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## **Foul! Romans 9–11 and athletic contests in ancient epic**

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# Early Christianity

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## Editorial

**Isaac T. Soon**

The Short Apostle: The Stature of Paul in Light of 2 Cor 11:33 and the Acts of Paul and Thecla

**Stefan Krauter**

Foul! Romans 9–11 and Athletic Contests in Ancient Epic

**Beatrice Wyss**

Die Brotrede Philons aus Alexandria in *Legum allegoriae* 3,169–178

**Carl Johan Berglund**

References to Heracleon in Clement of Alexandria

## New Discoveries

Roy D. Kotansky, The So-Called “Christ” Magician’s Cup

## New Projects

Tobias Nicklas, „Beyond Canon“: Eine kurze Erläuterung des Projekts

## New Books

Sandra Huebenthal, *Reading Mark’s Gospel as a Text from Collective Memory* (Chris Keith)

**Mohr Siebeck**

# Early Christianity

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Stefan Krauter

## Foul!

### Romans 9–11 and Athletic Contests in Ancient Epic

Der Aufsatz nimmt eine Anregung von Stanley Stowers auf, Röm 9,16; 9,30–10,4 und 11,11 f. auf dem Hintergrund des Wettlaufs bei den Leichenspielen für Patroklos in der *Ilias* zu interpretieren. Allerdings wird auf die Annahme verzichtet, es handle sich um eine bewusste und für die Adressaten des Römerbriefs erkennbare Anspielung. Der Aufsatz analysiert vielmehr alle vier überlieferten Beschreibungen von Sportwettkämpfen in antiker Epik und versucht, das kognitive Skript der intendierten Leser von einem Wettkampf zu rekonstruieren. Mit Hilfe dieses Skripts kann man plausibel abschätzen, wie antike Rezipienten die Ausführungen des Paulus hätten verstehen können, und damit den Gang seiner Argumentation besser nachvollziehen. Da auch die epischen Texte durch die Erzählung von Sportwettkämpfen Themen wie menschliche Anstrengung und göttliches Eingreifen, menschliche und göttliche Parteilichkeit, Gerechtigkeit und Gnade behandeln, bieten sie – von Fragen direkter Beeinflussung oder Bezugnahme völlig abgesehen – einen erhellenden Kontext für die theologische Deutung der Aussagen des Paulus.

*Keywords:* Rom 9–11, ancient epic, athletic contest, cognitive script

In *A Rereading of Romans*, Stanley Stowers proposed interpreting Rom 9:16; 9:30–10:4 and 11:11–12 against the background of an agonistic foot race.<sup>1</sup> He pointed to Homer, *Il.* 23.740–784, where Athena favors Ulysses and makes Aias slip on the filth of sacrificed cattle so that Ulysses wins the race and Aias comes second.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, according to Stowers, Paul thinks that God has put the stumbling stone Christ into Israel's way. However, far from contending that gentile Christ-believers have now won the race, and that Israel has lost (not to say: *is* lost), Paul points out that this παράπτωμα (misstep) and ἔττημα (falling back) took place for a greater good: the fulfillment of God's promises to all nations.<sup>3</sup>

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1 S. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 312–316.

2 Stowers, *Rereading of Romans* (see n. 1), 314–315.

3 Stowers, *Rereading of Romans* (see n. 1), 298–300.

While many of Stowers's reinterpretations have deeply influenced scholarship on the Pauline epistles this idea has not met with approval. A survey of recent commentaries on Romans shows that scholars are reluctant to consider the race imagery in Rom 9–11 as key to the understanding of the passage.<sup>4</sup> Two recent monographs on agonistic metaphors in Paul focus on the *realia* of ancient athletic contests and on athletic imagery in philosophical works.<sup>5</sup> Neither work deals with the description of sports contests in ancient epic, and neither deals extensively with Rom 9–11.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Stowers seems to have overstated his case contending that Rom 9:16; 9:30–10:4 and 11:11–12 were an allusion to the foot race in the *Iliad* and that Paul intended his addressees to notice this reference and to base their understanding of Rom 9–11 on it. Nevertheless, I think it might be worth following his suggestion, albeit a little more carefully.

Firstly, I will analyze all four extant descriptions of athletic games in ancient epic: Besides the funeral games for Patroclus in Homer's *Iliad*, these are the games commemorating the anniversary of Anchises's death in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the first Nemean games in Statius's *Thebaid*, and Scipio's games in honor of his late father and uncle in Silius's *Punica*. Following ancient conventions regarding poetic emulation, Virgil, Statius, and Silius base their descriptions of athletic games on the "canonical" Homeric model. Statius and Silius in their turn use the Roman classic Virgil as model.

4 E. Lohse, *Der Brief an die Römer*, KEK 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 278, 286; K. Haacker, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer*, 3rd ed., THKNT 6 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), 223; R. Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 583; M. Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer*, vol. 2: *Röm 9–16*, EKKNT 6/2 (Ostfildern: Patmos; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 64. Cf. also B. Noack, "Celui qui court," *ST* 24 (1970), 113–116; T. Baarda, "Romeinen 9:16, '... τρέχοντος...': Een korte exegetisch everweging bij een woord van Paulus," *NedTT* 67 (2013), 303–307.

5 U. Poplutz, *Athlet des Evangeliums: Eine motivgeschichtliche Studie zur Wettkampfmotaphorik bei Paulus*, Herders Biblische Studien 43 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2004); M. Brändl, *Der Agon bei Paulus: Herkunft und Profil paulinischer Agonmetaphorik*, WUNT 2/222 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006). Cf. also V. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature*, NovTSup 16 (Leiden: Brill, 1967).

6 Poplutz, *Athlet des Evangeliums* (see n. 5), 377–384, deals with Rom 9:16. According to her, the running metaphor points to the fact that neither human will nor human efforts influence God's election. Brändl, *Agon bei Paulus* (see n. 5), 286–288, deals with Rom 9:16 and 9:30–33. He reads the passages as expressing that God's mercy alone leads to salvation. He points to Homer, *Il.* 23.768–783 and Virgil, *Aen.* 5.328 and concludes that the idea was widely held that not the velocity of the runner but the favor of a deity gave victory in a race.

The poets allude to their predecessors' texts and want to imitate, combine, modify, and even surpass them.

