

# Jacob, Job, and Other Wrestlers: Reception of Greek Athletics by Jews and Christians in Antiquity<sup>1</sup>

*Clare Poliakoff, in memoriam*  
(*Proverbs 31:10-31*)

*Michael Poliakoff\**

The first conspicuous feature of the Greek athletic legacy is the will to excel and win. The enormous rewards for first (and only first) place at the four national festivals and the fierce competitiveness which not infrequently hazarded life and limb testify to this.<sup>2</sup> Another age viewing the Twentieth Century might well have the same perspective in evaluating our sports. But such a focus for ancient society as well as for our own would be misleading, since it would neglect that large body of people who participate, even compete, without thought of making it to the top, and it would neglect the complex of ethics, education, and personal development bound up with athletics. Jews and Christians in antiquity were generally suspicious of Greek sport, sometimes openly hostile towards it, but they often adopted its practice and learned spiritual lessons from the experience. This reception of sport could not have occurred were it not for the flexibility and breadth of Greek athletic ideology which enabled it to become part of widely different cultures: the story of Greek sport among Jews and Christians is as much a story of dialogue and continuum as it is of confrontation. This study will begin with the examination of an athletic metaphor, Job the Wrestler. It should quickly become apparent, however, that the metaphors of sport among Jews and Christians reflect far more than fashions of speech and literary traditions: they are documents of social history and tell us about lives and mores in antiquity.

---

\* Michael Poliakoff is an Assistant Professor in the Departments of Greek and Latin at Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts 02181.

1. I would like to thank the three audiences that have heard and critiqued my work on sport among Jews and Christians in antiquity: after the Wellesley conference. I gave an expanded version of the paper at the University of Pennsylvania, and at the American Philological Association Conference of 1983 addressed the question of religious law and clerical attitudes towards athletics. This article incorporates elements from those three talks and represents the early version of a much larger work on this topic. I am deeply indebted to my friend Prof. Marc Brettler of Yale University for his excellent advice and help on the Judaic material.

2. On Greek competitiveness in sport. cf. esp. the story of Arrichion in Philostr. *Im.* 2.6 and Paus 8.40 1-2; Cleomedes of Astypalia in Paus, 6.9.6. Pindar *O.* 8.65-71 and *P.* 8.81-7; Aristotle *Pol.* 8.1339a on early "burnout" of boy athletes; Galen 5. 909-910 K. (*On the Small Ball*) for injuries. M. Poliakoff, *Studies in the Terminology of the Greek Combat Sports*. Beitrage zur Klassischen Philologie 146 (Meisenheim. 1982) 14 n. 18 for more reference to fatality in ancient athletics.

Job of the Hebrew Bible is a complex figure. In the prose introduction and conclusion of the book, he is a man of unquestioning and steadfast faith. Afflicted by the Adversary (Hebrew, *hassaran*) in order to test his devotion to God, he sees his possessions and family destroyed. His response is the famous confession: "Naked I came out of my mother's womb and naked again I will depart. The Lord has taken what the Lord gave: the name of the Lord be blessed" (Job 1:21). When Job's trials are over, the Lord restores his health, he raises a new family, and lives a long and happy life. But the main body of the Book of Job is in poetry, and it presents a very complicated Job, one whose questions about God's justice in relation to innocent suffering receive only indirect and puzzling answers. As Jon Levenson summarized so nicely, "Job's experience shows that God does not always act justly; his conscience tells him he should."<sup>3</sup> Problems in the textual history and exegesis of Job, however, do not affect this particular study—the post-Biblical Job whom we will encounter is a much more stereotyped and simplified figure of unwavering devotion and piety.

In all of the Hebrew text of Job as well as the Septuagint, the principle Greek translation of the Hebrew, there is not a hint of wrestling or even of athletics. The passage below may come as a surprise after looking at the Biblical tradition. It comes from the *Sudu*, a Byzantine lexicon compiled in the 10th Century, and tells the story of Job in the well-worn technical vocabulary of Greek athletics.

Job was that truly great and also noble striver (*agonistes*) for the truth. who first opened that athletic stadium shared by the whole world. who threw (*katabalon*) his opponent (*antipalon*) in every wrestling bout (*palais*). who received blows and bruises to his very bones yet remained undefeated (*aetros*). who was full of worms yet also crowned (*srephmites*). Death was not able to lay him out or to put dust (*konisui*) on his shoulders, but he stood unturned (*aperitreptos*) like a statue or an anvil unstruck (*anelutos*) wrestling (*katapalaion*) throughout his whole life and smashing (*katarasson*) his opponent. He raised a monument of victory over the Evil One, not by contesting (*agonizomenos*) at Nemea, Olympia, the Isthmus, and Delphi, even the contests of which Greek histories boast, but by seeing with brave heart (*karteropsychos*) instead of children. substance. Rocks, slaves, and a course of life free from calamities (*ptomation*),<sup>4</sup> the households of his own children turned into their tombs, a common grave.

We have before us Job the Wrestler, an entirely post-Biblical creation. And he is a wrestler in no uncertain terms. Like some of the ancient athletic victors known from inscriptions erected in their honor, he is graced with a clean record, expressed in Greek by words beginning with alpha-privative (in English. "un"): he is undefeated, unturned, unstruck.<sup>5</sup> A wrestler needed to throw his

3. B. Bayer. "Job." *Encyclopedia Judaica* 10 (Jerusalem, 1972) 111-130; Jon D. Levenson, *The Book of Job in its Time and in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1972) On *hassatan*. observe that the article in Hebrew shows that it is a common. not a proper name The popular concept of Satan is a product of later exegesis.

4. Professor M. Marcovich kindly suggested the emendation *ke(nes)ptomuron* for the ms. *kai ptomaton*.

5. On athletes honored with words beginning with alpha-privative, cf. L. Robert, "Les épigrammes satiriques de Lucillius sur les athlètes." *L'épigramme grecque*, Entretiens sur L'antiquité classique 14 (Geneva.

opponent three times in order to win: it was a notable event when a wrestler made his way through a tournament without losing a single bout en route, and one reads sometimes in praises of the victor that he not only won, but never got dust on his own shoulders, *i.e.*, suffered a fall.<sup>6</sup> Job the Wrestler joins the ranks of these proud athletes.

The *Suda's* account of Job is the fullest development of Job as a wrestler. There are, however, quite a number of texts on this theme, starting with the *Testament of Job*, a work claiming to be the last will and testament of Job, written perhaps as early as the 1st century BCE.<sup>7</sup> Gone is the querulous and rebellious Job that surfaces in the Hebrew Bible: Job fights for God under well-defined circumstances in the *Testament*. Even in the most difficult and taxing combat, the outcome is clear. Satan finds Job above temptation and likens his unsuccessful struggle with the holy man to a wrestling match.

