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“... STRIVING FOR THE PRIZE”: THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE  
OF ATHLETIC LANGUAGE IN PHILIPPIANS 3:12-16

INTRODUCTION

The oldest written texts which we have in the Christian canon are from the apostle Paul. In his letters to communities of Christ followers in Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth, Galatia and Rome in the middle of the first century Paul proclaims the gospel in the context of very concrete, everyday situations and problems. In writing his letters, therefore, Paul not only uses the language of his Bible, but also everyday language from the spheres of the law court, banking, trading, family and kin, traveling and not the least from the sphere of athletics. When Paul uses language from many spheres of life, it is clear that he does not want it to be understood literally.

This study will deal with Phil 3:12-16 and the possibility of athletic language there. Our main question will be what the identification of athletic language contributes to the understanding of the text<sup>1</sup>. We shall begin with an analysis of the immediate context of Phil 3:12-16. In a second section we shall offer a brief exegesis of Phil 3:12-16. In the third and last section we shall focus on the athletic images in this text.

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<sup>1</sup> V.C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature* (NovTSupp, 16), Leiden: Brill 1967, p. 141: “what thought or point does the Apostle wish to illustrate by its use?”.

## 1. THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF PHIL 3:12-16

Philippians 3:12-16 belongs to a subunit which covers most or all of chapter 3. The precise delimitation is disputed. Many consider 3:1<sup>2</sup> (or 3:1a<sup>3</sup>) to be the conclusion of the previous subunit based on their understanding of τὸ λοιπὸν as “in conclusion” and of χαίρετε as “farewell.” Many of these scholars see 3:2-4:1 (or 4:9) as a fragment of an originally separate letter<sup>4</sup>. We go along with those scholars who see 3:1 as making the transition to a new section on the basis of interpreting τὸ λοιπὸν as introducing a final section and of χαίρετε as meaning “rejoice.”<sup>5</sup> The delimitation in 4:1 is motivated by the fact that 4:2-3 contains specific exhortations. Moreover 4:1 can be understood as forming an inclusion with 3:1 due to the presence of ἀδελφοί μου in 3:1 and 4:1 and to the fact that in both verses Paul speaks about the strengthening of the Philippians. In light of all this we are more inclined to see 3:1-4:1 as an integral part of the original letter<sup>6</sup>.

In Phil 3:1-4:1 we propose a concentric structure with the A and A' sections in 3:1-11 and 3:17-4:1 focused on Paul's polemics against the opponents. In 3:2 and 3:18-19 Paul hurls explicit polemic remarks against people whom he calls “dogs” and “enemies of the cross” respectively. The central section 3:12-16<sup>7</sup> is focused on Paul's striving for the goal, “the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14 NRSV) and the acknowledgement that he has not yet reached it.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., U.B. Müller, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Philipper*, THK, 11/1, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 1993, p. 136 and M. Bockmuehl, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, BNTC, London: Continuum 1997.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., G. Friedrich, *Der Brief an die Philipper*, NTD, 8, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 1976<sup>14</sup>, p. 126 and J. Gnilka, *Philippenerbrief*, HTKNT, 10/3, Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder Verlag 1968, p. 7, 165, 185.

<sup>4</sup> Note that U.B. Müller, *Philipper*, p. 136 defends the subdivision 3:2-4:1, but still considers the letter as a literary unity (p. 13).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., G.F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary, 43, Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson 1983, p. 123-124; P.T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 1991, p. 345 and B.B. Thurston, J.M. Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon*, SP, 10, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press 2005, p. 111-112. See also E. Lohmeyer, *Die Briefe an die Philipper, an die Kolosser und an Philemon*, KEK, 9, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1964<sup>13</sup>, p. 123 („Überleitung”).

<sup>6</sup> For a recent discussion of the integrity of Philippians and the central role of chapter 3 in that discussion see A. Standhartinger, ‘Join in imitating me’ (*Philippians 3.17*): Towards an Interpretation of *Philippians 3*, NTS 54 (2008), p. 417-436. See also J.T. Reed, *Philippians 3:1 and the Epistolary Hesitation Formulas: The Literary Integrity of Philippians, Again*, JBL 115 (1996), p. 63-90.

<sup>7</sup> While, as we saw, the beginning and end of the entire section are disputed, there is general consensus on the delimitation of 3:12-16.