In contrast to Stowers, I do not think that it is plausible to take Rom 9–11 as another instance of conscious allusion to Homer's athletic games although it might be probable that Paul and his addressees knew at least parts of the *Iliad*. Therefore, in a next step, I will try to reconstruct the cognitive script of an "athletic contest."<sup>7</sup> The four epic texts as well as Paul's remarks in Rom 9–11 presuppose a mental structure in their intended readers, or conversely, ancient people who read these texts used their culture-based conventionalized knowledge of events of the type "athletic contest" to understand them. Such a script results from repeated experience, that is, from participating in sports games, mostly as spectators, but also from listening to or reading narrations about sports games. It directs the readers' expectations, inferences, and evaluations. Vice versa, reading such texts influences the recipients' mental schemes, insofar as the texts are not absolutely conventional. They can break expectations with surprising twists and turns, question evaluations, and suggest alternative points of view.

With these findings in mind, we will turn to Paul's remarks in Rom 9–11. How would ancient readers have probably read the passages in these chapters that evoke a foot race? How does Paul use the cognitive script "athletic contest" to drive home his arguments? And on the other hand, what conclusions or assessments that his readers could have made does he try to preclude?<sup>8</sup>

In a final paragraph I will switch from the historical to a theological level. I want to show that the four epic accounts of sports contests analyzed in this essay provide an illuminating context<sup>9</sup> for interpreting Paul's arguments in

7 Cf. R.C. Schank and R.P. Abelson, *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures* (Hillsdale, Mich.: Wiley & Sons, 1977). On the use of cognitive linguistics in exegesis, cf. Y.-M. Park, *Mark's Memory Resources and the Controversy Stories (Mark 2:1–3:6): An Application of the Frame Theory of Cognitive Science to the Markan Oral-Aural Narrative*, *Linguistic Biblical Studies* 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2010); S. Finnen, *Narratologie und biblische Exegese: Eine integrative Methode der Erzählanalyse und ihr Ertrag am Beispiel von Matthäus 28*, *WUNT* 2/285 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010); J. Rügemeier, *Poetik der markinischen Christologie: Eine kognitiv-narratologische Exegese*, *WUNT* 2/458 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

8 Since studies on Rom 9–11 abound, I will not provide yet another detailed exegesis but limit myself to giving an outline.

9 I do *not* want to claim that Paul or his readers knew these texts. In case of the *Iliad* it is probable that they knew at least parts of it. In case of the *Aeneid* it is possible that they had heard of it and knew the rough outline of the story. For the *Thebaid* and the *Punica* this is, of course, impossible due to chronological reasons.

Rom 9–11, for by narrating sports contests they address issues of human effort and divine intervention, both human and divine impartiality and favoritism, and human as well as divine mercy.

## 1 The Funeral Games for Patroclus (Homer, *Il.* 23.257–897)

Most of bk. 23 of the *Iliad* contains the account of the funeral games for Achilles's friend Patroclus.<sup>10</sup> The games consist of eight disciplines,<sup>11</sup> two of which are of interest in our context: the chariot race and the foot race.

Four heroes take part in the chariot race (23.262–650): Eumelus, Diomedes, Menelaus, and Antilochus. The race begins and soon Eumelus is in the lead. Diomedes, the second fastest, follows close behind him and is about to overtake him when Apollo intervenes. Since he dislikes Diomedes and favors Eumelus the deity knocks the whip out of Diomedes's hands so that Eumelus can extend his lead (23.383–384). Athena, for her part, helps Diomedes by giving him back the whip and breaking the yoke of Eumelus's chariot. The horses break free and he is thrown out of the chariot (23.388–397). Due to divine intervention Diomedes wins the race (23.399–400). For a long time, it looks as if Menelaus will be second. However, the young Antilochus overtakes him in a risky and unfair maneuver (23.420–424). The badly injured Eumelus crosses the finish line last (23.532–533). When Achilles sees him, he feels mercy and decides to award him the second prize. Achilles defends this decision as appropriate, since Eumelus is known to be the best charioteer (23.534–538). Antilochus protests (23.543–554): If Eumelus had prayed to the gods, he would not have lost the race (23.546–547). Achilles should have given him some other award but not the second prize. On hearing these words, Achilles smiles (23.555) and awards another prize to Eumelus (23.563–564). Now, however, Menelaus the third and only one who has not yet received a prize feels insulted. He gives an infuriated speech: Antilochus has offended him in his honor. He was only second because of a trick, although his horses were slower (23.570–585). Antilochus appeases Menelaus and gives him the second prize because he

<sup>10</sup> On the place of the games in the structure of the epic, cf. S.L. Schein, "The *Iliad*: Structure and Interpretation," in *A New Companion to Homer*, ed. I. Morris and B. Powell (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 345–359, at 346.

<sup>11</sup> Chariot race, boxing, wrestling, foot race, spear fight, discus, archery, javelin. A tabular overview of all four epic texts is given by H. Lovatt, "Interplay: Silius and Statius in the Games of Punic 16," in *Brill's Companion to Silius Italicus*, ed. A. Augoustakis (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 155–176, at 159.

does not want the older and more honorable Menelaus to be angry with him (23.587–595). At this point Menelaus gives in and concedes the second prize to Antilochus (23.596–611).

The depiction of the chariot race shows some of the basic values of Homer's heroic world:<sup>12</sup> The heroes compete driven by the same agonistic spirit that guides them as warriors. They aim to outdo the others at all costs. When they are about to lose, they react by shedding tears of anger (23.385) and feeling insulted. Just how far this race is from the modern idea of "fair play" in sports is shown by the fact that effort is tightly linked to status: Eumelus "is" the fastest charioteer and therefore he cannot be last. The horses of king Menelaus "are" better than those of Antilochus and therefore the latter cannot win the second prize but only be conceded it. The role that deities play fits into this picture: they intervene in favor of their respective favorites, and it is possible to win them over through prayers or vows.<sup>13</sup>

The much shorter passage about the foot race (23.740–797) confirms these results. Achilles offers three prizes (23.740–753) and three heroes compete: Aias, Ulysses, and Antilochus (23.754–755). Ulysses is second behind Aias (23.759). Shortly before the finish line he prays to Athena, and she hears him (23.768–771). Now two things happen simultaneously: Aias slips on the filth of sacrificed cattle, stumbles and the dung fills his mouth and nose (23.774–777). Ulysses, strengthened by the goddess, starts a final sprint and wins the race (23.778). Aias wins the second prize. He suspects that Athena has made him stumble because she prefers Ulysses (23.782–783), but the spectators laugh at him (23.784). Antilochus is content with the third place since his competitors are older and more honorable than him (23.785–792).

In this account again human effort (Ulysses's sprint) and divine intervention come together.<sup>14</sup> Aias is fast while Ulysses is smart but this is not to say that Ulysses did not deserve victory. Aias's second place corresponds to his social status. So, he does not find mercy but scornful laughter when he complains.

