

DID PAUL THE APOSTLE CALL CHRISTIANS TO USE VIOLENCE? A THEOLOGICAL MEANING OF AGŌN IN PAULINE EPISTLES

Anna RAMBIERT-KWAŚNIEWSKA
anna.rambiert@gmail.com

Pontifical Faculty of Theology in Wrocław, Poland

ABSTRACT

Violence in biblical context in most cases recalls immediate reference to the Old Testament. However, also in the New Testament many passages can be found, that could be considered as describing violence. Among them, there is also an *agōn* motif present in Paul's language. Metaphors referring to Greek athletics are marked with cruelty. Analyzing one of them, that can be considered as most complex – the image of events taking place on the stadium from 1 Cor 9.24-27 – an observation can be made, that it contains many allusions to boxing, asceticism and even concept of exclusivity concerning victorious athletes: all these hints bring to the text violence. Could it be, that the intention of St. Paul was to frighten the young community in Corinth? This question will not find right answer without deep understanding of biblical metaphors and, what is even more important, understanding a reality in which they were born. In first case, we can recognize as useful Max Black's interaction theory of metaphor, in the second we are obliged to understand properly the historical and social context – especially if we are aware of presence, in 1st century AD, of cyclic festival organized every two years in Isthmian Sanctuary, only 3 km away from Corinth.

KEYWORDS

agonistic metaphor, ancient athletics, Pauline Epistles, asceticism, *agōn*.

1. Theory in practice

Metaphor is definitely one of the most important parts of spoken and written language, it is a specific code of local or even transcultural range. The most classical theory is the Aristotelian one. Aristotle concluded that metaphor serves to name objects¹ and to persuade, thus it performs a dual function, i.e. poetic and rhetorical². From this metaphorical juxtaposition of objects, according to the Classics (Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian), there arises no new semantic quality. The semantic scope is limited by the semantic fields of separate components of metaphor. And such an approach contradicts every semantic theory of metaphor because this kind of theory favours the new semantic quality that arose from the interaction of individual terms. Such a theory takes up the changes that arose from the juxtaposition of several, seemingly contradictory words, which through their interaction create a metaphorical sense. One of the fathers of contemporary research on metaphor, Max Black, claimed that a literal reading of a metaphorical statement asks to recognise that something is something which, thinking

¹ P. Ricoeur, *Język, tekst, interpretacja*, trans. by P. Graff – K. Rosner, Warszawa, 1989, 127-128.

² P. Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, London/ New York, 2003, 12.

in common sense, cannot be, therefore the author of such a statement is a liar. Indeed, metaphor, if we read it literally, is based on untruth and nonsense³. Hence the statement that a literary reading of metaphor is as ridiculous as its literal sense⁴.

Before we proceed to the proper analysis, we should take a step towards finding out more about the method. I decided to use Max Black's not so young "interaction theory of metaphor", known as the "interaction view", which he presented in his famous text titled "Metaphor", and developed, after the critical remarks of, inter alia, Paul Ricoeur, in his next article titled "More About Metaphor". Black established two realities, which seemingly had nothing in common, and which created the metaphor. The first one is the primary subject [principal subject], the second one is the secondary subject [subsidiary subject]⁵. The significance that arises from their interaction is not the fruit of profound reflection on their nature but rather a result of associated implications (commonplace associations) about each of them. What is "commonplace" for us will be a key to the significance of, on first sight, brutal agonistic metaphors in the Letters of St Paul. To accomplish our research goal we are obliged to find similar images in the writings of other ancient authors, and if it is possible then those living close enough in time to the life of Paul the Apostle.

The last step preceding our research is to classify our text as a metaphor by establishing what it means that a "predicate is rather metaphorical than literal"⁶? Max Black once more gives us a key in order to identify a statement as a metaphor. We are dealing with metaphor when a metaphorical reading is more accurate than a literal one.

