, 28; 3:9, 14, 15, 17, 24; 4:12; 2 John 2, 9 (2x).

he makes in the last two references to the Son of God (5:13, 20). The connection between *pistis* in the Son of God and eternal life will be examined further below, but the final point here is about the exhortation by the author concerning *pistis* in the true Son of God.

When the writer begins his epilogue, he declares the identity of the readers once again as those who have *pistis* in the Son of God (5:13):

I have written these things **to you who believe** in the name of the **Son of God**, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Τὰυτα ἔγραψα ὑμῖν ἵνα εἰδῆτε ὅτι ζωὴν ἔχετε αἰώνιον **τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ.**

He is writing “to you who believe in the name of the Son of God” (τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ). It is an even longer title for the Johannine believers than “the one who believes in the Son of God” (ὁ πιστεύων εἰς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ) seen in 5:10. This time, he specifies *pistis* in the “name” (ὄνομα) of the Son of God. He has alluded to Jesus’ “name” before, referring to sins being forgiven on account of his name (2:12) and the command to believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ (3:23). However, the phrasing in 5:13 is the only time “name” is mentioned as part of the identity of the Johannine believer. The readers are “believers in the name of the Son of God.”

In the penultimate verse, the Johannine author reveals the underlying countercultural reason for his frequent emphasis on the “Son” throughout his letter, and especially, the “Son of God” in the final chapter (5:20):

And we know that the **Son of God** has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is **true**; and we are in him who is **true**, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the **true** God and eternal life.

οἶδαμεν δὲ ὅτι **ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ** ἦκει καὶ δέδωκεν ἡμῖν διάνοιαν ἵνα γινώσκωμεν τὸν **ἀληθινόν**, καὶ ἐσμεν ἐν τῷ **ἀληθινῷ** ἐν τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ. οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ **ἀληθινὸς** θεὸς καὶ ζωὴ αἰώνιος.

In contrast to the emperor who is “the son of the god” uplifted in the Greco-Roman culture, the writer of 1 John has emphasized the victorious *pistis* in Jesus, the *true* Son of God. He uses the adjective “true” (ἀληθινός) three times in the verse to make his point.⁴⁹⁷ He has alluded to distinction of truth and lie before, for example, in reference to the truth not being in a

⁴⁹⁷ Cf. the only other reference to the adjective in the letter at 1 John 2:8.

hypocritical person (1:8, 2:4) or in reference to the spirit of truth (4:6, 5:6).⁴⁹⁸ However, he emphasizes the true Son of God, in contrast to the idols around them (his final word in 5:21) which includes the *pistis* in the emperor as the divine ruler of the Greco-Roman world.⁴⁹⁹ The author gives the final declaration of his focus on the victorious *pistis* that supersedes the Greco-Roman world, which is *pistis* in Jesus, the true divine Son of God.

Skeptical readers may doubt that the writer of 1 John is referencing the emperor as he does not use the word “emperor” (αὐτοκράτορας) directly in his letter. However, the fact that the only titular use of “the son of God” outside of the New Testament in the first century CE was for the Roman emperor suggests a countercultural narrative.⁵⁰⁰ It would be hard to imagine that the writer of 1 John is not aware of the cultural association he would provoke in emphasizing “the son of God.”⁵⁰¹ He does not need to use the word “emperor” directly because the title of “the son of God” would already provoke allusions to the emperor. Moreover, he does not discuss the emperor directly because the writer of 1 John wants to emphasize the *true* Son of God. While the culture may subscribe to a *pistis* in the emperor as the divine son, the Johannine believers counter the culture and conquer the Greco-Roman world with their *pistis* in Jesus as the true Son of God.

Testifying to Johannine Pistis

The *pistis* victory of 1 John is a positive and triumphant message. However, the letter is not like the victory odes from the athletic games that celebrate a victory for the purposes of the glory of the Johannine community (see section 1.1). The contentious undertone of the Johannine believers needing to conquer several opponents suggests that the war against the Greco-Roman world is not fully over. The author is writing his letter to assure the readers of their triumphant *pistis* in Jesus as the Son of God because the audience may not feel secure in their *pistis*.

⁴⁹⁸ The word “truth” (ἀλήθεια) occurs at 1 John 1:6, 1:8; 2:4, 21 (2x); 3:18, 19; 4:6; 5:6, cf. 2 John 1 (2x), 2, 3, 4; 3 John 1, 3 (2x), 4, 8, 12.

⁴⁹⁹ Jesus’ kingly entry into Jerusalem occurs just before in 12:12–19 in which the Pharisees were concerned that the culture was already shifting toward Jesus.

⁵⁰⁰ Peppard, *The Son of God*, 28.

⁵⁰¹ For a contemporary parallel of a word that is identified with a specific person: before 2015, I regularly used the word “trump” in my vernacular (e.g. “this will trump that”). However, I never use it now because “trump” cannot be said in any context today without evoking strong political undertones and an immediate mental image of a particular former global leader.

Like many New Testament writers, the Johannine author reflects his awareness of the fragility of others' experience as the basis for *pistis*.⁵⁰² The news of Jesus' resurrection and glorification was dependent on the testimony of a relatively small group of people who were personally unknown to most converts, and this was problematic because the Greco-Roman culture of *pistis* typically relied on personal experience and the testimony of those closest to them.⁵⁰³ People would form their *pistis* based on what they saw and heard with their own eyes and ears as a form of self-trust.⁵⁰⁴ If something could not be experienced directly, then there would be increased doubt. Diodorus Siculus, for example, warns his readers about some earlier untrustworthy historians who believed in false reports.⁵⁰⁵ Thus, when writing about the past, historians would often try to verify the information personally and get as close to the original source as possible.⁵⁰⁶

Believing in something that one could not test or prove was considered foolish, childish, and reflective of the uneducated masses.⁵⁰⁷ Therefore, if one had to rely on the testimony of another, it was better if the testimony could be investigated for oneself.⁵⁰⁸ For earlier events that could not be directly verified, multiple testimonies which were in agreement was considered more reliable and credible. Dionysus of Halicarnassus, for example, encourages having as "numerous and indisputable testimonies" (μαρτυριῶν...πολλῶν καὶ δυσαντιλέκτων) as possible regarding earlier historical accounts in order to deem them more "credible" (πισταί).⁵⁰⁹ If there was a consensus from multiple sources, then it would more likely be a truth worth believing.