(Satan addresses Job): I was like an athlete wrestling with another athlete, and the one hurled the other down. and the one above choked the one below, filling his mouth with sand, and battered all his limbs, and since the one underneath was bearing this harshness and was not admitting defeat. the athlete above cried loudly at this crisis. Even so, you, Job, are underneath and in misfortune but you have overcome my wrestling tricks which I was laying upon you.

*Testament of Job 27* (Kraft)

The Job commentary of Didymos the Blind, teacher and church leader in 4th century Alexandria, offers numerous descriptions of Job as a wrestler.<sup>8</sup> As in the *Testament of Job*, the holy man fights for God, does not quarrel with him, and the details of his trials turn into demonstrations of faith and piety. Commenting on Job 1:20, "So Job tore his garment (that is in grief over his dead children)," Didymos explains that Job stripped himself "in order to show symbolically that he strips like a contestant in front of his competitor." Julian the Arian heretic, writing at approximately the same time, carries this image further: Job not only strips for the contest, but powders himself with dust as all wrestlers did in antiquity.

O the endurance (*kartereius*) of the invulnerable man!  
'O the courage! O the great love for God! For just as the best athlete in the wrestling pit (*skammati*) preparing to compete (*antagonizesthai*) in wrestling strips his clothes, puts dust (*konizetai*) on his body and head, even the same

---

1968) 203-4, 242. On victories unmarred by setbacks, cf. M. Poliakoff, "Asynxostos," *Zeitschr. fuer papyrol. und Epigraph.* 44 (1981) 78-80.

6. The boast of unsoiled shoulders appears in an epigram by Alcaeus of Messenia, *AP* 9.588 "in the third event (wrestling) he did not get his shoulders dusty. but wrestling without a fall, he won the three contests at the Isthmus," and in an epigram by Philip. *AP* 16.25. "in supple wrestling his back did not put a sign on the sand in a fall."

7. For text and notes on the *Testament of Job*. cf. Montague Rhodes James in *Apocrypha Anecdota*. Texts and Studies 5.1 (Cambridge, 1897); Russell Paul Spittler. *The Testament of Job* (diss. Harvard 1971); R. A. Kraff. *The Testament of Job* (Missoula, 1974). On the later tradition, cf. B. K. Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic* (Providence, 1966) 22-9.

8. Further examples of athletic imagery appear in Didymos der Blinde, *Kommentar zu Hiob* (Tura Papyrus) ed. Henrichs, Koenen, Hagedorn (Bonn, 1968-) 9.10. ff., 28.28 ff., 40.16, 43.23-4. 71.17, 90.13-14, 136.29 ff., 166.29. ff.

way did the holy man, rending his garment and heaping dirt on his head, weep for his children.

Julian. *Commentary on Job* 21.7 ff. (Hagedorn)

In the Septuagint (but not the Hebrew text), Job pours dirt on his head in grief for his children: for Julian the significance of this act combines athletic combat and mourning.

Both Julian and Didymos at times show a considerable sophistication in their use of athletic terms. In addition to what we have seen so far, Didymos makes the contest between Job and Satan culminate with the 3rd attack, for in antiquity, three falls meant final defeat.

When the Devil was exhausted from making such attacks (*probalon*), and was unable to throw (*katabalein*) Job by taking away his property and by the destruction of children, and not even by the incalculable affliction of his body, as a third attack (*triton palaisma*), he took hold of (*plekei*) the company of Job's wife against him.

Didymos, *Commentary on Job* (Tura Papyrus) 46.4 ff (Henrichs)

One can also credit Didymos with a little subtlety of diction: this wrestling attack involves a woman, and like several other Greek authors, Didymos found *pleko* (or a compound form) a suitable double-entendre for erotic and athletic attack.<sup>9</sup>

The works of John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople between 398 and 404 CE have literally hundreds of athletic metaphors. In his works, holiness in general is likened to a contest, and Abraham, Joseph, Jesus, Paul, and in particular Job, are the great athletic heroes. What follows is just one of Chrysostom's descriptions of Job.<sup>10</sup> Satan, a sly wrestler, saves his best trick, cunning, for last in his temptation of Jesus:

For this is the custom of his wrestling: to bring on last the things which seem most likely to trip (*hyposkelizein*) the opponent. This indeed is what he did to Job. Accordingly having started there with things that seemed easier and weaker, he proceeds to the stronger.

John Chrysostom, *Homily on Matthew 13. 4* (PG 57.212.50)

Job the wrestler surfaces in visual art as well. Gregory the Great, pope in the late 6th century, wrote a commentary on Job, in which he continued the figure of Job the wrestler.<sup>11</sup> Eventually this found its way into the fine arts. Figure 1 shows an illumination from a 13th C. manuscript of Gregory's *Commentary*, now in Herzogenburg, Austria. It is an unusual piece of art, for nakedness is uncommon in the art of the 13th century, and indeed, elsewhere in this series of manuscript illuminations, Job is always dressed, even when lying on the dung-heap. Obviously the artist recognized that wrestlers in the

9. For further references to the decisive third fall, cf. Poliakoff, *Studies* (cited above, n. 1) 17, n 38; on *sympleko* in double entendre, cf. Poliakoff, *Studies* 84-5.

10. Job also appears as a wrestler in John Chrysostom, *PG* 49 68.9, 57.395, 61.389, 64.536, 63.557, 64, 551-3. John Sawhill, *The Use of Athletic Metaphors in the Biblical Homilies of St. John Chrysostom* (doss Princeton 1926) has been indispensable for this study.

11. Gregory, *Moralia in Job*, cf. e.g., *PL* 75.530 C: Lewalski, *loc. cit.* (above n. 7).



Figure 1. Illumination from a 13th century manuscript of Gregory the Great. *Commentary on Job*, from Herzogenburg. Reproduced from H. Swarzenski. *Wallraf-Richartz Jahrbuch* n.f. 1 (1930).

Greek world stripped for the contest. Job the wrestler entered the Middle Ages with accuracy of detail.