A 3:1-11: Paul vs. opponents (“dogs”): Paul as an example: his goal to gain Christ

B 3:12-16: Paul’s striving for the goal (the prize): emphasis on the “not yet”

A’ 3:17-4:1: Paul vs. opponents (“enemies of the cross”)

Paul’s hope: the transformation of our bodies

Paul’s appeal to the addressees

While some polemical aspects are undeniable in 3:1-4:1, it would not be correct to reduce its content to polemics against the opponents. The polemical sections are the occasion of something else that Paul intends to say. The section begins in 3:1-2 with the vocative *ἀδελφοί μου* and with Paul addressing the Philippian community with the present imperative active *βλέπετε* which is repeated thrice in that verse. Paul also includes the addressees in the emphatic *ἡμεῖς* in 3:3 when he proudly states: *ἡμεῖς γάρ ἐσμεν ἢ περιτομή, οἱ πνεύματι θεοῦ λατρεύοντες καὶ καυχώμενοι ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἐν σαρκὶ πεποιθότες*.

But beginning in 3:4, the focus is exclusively on Paul. We see this in the use of the first person singular pronouns and in the first person singular verb forms which are present in 3:4-11. No other verb forms or pronouns are used in this section. In fact the use of the first person singular continues in 3:12-14. But in 3:13 Paul addresses the Philippians again with the vocative *ἀδελφοί*. In 3:15-16 the verb forms change again to include the addressees (see the hortative form of the first person plural subjunctive *φρονῶμεν* in 3:15b, the infinitive *στοιχεῖν* which is usually understood in the sense of a hortatory subjunctive and the second person plural form *φρονεῖτε* in 3:15c).

Finally, in 3:17-4:1 Paul addresses the Philippians emphatically at the beginning and at the end of the section. The whole section is mostly marked by verb forms in the second person plural and first person plural pronouns. The subsection begins with the appeal *συμμιμηταί μου γίνεσθε, ἀδελφοί, ...* in 3:17 and concludes with the appeal *οὕτως στήκετε ἐν κυρίῳ, ἀγαπητοί* in 4:1. This last verse of our section is in fact marked as special by the fact that Paul not only addresses the Philippians as *ἀδελφοί* as in 3:13 and 17, but as *ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί καὶ ἐπιπόθητοι*, perhaps the most emphatic of all the addresses in Paul’s letters<sup>8</sup>. Then he adds the apposition *χαρὰ καὶ στέφανός μου* and at the end he repeats the vocative *ἀγαπητοί*. These pleonastic expressions of his love for the Philippians motivate Paul’s appeal *στήκετε ἐν κυρίῳ*. This command to stand firm in the Lord in correlation with the command *συμμιμηταί μου γίνεσθε* in 3:17 is what Paul actually wants to say in 3:1-4:1, everything else is in preparation and in service of this command. In the face of the opponents whom Paul characterizes in very negative terms in 3:2 and

<sup>8</sup> See U.B. Müller, *Philipper*, p. 185: “Der dringliche, ja beschwörende Charakter des Schlußappells wird an der Häufung der Anreden sichtbar”.

3:18-19 the apostle presents himself as an example (3:4-11), as someone to be imitated (3:16), so that the Philippians will stand firm in the Lord.

In 3:4-11 Paul gives a synthesis of his personal faith in Christ: ἵνα Χριστὸν κερδήσω<sup>9</sup> καὶ εὐρεθῶ ἐν αὐτῷ, μὴ ἔχων ἐμὴν δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐκ νόμου ἀλλὰ τὴν διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ, τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην ἐπὶ τῇ πίστει,<sup>10</sup> τοῦ γνῶναι αὐτὸν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν τῆς ἀναστάσεως αὐτοῦ καὶ [τὴν] κοινωνίαν [τῶν] παθημάτων αὐτοῦ, συμμορφιζόμενος τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ,<sup>11</sup> εἴ πως καταντήσω εἰς τὴν ἐξανάστασιν τὴν ἐκ νεκρῶν (Phil 3:8-11). After describing his prominent place as a circumcised member of the people of Israel (3:4-6), Paul speaks about the loss of everything he had before and the gain of Christ (3:7-11). The gain Paul saw in Christ is more precisely described as knowing Christ, as having, in Christ, a righteousness that comes through faith, as knowing “the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death” (3:10). After giving this example<sup>9</sup> of his Christ-centered faith, Paul does not immediately add his command to imitate him. Rather he first sees the need to protect what he had just said in 3:7-11 from being misunderstood when he says: “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal (Phil 3:12 NRSV).” The subunit that begins here, namely 3:12-16, is the focus of the next section of our investigation.