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12 On society and ethics in Homer's epic, cf. R. Osborne, "Homer's Society," in *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, ed. R. Fowler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 206–219, at 212–213; K.A. Raaflaub, "Homeric Society," in Morris and Powell, *New Companion to Homer* (see n. 10), 624–648, at 633–635; A.W.H. Adkins, "Homeric Ethics," *ibid.*, 694–713, at 702–706.

13 Cf. E. Kearns, "The Gods in the Homeric Epics," in Fowler, *Cambridge Companion to Homer* (see n. 12), 59–73, at 63–67.

14 A. Köhnken, "Der Endspurt des Odysseus: Wettkampfdarstellung bei Homer und Vergil," *Hermes* 109 (1981), 129–148.



Moreover, Aias's misfortune anticipates his fate: The *Iliupersis* tells that during the sack of Troy he pulled Cassandra so violently away from Athena's statue that it fell down and that he raped the prophetess in front of Athena's altar. Homer, *Od.* 4.499–511 reports that he was drowned by Poseidon because of his blasphemy.<sup>15</sup> Ancient readers, knowing these stories about Aias, would not have considered his defeat in the foot race undeserved.

## 2 The Games in Memory of Anchises (Virgil, *Aen.* 5.104–603)

The commemoration of the anniversary of Anchises's death in the *Aeneid* consists of four competitions – a ship race, a foot race, boxing, and archery – and as the final event the *lusus Troiae*, which is not a contest but a performance of drills on horseback. In our context, the first two contests are relevant.

Four ships take part in the regatta: Mnestheus's *Pristis*, Gyas's *Chimaera*, Sergestus's *Centaurus* and Cloanthus's *Scylla* (5.114–123). They have to circumnavigate the turning mark closely. Gyas is annoyed by his helmsman Menoetes, who fears hidden rocks and carefully avoids the turning mark so that the ship almost loses the lead, and throws him into the sea (5.160–175). Menoetes swims to a small cliff. The spectators laugh at him as he sits there in his dripping wet clothes and vomits the salty water (5.178–182).<sup>16</sup> Sergestus driven by his zeal to catch up steers his ship onto the cliffs (5.204–205). During the final spurt of the three remaining ships, when it seems likely that the race will end in a draw, Cloanthus prays to the sea gods and vows a bull to them. They push his ship and he wins the race (5.232–243). When at last Sergestus brings his badly damaged ship ashore he is greeted by the spectators with scornful laughter (5.272). Aeneas, in contrast, awards him a prize, happy that the ship and crew have been saved (5.282–285).

Many runners compete in the foot race (5.286–361), of whom the two friends Euryalus and Nisus, Diores, Salius, Patron, Helymus, and Panopes are introduced by name (5.293–302). The race begins with a remarkable announcement of Aeneas: No one will remain without a prize (5.305). A reward will be given to all competitors but the three fastest will receive

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Schein, "*Iliad*" (see n. 10), 355; E. Kearns, "Aias [2]," *DNP* 1 (1996), 310–311.

<sup>16</sup> This is scornful laughter (R.D. Williams, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos liber quintus*, ed. with a commentary [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960], 81) but nevertheless it is rather a sign of rude humor than of contempt.

additional prizes (5.308–309). When the race starts, Nisus takes the lead (5.318–319). Shortly before the finish line, the “unfortunate” Nisus slips on the blood of sacrificed cattle (5.327–330). Lying on the ground, Nisus intentionally causes the second fastest runner Salius to stumble so that the third, his friend Euryalus, wins the race (5.335–338). Helymus comes second and Dioreas third. Salius protests vehemently against Nisus’s unfair behavior (5.342) but the spectators favor the handsome young Euryalus (5.343–344), and the runner who is now in the third place, Dioreas, refuses to accept another counting (5.345–347). Now Aeneas intervenes: He confirms the prizes for Euryalus, Helymus, and Dioreas but he claims the right to show mercy on a friend who has fallen through no fault of his own (5.348–350). So, Salius receives a prize, too (5.351–352). Seeing that Aeneas gives prizes to the losers and has mercy on the fallen, Nisus asks for a reward showing his face and limbs smeared with cattle manure (5.353–355). Aeneas smiles at him (5.558) and hands him a gift.

If one compares Virgil’s accounts with his Homeric models one can see that he took over all his motifs – prayer/vow, divine intervention, slipping, obstruction of competitors, protest, laughter, smile, awarding consolation prizes – from Homer but arranged them differently. This rearrangement changes the message of the narrative fundamentally.

In Michael Putnam’s classic *The Poetry of the Aeneid* the chapter on bk. 5 is entitled “Game and Reality.”<sup>17</sup> While Homer’s games fit perfectly into the agonistic world of his heroes, Virgil’s games form a marked contrast to the rest of the epic, especially to the second half which depicts the fights between Trojans and indigenous people of Italy. The account of this war between peoples who should be in eternal peace (12.504) is full of distress, deaths of young men, and tragic victims. The games are full of life, hilarity, even comic<sup>18</sup> – and, in particular, compassion and mercy.<sup>19</sup>

Three examples may suffice: The helmsman Menoetes who is thrown into the water by Gyas is a humorous prefiguration of Aeneas’s helmsman Palinurus who falls into the sea and dies vicariously for his fellow Trojans (5.779–863).<sup>20</sup> Sergestus’s shipwreck resembles the final scene of bk. 5

17 M.C.J. Putnam, *The Poetry of the Aeneid* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 64–104.

18 The word *laetus* occurs nine times during the description of the games; cf. J. Uden, “The Smile of Aeneas,” *TAPA* 144 (2014), 71–96, at 71.

19 Putnam, *Poetry of the Aeneid* (see n. 17), 66.

20 Putnam, *Poetry of the Aeneid* (see n. 17), 75–77. L.M. Fratantuono and A. Smith, *Virgil, Aeneid 5: Text, Translation and Commentary*, Mnemosyne Supplement 386 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 326–327.

when Aeneas's pilotless ship almost crashes into the rocks of the Sirenes (5.864–871).<sup>21</sup> Although Sergestus is to blame for his accident, Aeneas's reaction is one of sympathy.<sup>22</sup> The two friends Nisus and Euryalus, who are introduced in connection with the foot race, will reappear in *Aen.* 9.175–502. They sneak into Turnus's camp at night and slay many of the sleeping enemies but eventually they are discovered and killed. That Nisus slips on the blood of sacrificed cattle can be read as proleptic reference to his and his friend's tragic death.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to the Homeric foot race where Aias slips after Athena has intervened in favor of Ulysses, Nisus himself slips by chance and then makes Salius trip on purpose.<sup>24</sup> The reason for this unfair action<sup>25</sup> is highly ambivalent: Nisus acts in favor of his friend because he wants to have sexual intercourse with him (*non oblitus amorum*, 5.334).<sup>26</sup> So, the result of the race is a consequence of chance and cheating out of dubious motives.<sup>27</sup> This makes Aeneas's reaction even more noteworthy: Aeneas's smile for the trickster Nisus points back to Jupiter's smile for Venus when he reveals to her that history will have a happy end (1.254),<sup>28</sup> and Aeneas's awarding prizes for all the runners, including losers and cheats, seems even to surpass Jupiter's benign rule, since in reality the end of history can only be achieved with enormous suffering and an indescribable number of victims whereas in the world of the games all is well.<sup>29</sup>

