

The Message of Athletic Images Contained in St. Paul's Epistles

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Athletic competitions play an important role in the lives of contemporary people. Games, championships, and even individual matches enjoy the great interest of the public and are among the most popular forms of entertainment. In antiquity, similar events absorbed people, especially those who lived in areas that were influenced by Hellenistic culture. Thus, it is unsurprising that St. Paul and people from his environment made such generous use of athletic imagery: by showing comparisons to agonistics,¹ they emphasized certain aspects of the Christian life.

Previously, publications dealing with Paul's references to sports analyzed only the lengthier and more important pericopes or focused on explaining the significance of athletics in the context of the social and cultural life of the ancient world.² The aim of this article is to focus on a larger number of fragments from the *Corpus Paulinum* and use them to explain what messages were addressed to the audience through the use of such metaphors. The author of this article hopes to expand knowledge about the topic under study.

When analyzing athletic metaphors in the *Corpus Paulinum*, we see a kind of thematic development. In the first Epistles of St. Paul,³ their aim is mostly

1 The term "agonistics" means participation in so-called agonies, or games and competitions (athletic or artistic) that took place in ancient Greece to honor a god or hero. Cf. *Wielki słownik wyrazów obcych PWN*, red. M. Bańko, Warszawa 2005, p. 21.

2 One exception is the monograph: A. Rambiert-Kwaśniewska, „*Walcz w dobrych zawodach o wiarę*” (1 Tm 6, 12a). *Relektura metaforiki sportowej w listach proto- i deuteropawłowych*, Wrocław 2015 (Bibliotheca Biblica), which is the most complete study of athletic themes in St. Paul's epistles. This article was written before the publication of this monograph, so the results of research presented in the latter are not considered here.

3 This division is not synonymous with the distinction between proto- and deuteropauline epistles. In this article, I assume the traditional understanding regarding the authorship of the Pauline Epistles. Thus, I will not deal with the topic of the true origins of these texts from the Apostle Paul, as this topic is constantly discussed and, furthermore, is not of great significance with respect to the topic I deal with in this article.

to present the conversion of people by the apostle as an athletic struggle. In later Pauline epistles, athletic images are of a more universal nature and serve to describe the lives of Christians. These two stages of development will be the structure of this article.

1. Evangelization as an Athletic Struggle

At the beginning, I should note that sometimes the apostle combines athletic and military images, which makes it difficult to recognize the subject of his allusion. However, such a relationship between these two realities undoubtedly results from the fact that in ancient Greece agonistic education and military training were strictly tied together.⁴ It is worth noticing that some athletic images referenced by St. Paul refer to sport in general, while others are references to specific athletic disciplines. His great knowledge related to the topic of agonistics demonstrates that he was not particularly disturbed by the fact that those competitions were held in honor of pagan deities. Furthermore, as some scholars have noticed, he could have used public gatherings related to agonies in order to evangelize; this could have been the case during his stay in Corinth, which coincided with the organization of an athletic competition outside Isthmia (51 AD).⁵

The first writing by Paul that contains a reference to athletic topics is the First Epistle to the Thessalonians.⁶ It was written in Corinth several months before Paul founded a community in Thessaloniki and expresses his concern for the young Church there. Recalling his arrival in this city, the apostle writes the following words:

For you yourselves know, brothers, that our reception among you was not without effect. Rather, after we had suffered and been insolently treated, as you know, in Philippi, we drew

4 This also results in a certain similarity of terminology used in both these areas. Cf. M. F. Baslez, *Antyczne chrześcijaństwo wobec kultury sportowej świata grecko-rzymskiego*, „Communio. Międzynarodowy Przegląd Teologiczny” 26 (2006) no. 4, p. 5.

5 Cf. O. Broneer, *The Apostle Paul and the Isthmian Games*, „The Biblical Archaeologist” 25 (1962) no. 1, p. 20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3211017>.

6 The aim of this article is the presentation of athletic metaphors, not the presentation of the development of this topic. Thus, the chronology of the Pauline Epistle I have accepted only aims to systematize the presented Biblical material.

courage through our God to speak to you the gospel of God with much struggle [έν πολλῷ ἀγῶνι] (1 Thessalonians 2 : 1–2⁷).