## 2. EXEGETICAL REMARKS ON PHIL 3:12-16

In 3:12 a new subsection begins which, however, in many ways is a continuation of the preceding section. As we mentioned already, the first person singular which is so prevalent beginning in 3:4, continues in 3:12-14. The focus is still prominently on Paul and only gradually shifts to the addressees. The language of gaining and attaining which was prominent in 3:7-11<sup>10</sup> continues in 3:12-16 (see λαμβάνω and καταλαμβάνω [3x] in 3:12-13 and φθάνω in 3:16). There is also an aspect of continuity in discontinuity in Paul’s use of the verb διώκω in 3:6 and then in very different way in 3:12.14. A new element is the strong presence of verbs of thinking (λογίζομαι in 3:13b and φρονέω in 3:15bc [twice]; cf. ἐπιλανθάνομαι in 3:13e). But before we enter more deeply into the interpretation of 3:12-16 we shall first present the Greek text (N<sup>28</sup>) in sense lines:

12a Οὐχ ὅτι ἤδη ἔλαβον  
 12b ἢ ἤδη τετελείωμαι,  
 12c διώκω δὲ

<sup>9</sup> See E. Lohmeyer, *Philipper*, p. 131 (“Vorbild”).

<sup>10</sup> See κέρδος (3:7), κερδαίνω (3:8) and καταντάω (3:11).

- 12d εἰ καὶ καταλάβω,  
 12e ἐφ’ ᾧ καὶ κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ [Ἰησοῦ].  
 13a ἀδελφοί,  
 13b ἐγὼ ἐμαντὸν οὐ λογιζομαι  
 13c κατειληφέναι·  
 13d ἐν δέ,  
 13e τὰ μὲν ὀπίσω ἐπιλανθανόμενος  
 13f τοῖς δὲ ἔμπροσθεν ἐπεκτεινόμενος,  
 14 κατὰ σκοπὸν διώκω εἰς τὸ βραβεῖον τῆς ἄνω κλήσεως τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.  
 15a Ὅσοι οὖν τέλειοι,  
 15b τοῦτο φρονῶμεν·  
 15c καὶ εἴ τι ἐτέρως φρονεῖτε,  
 15d καὶ τοῦτο ὁ θεὸς ὑμῖν ἀποκαλύψει·  
 16a πλὴν εἰς ὃ ἐφθάσαμεν,  
 16b τῷ αὐτῷ στοιχεῖν.

The subsection 3:12-16 is characterized by diatribe style with short, staccato-like sense lines, with incomplete syntactic constructions and many ellipses. 3:12-16 mainly consists of verbs and only very few nouns. In fact besides the two references to Christ [Jesus] and to God and the address ἀδελφοί, the only nouns that are used in 3:12-16 are ὁ σκοπός, τὸ βραβεῖον and ἡ κλήσις. There are a number of striking repetitions in the verbs that are used in this text. In 3:12-13 λαμβάνω and καταλαμβάνω occur altogether four times, but in different tenses, moods and voices: ἔλαβον, καταλάβω, κατελήμφθην and κατειληφέναι. The verb form διώκω is found in 3:12 and 14. τελειόω and τέλειος in 3:12 and 15 form an inclusion. Finally φρονέω occurs twice in 3:15 (φρονῶμεν and φρονεῖτε).