It is not a precise criterion, but we do not have a better diagnostic key for metaphors. How do we apply this rule in our study? The answer is very simple. If we had to deal with the literal statement then the examined texts would be a set of ancient truisms. In that case, towards such an approach, and being aware of the deeper theological purpose, we can assume that the images we have studied are metaphors of a strong parenetic charge.

I would like to make one more remark. My paper concerns only a few terms from the most spectacular agonistic image in the Pauline Letters, from 1 Cor 9.24-27, which contains a dose of brutality and shows how brutal sports were in the ancient Greco-Roman world. We concentrate on examining the following terms: ὑπωπιάζω, ἐγκρατεύομαι, δουλαγωγῶ/ and πικτεύω. It is important to state that our passage from *The First Corinthians* is widely considered as a reference to the Isthmian Games from 51 a.C., games that Paul may have witnessed⁷.

The whole passage is as follows:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into **strict training**. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man **beating** the air. No, **I beat my body** and **make it my slave** so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

³ M. Black, "More about Metaphor", in A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge, 1993, 21.

⁴ A. Rambiert, "Metaforyczny trójgłos. Rzecz o żołnierzu, zapaśniku i rolniku w 2 Tm 2,4-6", *Scriptura Sacra* 17, 2013, 33-34.

⁵ M. Black, "Metaphor", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 55, 1954-1955, 286-287.

⁶ M. C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, New York, 1958, 161.

⁷ O. Broneer, "The Apostle Paul and The Isthmian Games", *Biblical Archaeologist* 25.1, 1962, 16; J. Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Text and Archeology*, Minnesota, 2002, 15.

2. Some aggressive words

In view of extracting the proper meaning of the metaphorical terms examined here, we have to recognise that almost all of the sports metaphors refer to apostleship, either the Pauline or of some other leaders of the Church. Paul the Apostle wrote that he is like “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training” (1 Cor 9.25). The expression “is temperate in all things” is a descriptive translation of the Greek term ἐγκράτεια⁸. What does ἐγκράτεια mean and why can we see in it an act of violence? This term is inseparably linked with the reality of sports, although it is explained simply by “exercising self-control” and it has, first of all, a moralistic character. That is why it is associated with widely understood asceticism. In sports it meant long hours of exercise and dieting properly (in this context see: Ath 6.44.15; 7.30.2; 14.74.32 etc.)⁹. Garrison thinks that “in 1 Corinthians 9:25 self-control is closely related to *autokrateia*, the ability to adapt to all circumstances (cf. Phil. 4.11-13, 1 Tim. 6.6)”. It means that child of God is more than a victor, because “it is able to endure all conditions (Rom. 8.35-37)”¹⁰. In Garrison’s opinion “self-control” doesn’t imply more cruelty than verb ἄσκέω¹¹, and in the *First Corinthians* context it can be interpreted as an ascetical “commandment” against sexual violence (cf. 1 Kor 7.9; Gal 5.23)¹². In the times of Paul, also Philo was using this term in an allegorical manner, giving practical recommendations to the sages about how to treat the belly and its whims: “but philosophy teaches temperance with regard to the belly, and temperance with regard to the parts below the belly, and also temperance and restraint of the tongue (Philo *Cong. Erud.* 80)¹³.”

Next is a picture of a boxer who πυκτεύει, “strikes”, the invisible enemy. The verb πυκτεύω unambiguously alludes to the reality of sports. We can find many such pieces of evidence in Greek literature (Diog. Laer. 2.37.5: “νῆ Δί,” εἶπεν, “ἴν’ ἡμῶν πυκτευόντων ἕκαστος ὑμῶν λέγη, εὖ Σώκρατες, εὖ Ξανθίππη;”; Artem. *Oneir. Πυκτεύειν* παντὶ βλαβερόν· πρὸς γὰρ ταῖς αἰσχύναις καὶ βλάβας σημαίνει· καὶ γὰρ ἄσχημον γίνεται τὸ πρόσωπον καὶ αἷμα ἀποκρίνεται; Lucian *Salt.* 71.5; etc.). Highly accurate for our goal is a short mention about boxing in the work of Philostratus *De Gymnastica*:

9.1. The Spartans invented boxing

9.9. with the passage of time they discarded boxing and

9.10 the pankration with it, thinking it shameful to compete in sports where if one Spartan admitted defeat, the whole country might be accused of being cowards.¹⁴

⁸ Cf. V. C. Pfitzner, *Paul and The Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imaginary in the Pauline Literature*, Leiden, 1967, 87; H. M. Gale, *The Use of Analogy in the Letters of Paul*, Philadelphia, 1964, 109.