One could add many more examples, but more important is the question of what all of this means for our understanding of sport and society in later antiquity. The wrestling image goes well with the change in the Job figure of the Hebrew Bible, who questions God's rule, to the more simple, uncomplaining Job of the *Testament* and the writers of the early Church, a Job who fights for God against Satan.<sup>12</sup> To stop with this observation, however, would be to ignore the major questions of the appropriateness and significance of athletic

12. L. Koenen, D. and U. Hagendorf note the change in the Job figure in Didymos der Blinde, *Kommentar zu (Hiob III* (Bonn, 1969) anm. 1: "Der Gedanke dass Hiob in einem Agon leidet und nicht aufgrund einer Schuld, steht im Mittelpunkt des Hiobkommentares."

imagery for writers of the early Church. At first glance the passages cited above might seem reminiscent of what is popularly called "Muscular Christianity" with its companion "Agnostic Muscularity": late 19th C. movements, particularly associated with Charles Kingsley and Tom Hughes-Christianity or another ethical system with an athletic, outgoing, even aggressive image, which often related athletic skill to moral goodness.<sup>13</sup> But there is a substantial difference in that Muscular Christianity takes actual participation in athletics as the touchstone for ethical discussion while the passages we have just seen are metaphorical descriptions of sport. There are serious methodological questions involved in taking metaphors as historical documents, questions which need attention before going further in this study.

First, what does an athletic metaphor tell us about its user and his audience? If it is trite and transparent, it says relatively little. American usage, for example, such as "wrestle with a problem" or "reach the finish-line" may be innocent of any athletic intent. On the other hand, imagery that depends on technicalities of the sport and its diction will only speak to an audience with athletic experience. The metaphor, *e.g.*, "the director called for a pressure ten, but his staff caught a crab," would seem almost meaningless (if not indecent) to an audience without knowledge of crew races. A second methodological issue is the amount of sport terminology used: even for banal usage, frequency is noteworthy, and one needs to ask "why so often?"

Much of the Christian usage is very simple and nontechnical and can be explained in part as the fashion of Greek rhetoric. Paul and other contemporary authors could assuredly have picked up the metaphor of athletic struggle from Cynic/Stoic diatribe or from Hellenistic Jewish texts, which are rich in Greek wisdom, without any direct experience of athletics. Greek literary influences continued to affect Christians through the following centuries: it is worth noting, for example, that John Chrysostom was once the pupil of the pagan orator Libanius, whose works are full of references to the palaestra. The frequency of usage still demands a better explanation, however, and there is much that is appealing in R. Merkelbach's view that the Church is demonstrating the superiority of its spiritual contests over the pagan institutions.<sup>14</sup> The *Suda's* entry on Job, part of which appears on p. 50, is a good example of this. The passage continues:

The Opponent's madness and envy were not sated up until the point when he challenged (*ekkalesamenos*) this athlete naked (*gymnon*) to the dung heap, making him completely spotted with sores and full of worms and until

13. On Muscular Christianity, *e.g.*, R. B. Martin, *The Dust of Combat, A Life of Charles Kingsley* (New York, 1960); an excellent discussion of English Agnostic Muscularity appears in J. A. Mangan, "Philathlete Extraordinary A Portrait of the Victorian Moralizer Edward Bowen," *Journal of Sport History* 9.3 (1982) 23-40. Consider Bowen's poem, "Tom": "Base is the player who stops. Fight till the fighting is o'er;/ Who follows up till he drops,/Panting and limping and sore? /Tom!/ But above all, good humored, fair, and decent;/ Rules that you make obey;/ Courage to Honor is true;/ Who is the fairest in play,/ Best and good temperdest, who?/ and wholly unremitting in the pursuit of winning."

14. Concerning Paul and Greek rhetoric, cf. E. Norden, *Die Antike Kunstprosa* 2 (Berlin, 1923) 467. R. Merkelbach discusses the Church use of athletic metaphors as a sign of its triumph over pagan customs in a seminal article, "Der Griechische Wortchatz und die Christen." *Zeitschr. fuer Papyrol. und Epigraph.* 18 (1975) 101-148, esp. 112-3.

finally the Cursed One brought the defeat (*hettan*) upon himself and drew the lot (*eklerosato*) of final shame. You have now the prize (*epafhla*) of this philosopher. You have also the Bible, which sings much sweeter than Homer or mellifluous Plato, not giving the guidance of myths or the sufferings of others, or boldest Achilles or wily Odysseus, for whom slaughter is a trophy and the destruction of women success, but rather Satan dashed down by a naked, unarmed, solitary person He gained the ultimate and finest from his contests, to be raised with Christ . . . not after the fashion of the myth of Herakles and Admetus' wife Alkestis . . . but by the ineffable power of our Savior.

Paul, in fact, is the earliest witness to this Christian attitude. In I Cor. 9:24 ff., he characterizes his evangelical work as an athletic contest, with the difference that the athletes compete for a perishable (*phtharton*) crown, Christians for the imperishable (*aphrharton*). So also I Tim. 4:7-8, which may or may not be Paul's, bids the Christian "exercise (*gymaze*) yourself in holiness. Corporeal exercise is of benefit for a short time, but holiness is of benefit in all respects, since it has the forecast of life now and to come." John Chrysostom's sixth letter to Olympias (*PG* 52.599.35 ff.) praises the victory she has achieved by patiently bearing illness: this has taught others to enter the wrestling ground. Her victory, says Chrysostom, is all the more amazing because she has not burst into the agora or seized the middle of the city (as athletes do), but has won from her sick bed.

Most of what we have seen so far indicates little more than acquaintance with the language of Greek rhetoric and popular philosophy, but there is some Christian athletic imagery that is too precise and vivid to be derived mechanically from a literary tradition. Paul's I Cor. 9:24-27 contains an image that is confusing without some knowledge of boxing practice.

Don't you see that all the runners in the stadium run. but only one wins the prize? Run to take the prize! Each competitor has complete self-control. They do it to win a perishable crown, we do it for an imperishable one. Now I run not aimlessly. I box not like one who flays the air. But I bruise my body and put it in subjugation. lest I act as herald for others but myself be disqualified.

What does "flay the air (*aeru deron*)" mean? Some commentators favor "missing a punch and striking the air," which the Greek allows, but with "bruise my body (*hypopiazō*)" following, Paul's meaning is clearly "shadow box," that is, box with an imaginary opponent. This would be futile effort, mere show that involves no sacrifice and dedication, action like that of the boor in Theophrastus' *Characters* who walks around the baths pretending to work a wrestler's hip throw on imaginary opponents. But Paul declares that he is a real fighter: he joins in the real combats. For precise athletic usage, we should also consider Ambrose' *Commentary on Psalm 36* (*PL* 14.1038) which compares various wrestling situations to the vicissitudes of a righteous man, differentiating the rules of popular contest from official ones: it shows a high degree of palaestra experience on Ambrose' part, and also on the part of his audience.