3:12-16 is most importantly characterized by verbs of movement beginning with διώκω in 3:12c followed by ἐπεκτείνωμαι in 3:13f, διώκω in 3:14 and στοιχέω in 3:16b<sup>11</sup>. The movement is also emphasized by the expressions τὰ μὲν ὀπίσω... τοῖς δὲ ἔμπροσθεν. The verbs of movement (διώκω and ἐπεκτείνωμαι) are part of the language that expresses the goal (σκοπός in 3:14), the striving for the goal and the attaining of the goal (λαμβάνω in 3:12a, τελειόω in 3:12b, καταλαμβάνω in 3:12de.13c and φθάνω in 3:16a). The verbs διώκω and φθάνω are used together in Rom 9:31: Ἰσραὴλ δὲ διώκων νόμον δικαιοσύνης εἰς νόμον οὐκ ἔφθασεν. The goal is also described with the vocabulary of βραβεῖον and τελειόω/τέλειος. The entire text of 3:12-16 is characterized by a tension of “not yet” (twice in 3:12 with the verbs λαμβάνω and τελειόω) and “already” which is implied in ἐφ’ ᾧ καὶ κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ [Ἰησοῦ] (3:12) and possibly in Ὅσοι οὖν τέλειοι (3:15)<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> J. Gnllka, *Philippbrief*, p. 198 states that with διώκω Paul introduces “das Moment stürmischer Unruhe” in the text which is opposed to the “Bild einer vermeintlichen Ruhe der Vollendung”.

<sup>12</sup> See below, p. 84.

The movement toward the goal that characterizes 3:12-14 is underlined by the fact that the object of the striving, the goal of the movement is not expressed before we reach 3:14. The verb forms ἔλαβον, διώκω and καταλάβω do not have objects in the Greek text (and in the KJV). The modern translations supply “all this” (NIV, TOB) or “this” (NRSV) and “it” (NJB) as objects. The absence of direct objects heightens the tension which is only resolved in the second use of διώκω in 3:14. Here the goal is explicitly mentioned in a prepositional phrase: εἰς τὸ βραβεῖον τῆς ἄνω κλήσεως τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ<sup>13</sup>.

The prominent role of διώκω might remind the audience of the letter that in 3:6a Paul had just used this verb when referring to himself as a persecutor of the church (κατὰ ζῆλος διώκων τὴν ἐκκλησίαν). With the threefold use of the verb διώκω in 3:6.12.14 we are introduced to Paul’s passionate striving for a particular goal. But the point is that the goal that Paul is pursuing has changed. It is no longer the destruction of members of the church, but it is the call of God in Christ Jesus. The image of the persecutor gives way to the athletic image of the runner in the stadium. The purpose is no longer to destroy the Christ believers, but to reach the final goal of heavenly perfection. In 3:14 the prize of the runner is expressed in the words τὸ βραβεῖον τῆς ἄνω κλήσεως τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. With the majority of interpreters we understand the genitive τῆς ἄνω κλήσεως to be eexegetic explaining what the prize consists of<sup>14</sup>. ἄνω probably indicates the world of God, the heavenly sphere where this call will be accomplished. As such it is a call to perfection<sup>15</sup> in heaven<sup>16</sup>. In 3:12-14 the emphasis is on the need to strive for the goal and on the prize. However, when Paul describes the prize as a calling (κλήσις), he undermines any temptation of meritorious thinking, as κλήσις introduces the idea of grace<sup>17</sup>.

In 3:15-16 Paul gradually shifts the focus to the Philippians. He begins by saying: ὅσοι οὖν τέλειοι, τοῦτο φρονῶμεν. Here the question is in which sense Paul uses the word τέλειος because of a potential tension with the use of τετελείωμαι in 3:12 where Paul denies the idea of having reached the goal. Does Paul, when using ὅσοι οὖν τέλειοι, actually refer to people who in fact have reached the goal

<sup>13</sup> G. Friedrich, *Philipper*, p. 164: “Weil Christus ihn auf die Rennbahn gestellt hat, und er ihm den Kampfpriest vorhält, darum läuft der Apostel mit vollem Einsatz seiner Person nicht ins Ungewisse, sondern hat stets das Ziel vor Augen. Er will den Siegespreis erringen ..., nämlich die himmlische Berufung, die von Gott kommt und die dem Glaubenden als reiner Gnadenakt in Jesus Christus zuteil wird.”

<sup>14</sup> Cf. J. Gnilk, *Philipperbrief*, p. 200.

<sup>15</sup> Here we follow J. Gnilk who speaks of a “Ruf zur Vollendung” (J. Gnilk, *Philipperbrief*, p. 200).