Here, Paul describes the circumstances under which it was given for him to evangelize and illustrates them using athletic imagery. Preaching the Good News took place “with much struggle” (έν πολλῷ ἀγῶνι). The term ἀγῶν means “gathering; a place of games and competitions” as well as “struggle, court case, or an internal struggle, agitation, and fear.”⁸ Despite numerous meanings, this word had especially athletic connotations. The evangelization presented here faced great (πολύς) obstacles, the overcoming of which is presented here as athletic competitions. These difficulties could be the hostility and physical suffering that Paul and his collaborators experienced in nearby Philippi and are mentioned in verse 1.⁹ It is possible that in accordance with the further meanings of the term ἀγῶν the apostle could have also had in mind some internal dilemmas or fear caused by the unrest that had grown among the crowd and the violent rejection of his mission. It is in the context of these possible concerns and fear that it becomes easier to understand the words: “we drew courage through our God to speak to you the Gospel of God.” Regardless of if the challenges the apostle faced were the hostility of some people or internal obstacles such as doubts or fear, he continued his mission. Using the language of sport, despite experiencing a crisis he did not give up and was motivated by the prize that awaited him. That is probably why seventeen verses later Paul deals with the topic of rewards in order to show to his audience how dear they are to him:

For what is our hope or joy or crown [στέφανος καυχήσεως] to boast of in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming if not you yourselves? For you are our glory and joy (1 Thessalonians 2 : 19–20).¹⁰

In addition to other terms, the Thessalonians are called the apostle’s “crown of glory” (στέφανος καυχήσεως). Undoubtedly, this is a reference to the prize

7 The Biblical quotations in the English translation of this article come from the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE).

8 Cf. *Słownik grecko-polski*, pod red. Z. Abramowiczówny, vol. 1: A-A, Warszawa 1958, p. 22.

9 He also experienced similar hostility in Thessaloniki, which they also had to flee (see: Acts 17 : 1–10). However, Paul does not mention this so that his audience does not experience unpleasantness.

10 St. Paul addressed the Philippians in a very similar way, beginning his final admonition of the epistle intended for them with the words: “Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown [στέφανός μου], in this way stand firm in the Lord, beloved” (Philippians 4 : 1).

that athletes received after emerging victorious in competitions. However, it was not the crown itself, but prestige and the feeling of having achieved success that were the main prize. Thus, it is not surprising that he immediately responds to the question he asks: “For you are our glory and joy.” The time of receiving this prize is something of a mystery. The first part of the question lacks the form of the verb “to be” (noun phrase). Thus, this fragment can also be translated using the future tense: “what [will be] our hope...” This perfectly resonates with the second part of the question that deals with the “coming” (ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ παρουσίᾳ) of Jesus. Meanwhile, the apostle’s response uses the present tense: “For you are our glory and joy.” Thus, it could be said that the overcoming of the obstacles that evangelization faces here on this earth was a source of joy and pride for Paul. At the same time, being capable of gaining followers of Christ is a disposition that allows one to receive the full prize, which is salvation for both the one who evangelizes and the one who is evangelized.¹¹

The next writing in which St. Paul uses athletic imagery in order to describe his missionary activity is the Epistle to the Galatians. In it, he deals with the topic of salvation received as a gratuitous grace, not as a result of the Mosaic Law.¹² His dealing with this topic results from the fact that there were false preachers, the so-called Judaizers, in that community who taught about the need for Christians to accept the Mosaic Law and who simultaneously rejected Paul’s authority and the Gospel he preached. In this context, the apostle writes:

Then [...] I again went up to Jerusalem [...] and I presented to them the gospel that I preach to the Gentiles—but privately to those of repute—so that I might not be running [τρέχω], or have run [ἔδραμον], in vain (Galatians 2 : 1–2).

Unlike the previously discussed texts, a specific athletic discipline (namely, running) appears here. It is to running that Paul compares his missionary activity, which he subjected to the apostles’ verification, just as a runner is subjected to the evaluation of referees. St. Paul’s “evangelizing race” would be pointless and illicit if his teaching had not been considered to be in accordance

11 Cf. M. Bednarz, *1–2 List do Tesaloniczan*, Częstochowa 2007, p. 142–143, 216–221 (Nowy Komentarz Biblijny. Nowy Testament, 13).