Now, when a common person wrestles, if he plants his knee to the ground or slips, he is accounted defeated, but the athlete with wrestling experience wrestling for a crown even willingly plants his knee to the ground in order to win

(etiam volens genu figit ut vincat): and if he slips he is not counted out. and if he is pressed by the man on top, he rightly holds himself up with his hands and fights. and he is not bereft of his prize unless he is stretched out on his stomach or tied up by a hold on his limbs. Hence many arguments arise, since the types of loss are many and obscure to the general public.

In his *Commentary on Psalm 40* (PL 14.1130.24), Ambrose states explicitly that he witnessed as a young man certain events in athletic competition, proving that he did have first hand experience.” Finally we should note John Chrysostom’s image of the trainer stationed at the wrestling pit while the spectators are held back by the officials (*Genesis 2.1, PG 54.587.9 ff.*): it has the detail and vividness of a first-hand observation.

What was official Church policy? There is no simple answer, rather we find a mixture of tolerance for and disavowal of athletics. On the one hand. Clement of Alexandria spoke with approval of parents who send children to the gymnasium for instruction,<sup>15</sup> and John Chrysostom (*PG 60.208-209*) quietly acknowledges that training the body can benefit the soul. Many Church Fathers, however, show a marked suspicion of the body and a tendency towards rigorism and asceticism. Basil of Cappadocia, for example. though a moderate in his banning of religious discipline that harmed the health, found no place in his vision of holiness for sport or exercise: “leanness and pallor mark the Christian, the true athlete of the commandments of Christ . . . in weakness of body he overcomes his opponent and displays prowess in the contests of piety” (*Long Rules 17, PG 3 1.963*). Similarly Basil’s brother. Gregory of Nyssa, recommended, “perfecting the spirit’s strength in the body’s weakness” (*On Virginity 20, PG 46.399*). The celebration of the body and the Pagan cults associated with the Greek festivals would not square well with the world-renouncing, exclusive focus of the early Church. Although Tertullian recognized that God made man in his image, he nonetheless placed the same ban on athletics that he imposed on other spectacles—the theater, circus, and gladiatorial events. They were in Tertullian’s view part of the *pompa diaboli*, the devil’s parade, a service to idolatry. Second it was a pursuit of pleasure that would lead to passions incompatible with Church discipline.

We renounce your public games as much as we do their origins. which we know to stem from superstition . we have nothing to do in speech, sight. or sound with the insanity of the circus. the shamelessness of the theater. the heinousness of the arena. the vanity of physical education.

Tertullian, *Apology* 38

Now if you insist that the stadium is mentioned in Scripture, you will win that point. But you will not deny that what is done in the stadium is unworthy of your sight, blows of the fists, kicks, poundings, every assault of the hand and attack upon man’s face, which is the image of God. You will never approve of silly racing and hurling and even sillier jumping. never will empty and inge-

15. Fuller discussion of Ambrose in Poliakoff, *Studies* (cf. n. 1 above) 8. 10: the evidence does not warrant the conclusion drawn by W. Weismann. *Kirche und Schauspiele* (Wuerzburg. 1972) 63 n. 203. 63-5 n. 210 that the Church Fathers show widespread confusion of pankration and wrestling.

16. Clement of Alexandria, *Paid.* 3.49-51: note how heavily he relies upon Plato. *Laws* 796 a. On Clement’s use of Plato. of F. L. Clark. *Trans Amer. Phil. Assoc.* 33 (1902).

nious displays of power please you. nor the attention paid to an artificially developed body as it has gone beyond God's proper craft; and you will hate the men fed full on account of Greek pastimes. Wrestling is also the Devil's work: the Devil crushed men first. Its attack is the serpent's power, clinging to hold. twisting to bind. slippery for escape.

Tertullian, *On the Games* 18

There were also explicit Church strictures at times against athletics: the 4th C. "Apostolic Constitution" 8.32 (*PG* 1. 1131) bars from baptism those who participate in or watch athletics.<sup>17</sup>

It seems on the whole, however, that the Christian opponents of sport were constantly fighting a losing campaign. We observe in Tertullian's fulminations an answer to the insistence that Paul mentioned athletics and that therefore they were acceptable activities. Novatian responds with even greater ire to Christians who argue for sport:

Among the faithful and those who lay claim to the dignity of a Christian calling, some find no shame, no shame, I say—in vindicating from the heavenly Scriptures, the vain superstitions of the pagans that are intermingled in the spectacles "Where." they ask, "are such things mentioned in Scripture? Where are they prohibited? A struggling apostle paints for us the picture of a boxing match and of our own wrestling against the spiritual forces of wickedness. Why then should a faithful Christian not be at liberty to be a spectator of things that the divine Writings are at liberty to mention." I can with reason state here that it would have been far better for such people to lack knowledge of the Scriptures than to read them in such a manner!

Novatian, *On the Spectacles* 2 (*PL* 4.811) tr. De Simone

The evidence suggests that the athletic vocabulary and imagery which we see in metaphors represents more than a rhetorical tradition, rather it shows that the daily lives of the early Christians often included at least visits as spectators to the stadium. It has become a cliché in scholarship that "the closing of the Olympic Games virtually brought an end to the history of Greek Athletics." But Christian Byzantium had a lively tradition of athletics: the chariot races are notorious, and almost all of the contests of ancient Greece continued there. Basil I of Macedon, who ruled 9th century Byzantium, was himself a highly successful wrestler who vindicated his city's honor by defeating a loud-mouthed challenger from Bulgaria. Even in the 4th C., the Christian emperor Gratian was warm in his approval for the restoration of athletic contests in the Roman province of Africa—this is the same man who ordered the pagan Altar of Victory to be removed from the Senate House of Rome.<sup>18</sup>

If one looks closely at the nature of Greek athletics, especially in later antiquity, it becomes easier to understand how appealing the metaphor, and at

17. An extremely helpful study of Church attitudes is A. Koch, "Leibesübungen im Fruehchristentum und in der begnennenden Voelkwardenmgsreit." *Geschichte der Leibesübungen* 2 (Berlin-Munich-Frankfurt. 1972) 312-340. For a discussion of rigorism and asceticism in the early Church, cf. K. E. Kirk. *The Vision of God* (London, 1932).