The possibility of dubious false reports, the importance of direct experience, and the testimony of multiple witnesses who agree with one another to form a reliable *pistis* are all reflected in the letter of 1 John. The author knows that in the battle over *pistis* in the Greco-Roman world, the readers must be certain that there is evidence for the Johannine *pistis* superseding any other in the culture. Like many other New Testament writers, the Johannine

⁵⁰² E.g. Luke 1:14; 1 Cor 2:3–5; 2 Thess 1:10, 1 Tim 2:6–7; Titus 1:13–14; Heb 2:1–4; cf. Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 245.

⁵⁰³ Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 65, 245.

⁵⁰⁴ Cf. Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 5.8.1 which mentions that it comes naturally for men to judge another based on what they experience personally (as opposed to hearsay about the person). The more cynical Dio Chrysostom in his *On Distrust* Oration 74 promotes distrusting almost everyone but never suggests that a person cannot trust himself. Trusting in one's senses hardly needed to be made explicit because it was simply assumed (Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 42).

⁵⁰⁵ Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History* 1.5.1, 1.23.7–8, 1.26.1–3, 1.29.5–6.

⁵⁰⁶ Cassius Dio claims to begin his history where he can establish the clearest account of events (*Roman History* 1.3).

⁵⁰⁷ Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 67.

⁵⁰⁸ Cf. Lucian, *Slander* 31.

⁵⁰⁹ Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 7.70.2.

author uses testifying (μαρτυρέω) or testimony (μαρτυρία),⁵¹⁰ which are strong terms, often used of eyewitness testimony or irrefutable proof of experience of the resurrection.⁵¹¹ Within the short letter of 1 John, he refers to testifying or testimony a total of twelve times,⁵¹² ten of which are in the final chapter, where he also emphasizes *pistis* and declares the victory of *pistis*. He mentions testimony throughout the letter, and especially in the final chapter, because he wants the Johannine audience to be assured that their *pistis* is not an abstract ideology, or *pistis* in something that is trendy or the latest fad in the culture. It is a substantial and true *pistis* that is supported by evidence from both people and God himself.

The import of proving the Johannine *pistis* is apparent from the first three verses of the prologue in 1 John (1:1–3):

What was from the beginning, **what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands,** concerning the word of life—and the life was revealed, and **we have seen and testify**, and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—and we proclaim to you **what we have seen and heard** so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

Ὅ ἦν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, ὃ ἀκηκόαμεν, ὃ ἐώρακάμεν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἡμῶν, ὃ ἐθεασάμεθα καὶ αἱ χεῖρες ἡμῶν ἐψηλάφησαν περὶ τοῦ λόγου τῆς ζωῆς—καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἐφανερώθη, καὶ **ἐώρακάμεν καὶ μαρτυροῦμεν** καὶ ἀπαγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν τὴν ζωὴν τὴν αἰώνιον ἣτις ἦν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα καὶ ἐφανερώθη ἡμῖν—ὃ ἐώρακάμεν καὶ ἀκηκόαμεν, ἀπαγγέλλομεν καὶ ὑμῖν, ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς κοινωνίαν ἔχητε μεθ' ἡμῶν. καὶ ἡ κοινωνία δὲ ἡ ἡμετέρα μετὰ τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ μετὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

The writer begins with an emphasis on the testimony of “what was from the beginning,” (Ὅ ἦν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς), referring to Jesus.⁵¹³ He uses the first-person plural to indicate who is testifying; unlike later in the letter when he is referring to the Johannine community as a whole,⁵¹⁴ in the prologue, the “we” seems to be referring to himself and others who have been eyewitnesses or

⁵¹⁰ The word μαρτύριον also appears in many NT books (e.g. Matt 8:4; Mark 1:4; Luke 5:14; Acts 4:33; 1 Cor 1:6; 2 Thess 1:10; 2 Tim 1:8; Heb 3:5; James 5:3; Rev 15:5) but does not appear in the John's Gospel or the Johannine Letters. Cf. LSJ s.v. “μαρτύριον.”

⁵¹¹ Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 315; cf. footnote 26; LSJ s.v. “μαρτυρέω” and “μαρτυρία.”

⁵¹² Verbal forms of μαρτυρέω occur at 1 John 1:2; 4:14; 5:6, 7, 9, 10; cf. 3 John 3, 6, 12 (2x) and the noun μαρτυρία occurs at 1 John 5:9 (3x); 10 (2x), 11; cf. 3 John 12. The emphasis on testimony is clear in the Gospel of John as well which uses μαρτυρέω and μαρτυρία a combined 44 times. See especially John 1:34; 3:11; 19:35.

⁵¹³ Cf. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 100–101; Smalley, *The Epistles of John*, 6.

⁵¹⁴ E.g. 1 John 2:1, 3, 5, 18; 3:1, 2, 11; 4:11, 12, 13; 5:2, 3, 14.

those close to eyewitnesses of the incarnate Jesus,⁵¹⁵ and they are proclaiming the testimony “to you” (ὕμῖν, 1:2), his audience.⁵¹⁶

The author of 1 John references the senses of the eyes, ears, and hands which inform their testimony. Their *pistis* is not based on some abstract ideology or dream,⁵¹⁷ and it does not rely simply on what was *heard* (1:1, 3).⁵¹⁸ The Johannine *pistis* is not a weak baseless *pistis*, but a *pistis* based on what people have seen with their own eyes. The eyewitnesses have “seen,” as with testimony in court in which witnesses testify based on what they have seen and what they know (see also sections 2.1 and 3.2 regarding references to what “we know”). The expression “we have seen and testify” (ἐωράκαμεν καὶ μαρτυροῦμεν, 1:2) acts like a virtual swearing in at a deposition in court,⁵¹⁹ to give evidence and foundational substance to the Johannine *pistis* that is emphasized in the letter.

The writer uses a similar formula, “we have seen and do testify” in his next reference to testimony which is in the middle of his discourse on love (4:14):

And **we have seen and do testify** that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.

καὶ ἡμεῖς τεθεάμεθα καὶ μαρτυροῦμεν ὅτι ὁ πατήρ ἀπέσταλκεν τὸν υἱὸν σωτῆρα τοῦ κόσμου.