12 St. Paul has a similar thought in the Epistle to the Romans, using the following reference to sport: “So it [election] depends not upon a person’s will or exertion [τοῦ τρέχοντος – literally, ‘upon the runner’], but upon God, who shows mercy” (Romans 9 : 16).

with the teaching of Christ's direct disciples. This would also mean that all the communities he had established were not unified with the apostolic Church. However, these are only speculations, as one should not think that St. Paul was convinced of the orthodoxy of what he preached (see: Galatians 1 : 8) and he subjected himself to this evaluation because of those who were evangelized, so that they would be certain of the veracity of the Gospels that were preached to them. Thanks to the fact that St. Paul's activity was confirmed by the Jerusalem community, the error in which his opponents found themselves, both with respect to the figure of the apostle and the false teachings preached by them, was presented. However, their activity was at least partially accepted by members of the community, as demonstrated by Paul's following admonition in the next epistle I will discuss:

You were running [Ἐτρέχετε] well; who hindered you from following [the] truth? (Galatians 5 : 7).

This is the first reference to the image of the Christian life as a race, which is expanded in Paul's later epistles. It is difficult to say if this accusation means that the Galatians had already begun to live according to a false gospel or if the apostle believed it to be a real danger that this would happen in the near future. Regardless of these conjectures, he wants to say that living in accordance with the true Gospel teachings is like a good, quick run, while accepting false teachings would be their rejection and mean failure.¹³

The next athletic image can be found in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, at the end of the fragment in which St. Paul describes the internal freedom that accompanied him in his evangelizing mission.¹⁴ Here, the Apostle to the Gentiles also emphasizes that although the external circumstances can vary, he can adapt in order to fulfill his mission of spreading the Good News (see: 1 Corinthians 9 : 1–23). Thus, in order to better explain to his audience what the necessity of living in accordance with the Gospel the apostle writes:

13 Cf. P. Kasiłowski, *Metafory sportowe w Listach Pawła*, [w:] *Salezjanie a sport*, pod red. Z. Dziubińskiego, Warszawa 1998, p. 35ff.

14 Some scholars interpret the athletic image from 1 Corinthians 9 : 24–27 within the broader context of this epistle and believe it refers to the issue of consuming foods devoted to the gods. However, this connection is by no means certain. Cf. D. Moreau, „*Biegnijcie, aby zwyciężyć*”. *Bieg wytrzymałościowy a życie chrześcijańskie*, „*Communio. Międzynarodowy Przegląd Teologiczny*” 26 (2006) no. 4, p. 25.

Do you not know that the runners in the stadium [οἱ ἐν σταδίῳ τρέχοντες] all run [τρέχουσιν] in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run [τρέχετε] so as to win. Every athlete exercises discipline [ὁ ἀγωνιζόμενος] in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown [ἵνα φθαρτὸν στέφανον λάβωσιν], but we an imperishable [ἄφθαρτον] one (1 Corinthians 9 : 24–25).

Through a rhetorical question, at the beginning St. Paul refers to the obvious principle that only one competitor will win the race. The reference to one winner does not suggest that only one specific Christian can achieve the prize¹⁵ of eternal life, but rather that all of Christ's disciples should strive to be the best in their aspiration towards sanctity. The apostle continues to say that the winning of a prize by both an athlete and a believer requires discipline, but the fundamental difference is the quality of the prize: "They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one." Writing to the Corinthians about a perishable crown, the apostle is probably referring to the Isthmian Games, which took place near that city. Interestingly, in those games winners received crowns made of pine branches or celery leaves; thus, these trophies did not last long, as they quickly dried and withered, leaving behind themselves a handful to dried up remains.¹⁶ In this way, the apostle shows a major qualitative difference: athletes exert themselves greatly, but their prize is something that attests to the ephemerality of life. Meanwhile, Christians will have a perishable crown, which of course is salvation and eternal life with God. Thus, Jesus' disciples should all the more try to achieve this prize!

Meanwhile, in the next two verses of this athletic metaphor the apostle cites himself as an example and says:

Thus I do not run aimlessly [τρέχω]; I do not fight¹⁷ [πυκτεύω] as if I were shadowboxing [ὡς οὐκ ἀέρα δέρω].

¹⁵ The collective order "run, so as to win" confirms that St. Paul did not want to limit the number of winners to just one; indeed, in individual running competitions there cannot be a collective winner (there were no relay races in antiquity).

¹⁶ Cf. O. Broneer, *The Apostle Paul and the Isthmian Games*, op. cit., p. 16–17.

¹⁷ Boxing (πυγμαχία) differed significantly from the modern athletic discipline known by that name. Blows could only be dealt in the head and arms; one's opponent could not be held and he could be hit even when he was on the floor. Fists were tied using belts and sometimes small stones were attached to them in order to increase the efficiency of the blows. Fights were not limited in terms of time, so they lasted until they were resolved. Thus, in antiquity boxing was a very brutal and bloody sport. Cf. A. Rambiert-Kwaśniewska, *Bieg Pawła z Tarsu, czyli spotkania z grecką agonistyką*, Wrocław 2013, p. 75ff. (Archeolog Czyta Biblię).