18. On athletics in Byzantium. cf. Phaidon Koukoules, *Byzantinon bios kai politismos* 3 (Athens. 1949); Poliakoff. *Studies* (above, n. 1) 149-159. Gratian's edict appears in Codex Theodosianus 15.7.3.376, discussed in A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* 2 (Oxford. 1973) 1016 ff. H.A. Harris, *Greek Athletes and Athletics* (London. 1964) 47 gives the traditional view of the closing of the games; on the Church's role and the chronology of its edicts, cf. J. Ebert, "Die lateinischen Kirchenvaeter und die antiken Wettkaempfe." *Stadion* I.1 (1975) 194.

times the actual ideology of athletics could be to early Christians. Even if early Christianity was not “muscular” in equating moral goodness with athletic skill and experience, pagan moralists certainly were, and they provided a bridge for the continuation of Hellenic traditions.

Let us look first at a different Chrysostom—the sobriquet means, of course. “Golden mouthed”: this is Dio Chrysostom of Prusa. In two orations he praises the recently deceased boxer, Melankomas. There is little trace of this amazing athlete in other ancient records, and his boxing style, which involved holding his arm extended until his opponent gave up in exhaustion without landing a punch sounds too much like fantasy. If he is, in fact, Dio’s literary creation, then he reinforces even more the notion of “pagan athletic moralizing,” for he is a hero of self-restraint as well as of athletics.<sup>19</sup> We learn first that Melankomas was the largest, most courageous, and beautiful of men. Despite his beauty, he was renowned for being a man of self-control, restraint, and moderation:

The most amazing thing about the man was his actually being undefeated not only by his opponents, but also by toil and heat and appetite and sexual urges. For the man who intends to be superior to his opponents must first be defeated by these things...

If Melankomas had not been self-controlled and moderate, I doubt that he would have been so superior in strength, even if he was by nature the strongest.

Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes* 28.12; 29. 14

In *Or.* 29, Dio praises athletics above all activities, because “it produces at the same time courage, strength, and moderation.”

The athletes themselves expressed their awareness of the bond between the training of the body and that of the spirit. The testimony of the Greek inscriptions which honor outstanding athletes is eloquent and moving. One Calliocrates “has obtained with sweat and toil a glorious reputation,” and was renowned, “among all men throughout the world because of his perfect unremitting wisdom.” The inscription continues that “he took care of his soul.” A group of athletes mourned the death of Altidius,

since it struck down the most potent example of both moderation and achievement (for he was) most amazing in regard to his inimitable moderation and gentleness, which he showed throughout his whole athletic career.

An inscription from Aphrodisias records Ephesos’ praise for Aurelius Achilles, “who took up the training of his body, the most noble of contests, and also the holiest principle of life, to such a point that he blended as much virtue of soul as of body.”<sup>20</sup> The athletic guilds who ordered these inscriptions have often been the object of particular scorn from sport historians who see nothing but crude and mindless profiteering in the athletics of later antiquity. Through the researches of H. W. Pleket and David Young, the term

19. Lemarchand, *Dion de Pruse* (Paris, 1926) 25 ff. argues against the historicity of Melankomas. L. Robert, *Hellenica* 11-12 (Paris, 1960) 338-9 supports it.

20. Calliocrates: *Monumenta Asiae Minoris* 8.417 (=L. Robert, *Hellenica* 13. 134-147. Alfidius: Bean, *Bulleten* 29 (1965) 588-593 n. 2 (=R Merkelbach, *ZPE* 18 [1975] 146-8) Aurelius Achilles. L. Robert, *Op. Min.* 1 (Amsterdam, 1969) 614 ff.

“amateurism” has properly been recognized as inapplicable to ancient sport: “professionalism” with its perjorative connotations is also a cliché which hides the real and lasting value of Greek athletics. Merkelbach has shown the greatest insight in noting that “The Greeks, even in their later times, followed the same inner law under which they first began their short and brilliant reign.”<sup>21</sup> One of the most articulate and brilliant Greek athletes, a man who lived in the 4th century BCE, wrote this encomium of his sport:

The tactics of upright wrestling, a disentangling of necks, hands and sides, practiced with love of victory and with decorous disposition for the sake of strength and health are completely worthwhile and not to be overlooked.

*Laws 796a*

The author is Plato, and although the testimony concerning his competition in the Isthmian games does not come from the most reliable ancient sources (Apuleius, *Plato* 1.184; Diog. Laert. 3.4), like a lot of anecdotes, it conveys at least a general truth. Plato gives every indication of first hand palaestra experience, and I prefer to believe that he did in fact enter the Crown Games and benefit from them, even though we hear nothing about his having won.

If we turn for a moment from the “winning is everything” attitude that sometimes characterized Greek athletics, we find that pagan antiquity has already developed a spiritual interpretation of its sports. The Fathers of the Church were seldom prepared to openly condone participation in athletics, and Muscular Christianity would have to wait a millenium and a half, yet on the other hand, Greek athletics had for so long explicitly noted spiritual development in sport that the Church Fathers found it natural to incorporate the ideology of athletic training into their teaching: this tactic, of course, was sensible in light of the very real experience of early Christians in sport. The thick and detailed use of athletic imagery in the writings of the Church Fathers simply cannot be pure formalism or even anti-Pagan polemic: rather it is partly a tacit admission that athletic training has its own character building and spiritual value.

A careful view of sport imagery in Patristic works exposes growth and change in Church ideology. The Greek, of course, competed as an individual representing his city and the events of the contests were all one-on-one competitions. Job the Wrestler represents the reemergence of this hero-figure: a spiritual athlete who wins glory by his contests. He squares well with the ascetics who competed in holiness, but he also marks a departure from the Pauline concept of a corporate struggle. In I Cor. 9:24-27, Paul shifts abruptly from the advice “Don’t you know that although all runners in the stadium run, only one gets the prize? Run in such a way that you can win” to an explanation of himself: “Hence I run not aimlessly, I box not like a shadow-boxer. ’ Paul is careful to place his apostolic contest for the salvation of others in the context of their own struggles. Like Melankomas the boxer, Paul and the Corinthians exercise self-control (*enkrateuo*). The diction and thought are Hellenic, though the eagerness to universalize the agon is unusual. So also

21. R. Merkelbach, “Herakles und der Pankratiast,s” *Zeitschr. fuer Papyrol. und Eigraph.* 6 (1970) 47 ff.

Philip. 1:27-8, where Paul exhorts the Philippians to strive together for faith in the Gospel (*synathlountes*). Their behavior will vindicate Paul's contest (2:14-17): "Do everything without grumbling and quarreling, so that you may be blameless and pure to be my boast on the day of Christ, that I did not run or weary myself in vain." The Apostles' Creed "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have guarded the faith" (II Tim. 4:7) climaxes with faith: the victory crown is not so much for exceptional service, but for the recognition of the religion. This concept of agon as a struggle for faith, however, marks only a parenthesis in the ideology of athletics: as we have already seen, the contest was soon to become one of deeds and recognition again. We can see the Corinthian origin in John Chrysostom's assessment of Paul in his *Homily 25 on 2 Cor.*, 3 (PG 61.574.32):

Entering the world as if a stadium, and having stripped before all, thus he made a noble stand. For he knew the devils who were boxing with him. Accordingly he straightway shone radiant from the beginning, from the very starting post, and to the end he persevered unchanging, indeed, he even increased his pursuit as he drew nearer the prize.