21 Putnam, *Poetry of the Aeneid* (see n. 17), 77–78.

22 This story becomes even more pointed when one takes into account the references to events in Roman history: The arrival of the damaged ship evokes the return of Antonius's fleet after the naval battle of Actium (Fratantuono and Smith, *Aeneid* 5 [see n. 20], 335). Sergestus's descendant is L. Sergius Catilina, who in the Catilinarian conspiracy almost crushed the "ship" of the Roman state (*ibid.*, 338–340). So, Aeneas's reaction might stand symbolically for clemency toward the villains and losers in Rome's history. (And Aeneas's confident reaction when he takes over the helm and navigates the ship successfully past the cliffs after Palinurus has plunged into the sea demonstrates Augustus's superior political skills.)

23 Putnam, *Poetry of the Aeneid* (see n. 17), 81. Notice the differences between the external prolepsis of Aias's deserved doom in the *Iliad* and the internal prolepsis of Nisus's tragic death in the *Aeneid*.

24 Fratantuono and Smith, *Aeneid* 5 (see n. 20), 379.

25 Williams, *Aeneidos liber quintus* (see n. 16), 111, points to the fact that already in antiquity such a behavior was thought to be inappropriate (cf. Cicero, *Off.* 3.42).

26 Fratantuono and Smith, *Aeneid* 5 (see n. 20), 383–384.

27 Fratantuono and Smith, *Aeneid* 5 (see n. 20), 386.

28 Fratantuono and Smith, *Aeneid* 5 (see n. 20), 398; Uden, "Smile of Aeneas" (see n. 18), 73.

29 Uden, "Smile of Aeneas" (see n. 18), 74; E. Kraggerud, *Aeneisstudien*, SOSup 22 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1968), 118–239, esp. 227–228.

### 3 The First Nemeian Games (Statius, *Thebaid* 6.593–645)

In his *Thebaid*, P. Papinius Statius (ca. 45–96 CE) tells the myth of the “Seven against Thebes”<sup>30</sup> following Greek epic tradition but also emulating his Roman forerunners Virgil, Ovid, and Lucan.<sup>31</sup>

On their campaign, the seven heroes come to Nemea with their troops. Nemea is described as a beautiful bucolic landscape. What happens when the foreign warriors arrive can be read as the destruction of this paradise: A small child, Opheltes, is killed by a sacred snake when its warden leaves it alone to talk to the foreigners (5.534–553). One of the warriors kills the snake, thereby bringing divine revenge on his head (5.554–577). The foreigners cut down a sacred grove to get the timber for the pyre of Opheltes (6.84–117). They organize funeral games that resemble a real war.<sup>32</sup>

Of the eight disciplines,<sup>33</sup> we will have a closer look at the first three. In the chariot race we find again an instance of divine intervention. Since Phoebus wants the seer Amphiaraus to win, he makes Arion, the horse of Polynices, shy (6.491–512) and Polynices is flung out of the chariot. The horse with the empty chariot crosses the finish line first but nevertheless Amphiaraus wins the race (6.530). A slave woman is given to Polynices as consolation prize (6.549).

In the foot race, Parthenopaeus, the son of the running virgin Atalanta,<sup>34</sup> takes the lead. When he is about to win, Idas, the second fastest, pulls his long hair and overtakes him (6.615–617). Seeing the fraud, the Arcadians rush to arms and want to fight for their prince but the referee Adrastus decides that the race should be repeated without cheating (6.630). Before the second round, Parthenopaeus prays to Diana, his mother’s and his own tutelary deity to whom he has vowed his unshorn hair. His prayer is heard and he wins the race (6.631–645).<sup>35</sup>

A variation of the motif of stumbling can be discerned in the depiction of the discus competition. One of the contestants, the overconfident Phlegyas, wants to throw the discus but it slips out of his hand (6.693–696). This is interpreted as intervention by Fortuna who likes to disappoint human

30 On ancient testimonies and the rough course of events, cf. C. Klodt, “Sieben gegen Theben,” *DNP* 11 (2001), 524–525.

31 D.T. Vessey, “Statius [II 2]: P. Papinius Statius,” *DNP* 11 (2001), 925–928.

32 J. Soerink, “Statius’ Nemea/Paradise Lost,” *Dictynna* 12 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.4000/dictynna.1125>.

33 Chariot race, foot race, discus, boxing, wrestling, fight in armor, archery, javelin.

34 R. Harder, “Atalante: A. Mythos,” *DNP* 2 (1997), 145.

35 However, he will not fulfill his vow but die during the war against Thebes (9.900–902). Cf. Lovatt, “Interplay” (see n. 11), 162.

aspirations (6.691–693). Phlegyas receives a consolation prize because he has been frustrated by an unhappy coincidence (6.726).

With eight passages arranged in decreasing length, Statius's games closely follow the Homeric model. As in the *Iliad* and in contrast to the *Aeneid* the main figures of the epic participate in the sports contests.<sup>36</sup> They do so in a warlike spirit. However, this is not Homer's agonistic spirit, but almost a kind of horrible frenzy (*Thebaid* 6.456–458). Despite the rather gloomy atmosphere of the games, it seems to be important for Statius that the participants, unlike in the *Aeneid*, do not cheat. Adrastus's words in *Thebaid* 6.630 can be understood as a reproach to Virgil.

#### 4 Scipio's Games in Honor of His Deceased Father and Uncle (Silius Italicus, *Punica* 16.312–591)

After a political career under Vespasian, Tib. Catius Asconius Silius Italicus (ca. 25–102 CE) retreated to his estate and began writing the historical epic *Punica*. When he fell severely ill he decided to die by fasting (Martial, *Epigrammata* 4.14; 7.63; Pliny, *Ep.* 3.7), his epic not yet being finished. The extant seventeen books tell the story of the Second Punic War from its mythical prehistory to the Roman victory in the battle of Zama.<sup>37</sup> Silius's relationship to Statius is not easy to determine: Both poets could have composed their respective epics at the same time (or at overlapping times) and could probably have been aware of each other's work.<sup>38</sup>

In his report on the chariot race (*Punica* 16.312–456),<sup>39</sup> Silius uses several Homeric motifs in new combinations: The winner of the race is quickly determined. Cynrus starts too fast (16.342–345) so that Hiberus can overtake him when his horses are exhausted (16.393–400). Then, the focus of the narration is on the third and fourth of the four competitors, Durius and Atlas. Durius pushes Atlas off the line and smashes the axe of his chariot (16.401–415). After he has eliminated his direct rival he tries to catch up to the two chariots in front of him. He gets closer and closer to them and becomes overconfident. He is already in the process of overtaking

<sup>36</sup> Lovatt, "Interplay" (see n. 11), 163–164.