No, I drive my body and train [ὕπωπιάζω¹⁸] it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified”

In the images of running aimlessly (i.e., not to the finish line) and dealing blows in vain, the exegetes see a description of athletic training. This would mean that St. Paul wants to emphasize that he does not treat his activity as preparatory exercises, but as a real battle. However, it is possible that through these two images he also wants to vocally emphasize that his activity is not an aimless challenge; it has to be effective, just as the blows of a boxer should be precise and a runner must follow a designated path in order to get to the finish line as quickly as possible.¹⁹ In order to achieve such prudence, self-discipline is needed; it is presented here as restraining and enslaving one's own body. Such asceticism helps Paul to live the Gospel, which he proclaims and which makes him a reliable witness.²⁰

A similar combination of the image of an athlete-preacher along with encouragement for the audience to engage in “competitions of remaining faithful to the Gospel” can be found in the Epistle to the Philippians:

Only, conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear news of you, that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind struggling together (συναθλοῦντες) for the faith of the gospel, [...] For to you has been granted, for the sake of Christ, not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for Him. Yours is the same [athletic] struggles (τὸν αὐτὸν ἀγῶνα ἔχοντες) as you saw in me and now hear about me (Philippians 1 : 27–30).

We can see, the context this fragment refers to is once again the proclamation of false teachings by St. Paul's opponents, although this epistle does not directly say what they concerned. However, they became a time of trial that the audience was able to survive if they maintained the unity of

18 The verb used here (ὕπωπιάζω) literally means punching one's eyes. Cf. J. A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, New Haven-London 2008, p. 374 (The Anchor Yale Bible, 32). This is probably a reference to the brutality that characterized boxing in antiquity.

19 Cf. J. P. Urbański, *Język metafor i dyscyplin sportowych w Tradycji Pawłowej*, „Bielsko-Żywieckie Studia Teologiczne” 5 (2004), p. 269–270.

20 Cf. G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids 1988, p. 437ff. (The New International Commentary on the New Testament).

the community (one spirit, one heart). This unity could be attained through a shared struggle illustrated here using the image of a team effort²¹ for the faith (verse 27). Such a struggle to continue to follow the Gospel requires effort and involves suffering (verse 29), just as in sport. Fortunately, what could help the Philippians in this difficult situation is the model they have to follow; the figure of St. Paul is that model (verse 30). With regards to himself, he uses the image of the athlete, but it could also be said that for his audience he is a coach and wants “his team” to be a source of pride: “[A]s you hold on to the word of life, so that my boast for the day of Christ may be that I did not run in vain or labor in vain” (Philippians 2 : 16).²²

The third chapter of this epistle contains another fragment referencing an athletic image:

It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue [δῶκω] my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ [Jesus]. Brothers, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal [κατὰ σκοπὸν δῶκω], the prize of God’s upward calling, in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3 : 12–13).

In order to fully understand the meaning of this fragment, it is important to understand its first sentence. It literally sounds: “I’m not saying that I have achieved it.” As we can see, there is no object that states what Paul has not achieved. This most likely refers to fully knowing Jesus Christ, which the apostle writes about in the previous verses.²³ However, such knowledge of

21 The verb ἀθλέω means athletic or military struggle, while the prefix συν- should be translated as “commonly” or “together.” Cf. J. Flis, *List do Filipian*, Częstochowa 2011, p. 185 (Nowy Komentarz Biblijny. Nowy Testament, 11). A similar ideal of acting together to spread the Gospel can be found in the final instructions of this epistle, where Paul asks his syzygos for the support of Euodia and Syntyche: “Yes, and I ask you also, my true yokemate, to help them, for they have struggled [συνήθλησάν μοι] at my side in promoting the gospel, along with Clement and my other co-workers, whose names are in the book of life” (Philippians 4 : 3).

22 Cf. G. F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Grand Rapids 2004, p. 70ff. (Word Biblical Commentary, 43).