This sentiment, with its emphasis on general heroism, however, has moved far from Paul's intentions.<sup>22</sup>

Turning to Hellenistic Judaism one finds much the same range of acceptance and rejection of athletics that is apparent in Christendom. The parallels are predictable: Hellenistic Judaism was the original religion of the first Christians. Both religions suffered under Roman rule, symbols of which were the arena and hippodrome, both religions were exclusivist, *i.e.*, service to Pagan gods and participation in pagan ritual were inadmissible. We do, however, encounter a major difference between the metaphorical athletic heroes adopted by Jews and Christians. The Church, influenced particularly by asceticism, fostered metaphorical athletic heroes whose Biblical contests were purely spiritual, while Hellenistic Judaism, as we will see, built its metaphors of spiritual triumph with great frequency around Jacob, whose contests in the Bible are corporeal.

It is certain that Greek sport aroused outrage in some quarters. The pseudographical Book of Jubilees 3:31 condemns nudity, ordering "that they should cover their shame, and should not uncover themselves as the Gentiles uncover themselves"—this would make proper Greek competition with its complete nudity unacceptable. We noted that the Church Fathers objected to the association with idols that Greek sport entailed: the Rabbis had strenuously raised this objection. Also they attacked these athletics on aesthetic grounds: when the Romans brought their arenas to the Greek East and staged gladiatorial combat and wild beast events, Greek sport became associated with displays of cruelty and bloodshed. We find general condemnation of all of the Greco-Roman spectacles in the Toseftah (extra-canonical legal com-

---

22. Cf. V. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Matif* (Leiden, 1962), but note, *pace* Pfitzner, the concept of communal *agon* already in Luctian, *Anacharsis* 15. The omission of Melankomas from his discussion is a serious problem.

mentary) *Avodah Zarah* 2:5-6, where the Rabbis explain Ps. 1:1 "Happy is the man. . . who sat not in the seat of scorners" as referring to those who refrained from attending stadia, camps, and mimes. The reason for the ban is twofold: some say these places are to be avoided because they offer homage to idols, but other Rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud *Avodah Zarah* 18b added that even if there is no idolatry, these places are still "the seat of the scornful." Since the gymnasium was the institution of the ephebes and hence a point of entry to Greek citizenship, it also had associations of assimilation and apostasy. I Maccabees 1:14-15 records that some Hellenizing Jews built a gymnasium and underwent the gruesome practice elsewhere called *epispasm*, cosmetic surgery to conceal the circumcision. II Maccabees 4:14-17 calls the activities in the gymnasium *paranomos*, "contrary to law": along with neglect of the ancestral laws they led to impiety (*asebeia*), and divine punishment in the form of Antiochus' persecution followed.

One must not, however, draw conclusions beyond the evidence. It is true that the authors of I and II Maccabees saw in Greek athletics not only a symbol but also a source of assimilation and apostasy. It is also true that until Herod's games, there is no firm evidence for formal athletic festivals in later Hellenistic Palestine (see below, p. 61). But it is important not to overread the polemics of the Maccabee books, infer that sport in itself meant the rejection of the Torah (Law), and assume that it only surfaced as an aberration in ancient Judaism. Of the Jews who used the gymnasium in Jerusalem which Jason built with the approval of Antiochus IV, how many reversed their circumcisions? I Maccabees 1: 14-15 in one sentence has the Jews building a gymnasium, reversing their circumcisions, and becoming "joined to the Gentiles (*ezeugisthesan tois erhnesin*)",<sup>2 3</sup> a phrase which intimates that they submitted sexually to the Greeks as well. The rapidity and thoroughness of the corruption the gymnasium brought as described in this account make it a polemic that is difficult to believe, and there must have been a large middle ground of faith and practice. For example, right after a denunciation of the gymnasium, II Maccabees tells of the Jewish delegation to the quadrennial games at Tyre: the ambassadors refused to donate the money to the Herakles cult, but applied it to the triremes. It is hard to imagine off hand that the priests who threw the discus in Jason's gymnasium at Jerusalem reversed their circumcisions or even appeared naked. Just as a corrective to quick assumptions based on thin evidence, we should note Dionysius of Halicarnassus 7.72, which states that unlike the Greeks the Romans continued to use the loincloth

---

23. Epispasm or neglect of the covenant of circumcision appears in I Macc 1:15, I Cor. 7:18. Soranus, *Gyn.* 2.34, p. 79.1, Jubilees 15:33-4. Assumption of Moses 8:3, Celsus, *de re med.* 7.25.1. Discussion in M. Hengler, *Judaism und Hellenum* I (Enpl. ed.) (Philadelphia, 1975) 289; J. Rubin, "Celsus Decircumcision Operation," *Urolog* 16 (1980) 121-124. Concerning problems in the interpretation of the Maccabee books, cf. A. Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom* (Cambridge, 1975) ch. 5. J. A. Goldstein, "Jewish Acceptance and Rejection of Hellenism," in ed. E. P. Sanders, Baumgarten, Mendelson, *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition* (Philadelphia, 1981) 64-87 offers an excellent and cogent critique of assumptions about the gymnasium; consideration of Lieberman (n. 26 below) strengthens his point further. On the implications of *ezeugisthesan*, cf. J. A. Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, Anchor Bible Commentaries (New York, 1976) *ad loc.* and Poliakoff, *Studies* (n. 1, above) 131.

in athletic competitions up to his day—presumably Roman decorum only later countenanced full nudity. The gymnasium in Jerusalem does not in itself represent apostate Judaism. It is noteworthy that the only non-negotiable issue in the Jewish objections to Herod's games was the purported display of idols, and Josephus tells us that the religious community could tolerate, albeit with some misgivings, the other aspects of the festival (*Antiquities* 15.267-277).<sup>24</sup> I Maccabees is a family history of the Hasmoneans and II Maccabees a theological vision of history: both sometimes substitute moralizing for political history, and both no doubt found the gymnasium a convenient emblem for a series of disasters associated with the Jews' dealings with the Seleucids.