<sup>37</sup> C. Reitz, "Silius [II 5]: S. Italicus," *DNP* 11 (2001), 557–559.

<sup>38</sup> F. Ripoll, "Statius and Silius Italicus," in *Brill's Companion to Statius*, ed. W.J. Dominik, C.E. Newlands, and K. Gervais (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 425–443, at 427–436; Lovatt, "Interplay" (see n. 11), 156–157.

<sup>39</sup> Silius follows Virgil and narrates four contests plus one final event: chariot race, foot race, fight in armor, javelin, and honorific javelin.

when suddenly his whip drops out of his hand (16.431–432). In the end, Atlas gets a consolation prize because Scipio pities him for his old age and his fall (16.454–455). A plausible interpretation of Silius's account is that, on a metaphorical level, he deals with the question of suitability for political power, hence the stress on virtues like endurance, experience, or self-confidence.<sup>40</sup>

The foot race in the *Punica* (16.457–526) seems to be a “correction” of the foot race in the *Thebaid*: Following the Virgilian model, there are prizes for the three fastest runners and a modest reward for all those who start (16.457–464). Seven young men stemming from different regions participate in the contest (16.465–477).

The race begins and the audience cheers on the runners, who all seem worthy of victory (16.487). Eurytus takes the lead, Hesperos is second. Suddenly Theron, the last runner, starts a sprint and overtakes everyone else until he is third behind Hesperos. In a dramatic scene resembling a sports report Theron overtakes Hesperos and catches up with Eurytus (16.516–518). When they are about to cross the finish line at the same time the infuriated Hesperos grasps Theron's hair and pulls him back (16.519–522). Whereas Statius's idea that the second fastest runner pulls the leading runner's hair back and at the same time overtakes him and wins the race is very unlikely, the outcome of Silius's foot race is, technically speaking, “correct.”<sup>41</sup>

The rest of the passage, however, is astonishingly disappointing: Eurytus wins and gets the first prize, the others also get their rewards without further ado (16.522–525). The fact that Eurytus only became first because of Hesperos's unfair trick against Theron is simply ignored. Had Silius thought of giving a morally better version of Virgil's race<sup>42</sup> – with the prizes given as announced and the reason for the trickery not being same-sex love but agonistic zeal – one could not judge his text other than a complete failure.

What is remarkable is the complete absence of prayers, vows, and deities in Silius's games.

40 Cf. S. Rebeggiani, “The Chariot Race and the Destiny of the Empire in Statius' *Thebaid*,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 38 (2013), 187–206.

41 Lovatt, “Interplay” (see n. 11), 163; Ripoll, “Statius” (see n. 38), 432.

42 Lovatt, “Interplay” (see n. 11), 165.

## 5 Athletic Contests – Reconstruction of a Culture-Based Cognitive Script

In her book on oral traditions in Homer's epics,<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Minchin identifies a "contest script," that is, a mental scheme based on culturally determined experiences, which Homer's descriptions of athletic games follow:

The prizes are set up  
 A challenge is announced  
 Competitors come forward  
 Preparations for the competition are made by:  
   drawing of lots  
   taking one's mark  
   judge/witness appointed  
 The Contest takes place:  
   engagement  
   performance  
   reaction of spectators  
   the end of the contest  
   identification of victor  
 Collection of prizes.<sup>44</sup>

As can easily be seen, all four accounts of athletic contests analyzed in the previous sections more or less follow this script. In the case of Virgil, Statius, and Silius, this is not due to oral tradition in their epics, but to the fact that they emulate Homer. However, their dependence on a common literary model does not exclude the possibility that they also rely on a cognitive script when narrating athletic contests. Perhaps one could even say that they are able to modify the Homeric model precisely *because* they presuppose a mental scheme of athletic contest. In their minds and in the minds of their (ancient) recipients there is a fixed chain of events, and this enables them to vary narrative details.

Minchin's "contest script" gives this basic chain of events. I think, however, that more can be found in the epic accounts of sport games. One can discern stock motifs, and from these one can make conclusions about probable expectations, inferences, connotations, and evaluations of ancient recipients:

<sup>43</sup> E. Minchin, *Homer and the Resources of Memory: Some Applications of Cognitive Theory to the Iliad and the Odyssey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> Minchin, *Homer* (see n. 43), 43–44.

(1) *Divine intervention*: Apart from Silius's games in which the gods do not feature, deities play an important role in epic descriptions of athletic games. There are, however, major differences concerning how deities intervene in the contests.

(a) Deities intervene out of favoritism: In Homer's and Statius's chariot races, deities intervene on their own initiative. They favor one of the contestants (or dislike one of them) and therefore they hinder or even harm his rival (or him). This motif is notably absent from Virgil's games.

(b) Deities hear prayers or vows: In Homer, Virgil, and Statius, deities hear prayers or vows and respond to them by supporting those who beg them or by hindering their rivals.

(c) The role of fortune: In Statius, fortune acts like a deity. However, Fortuna's intervention is not due to favoritism but the intention to undermine human aspirations. In Virgil and in Silius, fortune is not represented as a deity with personal traits and intentions. Accidents happen by chance.

(2) *Human effort*: Although the result of the races may depend on divine actions or on chance they are first and foremost athletic contests. Human talents and human efforts play a major role in them.

(a) Effort: All competitors strive for victory, they use their physical abilities and give their best.

(b) Risky maneuvers: During the chariot races, especially when overtaking and when driving narrowly round the turning mark, competitors push others' chariots off the track or even smash others' chariots on purpose.

(c) Cheating: From risky maneuvers, unfair tricks must be differentiated. Making runners stumble or pulling their hair were already considered foul play in antiquity.

(d) Human effort can be combined with prayer for divine help: Ulysses prays *and* makes a final sprint.

(3) *Reactions*: Narrated reactions to the events happening in the athletic contests are of particular interest to us, as they show what behavior the ancients would have considered usual or appropriate in these cases.