The verb for “see” (θεάομαι) in 4:14 differs from the one in 1:2 (ὁράω).⁵²⁰ In 4:14, the writer may be using θεάομαι to express the nuance of what the eyewitnesses have seen and experienced that is not the invisible God or the incarnate Jesus.⁵²¹ The “seeing” may also include written accounts that have been circulating, as written testimony was often considered

⁵¹⁵ The prologue of John’s Gospel also refers to the importance of the eyewitness testimony of John the Baptist for the purpose of *pistis* (John 1:7–8).

⁵¹⁶ Cf. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 103; Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 37. The reference to fellowship “with us” (μεθ’ ἡμῶν, 1:3) also indicates that the initial “we” of eyewitnesses is separate from the readers.

⁵¹⁷ Cf. Cicero’s frustration over people who place confidence in dreams (*De Divinatione* 2.122).

⁵¹⁸ Hearing in the ancient world was not considered as reliable as seeing (e.g. Seneca the Younger, *De Ira* 2.24; cf. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 36–37).

⁵¹⁹ Thompson, *1–3 John*, 34.

⁵²⁰ Cf. elsewhere in the New Testament regarding testimony about what has been “seen” at John 3:11, 32; Acts 7:44.

⁵²¹ Cf. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 251; LSJ s.v. “θεάομαι” and “ὁράω.” The verb “ὁράω” also appears at 1:1, 3; 3:1, 2, 6; 4:20 (2x); 5:16; cf. 3 John 11, 14. The less common NT verb θεάομαι appears elsewhere in 1:1; 4:12. That both verbs appear in 1:1 may indicate the distinction of what has been seen directly with their eyes (ὁράω) and what other experiences they have had that support what they have seen directly (θεάομαι). This is especially true of 4:12 in which the verb θεάομαι is used in the reference to no one having *seen* God. Although God is invisible, the Johannine community can feel the love of God within them. The frequency of the two verbs of “seeing” in the letter indicates the importance of evidence for their *pistis*.

more reliable.⁵²² It is notable that the “see” verbs are in the perfect tense (ἐωράκαμεν, 1:2; τεθεάμεθα, 4:14); the eyewitnesses who have literally seen Jesus and his death and resurrection have seen him in the past, and are now testifying in the present (reflected in the tense, μαρτυροῦμεν) to give evidence for what they have seen in the past. They are probably testifying by evangelizing to the general public, but also to the audience in this letter. The succeeding verse refers to those who confess (ὁμολογέω)⁵²³ that Jesus is the Son of God, further supporting the sense of testifying to others about what they know.

In the final chapter, references to testifying and testimony appear ten times, indicating the importance of what the writer is trying to convey to his audience: testimony gives evidence for their *pistis*. Immediately following the proclamation of the victorious *pistis* (5:4–5), the writer offers three distinct witnesses for the Johannine *pistis* (5:6–8):⁵²⁴

This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the **one that testifies**, for the Spirit is the truth. For there are three who **testify**: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three are in agreement.

Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἐλθὼν δι' ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος, Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς οὐκ ἐν τῷ ὕδατι μόνον ἀλλ' ἐν τῷ ὕδατι καὶ ἐν τῷ αἵματι καὶ τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν τὸ **μαρτυροῦν** ὅτι τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν ἡ ἀλήθεια. ὅτι τρεῖς εἰσιν οἱ **μαρτυροῦντες**, τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ καὶ τὸ αἷμα καὶ οἱ τρεῖς εἰς τὸ ἓν εἰσιν.

In verse 6, the Spirit is mentioned first as “the one that testifies” (τὸ μαρτυροῦν), and this is probably referring to the indwelling Spirit, as the writer has mentioned the Spirit being given to the Johannine believers (4:13). The indwelling Spirit testifies to the truth about Jesus who came by water (referring to the baptism of Jesus) and blood (referring to Jesus’ crucifixion).⁵²⁵ As we have seen above, the culture relies foremost on trusting oneself, and the indwelling Spirit offers the testimony of personal experience in the truth (ἀλήθεια, 5:6).

The Johannine writer then clarifies that there are in fact three testimonies. Although spirit, water, and blood are all neuter nouns in Greek, the author personifies them with the

⁵²² Cf. John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition, in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 103. Livy says that he will be sure to give a “clearer and more definite account” of history because writing is “the sole trustworthy guardian of the memory of past events” (*History of Rome* 6.1.2)

⁵²³ See ὁμολογέω at 1:9; 2:23; 4:2, 3, 15 cf. 2 John 7. The distinction between ὁμολογέω and μαρτυρέω is that the ὁμολογέω literally means “agree with,” but it can also mean “confess” or “be allowed;” cf. LSJ s.v. “ὁμολογέω.” In 2:23, the one who “confesses” Jesus Christ as the Son of God is placed in contrast to the one who “denies” (ἁρνέομαι, cf. 2:22) him, suggesting the distinction between verbally agreeing with the Johannine *pistis* and rejecting it outright.

⁵²⁴ Cf. Brown, *Epistles of John* 775–787 for issues of interpolation and variance of the so-called Johannine Comma in 5:7–8.

⁵²⁵ Cf. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 231–234.

collective masculine plural (μαρτυροῦντες) to emphasize the fact that there are three different witnesses who testify, and that their testimonies agree with one another.⁵²⁶ The water and blood refer to past events, but the testimonies of these events, along with personal testimony from the indwelling Spirit, all cohere about Jesus. By framing the testimonies in this manner, the author of 1 John draws upon the culture of trusting in oneself and the agreement of multiple witnesses to reinforce the truth about the Johannine *pistis*.⁵²⁷

The reliability of a testimony is dependent on the one giving the testimony,⁵²⁸ and so this may explain why the writer of 1 John adds to his initial emphasis on eyewitness testimony from people in the prologue to that of God himself testifying to his Son (5:9–10, see *Figure 4*). The writer underscores his point here with the most saturated references of “testimony” and “testifying” appearing a combined seven times in the two verses. The writer initially distinguishes human testimony from the testimony of God (5:9).

Figure 4

1 John 5:9	1 John 5:10
If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified concerning his Son. εἰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν τῶν ἀνθρώπων λαμβάνομεν, ἡ μαρτυρία τοῦ θεοῦ μείζων ἐστίν· ὅτι αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ μαρτυρία τοῦ θεοῦ ὅτι μεμαρτύρηκεν περὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ.	<u>The one who believes</u> in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. <u>The one who does not believe</u> in God has made him a liar because <u>he has not believed</u> in the testimony which God has testified concerning his Son. ὁ πιστεύων εἰς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ ἔχει τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἐν αὐτῷ, ὁ μὴ πιστεύων τῷ θεῷ ψεύστην πεποίηκεν αὐτόν, ὅτι οὐκ ἐπίστευκεν εἰς τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν μεμαρτύρηκεν ὁ θεὸς περὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ.