There are a few pieces of evidence that may argue that the Rabbis, even in Palestine, had direct and close knowledge of Greek athletics. A Midrash (homiletic exegesis) cited in the name of Rabbi Hama ben Haninah (3rd C.) compares Jacob's wrestling contest to athletic competition. "This may be compared to an athlete who was wrestling with a royal prince; lifting up his eyes and seeing the king standing near him, he threw himself down before him" (Soncino tr.). Rabbinic literature often alludes tersely, for us cryptically, to well-known Greco-Roman institutions:<sup>25</sup> this comment may represent more than a Rabbi's imagination and may reflect the practice of career athletes. A pankratiast from Alexandria, Marcus Aurelius Asclepiades, boasted of his achievements and integrity in competition, specifying among other virtues "I never won a contest by royal favor" (*IG* 14.1102.14-15= Moretti 79): the implication of his boast is that athletes often did behave differently in the presence of royalty (as in this midrash), and that victory or defeat could be a matter of discretion. Also noteworthy is a midrash on Genesis 4:9 "The voice of your brother's blood cries unto me from the ground." Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai said,

Think of two athletes wrestling before the king: had the king wished, he could have separated them. But he did not so desire, and one overcame the other and killed him, with the victim crying out, "Let my cause be pleaded before the king!" (Soncino tr.)

The wealthy and noble in Roman times commonly had private gladiatorial shows, and a 2nd C. papyrus (SE 6222) tells of pankration bouts arranged at the whim of a local ruler in the province of Egypt. The peculiar analogy found in this midrash may well reflect direct knowledge of sport.

Knowledge of an activity is certainly not the same as official tolerance, but there is one place in the Mishna, an early codification of the Oral Law of Judaism, that is clear testimony to rabbinic sanction for sport. The tractate *Shabbat*, which prescribes appropriate behavior on the holy day of rest, specifies:

24. An excellent and thorough study of athletics in the Herodian age appears in the works of Manfred Laemmer: of his articles in ed. U. Simri, *Physical Education in the Jewish History and Culture* (Netanya, 1973, 1977, 1981) and in *Koelner Beitrage zur Sportwissenschaft* 1972, 1973, 1971, 1976, 1981-2.

25. On Talmudic allusion, cf. S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1950) 3-19. J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome* (London, 1969) 49 gives evidence for private gladiatorial shows.

They may oil and massage the stomach. but not exercise and not scrape. They may not go down to the wrestling area and may not use artificial emetics.

*Shabbat* 22:6 (tr. Lieberman)

Saul Lieberman dealt with this text in detail in his book *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, and his arguments show that at least at the time this Mishna was written, the Rabbis permitted a large range of athletic activity. The tractate deals here with what is forbidden on Sabbath, but by implication permissible on other days of the week. Different manuscripts of the Mishna vary in using the terms *kordimah* or *peelomah* for what is translated as “wrestling area”: these are Greek loan words familiar to the Classicist as *keroma* and *peloma*, the special mud and oil surface used for wrestling practice in the palaestra. The Mishna represents the norms of ancient Palestine, and *peelomuh* appears to be the reading of the Palestinian version of the text: thus this passage is evidence not only for the practices of assimilated Jews in the Diaspora but for Palestine. A final point to note is that this Mishna is not dealing with dilettante athletes: the inducing of vomiting was a sign of high level training methods, and as Lieberman noted, “like their Gentile neighbors, the Jews used to perform all kinds of exercises of the body, and the Rabbis tolerated it.”<sup>26</sup>

The borders between Judaic and Greco-Roman were sometimes crossed at the highest levels. Resh Lakish, one of the greatest Talmudists of the 3rd century, spent part of his life in both worlds:

Resh Lakish once sold himself to the Lydians (= Latin *ludarii* “gladiators”). He took with him a bag with a stone in it, because, he said, it is a known fact that on the last day they grant any request in order that his blood may be sweet. On the last day they said to him. “What would you like?” He replied “I want you to let me tie your arms and seat you in a row and give each one of you a blow and a half with my bottle.” He bound them and seated them and gave each of them a blow with his bag which stunned him. One of them ground his teeth at him. “Are you laughing at me?” he said. “I have still half a bag left for you.” So he killed all of them and made off.

Babylonian Talmud. *Gittin* 47a (Soncino tr.)

There is, of course, an element of the fantastic here, but also a measure of grim social history. Like a number of Jews, Resh Lakish was driven by poverty to sell himself to a gladiatorial troupe, a practice roundly condemned in several places in the Talmud (cf. esp. *Gittin* 46b-47a). The Rabbis for good reason knew quite a lot about the arena, and we even find in the passage cited above a reference to the notorious *cena liberalis*, the banquet on the eve of the games at which the promoters treated the gladiators like noblemen. Resh Lakish’ past was a source of embarrassment to him later in life, and the arena was assuredly beyond the limits of official tolerance, but this view of Jewish gladi-

---

26. Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1942) 92-7.

ators shows how some Jews came to adopt typically Greek and Roman athletic practices.<sup>27</sup>

Together these citations from rabbinic literature give us a good insight into the breadth of faith and practice to be found even in the homeland of Orthodoxy. The attitude towards Greek athletics and Roman gladiatorial combat was hardly one of warm reception, especially for the latter. But since rabbinic writings both admire and praise physical activity and physical beauty it is clear that there was no intrinsic unacceptability about athletics as long as they did not engender transgressions of *hlacha* (religious law) such as idolatry, nudity, and violence.<sup>28</sup>

For the Diaspora, one can say with more authority that the Jews energetically engaged in sport. The letter of Claudius to the Jews of Alexandria, extant on papyrus, shows that the Jews of that city were anxious to engage in athletic festivals under the aegis of the gymnasium (*CPJ* 153). Gymnasium membership was the first step towards citizenship: their eagerness to participate and Alexandrian hostility suggests that their athletic activities were a bid to gain citizenship and avoid the poll tax levied on non-citizens. But it is still clear evidence of Jewish enthusiasm for Greek sport in the Diaspora. There is also evidence of Jews in ephebic (gymnasium youth) organizations. An inscription from Hypaepa (II CE) reads "*Ioudaion Neoteron*" —which strongly suggests Jewish ephebes. An ephebic inscription from Iasos has a number of identifiably Jewish names on it.<sup>29</sup>

The writings of Philo Judaeus of 1st century Alexandria are the single richest source of athletic terminology in all of Greek literature. Philo makes particularly fruitful use of Greek traditions, in keeping with his many-sided character, for he was both a student of Greek philosophy and mysticism and a ritually observant Jew and leader of the Jewish community. Philo's athletic imagery shows a unique immediateness and directness: he unashamedly admits his first-hand experience as a spectator at the Games. In a treatise arguing that only a virtuous man is truly free. Philo writes in the first person that he saw a competitor in the pankration fight aggressively only to succumb to exhaustion because of his opponent's ability to withstand the attack: this he compares to a virtuous man's ability to withstand violence (*Every Good Man is Free* 26). Elsewhere he recounts, again in the first person, how he saw foolish spectators at the horseraces lose their lives because they left their seats and stood too close to the chariots as they raced past (*Providence* 58). In a work on Jewish Law, he speaks with approval of parents who send their children to athletic trainers so they may gain good condition and gracefulness.