(a) Reactions of competitors: The texts show a strong interest in the mental and physical conditions of the contestants. They sweat, gasp, shout, and tense their muscles. Their basic emotion is zeal, which sometimes increases to rage or even frenzy. After the competition they take issue with the result. They grab their prizes or shed tears of anger or disappointment.



Those who believe they have been treated unfairly start arguing, while those who have won prizes do not want to accept another counting. Looking at these debates one can discern some interesting features: One cannot debate divine interventions or fortuitous accidents. If a contestant is hindered or even seriously injured by a deity he can lament but not complain. Attempts to win over a god through prayers and vows are considered legitimate means. It can even be argued that it is a competitor's own fault not to have used this means. On the other hand, it is possible to quarrel about human actions: Risky maneuvers and tricks can be denounced as fraudulent, in particular if they violate social hierarchies. The referee<sup>45</sup> can be criticized for his decisions if he seems to change the rules arbitrarily.

(b) Reactions of the audience: The spectators are by no means impartial but favor "their" athletes ardently, the reasons including ethnicity or kinship, loyalty, fame, and also the beauty and charm of the athletes. In the debates about the ranking, spectators can take sides with one of the contestants. Those who have been affected either by the intervention of a deity, by an accident or by some action of a rival are sometimes pitied by the audience, but sometimes they are met with scornful laughter.

(c) Reactions of referees: If athletes start quarreling the referee must make an appeasing decision. Only exceptionally will the competition be repeated. Often, the referee awards consolation prizes. Sometimes the referee does this on his own initiative, because he feels mercy for an athlete whose rank does not suit his status or who has fallen victim to unfortunate circumstances. A noteworthy exception is the awarding of prizes to those who have lost due to their own fault or even to cheats.

## 6 Reading Rom 9–11 as a Foot Race

With this cognitive script and with this set of possible expectations, inferences, connotations, and evaluations of ancient readers when they heard or read about athletic contests we come now back to Paul's arguments in Rom 9–11.

In this passage of Paul's letter to the Christ-believers in Rome, we find three allusions to foot races. In Rom 9:16, Paul writes: "So it does not depend on him who wills nor on him who runs but on God who shows

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<sup>45</sup> I use the slightly anachronistic word "referee" for the person who organizes the games, presides them, sets up prizes, and decides about the awarding of the prizes. The modern conception of the referee as impartial is neither entirely suitable nor entirely inappropriate.

mercy.” In Rom 9:30–10:4, there is no such clear agonistic metaphor but several words can be understood to refer loosely to a foot race: pursue (διώκειν), reach (φθάνειν), to hit one’s foot on a stone (προσκόπτειν τῷ λίθῳ τοῦ προσκόμματος), zeal (ζήλος), goal (τέλος).<sup>46</sup> In Rom 11:11–12, we again find a dense network of allusions to a race: stumble (πταίνειν), fall (πίπτειν), misstep (παράπτωμα), to make someone zealous (παραζηλοῦν), falling back (ἔττημα).<sup>47</sup>

## 6.1 Possible Perceptions of Ancient Readers

Let us assume that ancient readers perceived these passages as allusions to a foot race<sup>48</sup> so that they activated their culturally determined knowledge about athletic contests. How would they have understood them? We can suppose that something like the following chain of events arose in their minds: Israel – that is, the Judeans – takes part in a foot race. She takes the lead but suddenly she hits her foot on a stone and stumbles. Now something unforeseen happens: gentiles overtake her.<sup>49</sup> Israel does not fall to the ground but recovers again and tries zealously to catch up. In the end, the referee will award prizes.

What kind of reactions or connotations would such a narrative have evoked? With the help of our reconstructed cognitive script of agonistic contests we can identify a space of possible or probable inferences.

*Israel hits her foot on a stone:* This could be an unhappy accident, the consequence of her overconfidence, the intervention of a deity who favors gentiles (or dislikes the Judeans) or the reaction of a deity to the religious behavior of gentiles. Feelings towards the stumbling contestant could vary from pity to scorn.

<sup>46</sup> The debate whether τέλος should be translated “end” or “goal” is endless. One of the most nuanced discussions of this question is F. Avemarie, “Israels rätselhafter Ungehorsam: Römer 10 als Anatomie eines von Gott provozierten Unglaubens,” in *Neues Testament und früh rabbinisches Judentum: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, WUNT 316 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 531–552, at 538–547. If one reads the passage as alluding to a foot race the only possible translation is “goal.”

<sup>47</sup> On the meaning of this rare word, cf. Stowers, *Rereading of Romans* (see n. 1), 313–314; Wolter, *Römer* (see n. 4), 164.

<sup>48</sup> I do not want to say that all ancient readers understood these passages in this way nor that we can conclude with certainty that Paul wanted his readers to understand these passages in this way. Only rarely are texts unequivocal. Usually more than one reading is possible (but not an unlimited number of readings). So, I want to argue that reading these passages as allusions to a foot race is *one* possible and even obvious interpretation.

<sup>49</sup> Rom 9:30 gives the impression that these gentiles do not start running until Israel has stumbled. The other gentiles (i. e., the gentiles who do not believe in Christ) do not even start.

*Gentiles overtake Israel:* As we have seen above this would not have necessarily been understood as an undeserved lead. The gentile readers might see themselves in the role of the audience or in the role of the gentile runners. In either case they could be inclined to favor the gentile runners in the narrative. Therefore, they might be ambivalent towards Israel's zeal to catch up: On the one hand, they would consider this a comprehensible reaction. What else should the runner who has fallen behind do? On the other hand, they might fear that Israel's catching up would result in the gentile runners losing the race.

*The referee will award prizes:* In Rom 11:12, the outcome of the race is still open. Only in Rom 11:25–36 does Paul give a tentative answer to the question of how the divine referee will end the competition (though there he no longer uses the metaphor of an agonistic contest). So, having read until Rom 11:12 ancient readers might have wondered about the results. Would the order of prizes stay fixed? Could it happen that the referee took the status of the contestants into consideration and therefore changed this order? (From previous passages of the letter, for example Rom 3:1–4; 9:4–5, they knew that the status of the Judeans was higher than that of the gentiles.) Would there be a dispute about the prizes? Would the referee award consolation prizes?

## 6.2 Paul's Line of Reasoning

Keeping this range of possible thoughts of ancient readers in mind and coming back to Paul's arguments in Rom 9–11, I think we can see that Paul takes up these possibilities, strives to rule some of them out, and tries to direct his readers' thoughts in a certain direction.

With Rom 9:16 Paul sets the tone for what follows.<sup>50</sup> This first<sup>51</sup> allusion to a foot race is brief but remarkable: The outcome will depend *only* on the referee's (i. e., God's) decision. This divine referee decides out of mercy.<sup>52</sup> At this point it is far from clear what this will actually mean for the runners. If one reads the immediate context of this sentence one might get the

<sup>50</sup> The effect is similar to Aeneas's announcement at the beginning of the foot race (Virgil, *Aen.* 5.305). It sets the tone for the following account but it is not yet clear what will happen.