The “testimony of men” (ἡ μαρτυρία τῶν ἀνθρώπων, 5:9) might be received by others as authoritative, but if people are willing to hear the testimonies of men, then surely they should receive the “testimony of God” (ἡ μαρτυρία τοῦ θεοῦ) which surpasses human testimony. He uses the perfect tense of the verb, “he has testified” (μεμαρτύρηκεν, 5:9, 10) to indicate that

⁵²⁶ Cf. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 282–284; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 237.

⁵²⁷ Cf. other New Testament references to multiple witnesses: Matt 18:16; John 8:17; 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19; Heb 10:28.

⁵²⁸ Cf. Sallust, *The War with Jugurtha* 17.7 in which the responsibility for reliable information comes from the sources themselves; cf. Marincola, *Authority and Tradition*, 105.

God himself has already testified in the past about his Son Jesus. The author of 1 John and the other eyewitnesses have testified (1:2). They are mere humans and offer the testimony of men, and people will usually accept and believe the testimony of men. However, the author repeats in verse 10 that God has testified as well, and the implication is that they should certainly believe God's testimony because his testimony is even greater (5:9).

Some people do not believe in God's testimony that he is shown through Jesus his son, and if they do not believe, then they have identified God as a liar (cf. 1:10 and discussion on "liar" above). It seems that there are people who have not acknowledged God's testimony as greater and that there are also people who are testifying to a different *pistis*. They do not believe in the testimony that God has given about his Son (5:10). The Johannine leader is probably referring to the antichrists and false prophets that he has alluded to earlier.⁵²⁹ Those who left the Johannine community (2:19) may have done so because of testimonies from those who denied that Jesus is the Christ (2:22–23). They seem to have been swayed in their *pistis*, and the emphasis on God's testimony in the final chapter suggests that the author is concerned that others in the Johannine community might question their *pistis* as well.

Verse 10 emphasizes the connection between testimony and *pistis*, between those who have internalized the testimony of *pistis* in Jesus as the Son of God, and those who have chosen to reject this testimony. The readers of the letter have trusted in their Johannine teacher and believed his testimony thus far, possibly because they feel that they have a personal relationship with the man who addresses them as his "children."⁵³⁰ However, there are many who have likely not seen Jesus firsthand and may struggle in their *pistis*, especially when confronted with another seemingly convincing testimony in alternative *pistis*. They may also be tempted by what they see with their own eyes in their daily personal experiences of the world (2:16). Thus, the writer of 1 John warns his readers not to be tempted by the world (2:15) and cautions them about false testimonies from those who would deceive them (2:28; 3:7; cf. 4:1) in a similar manner to Diodorus Siculus who cautioned his readers about historians reporting false testimonies,⁵³¹ and towards the end of 1 John, the author repeats the phrase (μεμαρτύρηκεν [ὁ θεὸς] περὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ, 5:9, 10) to emphasize the authoritative testimony of God. The author suggests the foolishness of those who would regard God as a "liar" when they would normally accept the testimony of men, and he seems to exhort his readers to retain their *pistis* that is based in God's testimony about his Son.

⁵²⁹ See 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; cf. 2 John 7. See also section 2.2 on antichrists and false prophets.

⁵³⁰ Cf. 1 John 2:1, 12, 14, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21.

⁵³¹ Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History* 1.5.1, 1.23.7–8, 1.26.1–3, 1.29.5–6.

In the final reference to testimony, the writer of 1 John offers the implications of *pistis* in God's testimony (5:11):

And this is **the testimony**: that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ μαρτυρία ὅτι ζωὴν αἰώνιον ἔδωκεν ὁ θεὸς ἡμῖν, καὶ αὕτη ἡ ζωὴ ἐν τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ ἐστίν.

In this simple statement, the author reveals his concern about why it is important to receive the testimony of both God and the eyewitnesses. Here, he is not trying to convey the content of the testimony (what God asserts) but the *result* of *pistis* in the testimony, which is eternal life. The consequences of *not* having *pistis* is great, and so the author wants to assure his audience that the testimony is more than reliable, and he wants to ensure that the readers retain their *pistis* and not assume any validity in the beliefs of the culture that would deem the Johannine *pistis* invalid. He specifies yet again that this life is “in his Son” (ἐν τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ) who is connected to eternal life, as we shall explore in the final section below.

Victorious Pistis and Eternal Life

The reason why the *pistis* victory is so important to the Johannine author is because of the consequence of eternal life. In the Greco-Roman culture, the afterlife and the idea of an eternal soul was something that was little understood but often sought. As we have seen, the athletes wanted a lasting glory in their victory odes (section 1.1), and the emperors sought apotheosis and desired to be called “god” or “son of god” even while on earth (section 4.1). The uncertainty around death fostered myths about the underworld,⁵³² and as we have seen in section 3.1, different philosophical responses to life after death. The Romans under the Empire tried to cope with death through private deification in which sacrifices were made to the dead, effectually rendering them as divine.⁵³³

The writer of 1 John offers a final countercultural message to the Greco-Roman culture which longs for eternity and the afterlife, and yet seem to be dissatisfied in its responses. Finally, we see why the victorious *pistis* is so important to the author. It is not just about

⁵³² Cf. Jan N. Bremmer, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife: The 1995 Read-Tuckwell Lectures at the University of Bristol*, Read-Tuckwell Lectures, University of Bristol 1995 (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 6.

⁵³³ Veit Rosenberger, “Coping with Death: Private Deification in the Roman Empire,” in *Burial Rituals, Ideas of Afterlife, and the Individual in the Hellenistic World and the Roman Empire*, ed. Katharina Waldner, Richard Gordon, and Wolfgang Spickermann (Stuttgart, Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2016), 121.

conquering the Greco-Roman world and having some personal pride in knowing more than the world. There is eternity at stake. The author repeatedly emphasizes eternal life as the countercultural consequence to the victorious *pistis* of 1 John.