⁹ P. F. Esler argues that ἐγκράτεια is nothing more, than one month period of preparation for all the athletes before Olympic Games: cf. P. F. Esler, “Paul and the Agon: Understanding a Pauline Motif in Its Cultural and Visual Context”, in P. von Gemünden – A. Weissenrieder (ed.), *Picturing The New Testament. Studies in Ancient Visual Images*, Tübingen, 2005, 376-378.

¹⁰ R. Garrison, “Paul’s use of the Athlete Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 9”, *Studies in Religion* 22, 1993, 212.

¹¹ Cf. J. Marsaux, *Praktyka sportowa a życie duchowe*, trans. by L. Balter, *Communio* 26, 2006, 41-42.

¹² R. F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, Collegeville, 1999, 361.

¹³ All translations of Philo, see C. D. Yonge (ed.), *The Works of Philo*, Peabody, 1993.

¹⁴ W. E. Sweet, *Sport and Recreation in Ancient Greece. A Sourcebook with Translations*, New York, 1987, 216.

Boxing was probably the most cruel among the ancient sports. Before the fight, competitors wrapped leather thongs around their fists and fastened so-called “ants” – small pebbles – to hurt the opponent’s body. Boxers were recognised (particularly at the beginning of their career) on account of facial deformations and the number of scars on their bodies¹⁵.

Furthermore, one can find in the Pauline Epistles a very interesting verb, ὑπωπιάζω, which is usually translated quite euphemistically in modern languages as “I keep under my body”, while the literal meaning is “to strike one under the eye, give him a black eye”. More frequently we note the literal meaning of the term in Greek literature than the sententious one, starting from Aristotle (Arist. [Pr.] 890a.24: λέγω δὲ οἶον ἐπεὶ τὰ ὑπόπια καὶ ὁ χαλκὸς ἐξαίρει καὶ ἡ ῥαφανὶς καὶ [...]; Rh. 1413a.22-24: ὑπερβολαὶ μεταφοραὶ, οἶον εἰς ὑπωπιασμένον “ώήθητε δ’ ἂν αὐτὸν εἶναι συκαμίνων κάλαθον”), through the comic writers (Ar. Pax 541; Vesp. 1386), the Bible (Prov. 20.30: ὑπόπια καὶ συντριμματα συναντᾷ κακοῖς, πληγαὶ δὲ εἰς ταμίεια κοιλίας.), Athenaios (Ath. 10.23: τοιοῦτόν ἐστιν καὶ τὸ ἐν Εἰρήνῃ Ἀριστοφάνους ὑπωπιασμένοι <ἀπαξάπασαι καὶ κυάθους προσκείμεναι>), Diogenes Laertios (Diog. Laer. 6.89.12: Νικόδρομον ἐξερεθίσας τὸν κιθαρωδὸν ὑπωπιάσθη; 2.136.5 ἐν δὲ ταῖς ζητήσεσι, φησὶν, ὧδε μάχimos ἦν ὥσθ’ ὑπόπια φέρων ἀπήει) and up to Philostratus “the Athenian”. In a work of the latter, called *Imagines*, we read:

And as to the wrestling? Those who engage in the pancratium, my boy, employ a wrestling that is hazardous; for they must needs meet blows on the face that are not safe for the wrestler, and must clinch in struggles that one can only win by pretending to fall, and they need skill that they may choke an adversary in different ways at different times [...].

