CHAPTER EIGHT

THE AGON MOTIF IN THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

1. THE ATHLETE AND SOLDIER OF CHRIST

The Pastoral Epistles present themselves as Paul’s personal letters of encouragement and exhortation to his disciples and co-workers who now assume greater responsibility with the end of Paul himself in view. If we presuppose the correctness of this situation as suggested by the letters themselves the picture of the Agon which they present offers no great problems. Nor can there be any talk of a wide rift at this point between Paul himself and the ‘Deutero-Paulines’. On the contrary, the three characteristic features of the use of the athletic—as well as the military—image in the Pastorals reveal a natural development from Paul’s use in his earlier letters.

The three characteristics of the twin metaphors in the Pastorals are the following: 1. Both are exclusively applied to him who is to walk in the Apostle’s footsteps as an athlete and soldier of the Gospel. Instead of apostolic apology we find pastoral paraenesis and, right at the end, a retrospective ‘apostolic confession’. 2. Both images appear in a more established or stereotyped form. Gone are the rhetorical questions, present instead is only direct exhortation. 3. Once more it is the ‘Kampfsituation’ of the preacher and teacher, brought about by the fight against heresy, which forms the background to both images.

It is significant that the athletic termini play an increasingly important role in the later letters of Paul.¹ This development reaches its most pointed form in the Pastorals so that one may conclude, keeping in mind the specific situation of the addressee, that the five passages which come into consideration in I and II Tim contain genuinely Pauline thought.

The picture of the Agon in the Pastorals has often suffered from

¹ T. Nägele, Der Wortschatz des Apostels Paulus, Göttingen 1905, pp. 83f., rightly suspects that “das eine oder andere solcher Wörter (sc. ΔΓΩV etc.) erst in den Gefangenschaftsjahren des Paulus ein Bestandteil seines produktiven Wortschatzes wurde”.

the same distortion in interpretation as the Pauline passages studied up to this point. In place of the ‘good fight’ of him who has been entrusted with the Gospel there has appeared a generalised picture of the moral-religious struggle of the Christian. That which the writer of I Tim 6:12 meant when exhorting his reader to ‘fight the good fight’ has often been turned (in many a confirmation address!) into a piece of general paraenesis far removed from its original context and purpose.

A glance at the two occurrences of the military image, by itself in I Tim 1:18f. and together with the athletic image in II Tim 2:3-5, is again necessary in order to gain a correct picture of the scope of the Agon in the two epistles to Timothy. The parallelism between the two metaphors is emphasised by two distinct features. 1. Apart from the doubtful case in Eph 6:12, only II Tim 2:3-5 reveals a genuine mixture of the two images in the NT. 2. In the second place there is also a striking correspondence in phraseology between ἡ καλὴ στρατεία in I Tim 1:18 (also καλὸς στρατιώτης in II Tim 2:3) and ὁ καλὸς ἀγών in I Tim 6:12 and II 4:7.

It is above all in these phrases and in the use of the definite article that we are entitled to detect the traditional character of these images. Dibelius remarks that the contrast between physical and spiritual γομνασία in I Tim 4:8 reflects an original polemic against athletics as we have also noted it in tracing the history of the philosophical use of the athletic image.¹ We have also found this original polemic in the frequent designation of the sage’s Agon as καλὸς. Philo’s exhortation in Leg All II 108 illustrates this point most clearly, in reference both to the contest itself and to the incomparable crown which is to be won: κάλλιστον ἄγωνα τούτον διάθλησον καὶ σπουδάσον στεφανωθῆναι κατὰ τῆς ἡδονῆς καὶ ἐκείλεά στέφανον, ἵνα οὐδεμία πανήγυρις ἀνθρώπων ἐχορήγησιν.² The original polemic contained in the adjective ‘good’ is completely lost in I Tim 6:12 and II 4:7, and an attack against the games and against athletics as such is certainly not contained or intended in the comparison between the two kinds of exercise in I Tim 4:8. Nor

² Cf. also Mut Nom 82: καλὸν ἄθλον, Leg All III 48: καλὸς δρόμος καὶ πάντων ἄριστον ἀγώνισμα, and Vit Mos II 136: ἀγώνισμα καλὸν. W. Grundmann (TWNT III, p. 552) also concludes that the use of καλὸς in the Pastorals, apart from the Jewish phrase καλὰ ἔργα, has been taken from “der durch die Gedanken stoischer Ethik geformten Vulgärsprache”.