27. Evidence for Jewish gladiators appears, among other places in *Gittin* 4:9 and *Ter.* 8:5. On the identification of "Lydians," cf. S. Krauss, *Griechische und Lateinische Lehnwoerter* (Berlin, 1898) and M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of Targumim, Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (New York, 1926). On the *cena liberalis*, cf. K. Meuli, *Der Griechische Agon* (Cologne, 1968) 49, a topic which I will discuss in detail in a forthcoming article.

28. On Jewish attitudes towards the body, cf. J. Alouf, "Physical Culture in the Period of the Talmud," *Physical Education in the Jewish History and Culture* (Netanya, 1973).

29. For studies of athletics in the Diapora, cf. L. H. Feldman, "The Orthodoxy of the Jews in Hellenistic Egypt," *Jewish Social Studies* 22 (1960) 224-228; V. Tcherikover and A. Fuks, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* (Cambridge, 1957) 39 n.99.

just as they send children to learn the liberal arts (*Special Laws* 2.229-30). Philo's athleticism has overriding ethical and philosophical purposes, and in his enthusiasm for the spiritual, he can condemn the Greek festivals, just as Diogenes the Cynic and other Greeks had done before him,

Do not regard as holy the Games which the cities put on every other year, having built theaters to receive many thousands of people. For in these festivals, the man who outwrestles an opponent and stretches him on his back or prone on the ground, or the one powerful in boxing or pankration who doesn't stop short of violence and wrongdoing wins the first prize. Now the only contest which can rightly be called Olympic the inhabitants of Elis do not hold, but it is the contest for the gaining of divine, truly Olympian virtues.

Philo, *Husbandry* 113, 119

This, however, should not cause us to lose track of his real admiration for Greek sport.

Where is Job the Wrestler? We do not find him in any Jewish source, except the *Testament of Job*, if indeed our editions represent totally a Jewish work. It would be the Church Fathers who would make Job into a heroic martyr, strong in his weakness: Philo's athlete of the spirit is above others Jacob. Philo looks towards the one actual wrestler in the Hebrew Bible and, concentrating on the physical details of his encounters (cf. esp. *Dreams* 1.129-130), retells the story of Jacob supplanting Esau and his match at the river Jabok as a contest against temptation. The Bible story of Genesis 32:25-29,

Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." Said he, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and man and have prevailed."

(New JPS translation) (cf. Hos. 12:5)

becomes spiritual in Philo:

Although Pleasure expects to heel-trip (*pternizein*) and deceive the discerning mind, she will herself be heel-tripped by Jacob, trained in wrestling not of the body, but the sort which the soul wrestles with its enemies, the habits, fighting against passions and evil.

*Allegorical Laws* 3.190

The Septuagint had already developed the image of Jacob as a wrestler by translating Gen. 27:36, "Was he named Jacob that he might supplant me" (new JPS), with the Greek wrestling term *pternizo*, "heel-pull," or "heel-trip." Philo has Jacob continue as the heel tripper even at Jabok (*On Changes of Names* 81.2). Reflecting an uninhibited eagerness for athletics, he gravitated to the one corporeal wrestler of the Bible.<sup>30</sup> The Church found the ab-

30. On Philo, cf. L. Robert, *Hellenica* 11 (Paris, 1960) 337 n. 1. 442 n. 4; *Rev. phil.* 41 (1967) 30-1 n. 6; H. A. Harris, *Greek Athletics and the Jews* (Cardiff, 1976) with extensive citations and lexical study. There is a full discussion of *pternizein* in ed. Henrichs, *Didymos der Blinde, Kommentar zu Hiob* (Tura Papyrus) 2 (Bonn, 1968) 72-3. n.48, 49, but the term has a technical wrestling meaning which "mit Fuesen trat" does not convey.

stract, emotional battles of Job more evocative, especially when asceticism was on the rise, and in John Chrysostom's writings, for example, Job receives more athletic imagery than any other figure, even Paul.

Jacob and his wrestling opponent deserve a few more words. The patriarch-to-be wrestles at the ford of the river Jabok. Biblical scholars have suggested that the oldest level of this story is the contest of Jacob and a river demon—the protagonist's desire to leave at dawn does indeed sound more like Nosferatu than an angel. That is to say, the hero Jacob's *rite de passage* involves a wrestling match. In this light, Jacob is part of a tradition of ancient Near Eastern heroes: like Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, he does not assume full stature until he has proven himself in wrestling. Athletic prowess was expected of the leader—Shulgi the Sumerian king, for example, claims prowess in wrestling and racing, among other talents. Judging from the milieu of ancient Israel, the priestly nation was not devoid of sport.<sup>31</sup> It clearly did not develop an athletic festival system like that of ancient Greece, but it is important not to argue from this omission that sport was categorically hateful and sacrilegious to Jews in antiquity.

This aspect of sport history demonstrates an ideology quite different from that of the boxer in *Iliad* 23 who boasts that he will crush his opponent's skull, from the shamed losers described in two of Pindar's *Odes*. The reason that Greek sport found a place, albeit modest, in both Jewish and Christian traditions is that it never lost its spiritual significance—it is our distorted perspective to focus only on the glittering moments of athletic triumph. Jacob the Heel-tripper and Job the Wrestler, and all the other examples of Judaeo-Christian transformations of Greek athletic institutions are not the illegitimate spawn of untempered anti-Hellenism, rather they are testimony to the depth, variety, and flexibility of the Greek legacy.

---

31. For discussion of the folk traditions behind Jacob's encounter, cf. C. Waterman, *Genesis*, *Bibischer Kommentar* 1.2 (1977). J. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Philadelphia, 1982) 184-191 discusses wrestling in the ancient Near East, cf. further, G. R. Castellino, *Two Shulgi Hymns*, *Studi Semitici* 42 (1972) 40-3, 257-9, and L. Jacob-Rost, "Sport im alten Orient," *Altertum* 11 (1965) 3-8.