From the prologue to the epilogue, the Johannine author connects the *pistis* in Jesus with eternal life. The word “life” (ζωή) appears thirteen times in the letter, of which six refer specifically to eternal life (ζωή αἰώνιος).⁵³⁴ However, just as the language of *pistis*, testimony, and the Son of God are all concentrated in chapter five, the majority of references to “life” are also concentrated in the final chapter, suggesting yet another connection to *pistis*. Indeed, the Johannine author alludes to the connections between “life” and *pistis* in Jesus, starting from the prologue in which “life” appears three times in the first two verses (1:1–2):

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning **the word of life**—and the **life** was revealed, and we have seen and testify, and proclaim to you **the eternal life** that was with the Father and was revealed to us.

Ὁ ἦν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, ὃ ἀκηκόαμεν, ὃ ἐώρακαμεν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἡμῶν, ὃ ἐθεασάμεθα καὶ αἱ χεῖρες ἡμῶν ἐψηλάφησαν περὶ **τοῦ λόγου τῆς ζωῆς**—καὶ ἡ **ζωή** ἐφανερώθη, καὶ ἐώρακαμεν καὶ μαρτυροῦμεν καὶ ἀπαγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν **τὴν ζωὴν τὴν αἰώνιον** ἣτις ἦν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα καὶ ἐφανερώθη ἡμῖν.

In verse 1, the author refers to Jesus with three different monikers: “the word of life” (ὁ λόγος τῆς ζωῆς), “the life” (ἡ ζωή), and “the eternal life” (ἡ ζωὴ ἡ αἰώνιος).⁵³⁵ All three include the word “life” with the definite article, indicating more formally that these are titles for Jesus,⁵³⁶ and the third title, eternal life, is the theme that the author of 1 John reinforces throughout his letter.

The life (ζωή) of 1 John is not to be confused with another word that could be translated “life” (βίος)⁵³⁷ that appears in 1 John 2:16 and 3:17 (see also section 2.1). The word βίος elsewhere in the NT appears as referring to everyday life (e.g. 2 Tim 2:4) or to a person’s

⁵³⁴ See ζωὴ αἰώνιος at 1 John 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20. Additional references to ζωή are at 1:1; 1:2; 3:14; 5:11; 5:12 (2x); 5:16. Cf. in John’s Gospel: the first occurrence of ζωή is at 1:4, and the first reference to ζωὴ αἰώνιος is at 3:15. The theme of eternal life is clearly present in the Gospel as well; ζωὴ αἰώνιος in John’s Gospel at 3:16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68; 10:28; 12:25, 50; 17:2, 3.

⁵³⁵ In addition to the “the word of life” (ὁ λόγος τῆς ζωῆς, 1 John 1:1) having allusions to Jesus who is “the Word” (ὁ λόγος) in the Gospel of John (1:1, 14), “the life” (ἡ ζωή, 1 John 1:2) follows almost immediately after “the word of life,” indicating that “the life” refers to “the word of life.” Moreover, the repetition of ἐφανερώθη in 1:2 indicates that “the life” and “the eternal life” have the same referent.

⁵³⁶ Cf. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 39. Cf. “life” also being identified with Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel of John (1:4).

⁵³⁷ Cf. LSJ s.v. “βίος.”

livelihood (e.g. Mark 12:44; Luke 21:4). However, the author uses βίος in reference to the life of the world. While ζωή reflects eternal life in Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, βίος is the life that is attached to the Greco-Roman world. The word ζωή is representative of the eternal life that the Johannine community are living now and continue to live after their physical death because they have *pistis* in Jesus as the Son of God.

The reference to “eternal life” appears only once in chapter two, but the context uses similar language to the prologue (2:24–25):

Let what you heard from the beginning remain in you. If what you heard from the beginning remains in you, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise which he has promised us, **eternal life**.

ὁμοῖς ὁ ἠκούσατε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ἐν ὑμῖν μενέτω. ἐὰν ἐν ὑμῖν μείνη ὁ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ἠκούσατε, καὶ ὑμεῖς ἐν τῷ υἱῷ καὶ ἐν τῷ πατρὶ μενεῖτε. καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἐπαγγελία ἣν αὐτὸς ἐπηγγείλατο ἡμῖν, **τὴν ζωὴν τὴν αἰώνιον**.

The sense of contention surrounds these two verses, as the verses before warn of antichrists and those who deny Jesus (2:18–23), and the verse immediate after warns of those who would deceive the readers. Verse 24 echoes the first verse of the letter, referring to what was heard “from the beginning” (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς). In contrast to the first-person plural verbs in the prologue, however, the verbs here place the focus on the readers (“you heard” (ἠκούσατε, 2x), “you will remain” μενεῖτε). Moreover, the restatement is placed in the a conditional form: “if what you heard from the beginning remains in you” (ἐὰν ἐν ὑμῖν μείνη ὁ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ἠκούσατε, 2:24), suggesting that the Johannine *pistis* needs to be appropriated by the person first.⁵³⁸ We see the emphasis on “remaining” (μένω) repeated three times in verse, which underlines the importance of not faltering in the Johannine *pistis*. As a result of their remaining in the true Son of God, they receive eternal life.

Eternal life is not just a possibility based on good behavior (reflecting a fear of divine judgment) or based on the whims of a Greco-Roman deity. The Johannine author offers a countercultural assurance that this eternal life is promised by God. The noun and verb for “promise” (ἐπαγγελία, ἐπαγγέλλομαι) make their sole appearance in the letter in reference to what God promised the Johannine believers: eternal life. Instead of referring directly to the incarnation of Jesus, the writer chooses to identify Jesus as “eternal life.” The framing of the eternal life being a promise that God had already promised before, with the use of the aorist verb (ἐπηγγείλατο) that suggests an allusion to the prophesied Jesus, simultaneously suggests

⁵³⁸ Cf. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 119.

a reference to the past in which the promise was made, and the future of the *effect* of eternal life.⁵³⁹ However, as the conditional language suggests (2:24), the effect of an alternative *pistis*, that is, a *pistis* from the Greco-Roman world, produces a radically different result.

The Johannine author expresses the consequences of an alternative *pistis* with extreme language in chapter three (3:13–15):

Do not be astonished, brothers, if the world **hates** you. We know that we have passed from **death** to **life** because we love one another. The one who does not love remains in **death**. Everyone who **hates** a brother is a **murderer**, and you know that every **murderer** does not have **eternal life** remaining in them.