<sup>51</sup> On the primacy effect, cf. S. Finner and J. Rüggeheimer, *Methoden der neutestamentlichen Exegese: Ein Lehr- und Arbeitsbuch* (Tübingen: Francke, 2016), 160–161.

<sup>52</sup> For mercy as major theme in Rom 9–11, cf. L. Ryliškyté, "God's Mercy: The Key Thematic Undercurrent of Paul's Letter to the Romans," *CBQ* 81 (2019), 85–105, at 90–98.

impression that Paul is defending divine arbitrariness.<sup>53</sup> His assertion that there is no injustice with God (9:14) does not really fit his own preceding statements about God's election. Only in Rom 11:32, near the end of Paul's argumentation, can readers understand what he intended to say in Rom 9:16.

Secondly, Israel's stumbling is not bad luck. God has put the "stumbling stone" into her way.<sup>54</sup> However, divine intervention, despite being irresistible, does not preclude human efforts. What modern interpreters have often considered as inconsistency in Rom 9–11<sup>55</sup> looks rather "normal" when read in the light of the culturally determined expectations of ancient people. Israel competes with zeal but not with understanding (10:2).<sup>56</sup> So it is a consequence of her lack of understanding that she misses the goal, and, at the same time, this is divinely predestined.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, it is absolutely undeserved that gentiles have the opportunity to overtake, but this is not to say that they should not run with all their strength.

Now, if God has put the stumbling stone into Israel's way what were the motives? Paul seems to reaffirm his readers' assumption that God did this for the benefit of gentiles. At the same time, however, he wants to rule out the rather obvious conclusion that this is a case of favoritism. God neither hates Israel and therefore harms her nor does God favor gentiles by hindering their rival in the race. Hence, Israel's zeal to catch up is not a threat to the gentiles who have taken the lead. Paul's reasoning strains the metaphor of a race: Israel's falling back has benefitted gentiles, *therefore* her catching up will be an even greater advantage for them (11:12, 15).

Concerning the referee's decision about awarding prizes after the race, Paul confirms what one may have assumed after having read the previous chapters of his letter: The referee will indeed take into consideration the

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53 The example of Aias shows that ancient readers might infer that a deity hates someone because of the bad things this person will do in the future (a connection between divine election and prescience which became prominent in later Christian theology). Perhaps the reason for Paul's harsh statements in Rom 9:11–12 is that he wants to rule out this idea.

54 Cf. Avemarie, "Ungehorsam" (see n. 46).

55 Cf., e.g., H. Räisänen, "Torn between Two Loyalties: Romans 9–11 and Paul's Conflicting Convictions," in *The Nordic Paul: Finnish Approaches to Pauline Theology*, ed. L. Aejmelaeus and A. Mustakallio, LNTS 374 (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 19–39; M. Wolter, "Das Israelproblem nach Gal 4,21–31 und Röm 9–11," *ZTK* 107 (2010), 1–30.

56 Cf. Silius, *Punica* 16.333–345, where Cyrrnus has a big lead right at the start of the chariot race. The crowd of spectators cheers at him but those with more experience and expertise know that he will exhaust his horses and lose the race.

57 Avemarie, "Ungehorsam" (see n. 46), 534–538, points out that Paul does *not* use words like "fault," "trespass" or "sin" in Rom 10.

status of the contestants, meaning Israel will certainly win a prize (11:26). Paul struggles to convince his readers that this is not a case of disappointing, frustrating or even annoying favoritism. Israel's status as a winner of the race is tightly bound to God's promises and, hence, to God's credibility.<sup>58</sup> If it were not impossible for God's merciful election to be regretted and changed (11:29) all attempts to have πίστις in God – that is, to trust in God and to be faithful and loyal to God – would be in vain.<sup>59</sup> So Paul points out there is no need for quarreling about prizes.<sup>60</sup> They are given out of mercy, and in this sense they are all consolation prizes (11:32).

From this follows a last point, which seems to be particularly important for Paul: There is no room for scorn or contempt in this contest (11:17–20). All competitors must do their best and the race takes place in a spirit of agonistic zeal. Nevertheless, all prizes are undeserved. Neither is taking the lead a reason for boasting nor stumbling and falling back a reason for scornful laughter.<sup>61</sup>

## 7 Towards a “Theology of Athletic Contests”

Accounts of athletic contests in ancient epic are not just a kind of pre-modern sports report. They have political, ethical, and philosophical overtones. Besides, they deal with questions that can be called theological.<sup>62</sup> In the following, I want to try and (re)construct this “theology of athletic

58 Cf. J. Kaminsky and M. Reasoner, “The Meaning and Telos of Israel's Election: An Interfaith Response to N.T. Wright's Reading of Paul,” *HTR* 112 (2019), 421–446.

59 Cf. T. Nicklas, “Paulus und die Errettung Israels: Röm 11,25–36 in der exegetischen Diskussion und im jüdisch-christlichen Dialog,” *EC* 2 (2011), 173–197, at 188.

60 J. Leonhard-Balzer, “Israel and the Community in Paul (Rom 9–11) and the Rule Text from Qumran,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Pauline Literature*, ed. J.-S. Rey, STDJ 102 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 277–294, at 290–291.

61 So, Stowers, *Rereading of Romans* (see n. 1), 315, is not entirely right when he states that “Pride is properly due to the winner of a contest! [...] As in the case of Odysseus, the winning runner did not win by his own strength.” Ulysses wins the race by his own strength with the help of a deity, and ancient readers would not have automatically concluded that this prevented pride for the winner or scorn for the loser.

62 One might object that “theology” is a Christian concept and that therefore it is anachronistic to use it in this context. I am well aware that one should be cautious against Christianizing readings. Nevertheless, it is an ancient “emic” parlance to call poets' stories about deities *theologia fabularis* (cf. Varro, *Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum*, frag. 7 [B. Cardauns (ed.), *M. Terentius Varro: Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum* (Wiesbaden: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, 1976)] *apud* Augustine, *Civ.* 6.5). Hence I consider it appropriate to analyze epic texts regarding to their ideas about divine beings, although this is not exactly the same as that to which the modern usage of “theology” refers (but not something totally different, either).

contests,” or rather these various “theologies of athletic contests” and to investigate Paul’s place within their range.

