CHAPTER THREE

HELLENISTIC JUDAISM AND THE AGON TRADITION

The purely hellenistic material at our disposal has shown that at least the linguistic presuppositions were present in the milieu of Paul to enable him to make use of the athletic metaphor. However the fact that the outer form was present cannot detract from the realization that the philosophy represented by the traditional athletic image was diametrically opposed to Paul’s own theological thought.

Consequently we are set the task of searching for parallel or illustrative material closer to the intellectual and religious home of Paul, namely in Hellenistic Judaism.¹ In actual fact one here meets a wealth of evidence testifying to the continuance of the Agon tradition, above all in the writings of Philo of Alexandria, and in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament. That we are here still dealing with the same tradition is further indicated by the striking manner in which the sources reflect decided influences from the thought of the diatribe.

1. PHILO

The works of Philo of Alexandria teem with the terminology of the games and with the picture of the Agon of virtue. Here again, however, one should not be satisfied with simply adducing interesting parallels—even when it is realized that they offer further convincing proof of an Agon tradition.² These passages should be seen in the light and within the framework of the writer’s entire scheme of thought, in order to make the examination completely fruitful. This is all the more important in the case of Philo since a purely linguistic or formal comparison could lead to the false conclusion that Philo is simply carrying on uncritically the image of the diatribe before him.³

¹ This further stage of the study is also necessitated by the need to examine closer the suggestion of some scholars that Paul received the athletic metaphor from the hellenistic synagogue; cf. the Introduction p. 4 note 2.
² See e.g. the list of references in Eidem, Pauli bildwelt, pp. 175f.
³ P. Wendland, Philo und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe, in: Beiträge zur Geschichte der griechischen Philosophie und Religion, Berlin 1895, has
The recurrence of the traditional features and themes of the Cynic-Stoic picture of the Agon of virtue are not difficult to find in Philo. The polemic against the supposedly holy character of the national games again occurs frequently. The moral athlete is to leave to others the prizes of those unholy contests which the states hold every three years and to apply himself rather to winning the crowns in those contests which are truly holy: ὁ τῶν Ὀλυμπίακῶς ἄγων μόνος ἐν λέγοιτο ἔνδικως ἵππος, οὐχ ὅν τιθέασιν ὁ τῆν Ἑλλήνοις αἰκοῦντες, ἀλλ' ὁ περὶ κτήσεως τῶν θείων καὶ ὄλυμπίων ὡς ἀληθῶς ἀρετῶν εἰς τούτον τοῦ ἄγωνα οἱ ἀθενεστάτοι τά σώματα ἔρρομενεστάτοι δὲ τὰς ψυχὰς ἐγγράφονται πάντες.¹

Philo ridicules the efforts of the athletes² by pointing out the superior physical strength and prowess of the animals, and by drawing attention to the anomaly that, normally, physical injury to others is punishable, but is rewarded in the arena with crowns and honour.³ In traditional fashion he contrasts the athletes who take thought only for the improvement of the body with the philosophers οἷς ἦσσω ἐγκυνιάζονται διὰ ἔρωτον ἱδρῶτον πρὸς τὴν τῶν περὶ τῶν βίων ἀναγκαίων καὶ χρησίμων κτήσιν.⁴

The true Agon of life which alone deserves to be designated as holy again appears as the contest for virtue in the struggle against the passions and vices.⁵ As in the diatribe this contest is called the

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¹ Agrie 113 and 119; compare also Mut Nm 106: ἁγωνισταῖς κατὰ τοὺς ἱεροὺς ἄγωνας λεγομένοις with Abr 48: ἄνδρον ἄθλητικὰ ... ἐπὶ τοὺς ἱεροὺς δυναμεῖν ἄγωνας.

² Note also the familiar play on words with ἄθλητας and ἄθλοις in the cutting polemic in Vit Cont 41, and also in Plant 39 and Som 2 24.

³ Wendland, op. cit., p. 43.

⁴ Spec Leg II 91; cf. also Leg All III 72.

⁵ For the Agon of virtue as 'holy' see, in addition to note 2 above, Migr Ab 200, Mut Nm 81f. and Praem Poen 52: λέγω δὲ ἱεροὺς (sc. ἄγωνας) οὖ τοὺς παρὰ πολλοῖς νομιζομένους ... ἀλλ' οὖς ἡ σωφρ. πέρικε διάθεσιν.