ROUND THE TIME Hebrews was written, the early Christian community lived with a heightened sense of persecution. In the crucible of persecution, Christians faced the great temptation of renouncing or denying their faith in Jesus. The writer of Hebrews directed much of his effort toward encouraging Christians to endure and hang on.1 This plea was grounded in the superior nature of Christ’s identity as the only High Priest who could make the necessary atonement for sin. As well, the writer of this unique epistle appealed to Israel’s colorful history, encouraging Christians with stories of bold faith by those who faced hard times in the past (see Hebrews 11).

Hebrews 12 offers an inspiring challenge for all Christians. As a spirited football coach might instruct his embattled team, the writer of Hebrews explodes with the message, “Hang in there. Don’t give up!” Additionally, the writer admonishes Christians to rid themselves of all encumbrances and sin!

The writer of Hebrews showed mastery in his usage of the Greek language of the first century. As well, this epistle contains an educated awareness of both Greek philosophy and Jewish theology. Particularly pertinent to Hebrews 12:1-2, the Book of Hebrews employed classical images from Greco-Roman culture to help readers and listeners alike grasp the meaning of the gospel.2 Hebrews 12:1-2 is packed with meaningful insight about how one can endure hard times. The depth of these verses unfolds in the way the words are knit together, providing a deep apologetic for standing firm in Jesus. As this article reveals, _ogkos_, a noun in Hebrews 12:1, is certainly reflective of the depth of content included throughout Hebrews.

Joe Beckler

Etymology and Meaning
The writer of Hebrews encourages Christians to throw off all encumbrances. The Greek word for encumbrance is _ogkos_. Hebrews 12:1 represents the only use of _ogkos_ in the New Testament; the Greek Septuagint never uses the term. Because of the word’s limited usage in the New Testament, we can best reconstruct its meaning in light of its usage within the earlier Classical Greek context.

Generally speaking, _ogkos_ meant encumbrance, impediment, or something that got in someone’s way.3 Within the context of classical Greek usage, _ogkos_ also carried meanings such as mass or weight. As well, the word could refer to some form of inner spiritual weightiness. Some classical usage of _ogkos_ also conveyed a sense of burden, such as a burden of the flesh.4

To help us evaluate what the writer of Hebrews meant in using the phrase _throw off all encumbrances_, we should recognize that his use of _ogkos_ does not refer to sin. This is apparent in the fact that the writer of Hebrews dealt with the subject of sin specifically in the phrase—_sin that so easily entangles_. _Ogkos_ referred to things other than sin, namely anything that hindered or slowed a person down. With respect to everything in life, the Christian was being charged to travel light in the world. In his use of _ogkos_, the writer of Hebrews emphasized that some things, which may not necessarily be bad in and of themselves, could still hamper.6

Race Imagery
The race imagery employed in this verse is also crucial to understanding the particular usage of _ogkos_. Hebrews 12:1-2 makes clear that a race has been marked out for Christians to run. The writer borrowed the imagery of athletics from the Greco-Roman world, a culture that popularized races and other forms of athletic competition.
“With respect to everything in life, the Christian was being charged to travel light in the world.”
Races were popular events in Greco-Roman culture. The first recorded account of officially-competitive games indicates they were held in 776 B.C. in the city of Olympia. Competition was intense. For years, Greek athletes looked for ways to increase their speed. Ultimately, this led to runners competing in the nude. According to Greek historians, this trend started in 720 B.C. with an athlete named Orsippas who lost his shorts (called zoma) in a stadium race, which he won. After this race, officials ruled that athletes were to remove all clothing and compete completely nude. (Pausanias, the Greek historian, suspected that Orsippas actually let his zoma fall intentionally so he could run without anything hindering.)

Not all young men would compete in the Olympics. Yet, the athletically-minded Greeks established the gymnasium. This institution, which existed for hundreds of years, influenced areas dominated by Hellenism and affected the culture of the later Roman Empire as well. Young men participated in the gymnasium for competition, fitness, and well-being. Like the Olympic athletes, those participating within the gymnasium exercised naked.

Of course much time passed between the Olympic events and the time of the writing of Hebrews. Yet, the theme of running and competing was a strong metaphor for the early Christian community. Both Paul and the writer of Hebrews used themes of competing to convey the determination required for living the Christian life. Yet Jewish-Christian readers considered being publicly naked to be shameful. No doubt, though, they would have known about this practice.
Using this metaphorical imagery likely added thoughtfully shock-value to what the writer was trying to convey to his audience of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. The idea of an unencumbered athlete, running stripped down, was a cultural image that made sense to the early Christians who received the Letter of Hebrews.9

With respect to ὁγκος in Hebrews 12:1, the image of running, as understood in Greco-Roman culture, sheds light on what the writer wanted to convey. Just as an athlete would strip in order to race unhindered, Christ-followers were charged to look closely at the things occupying their lives.

Ὁγκος appears only once in the New Testament. Yet, the one usage in Hebrews 12:1 is packed with meaning tied to the historical context of the Greco-Roman world. The writer saw anything getting in the way of serving Christ as a threat. In an effort to endure difficult times, Christians were to strip away anything that would cause a deterrence in running the most important race marked out, namely the pursuit of following Jesus.

5. All Scripture quotations are the writer’s own translation.

Joe Beckler is a church planter and resort minister in Durango, Colorado.