23 Paul also deals with the topic of striving for greater perfection and knowing Christ more intimately in the Epistle to the Colossians, using another athletic allusion: “It is He whom we proclaim, admonishing everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. For this I labor and struggle [ἀγωνιζόμενος], in accord with the exercise of His power working within me. For I want you to know how great a struggle I am having for you and for those in Laodicea and all who have not seen me face to face” (Colossians 1 : 28–2:1) Once

Christ does not refer to intellectual cognition, but rather the fullness of Paul's personal relationship with His master. Furthermore, as the text indicates, the apostle also lacks full moral perfection. Interestingly, when we take into consideration the autobiographical context of the referenced statement, we could believe that in writing about his imperfection St. Paul refers to the context of his life, just as years earlier as a Pharisee he believed that fulfilling the Mosaic Law would lead him to perfection. However, in the event on the road to Damascus St. Paul was taken by Jesus Christ (verse 12) and now he knows that achieving this fullness consists of complete unification with Him. Such full closeness is not the result of a one-time act of will, but instead requires constant struggle. At this point, the apostle once again makes use of athletic imagery, presenting himself as a runner²⁴ and forgetting what remained behind him and concentrating on what was ahead of him. Speaking about forgetting what has passed, St. Paul could have his past as a Pharisee and his persecution of Christians in mind, but also his later "post-conversion" achievements in evangelization. Of course, he does not refer to obliterating his past from his memory but indicates a certain relativity of both his improper behavior and that which could be considered his contribution. The former is not an obstacle that is incapable of being overcome, while the latter does not give a sufficient guarantee of achieving ultimate closeness to God. Concentrating on things of the past is pointless, just as a situation in which a runner constantly looks behind him or herself is absurd. Thus, St. Paul writes about straining all his strength in order to achieve the goal. It is difficult to unambiguously say if in this image this goal (*σκοπός*) is the finish line (which is the interpretation found in Poland's Millennium Bible) or if it is coming in first place; however, achieving both is tied to receiving a prize. In order to receive this prize, he calls God, who is like a referee asking the winner to come to the podium, "upward" (verse 14). At the same time, it should be noted that the Biblical thought of God calling man to be with Him in heaven resonates in this image of "upward calling." Thus, in the fragment

again, there is a comparison between the evangelizing mission and athletic competitions. What is interesting is that in this fragment the apostle emphasizes that he is also concerned about those Christians who believed in Christ as a result of His disciples and did not know Him personally.

24 Here, St. Paul uses the verb *διώκω*, which means "to chase" or "to hurry" twice; thus, this does not necessarily need to be an image of a run and thus some commentators here see an image of a chariot race here (however, they are a minority). Cf. J. P. Urbański, *Język metafor i dyscyplin sportowych...*, op. cit., p. 273–274.

under discussion the apostle notes that one cannot be satisfied with one's present relationship with God and Christ, but one must constantly struggle to deepen it in order to receive the prize of the heavenly fullness of closeness with God at the end of the run that is life.²⁵

An interesting aspect of the use of athletic imagery in the context of evangelization also appears in the final fragments of the Epistle to the Romans and the Epistle to the Colossians.

I urge you, [brothers,] by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in the struggle by your prayers to God on my behalf [συναγωνίσασθαί μοι ἐν ταῖς προσευχαῖς ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ] (Romans 15 : 30).

Epaphras sends you greetings; he is one of you, a slave of Christ [Jesus], always striving for you in his prayers [ἀγωνιζόμενος ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν ἐν ταῖς προσευχαῖς] so that you may be perfect and fully assured in all the will of God (Colossians 4 : 12).

As we can see in the first quotation, St. Paul asks his audience for prayers in his intention. Meanwhile, the second fragment assures that Epaphras, Paul's collaborator, is always prayerfully concerned about Christians in Colossae. The common denominator of both verses is the presentation of prayer as an athletic struggle. Just like athletic competitions, prayer requires effort. Furthermore, in both realities – prayer and sport – endurance and not giving up are very necessary.

Thus, we see that St. Paul's evangelizing mission is to a large extent explained to the recipients of his epistles through the aid of athletic analogies. However, in the fragments under discussion there was an expansion of comparisons in the field of agonistics to include the similarities between the lives of Christ's disciples and the Good News preached to them. Such a comparison of the Christian life with sport frequently appears in later epistles by the Apostle to the Gentiles and will be the subject of our further reflections.

2. The Life of the Christian as Participation in Athletic Competitions

The instruction on the Christian life along with a subtle athletic reference appear at the end of the Epistle to the Ephesians, where Paul references the

²⁵ Cf. G. W. Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, Grand Rapids-Nottingham 2009, p. 249–257 (The Pillar New Testament Commentary).

image of so-called spiritual armor in order to encourage his audience to rely on Christ:

Finally, draw your strength from the Lord and from His mighty power. Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. For our struggle²⁶ [ἡ πάλη] is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens (Ephesians 6 : 10–11).