μὴ θαυμάζετε, ἀδελφοί, εἰ **μισεῖ** ὑμᾶς ὁ κόσμος. ἡμεῖς οἶδαμεν ὅτι μεταβέβηκαμεν ἐκ τοῦ **θανάτου** εἰς τὴν **ζωήν**, ὅτι ἀγαπῶμεν τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς· ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν μένει ἐν τῷ **θανάτῳ**. πᾶς ὁ **μισῶν** τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ **ἀνθρωποκτόνος** ἐστίν. καὶ οἶδατε ὅτι πᾶς **ἀνθρωποκτόνος** οὐκ ἔχει **ζωὴν αἰώνιον** ἐν αὐτῷ μένουσαν.

The writer of 1 John places a division once again between the Johannine community and the world that can hate them (3:13). The implication is that they should *expect* the world to hate them (see also section 2.3) as they have a *pistis* that does not align with theirs. In contrast to the hate from the world, the Johannine believers are expected to love one another (3:14). The author uses the extremities of life (ζωή) and death (θάνατος) to illustrate the differences in before and after *pistis* in Jesus as the Son of God. Every Johannine believer was remaining in the realm of death, just like every person in the Greco-Roman world. However, when the readers of 1 John accepted the Johannine *pistis*, they also received the promised eternal life. The reader is indicating the severity of the change by saying that the readers have passed from death to life already and that love is the marker of their having done so (3:14). However, the lack of love is an indication that a person has not accepted the true Johannine *pistis*, and that person is remaining in death.

The Johannine author then takes one step further in the extreme by saying that the one who hates is a murderer (ἀνθρωποκτόνος, 3:15). The writer uses the language of “remaining” (μένω) once again to indicate that every murderer does not have eternal life remaining in them. Eternal life does not “remain” in murderers who demonstrate hate for their brothers. The severity of the language reveals the severe consequences of the contention in 1 John. It is a battle in which there is the potential for violence and even death. The one in the world who

⁵³⁹ Cf. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 161.

hates also remains in death. But as discussed in section 2.1, the Johannine author is drawing an even more extreme in referencing the one who hates a brother.

The references to “brother” have been to members within the Johannine community (e.g. 2:9–10; 3:10; 5:16), and it is especially apparent in the vocative that is used by the author in 3:13.⁵⁴⁰ The references to Cain murdering his brother earlier in the chapter (3:12), and the emphasis that the Johannine community must not be like Cain underlines the sense of the finality of death. The inclination to respond like the world and hate others is an indication that a person still remains in the world of death. The author in verse 15 counters the culture by saying that the Johannine community must not be like the world and hate and do evil deeds, reflecting the *pistis* of the world and the *pistis* of the evil one who has authority over the world (3:12, 5:19). The people of that world do not have eternal life in them, but the Johannine believers do.

As we have discussed in the sections above, the final chapter emphasizes the Johannine victory through the most frequent references to *pistis* language, testimony, and the Son of God. The writer of 1 John similarly reinforces the countercultural message of eternal life in the last chapter to demonstrate the effect of their *pistis* in Jesus as the Son of God (5:11–12):

And this is the testimony: that God gave us **eternal life**, and this **life** is in his Son. The one who has the Son has **life**; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have **life**.

καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ μαρτυρία ὅτι **ζωὴν αἰώνιον** ἔδωκεν ὁ θεὸς ἡμῖν, καὶ αὕτη ἡ **ζωή** ἐν τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ ἐστίν. ὁ ἔχων τὸν υἱὸν ἔχει τὴν **ζωήν**, ὁ μὴ ἔχων τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν **ζωήν** οὐκ ἔχει.

Pistis in the testimony about the Son of God is important because what is at stake is eternal life. He mentions life (ζωή) four times, with eternal life being referenced first, and the succeeding references simply being “life.” The emphasis on “life” contrasts the previous allusions to “death” in chapter three, and serves as a counterpoint to the death he mentions in succeeding verses (5:16–17). As he concludes his reference to testimony in verse 12, he alludes to “life” four times to emphasize God’s testimony which is that God has granted eternal life to the Johannine believers in the past, and this eternal life is not available to those who do not have *pistis* in Jesus as the Son of God.

One might imagine that the Johannine believers should know this information. Seeing all of the eternal life verses in succession can make the Johannine author seem overly and

⁵⁴⁰ Cf. brotherhood language in Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 189.

unnecessarily repetitive. However, each time, the Johannine author emphasizes the effect of eternal life in a slightly different and nuanced way. In the case of 5:12, the author emphasizes the aspect of possession that is reminiscent of the indwelling Spirit (cf. 4:13) and the internalized testimony (5:10). The one who does not *have* the Son of God (ὁ μὴ ἔχων τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ), meaning the one who has not internalized *pistis* in the Son of God, does not possess eternal life. By contrast, the one who does *have* the Son (ὁ ἔχων τὸν υἱὸν), meaning that he does have *pistis* in the Son of God, also possesses eternal life. In the Greco-Roman culture, someone may have *pistis* in the emperor as *divi filius*, but that would not result in the believer possessing eternal life. The political would be intertwined with the religious aspects of such *pistis*, and senators, for example, would be foolish to deify dead family members in an effort to afford some sense of eternity to them because it would be interpreted as a challenge to the emperor.⁵⁴¹

When the Johannine writer finally begins his epilogue, he gives the reason for his writing, which is the assurance of eternal life for the Johannine believers (5:13):⁵⁴²

I have written these things to you who **believe** in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have **eternal life**.

Ταῦτα ἔγραψα ὑμῖν ἵνα εἰδῆτε ὅτι **ζωὴν** ἔχετε **αἰώνιον** τοῖς **πιστεύουσιν** εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ.

As discussed in previous sections, the Johannine author has spent the earlier part of the chapter demonstrating that the Johannine *pistis* is not a weak or trendy *pistis* that is passing through the culture based on the testimonies of a couple men. It is a victorious *pistis* that is based on the testimony of God himself. As the Johannine believers come into conflict with the opponents that tempt the community to doubt their *pistis*, the author wants to assure the believers that the effect of their *pistis* is not a small one. It has eternal consequences. Eternal life through apotheosis in the culture was coveted by the emperors, who hoped to be deified after their death and sought to be as close to a divine figure in life as well. For them, deification was the prize, and in a way, the Johannine author is reminding his audience of the “prize” of eternal life that they receive through their *pistis* in Jesus as the Son of God. He is assuring them that the Johannine *pistis* is worth the battle against the Greco-Roman world.