The basic idea of sports contests is that human efforts have an appropriate effect: The one who runs faster will win.<sup>63</sup> This idea makes sports competitions an apt metaphor for life in general, since it is a fundamental expectation of humans that there be an adequate relationship between effort and result. Nevertheless, it is a common experience in life as well as in contests that there can be a mismatch. Some contingent event prevents the greatest effort from leading to the deserved result. This discrepancy needs an explanation. In a “polytheistic” system the intervention of deities is an apt and fairly obvious explanation. In Homer and Statius, for example, the dropping of a whip, the breaking of a yoke or the shying of a horse are attributed to a deity’s interference. This interference is motivated by human-like emotions: favor or dislike. Since deities are thought to act from similar motives to humans, it is a rather logical conclusion that one could try and win them over to one’s own case. This is the rationale behind prayers and vows. In this system contingency management consists not only in coping with the fact that some event has disrupted the “normal” relationship between effort and result but also in trying to cause such an event. Such an attempt to deal with deities is not an alternative but a complement to human effort and it is clearly distinguished from attempts to manipulate the relationship between effort and effect by purely human means (e.g., by making someone stumble or pulling someone’s hair). Whereas in the latter case the normal reaction is protest, in the former case the intervention is irresistible and the outcome is not debatable. Those affected can react with lament, others can react with either pity or scorn.

This kind of theologizing is not without alternatives: Silius does not use divine intervention as explanation for the events during his games. He moralizes his account. Apparent discrepancies between effort and effect are explained by a lack of virtues in those involved (they are too confident, they are inexperienced) or they are explained by human intervention (someone being so zealous as to pull back their rival). Statius complements the Homeric line of thought with another: contingent events are due to fortune. Fortune, despite being a deity, is unlike “normal” deities in that her only motive is to frustrate human aspirations. In contrast to other deities, she

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63 Brändl’s claim (*Agon bei Paulus* [see n. 5], 287) that the idea was widespread that not the velocity of the runner but the favor of a deity gave victory in a race is not correct. All accounts of athletic contests in epic literature see it as the ordinary run of things that human effort is decisive *and* they deal with unexpected, divinely caused disturbances of this order.

cannot be influenced. Fortune becomes almost a synonym for sheer coincidence. A different kind of reasoning can be found in Virgil: He picks up the motif of invoking the gods for help and winning them over by means of a vow, but this idea is not very prominent in his games. Divine favoritism, as already stated, is absent. When human efforts do not have appropriate results the reason is either chance (Nisus slips on blood), human fault (Sergestus damages his ship) or human trickery (Nisus makes Salius stumble). Divine beings enter the story at another point: The semi-divine hero Aeneas, who is equipped with traits of the most high god, has the task of guaranteeing all contestants a good result despite chance, guilt, and cheating. He shows mercy and compassion, he consoles, and he smiles. When Virgil describes the “real” myth-historical world he combines the Homeric model of divine favoritism with the idea that Jupiter is the impartial guarantor for destiny finding its way to the end of history. This combination leads to massive tensions: Pious people suffer, unfortunate people become victims, achieving the end of history requires huge sacrifices,<sup>64</sup> and the world is full of tears. In contrast, the games are a hilarious, playful, almost utopian world in which divine mercy makes all well.

When we now come back to Paul we can first of all note that he shares some basic convictions with the authors of the four epics that we have taken into consideration. For him, too, human effort should normally have a suitable result. Also, he observes that this is not always the case but that unexpected events occur. Israel does not respond to Paul’s gospel in the way he would consider appropriate.<sup>65</sup> In Paul’s monotheistic reasoning some of

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64 I will not deny that Virgil’s epic justifies these sacrifices. In this respect it is indeed a piece of propagandistic literature. But this is only one side of the coin. Cf. E.A. Schmidt, “Vergils Aeneis als augusteische Dichtung,” in *Von Göttern und Menschen erzählen: Formkonstanzen und Funktionswandel vormoderner Epik*, ed. J. Rüpke, Potsdamer altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 4 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2001), 65–92, at 85–87; J. Griffin, “Augustan Poetry and Augustanism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus*, ed. K. Galinsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 306–320; R. Tarrant, “Poetry and Power: Virgil’s Poetry in Contemporary Context,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. F. Mac Góráin, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 243–262.

65 I want to leave open, what this “appropriate reaction” of Judeans would look like. I agree with many recent interpreters of Paul that he does not expect it to be the same as the reaction of gentiles. Their appropriate reaction is turning away from their cults, trusting in and being faithful to God and Christ, living a life in God’s spirit, and not taking over Judean habits. I think it is a consensus in contemporary Pauline scholarship that at least the first and the last point cannot apply for Judeans. For various positions in the current debate, cf., e.g., T.L. Donaldson, “Jewish Christianity, Israel’s Stumbling and the *Sonderweg* Reading of Paul,” *JSNT* 29 (2006), 27–54; M. Wolter, “Ein exegetischer und theologischer Blick auf Röm 11.25–32,” *NTS* 64 (2018), 123–142.

the abovementioned explanations for such contingent events and some of the ways in which they can be dealt with are impossible. For him nothing happens by chance. It is inconceivable that Israel's rejection of the gospel should have no reason (or social, political or cultural reasons which were beyond Paul's horizon anyway). Likewise, the idea of divine favoritism is not an option for Paul. In Rom 9:6–23, Paul makes statements that resemble the reasoning about divine favoritism in some of our epic texts: God loves *or hates*, elects *or rejects*. However, as the argument progresses, he leaves *this* idea of election behind.<sup>66</sup> When God acts in favor of gentiles and makes Israel stumble this is not favoritism for gentiles. When God saves all Israel this is not favoritism for Israel. Not only is the Homeric world of rather capricious deities unthinkable for Paul but also any kind of ethnocentrism. God is the God of the Judeans *and therefore* God is also the God of gentiles *because* (as Israel confesses) God is one (Rom 3:29–30). Paul thus comes to a point where the logic of a race metaphor is inevitably strained: Whatever happens and whomever God hinders or supports it must be for the greater good of all.

Of all the epic texts we have analyzed, Virgil's games come closest to this line of reasoning. In both cases the main task of the merciful deity (i. e., Aeneas or the Judean God) is to guarantee that the end of history is achieved: The order of prizes remains fixed, fate is fulfilled, God's promises are unregrettable. For Virgil this is but a game, a counter-world. In the real world, things happen by chance or due to the wrath of divine beings. Even when one has reached the end of history and looks back (and Virgil did believe that he stood at the end of history in a Roman Empire under the benign rule of Augustus), one sees the obviously senseless suffering of innocent victims. Only in the playful world of games no one goes without a prize. This is not the way Paul thinks. For him God's grace has begun to be realized in this world.

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66 Cf. Kaminsky and Reasoner, "Israel's Election" (see n. 58), 439.