Although these referenced verses and their elaboration (Ephesians 6 : 13–17) reference a military image, speaking about struggle itself the apostle uses the term πάλη (“wrestling”).²⁷ This could be because he would like to avoid presenting the life of Christ’s disciples as war, which would sharply contrast with the topic of peace, which is emphasized in this epistle on several occasions (Ephesians 2 : 14–15; 4 : 3; 6 : 15). Although Christians are called to live in harmony with God and people, they must continually struggle against evil spirits that attack them; here, they are called Suzerainty, Power, the rulers of the world of darkness, and spiritual elements of evil in the heavenly altitudes. Such wrestling could last a long time and was very exhausting; taking into consideration that Satan is a being that is more intelligent than humans, people who rely only on their own strength are incapable of defeating him. Thus, Christians must fight using God’s power and rely on spiritual armor, or on truth, justice, and readiness to preach the good news about peace, faith, and salvation; they must also make use of weapons serving spiritual warfare: the word of God and prayer (see: Ephesians 6 : 14–18).²⁸

26 In those times, wrestling (πάλη) had different rules than the contemporary form of this discipline. Wrestlers fought standing up, while in order to strike at their opponents they could only use blows that encompassed their rivals’ entire bodies (for example, undercuts). Victory was achieved when the wrestler made his opponent touch the ground with his thigh, arm, or back three times (thus, it was not necessary to make one’s rival fall, like today). Cf. A. Rambiert-Kwaśniewska, *Bieg Pawła z Tarsu...*, op. cit., p. 71–72.

27 It is worth noticing that the Greek language contains the terms στρατεία (“military activity, battling, battle, fight”) and πόλεμος (“war, battle, struggle”), which would better fit the image of the preparation of the warrior for military activities. Cf. R. Popowski, *Wielki słownik grecko-polski Nowego Testamentu*, Warszawa 1994, p. 511, 566 (Prymasowska Seria Biblijna, 3). At the same time, one must admit that here the apostle does not put much effort into making the image coherent: the term πάλη calls to mind wrestling, which was done in the nude, and at the same time gives instructions to put on a knight’s armor.

28 Cf. M. Barth, *Ephesians. Translation and Commentary on Chapters 4–6*, Garden City 1984, p. 763–764 (The Anchor Bible, 34A).

The next athletic image concerning the life of Jesus' disciple is found in the First Epistle to Timothy. As its name suggest, this New Testament book is directed to a specific person: Timothy, Paul's collaborator and the bishop of Ephesus. False prophets, probably gnostics, appeared in Ephesus; they banned marriage and the consumption of some foods (see: 1 Timothy 4 : 3). The apostle calls these false teachings myths, and in this context introduces an image related to gymnastics:

Avoid profane and silly myths. Train yourself (Γύμναζε δὲ σεαυτὸν) for devotion, for, while physical training [σωματικὴ γυμνασία] is of limited value, devotion is valuable in every respect, since it holds a promise of life both for the present and for the future. This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance. For this we toil and struggle, because we have set our hope on the living God, who is the savior of all, especially of those who believe (1 Timothy 4 : 7–10).

The physical training mentioned here refers to the avoidance of martial intercourse and to certain meals, or to things that in and of themselves are good because they have been created by God and are an opportunity to express thanks to Him (see: 1 Timothy 4 : 4). However, in the quoted fragment Paul no longer emphasizes the falseness of untrue statements; instead, he emphasizes that these ascetic commandments do not bring much benefit, as they are solely human activities and their effects are limited only to earthly life. Hence, the apostle contrasts physical training with perfecting one's devotion, whose fruit will be God's closeness experienced both in this life and the next (verse 8). Thus, Paul recommends that Timothy practices devotion. One should strive for devotion and spread proper teachings (verse 9) like an athlete who competes in competitions (verse 10).²⁹

In Chapter 6 of this text, Paul again returns to the topic of false teachers, at the same time noting that their true motivation is not striving for truth, but desire for prophet. Such a desire to become wealthy at all costs causes one to fall to temptation and lust and is even the root of all evil (see: 1 Timothy 6 : 3–10). In this context, the apostle gives Timothy the following instructions:

But you, man of God, avoid all this. Instead, pursue [δίωκε] righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness. Compete well [ἀγωνίζου τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα τῆς πίστεως] for the faith.

²⁹ Cf. L. T. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, New York 2001, p. 249ff. (The Anchor Bible, 35A).

Lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called when you made the noble confession in the presence of many witnesses (1 Timothy 6 : 11–12).

Thus, we can see that Paul contrasts excessive efforts put into trying to attain material goods with virtue, which should characterize the good Christian. The aim of Timothy's run is supposed to be justice, piety, love, endurance, mildness, and faith (or trust, honesty, or fidelity, because those are also possible meanings of the term πίστις). The life of the bishop of Ephesus should be a good athletic competition. However, interpreting the phrase ἀγών τῆς πίστεως is somewhat difficult. It can be understood, according to the Polish Millennium Bible, as "competitions for faith" (πίστις in the function of *genetivus obiectivus*), but also "competitions that are faith" (πίστις in the function *genetivus epexegeticus*). The former possibility would mean either further missionary activity or concern for the faith of Timothy and the Christians entrusted to him; in this case, faith would be the goal for the Christian competitor to try to achieve. Meanwhile, the second option treats "the reality of faith" as an arena of athletic challenges. However, comparing both proposals with the hitherto presented agonistic images we can say that the latter interpretation seems to be more appropriate. Living in accordance with faith in Christ is an area of struggle, while the prize that awaits the victor is eternal life (verse 12). Every Christian is called to this, let alone a bishop who from the moment of his being chosen as a pastor is to be a particular model for the community entrusted to him.³⁰

Meanwhile, the Second Epistle to Timothy is St. Paul's last written text and therefore is something like his testament. At the beginning of the second chapter, the apostle instructs Timothy to continue to spread teachings about Christ by preparing more disciples who are capable of preaching it (see: 2 Timothy 2 : 2). What is more, the activity of the disciple is also illustrated with three images. The first of them refers to a soldier, who is supposed to be conditioned for hardship and who should concentrate on military activity rather than dealing with the matters ordinary, everyday life. These same requirements pertain to Christians, so that may be "soldiers" who appeal to God (see: 2 Timothy 2 : 3–4). Meanwhile, the third image presents the farmer as the one who should consume his harvest, which he achieved thanks to his

30 Cf. H. Langkammer, *Listy pasterskie. Pierwszy list do Tymoteusza. Drugi list do Tymoteusza. List do Tytusa*, Lublin 2006, p. 78 (Biblia Lubelska).

hard work. In this way, St. Paul notes that the preacher undoubtedly has the right to receive a payment (see: 2 Timothy 2 : 6). Meanwhile, an athletic image is found between the presentation of the soldier and the farmer:

Similarly, an athlete [ἀθλητῆ] cannot receive the winner's crown [οὐ στεφανοῦται] except by competing according to the rules (2 Timothy 2 : 5).

In Paul's athletic metaphors, the prize of being honored with a crown usually means achieving salvation and remaining with God (see: 1 Thessalonians 2 : 19–20; 1 Corinthians 9 : 25; 2 Timothy 4 : 8). In order to achieve it, the competitor should fight in accordance with the rules; otherwise, he or she will be disqualified. Thus, here there is a reference to the need for the follower of Christ to follow the requirements of the Gospel.³¹ Such coherence is even more significant when it refers to those who preach the Good News. However, it should be noted that although the thought the compatibility between faith and everyday behavior is very true and important, it is not what is most important in this image. Receiving the award while following the rules requires a certain self-discipline and much effort. Because of the need for persistence and acting amidst difficulties and obstacles is therefore the main message of this fragment, as demonstrated by the neighboring verses presenting the soldier and the farmer.³²

This epistle appears like a will especially in its final chapter. St. Paul first indicates that he is aware of looming death (see: 2 Timothy 4 : 6), after which he sums up his life:

I have competed well [τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα ἠγωνίσμαι]; I have finished the race [τὸν δρόμον τετέλεκα]; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness [ὁ τῆς δικαιοσύνης στέφανος] awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for His appearance (2 Timothy 4 : 7–8).

Here, the apostle compares his life to athletic competitions in general and, later, to a race in particular. The term δρόμος described a sprint the length of one stadium (192 m), which on the one hand demonstrates the brevity of

31 Such a requirement is, in fact, a necessity, which is attested by the use of the first conditional *eventualis* in the Greek text.