⁵⁴¹ Rosenberger, “Coping with Death,” 120.

⁵⁴² A similar emphasis appears at the Gospel of John, which is said to be written for the purposes of the audience having *pistis* in the Son of God and receiving the effect of [eternal] life (John 20:31).

In the final verses of the epilogue, the writer does not conclude with standard greetings found in other New Testament letters. Instead, he offers several caveats including one about sin and how it can affect a person's life (5:16–17):

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin that does not lead to **death**, he will ask, and he will give him **life** to the ones who commit sin not leading to **death**. There is sin leading to **death**; I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to **death**.

Ἐάν τις ἴδῃ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἁμαρτάνοντα ἁμαρτίαν μὴ πρὸς **θάνατον**, αἰτήσῃ καὶ δώσει αὐτῷ **ζωήν**, τοῖς ἁμαρτάνουσιν μὴ πρὸς **θάνατον**. ἔστιν ἁμαρτία πρὸς **θάνατον**· οὐ περὶ ἐκείνης λέγω ἵνα ἐρωτήσῃ. πᾶσα ἀδικία ἁμαρτία ἐστίν, καὶ ἔστιν ἁμαρτία οὐ πρὸς **θάνατον**.

These verses provoke many questions including the question of what sin leads to death and what sin does not lead to death. Because the focus of the chapter, and indeed of the entire letter, has been the contention over *pistis*, this caveat in the epilogue likely indicates a concern over *pistis* as well.

The writer thus far has framed the battle over *pistis* in light of a worldly *pistis* from the culture that remains in death, in contrast to the Johannine *pistis* which results in eternal life (cf. 3:12–16). We see similar language in 5:16–17 with references to life and death. Because every other verse that refers to life (ζωή) has been a reference to eternal life through *pistis* in Jesus, it seems that this reference to life in 5:16 would also be referring to eternal life. The one who is giving the life must therefore be a reference to God who grants eternal life (5:11).

The writer brings up the issue of sin (ἁμαρτία), something he has addressed in every chapter of his letter.⁵⁴³ He knows that his spiritual children may be tempted to sin, especially by the temptations of the Greco-Roman world (2:15–17), but he assures that if they do sin, the Johannine members are not at a total loss and do have the support of Jesus himself (2:1). Regarding the distinctions about the sin that leads to death and the sin that does not lead to death, the previous references to death are helpful. The only other verse which has addressed death is 3:14, in which we saw that the author identifies those without the Johannine *pistis* to be in death. Therefore, the sin that leads to death suggests the extreme nature of a sin that is leading directly away from the Johannine *pistis* and towards the worldly one.

Despite the extreme language, the writer is actually presenting a positive message. When he says that the Johannine believers need not pray about the sin leading to death, he is

⁵⁴³ Cf. ἁμαρτία in 1 John 1:7, 8, 9 (2x); 2:2, 12; 3:4 (2x), 5 (2x) 8, 9; 4:10.

not suggesting that they should abandon extreme sinners to their evil devices. That would be in contrast to the love discourse that permeates the letter (esp. 4:7–21). Rather, the author is saying that the Johannine members do not have to dwell on such matters. Instead, he focuses on the sin not leading to death, something he repeats three times in the two verses. When someone is struggling with sin, a fellow Johannine member can pray for that person, and have reassurance that they can still receive eternal life as a result of the Johannine *pistis*. Thus, sin is a concern, but it does not mean that a person is completely lost to the *pistis* of the world.

In the penultimate verse of the letter, the writer of 1 John emphasizes eternal life one last time (5:20):

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and **eternal life**.

οἶδαμεν δὲ ὅτι ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ἦκει καὶ δέδωκεν ἡμῖν διάνοιαν ἵνα
γινώσκομεν τὸν ἀληθινόν, καὶ ἐσμεν ἐν τῷ ἀληθινῷ ἐν τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ
Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ. οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἀληθινὸς θεὸς καὶ **ζωὴ αἰώνιος**.

In contrast to the world that is under the power of the evil one mentioned in the previous two verses (5:18–19), the author summarizes his central countercultural message about the victorious *pistis* over the *pistis* of the Greco-Roman world. The victorious *pistis* that conquers the world is *pistis* in the true Son of God, who is Jesus Christ, and the Johannine believers receive eternal life through this *pistis*.

The closing verse, then, suggests an implicit “therefore” (5:21):

[Therefore] little children, keep yourselves from idols.

Τεκνία, φυλάξατε ἑαυτὰ ἀπὸ τῶν εἰδώλων.

The writer finishes with a final warning against the culture. The warning is appropriate as the entire letter has been a countercultural narrative about the battle over *pistis*. Although the Johannine readers may face temptation (2:15–17), idolatry (5:21), and opponents⁵⁴⁴ who try to promote a different *pistis* in the Greco-Roman world, they can be reassured that the Johannine *pistis* is in the true Son of God (esp. 5:20), which is attested by both God and man (1:1–4; 5:6–11). The Johannine believers are by nature Johannine conquerors because they contend against

⁵⁴⁴ Cf. the evil one (2:13, 14; 3:12; 5:18, 19), antichrists (2:18, 22; 4:3; cf. 2 John 7), false prophets (4:1), and the world itself (2:15–17; 3:1, 13; 5:4, 5, 19).

the polytheistic and imperial *pistis* of the culture and receive what the culture cannot achieve: eternal life through *pistis* in the true Son of God.