Trans. by A. Fairbanks (Philostr. *Imag.* 2.6.3)

Although the verb ὑπωπιάζω means only “to bruise”, some scholars (e.g. M. F. Baslez¹⁶) see in this word a specialised concept, i.e. a specific variant of boxing, thus all the more we have to understand the Pauline vision in the spirit of sports. Therefore, if we want to translate the Pauline text properly, according to the ἱεροὶ ἀγῶνες vision, we should write “I strike my body under the eye”. Subsequently, Paul intensifies the picture by writing about his own body – “and make it my slave” – δουλαγωγῶ ([Longinus] *Rhet.* 44.6.8: καὶ ἡ φιληδονία δουλαγωγοῦσι; Epict. *Diatr.* 3.24.76: τί λέγεις πρὸς τοῦτον τὸν δουλαγωγοῦντά σε; 4.7.17: οὐκέτι οὐδεὶς δουλαγωγῆσαι με δύναται etc.). Is this not similar to a description of taking away someone’s freedom? First the person is beaten and then enslaved.

I would like to clarify one more phrase which is difficult to interpret. Paul mentions that each of the competitions can be won only by one of the participants (εἷς δὲ λαμβάνει τὸ βραβεῖον). Is this not also an important symptom of cruelty? Many scholars, including Sir Moses I. Finley and Henri Willy Pleket, confirm this, saying that it was better to die during the games than to return to one’s hometown without the crown¹⁷. Defeat overshadowed the whole life of the athlete, his family and the πόλις. Philip Esler, in his article, mentioned two anthropological conceptions: *honour-shame* and *challenge-and-response*, which proclaim that: “[...] winning an event against comers from all over Greece in games organized by a city-state would lead to a greatly

¹⁵ *Ant. Pal.* 11.75; Cf. D. Słapek, *Sport i widowiska w świecie antycznym*, Kraków 2010, 757-759.

¹⁶ M. F. Baslez, *Antyczne chrześcijaństwo wobec kultury sportowej świata grecko-rzymskiego*, trans. by L. Balter, *Communio* 26, 2006, 6.

¹⁷ M. I. Finley – H. W. Pleket, *The Olympic Games*, London, 1976, 124.

enhanced reputation, a rise in the level of the victor's honour. This enhanced honour would be shared by the city-state of the champion and by his family. At the same time [...] the losers would be left desolate"¹⁸. I will thus try to unravel the meaning of this apostolic act of violence.

Since all of the concepts presented here express some kind of violence, particularly against one's own body, did Paul call Christians to practise such acts? From the very beginning we adopt the metaphorical nature of the statements as an axiom – because if we took it literally we should recognise in Paul a highly skilled athlete who took part in a race, was engaged in boxing and wrestling. What is more, he was fighting not for the corruptible crown but for the incorruptible award – is this about glory then?

Such a reduction of the passage to absurdity allows us to state that we are dealing with a metaphor. None of the available historical sources certify Paul's athletic specialisation; on the contrary, tradition proves that the Apostle was of a frail physique and of poor health. The metaphorical nature of the statement also points to the rhetorical question οὐκ οἴδατε¹⁹, suggesting that we are dealing with a form of didactic speech in the shape of a diatribe. If we are already sure as to the nature of the statement, let us try to find its correct meaning.

3. Primary and secondary subjects and associated implications

We stated before that the main subject of metaphorisation is the Pauline apostleship. We can attempt to present our point in a simplified form:

- 1) the Apostle is a wrestler practising temperance in all things.
- 2) the Apostle is a boxer who does not beat the air.
- 3) the Apostle is a person blacking the eye of his own body.
- 4) the Apostle is the one bringing the body into subjection.

In each expression we are dealing with violence. We need to examine what kind of new quality is brought about by these expressions to the description of the Pauline apostleship. We have already said that a wrestler practises temperance in his diet or in intense physical training. The Apostle also practises temperance – not corporeal, but spiritual temperance. He wishes “to get a crown that will not last” (1 Cor 9.25)²⁰. This apostolic temperance is composed of fasting, spiritual training and various inconveniences, including imprisonment and much more, as the Apostle states in 2 Cor 11.26: “have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers” etc. The boxer is wounded and cut, his effectiveness depends on the precision of his punches, therefore on his ability to locate blind-spots on his opponent's body. The same efficiency has to characterise the Apostle as well. He has to be aware of the existence of

¹⁸ P. F. Esler, loc. cit., 364.

