CHAPTER FOUR

PALESTINIAN JUDAISM AND THE GAMES

The development of the Agon image and terminology as traced up till now can rightly be called a tradition in as far as its use, even by Hellenistic Judaism and the pseudepigraphical writings of Palestinian Judaism, continually betrays its Greek origins. However, it should be noted that the passages in IV Ezra and the Syrian Baruch apocalypse, while presenting the typically Greek thought of life as an Agon, do not contain a conscious comparison from the games. In these instances one can only speak of a pale, non-metaphorical, use of 'agon'.

That we should not expect a positive use of the athletic image on Palestinian soil is only to be expected when one surveys the attitude of the Palestinian Jews, and especially of the Rabbis, to the games and allied Greek institutions. While the Jew in the hellenistic diaspora felt more free to enter the Greek theatre and stadium, the situation in Palestine itself was different.

In the first place the fostering of athletic contests and gymnasias

---

1 The use of the loan word ἱμάχλος (= ἀγών) in Jelamenu, Emor, also reveals a pale military sense (cf. J. Levy, Neuhebräisches und Chaldäisches Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim, Leipzig 1876, p. 20, and M. Jastrow, A Dictionary of the Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Jerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature, New York 1950, p. 11); the lexicographers also cite a possible occurrence of ἵμαχλος (= ἀγωνία) in Tanch. Mishpatim 92 a, but the text is not certain.

2 Philo himself reports having attended an ἀγών πεντακαταστάτων and the performance of a tragedy by Euripides (Schürer II, p. 60 and S. Krauss, Talmudische Archäologie III, p. 119). In addition note the inscription reserving a place for the Jews in the theatre at Miletus (A. Deissmann, Licht vom Osten, Exkurs IV) and the inscription from Berenice in Cyrenaica set up εἰς τόν ἐπισημοτάτον τόπον τοῦ ἀμφιθέατρου (CIG III, 5361, lines 26 ff., in Schürer III, p. 80). The famous letter of Claudius to the Alexandrians in 41 A.D. (Tcherikover and Fuks, Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum II, Cambridge/ Mass. 1960, no. 153 lines 88 ff.) orders the Jews not to intrude themselves into the games (γυμνασιαρχικοῖς ἐξ οἰκειουσίας ἀγώνων) since they enjoy what is their own. But the order could presuppose previous participation.

3 Cf. the πεντακαταστίκης ἀγών in Tyre in II Macc 4:18 ff., originally founded by Alexander the Great (Schürer II, p. 47).

4 The Hellenizers erected a gymnasium in honour of Antiochus on the acropolis of Jerusalem κατὰ τὰ νόμιμα τῶν ἔθνων, I Macc 1:14, II Macc 4:9-17,
institutions which went directly against the national and religious sensibility of the Jews—had been a major weapon of the program of hellenization under Antiochus Epiphanes. But the greatest introduction of these foreign practices came under Herod the Great. Not only in Caesarea did he build a theatre and amphitheatre and institute quinquennial games with great prizes. Even in Jerusalem itself he erected such buildings, and, as in Caesarea, celebrated showy πενταετηρικοὶ ἀγώνες in the muses, athletics and chariot racing, attracting champions from neighbouring countries with the promise of munificent prizes. In addition he endowed other Palestinian cities with theatres, gymnasia, stadia and other public buildings of this nature, and also sponsored the Olympic games which were declining for want of funds. The judgment of Josephus on these innovations as being κατὰ τοὺς Ἰουδαίους ἡδους ἄλλοτρια can be taken as representing the common feeling of the majority of the Jews. Four reasons are suggested for this attitude. The gymnastic athletes contested naked, and the games themselves were consecrated to Caesar—in imperial times the public games in the provincial cities were connected with the Caesar-cult. But it was above all the cruelty of the gladiatorial contests also introduced by Herod which were condemned as a destruction of honoured customs. In addition the trophies gave special cause for offence since they were mistaken for images.

Nevertheless, the material gathered by Schürer shows that the imperial times saw an amazing growth of these foreign institutions even within Palestine—thus the even more radical renunciation in the Rabbinical literature. But here the polemics are directed more against the frivolity of the theatre and the cruelty and impiety of the 'venationes'. Only rarely does an illustration taken from the

and IV Macc 4:20. Antiochus also wanted to introduce the Dionysia in Jerusalem, and a palaestra is mentioned in II Macc 4:14.

1 Bell 1.415, and Ant 16.137f.
2 Ant 15.268ff.
3 Cf. Schürer II, p. 61; Bell 1.430 reports that the king was himself proficient ἐν ταῖς γυμναστικαῖς.
4 Bell 1.426f, and Ant 16.149.
5 Ant 15.268.
7 Ant 15.274; many Jewish prisoners perished in the arena at the end of the Jewish war (Bell 3.539, 7.23f, 37f, and 96).
8 Ant 15.276.
9 Schürer II, p. 47-52, and 60f.
10 See Strack-Bill. IV 1, Exkurs 15B, pp. 401ff. "Stellung der alten Syna-