Conclusion and Final Reflections

This thesis has attempted to contribute to the scholarship of 1 John in its exegetical and cultural reading of the letter. The analysis of the “conquering” language with consideration to the cultural context aids modern readers especially in demonstrating that the previously assumed intra-Johannine, sectarian contention of 1 John is more likely a contention with the culture of the Greco-Roman world in which the Johannine members lived and worked. While the broader culture touted a *pistis* to the emperor and to many gods, the writer of 1 John urges his spiritual children to fight against this cultural norm and to hold onto their *pistis* in Jesus as the true Son of God. In the battle over *pistis*, the countercultural message of 1 John would have been an encouraging letter to receive. The Johannine mentor is demonstrating to his spiritual children that he understands the challenges and temptations that they face in retaining their *pistis* in Jesus as the true Son of God, when the culture of the Greco-Roman world operates in a *pistis* in many gods and honors the emperor as *divi filius*. Thus, the triumphant declaration that the Johannine *pistis* is a *nikē*, which conquers the world (5:4), drives the believers of Jesus to persist in their *pistis* battle. As chapter one has shown, the conquering language toward a Johannine *nikē* utilizes militaristic undertones already familiar in the Greco-Roman culture which associates the goddess Nike with military battles, to underline the Johannine believers conquering their opponents. As discussed in chapter two, each of these opponents including the evil one, the antichrists, and the false prophets is affiliated with “the world,” and it is ultimately the conquering of the world itself which marks the Johannine victory. Moreover, the repeated emphasis on “the world” as the ultimate opponent underscores the countercultural tone of Johannine resistance to the Greco-Roman world. Chapter three of this thesis has shown that the author of 1 John has already alluded to the culture with his reference to the negative fear of the divine in the polytheistic world which contrasts the Johannine love of God (4:18), and that his countercultural message continues to the very end, with a concluding warning against the many idols of the Greco-Roman world.

Finally, chapter four has demonstrated that the battle with the Greco-Roman world in the First Letter of John is ultimately a conflict of *pistis*. Roman soldiers achieved military victories with a *pistis* to the emperor, who was also known as the *divi filius*, the son of god, and the repeated emphasis on Jesus as the true Son of God in 1 John demonstrates the writer’s countercultural exhortation: for the Johannine believers to resist what is touted in the culture and to hold fast to their *pistis* in Jesus. While the culture promotes a *pistis* to the emperor, the Johannine author proclaims that the testimonies of both man and God prove that Jesus is the

true divine Son. Though the Johannine believers need to be vigilant in resisting the antichrists, false prophets, and idols in the world which represent a different *pistis*, they can also be reassured that the minority community which holds a *pistis* in Jesus as the true Son of God conquers this world of opponents around them.

The countercultural victory of 1 John is especially striking when one considers the progression of the *pistis* battle in latter centuries of the Roman Empire. By the fourth century CE, the goddess Nike/Victoria became a visual representation of that battle as she was taken *in* and *out* of the Curia (Senate House) in Rome. After the unexpected conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity,⁵⁴⁵ his son Constantius II removed the altar of Nike/Victoria, and established a law in 356 to make it a capital crime to sacrifice or take part in the worship of images.⁵⁴⁶ By this time, the cult of Nike/Victoria had been practiced in Rome for some six and a half centuries, and the Altar of Victory had been the place where senators had sacrificed at her altar before each meeting and sworn oaths of loyalty to the emperor ever since Augustus first placed her there in 29 BCE.⁵⁴⁷ Subsequent Christian emperors were more tolerant and allowed the cults of Rome to remain,⁵⁴⁸ and the Altar of Victory was placed back in the Curia, probably during the brief reign of Julian in late 361 to mid-363.⁵⁴⁹

For most of the fourth century, and certainly under the time of Constantius II, the pressures on the Roman elite still strongly favored traditional practices,⁵⁵⁰ but when the emperor Gratian stopped financial support of the cults in 382, and removed the altar of Nike/Victoria from the Curia for a second time, there seems to have been a noticeable shift in the culture.⁵⁵¹ Symmachus as prefect of the city of Rome wrote a lengthy memorandum to the emperor arguing for the restoration of the altar as it had come to represent the deep history of Roman imperial tradition and the religious customs which Symmachus believed had served the

⁵⁴⁵ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 366.

⁵⁴⁶ *Codex Theodosianus* 16.10.6.

⁵⁴⁷ John Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court, A.D. 364–425* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 204.

⁵⁴⁸ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 374.

⁵⁴⁹ Glen L. Thompson, “Constantius II and the First Removal of the Altar of Victory,” in *A Tall Order: Writing the Social History of the Ancient World: Essays in Honor of William V. Harris*, ed. Jean-Jacques Aubert and Zsuzsanna Várhelyi (München; Leipzig, Germany: K. G. Saur, 2005), 103.

⁵⁵⁰ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 380.

⁵⁵¹ Symmachus, *Relations* 3.15. It seems only the altar was removed and the statue of Nike/Victoria herself may have been retained; cf. Claudian *De VI cons. Hon.* (of 404), 597f; cf. Alan Cameron, *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 239f; Matthews, *Western Aristocracies*, 204. The reason for the statue staying was probably because Nike/Victoria had become a symbol of rule and support of the senate, and it was the sacrifices that had been a problem for Constantius (Thompson, “Constantius II and the First Removal of the Altar of Victory,” 92–93).

state well in fostering loyalty to the emperor.⁵⁵² For him, the goddess Nike/Victoria was synonymous with Rome. Thus, Symmachus' arguments were less directed against the issue of Christianity and more in favor of the toleration of the cults.⁵⁵³

Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, countered Symmachus with two letters which forcefully argued that it was the Christian duty of the emperor to fight for the church.⁵⁵⁴ The bishop seems to have presented a countercultural argument against the traditional culture at the highest level, regarding the once universally respected state religion, which Symmachus believed had made the Roman Empire prosperous, as the outdated enthusiasm of a local minority.⁵⁵⁵ Ambrose was successful in his efforts, and after 382, with the brief exception of the reign of Eugenius in 392–394, “there was now only one true *religio*.”⁵⁵⁶ What the writer of 1 John had presented centuries before as the countercultural victory of *pistis* against the Greco-Roman world had become the predominant norm.

⁵⁵² Cf. Gerhard van den Heever, “The Usefulness of Violent Ends: Apocalyptic Imaginaries in the Reconstruction of Society,” in *Reconceiving Religious Conflict: New Views from the Formative Centuries of Christianity*, ed. Wendy Mayer and Chris L. de Wet, Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2018), 282–235.

⁵⁵³ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 386.

⁵⁵⁴ Ambrose, *Epp.* 17–18. A more skeptical view of Ambrose suggests that his dispute over the altar was a low-risk opportunity to “flex his muscles” in the imperial court (Robert Chenault, “Beyond Pagans and Christians: Politics and Intra-Christian Conflict in the Controversy over the Altar of Victory,” in *Pagans and Christians in Late Antique Rome*, ed. Michele Renee Salzman, Marianne Sághy, and Rita Lizzi Testa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 48).

⁵⁵⁵ Cf. Ambrose, *Ep.* 18.2; Matthews, *Western Aristocracies*, 207.

⁵⁵⁶ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 386.

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