32 Cf. J. Stępień, *Listy do Tesaloniczan i pasterskie*, Poznań–Warszawa 1979, p. 119–120 (Pismo Święte Nowego Testamentu, 9).

human life and, on the other, emphasizes the intensity of Paul's use of this time.³³ The reference to keeping the faith in the context of competitions brings about association with the regulated form of rivalry that is in accordance with one's vows. However, the term πίστις used here has its theological significance and describes not so much faith in Jesus as the apostle's remaining faithful to the mission of preaching the Gospel that had been entrusted to him. It is worth noting that all three verbs used here – “I performed” (literally, I fought in athletic competitions), “I finished,” and “I protected” (ἠγγώνισμαι, τετέλεκα, τετήρηκα) – are used in the perfect tense, which means that these activities have concluded but their effects continue to be seen. Although Paul's life is nearing an end, his works of evangelization led countless people to believe in God. All this is unassailable evidence that he deserves the prize that he himself describes as receiving the crown of justice and thus the crown given to the righteous for their righteousness. The Apostle to the Gentiles can be almost sure of this prize, as the arbiter in this competition is the only completely objective and righteous judge: Christ. I should also explain the intentional “distortion” that appears in the presented image. Unlike in the case of true athletic competitions, Paul is not the sole victor. Everyone who proves that he or she loves God in his or her life can win along with him, because this is what the expression “to love His appearance” means.³⁴

Conclusion

In the texts quoted above, it is clear that St. Paul frequently used athletic images in his epistles and teaching.³⁵ He used terminology referring both to sport in general (ἀγών, ἀγωνίζομαι, ἀθλέω) and to specific athletic disciplines (running: τρέχω, δρόμος, διώκω; boxing: πυκτεύω, δέρω, ὑπωπιάζω; wrestling: πάλη; and gymnastics: γυμνάζω, σωματική γυμνασία³⁶). In many cases, the

33 Cf. A. Rambiert-Kwaśniewska, *Bieg Pawła z Tarsu...*, op. cit., p. 61–62, 67–68.

34 Cf. L. T. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy...*, op. cit., p. 431–432.

35 The remaining books of the New Testament contain barely several references to sport: Acts 13 : 25, 20 : 24; Hebrew 10 : 32, 12 : 1ff, 12–13 and, possibly, some texts containing the symbol of the crown: James 1 : 12; 1 Peter 5 : 4; Revelation 2 : 10, 3 : 11. Of these fragments, the richest image is in Hebrews 12, and it is discussed in greater detail in: P. Wańczyk, *Wpatrzeni w Jezusa. Życie chrześcijan w świetle Listu do Hebrajczyków*, Kraków 2015, p. 18–31, 40–41.

36 Furthermore, some authors also notice references to gladiators' fights and equine knights' exercise in Paul's writings and consider them to be athletic images. Cf. J. P. Urbański, *Język metafor*

arena of St. Paul's athletic activity is his itinerant evangelizing activity which, one should note, was his unique and personal vocation. Thus, it is appropriate to refer most guidelines regarding preaching the Good News to the territory of the mission that God designates to every Christian.

In their lives, Christ's followers encounter numerous obstacles and difficulties. However, they have to be persistent and put effort into remaining faithful to Christ and His Gospel. In order to achieve this, one needs prudence, which can be achieved through asceticism, but not asceticism undertaken for one's own sake, but that which leads to a closer relationship with God. Faith is also a reality of spiritual struggle that every Christian should undertake by practicing virtues: justice, devotion, faith, love, endurance, and mildness, and also through zealous prayer. Persisting in the community of Jesus' community is also an important aspect. Such guidelines are a perfect aid to all who want to attain the prize of eternal life with God and at the same time also want this for people they encounter in their lives.

Abstract

The Message of Athletic Images Contained in St. Paul's Epistles

In his epistles, St. Paul frequently makes use of athletic imagery, both in relation to sport in general and to specific athletic disciplines (running, boxing, wrestling, gymnastics). However, the use of athletic themes is not an aim in and of itself for St. Paul, but rather it is intended to give specific guidelines to his audience. An exegetic analysis shows that the Apostle to the Nations compares his life and that of other Christians to athletic competitions. The field of these competitions is the way of faith in Jesus in which there are numerous difficulties and obstacles. Hence, the Christian as an athlete who wants to experience eternal life should be persistent, ascetic, practice virtues and prayer, and, most important, his or her task is to have a close relationship with God and the community of believers.

Keywords: St. Paul, sport, athletic competitions, agonistics

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i dyscyplin sportowych..., op. cit., p. 272; W. Augustynek, „Arena sportowa” w listach św. Pawła, „Ruch biblijny i liturgiczny” 6 (1953) no. 1–6, p. 173, <https://doi.org/10.21906/rbl.2521>.

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