¹⁹ J. S. Sibinga, “The Composition of 1 Cor. 9 and Its Context”, *Novum Testamentum* 40, 1998, 147; according to Abraham J. Malherbe diatribe is a “popular philosophical treatment of an ethical topic [which] has the practical aim of moving people to action rather than reflection”; S. C. Martin, *Pauli Testamentum: 2 Timothy and the Last Words of Moses*, Roma, 1997, 40-41.

²⁰ “The ‘imperishable crown’ of 1 Corinthians 9.26 is not a temporal reward: ‘*aphtharsia* is a strictly future blessing of salvation which is understood in exclusively eschatological terms’”. R. Garrison, loc. cit., 216.

his opponent, he has to punch him accurately, i.e. to cultivate an effective persuasion and apology and to introduce both. He has to locate the opponent's blind-spots – whether this is a spiritual opponent such as Satan (cf. 1 Thess. 2.18) or false teachers (cf. Gal. 2.4-5; 5.7-9).

Paul sees the enemy in his own body, so he punches and leaves a permanent mark. This is not about asceticism consisting of self-flagellation. The black eye is a sign of the spectacular victory over a body's desires. It is not so much a physical mark as a spiritual one.

Let us mention now about the one who “gets the prize” from v. 24, i.e. about the one who receives the eternal life, if we deprive our statement of its metaphorical sense. Can this really mean that heaven within the meaning Paul proposes is allowed only to a narrow group of fundamentalists? I am not sure about this. If we compare this declaration with other passages from the Pauline Epistles, e.g. the passage from 1 Cor 12.15-16, where we are dealing with a corporal metaphor, we can argue that in the author's mind this “one” has a collective²¹ meaning and it represents the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, which “is a unit, though it is made up of many parts” (v. 12).

Finally, we have to consider what it means exactly that the competitor “beats his body and makes it his slave”²². It means that he is able to control it, to stand all the hits, not to give in to their power and to continue the fight. As we know, in every kind of athletic competition not only is one's physical condition important but also one's mental condition, which empowers one to control the desire to surrender at the beginning of the struggle. The Apostle, when seeing an enemy in the corporal, desires to fight with that enemy, to control his own body, as he is aware of its fragility and weakness²³.

4. Conclusion

These juxtapositions and interpretations exclude of course physical violence in the literal meaning. It is more about ἐγκράτεια, or self-control. This kind of violence is not a figment of Christianity because many among the eminent thinkers before Paul the Apostle chose this kind of existence, which was to minimise one's physical needs and desires. It was an utterly laudable way of achieving perfection. Let us only recall the attitude of ἐγκράτεια, following Diogenes Laertios about Zeno of Kitium, a stoic: “This man adopts a new philosophy. He teaches to go hungry: yet he gets disciples. One sole loaf of bread his food; His best dessert dried figs; water his drink (Diog. Laert. 7.27.9-10)”.

Enkrateia in the biblical and more allegorical sense may also represent the way to fight the serpent, which is the symbol of desires (Philo, *Op. Mun.* 164): “For the serpent fighter appears to me to be no other than temperance expressed under a symbolical figure, waging an intemperance and pleasure” (trans. by C. D. Yonge). Similar behaviours, but motivated by ideas other than stoicism and perhaps more spiritual than physical ones, are also suggested by Paul the Apostle, and the same, let us say lifestyle, continues in Christian theology.

²¹ S. A. Son, *Corporate Elements in Pauline Anthropology: A Study of Selected Terms, Idioms, and Concepts in the Light of Paul's Usage and Background*, Roma, 2001, 123.

²² Cf. 1 Cor 9.27.

²³ M. Rosik, *Pierwszy List do Koryntian*, Częstochowa, 2007, 307; A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians. A commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids 2000, 716.

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