<sup>16</sup> See also 3:20: ἡμῶν γὰρ τὸ πολίτευμα ἐν οὐρανοῖς ὑπάρχει.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. G. Friedrich, *Philipper*, p. 163: “Die Gerechtigkeit aus Glauben schließt nicht aus, sondern erfordert, daß man mit ganzer Hingabe das vorgehaltene Ziel im Auge behält, um das zu erlangen, was Christus geben will. Die Rechtfertigung ist wohl ein gegenwärtiges Geschehen, aber ihre Endrealisierung steht durchaus noch aus, wie Paulus es wiederholt in futurischen Sätzen andeutet”.

or people who erroneously think or claim to have reached the goal?<sup>18</sup> The shift to the second person plural φρονεῖτε in 3:15c suggests that in 3:15b the first person plural φρονῶμεν is a rhetorical device by which Paul is mainly thinking of the addressees, but includes himself to make it sound less confronting. If that is the case, then it is possible to understand ὅσοι οὖν τέλειοι to mean: “whoever [of us] therefore thinks to have reached the goal [but in fact has not].” With τοῦτο φρονῶμεν Paul wants all those who consider themselves to have reached the goal (whether among the Philippians or the opponents) to consider what he had just said in 3:12-14 (we understand τοῦτο as anaphoric<sup>19</sup>), namely the fact that even Paul realizes and acknowledges that he himself has not yet reached the goal (3:12b)<sup>20</sup>.

### 3. ATHLETIC IMAGES IN PHIL 3:12-16

So after having analyzed Phil 3:12-16, we are in a better position to make an attempt to understand its deeper meaning. Because of the elliptic nature of the text, such an attempt will always remain even more uncertain than the constitutive uncertainty of any interpretation of texts. In 3:12 the section opens with Οὐχ ὅτι ἤδη ἔλαβον. As we already mentioned, the verb does not have an explicit object. Many options have been discussed. The main question is whether one looks for the object in the preceding or in the following text. Those who look for the object in what follows, find it in τὸ βραβεῖον in 3:14 and therefore assume that with ἔλαβον the athletic imagery begins. But the question is how the hearers of this letter, or even the first time readers, could have known what Paul was going to say in the following verses. Therefore one might prefer to supply the unexpressed direct object of ἔλαβον from the immediately preceding text:

τοῦ γνῶναι αὐτὸν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν τῆς ἀναστάσεως αὐτοῦ καὶ [τὴν] κοινωνίαν [τῶν] παθημάτων αὐτοῦ, συμμορφιζόμενος τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ,<sup>11</sup> εἴ πως κατακτήσω εἰς τὴν ἐξανάστασιν τὴν ἐκ νεκρῶν (3:10-11). Paul’s new goal which made him

<sup>18</sup> Some use “perfect” as a translation of τέλειοι in quotation marks (cf. “Nous tous, les «parfaits»” in TOB). It seems that Paul only considers those as “perfect” who acknowledge that they are not yet perfect. Therefore the ellipsis should probably not be supplemented as “as many as [be] perfect” (cf. KJV), but rather “as many as [wrongly think themselves to be] perfect”

<sup>19</sup> Cf. U.B. Müller, *Philipper*, p. 170: “τοῦτο bezieht sich primär auf das unmittelbar vorher Gesagte ... Die konsequente Orientierung an der himmlischen Berufung soll der gemeinsame Zielpunkt zwischen Apostel und Gemeinde sein.”

<sup>20</sup> G. Friedrich, *Philipper*, p. 164: “Die wahrhaft Vollkommenen, die Gott ungeteilt gehören wollen, sind gerade die Unvollkommenen, die noch auf der Kampfbahn laufen und den Siegespreis noch nicht errungen haben. Sie wissen, daß sie noch nicht am Ziel sind, daß sie Christus immer wieder ergreifen müssen, bis er sie ganz ergriffen und zur himmlischen Berufung geführt hat.”

regard everything else as loss (3:7) was to gain Christ (ἵνα Χριστὸν κερδήσω) and to participate in his suffering and resurrection (cf. 3:10). After telling his addressees about this goal in 3:7-11, in 3:12-16 Paul obviously wants to emphasize that he has not yet attained this goal, but is still pursuing it.

While in the context it is most likely that the hearers (or readers) will understand 3:12-13 in this way, there remains an uncertainty which stems from the fact that the verbs in 3:12 do not have any expressed object, not even a pronoun. This raises the curiosity of the members of the audience who hope that the riddle will be solved in the continuation of the text and who will not be disappointed when they reach 3:14.

The verbs λαμβάνω, διώκω and καταλαμβάνω in 3:12-13 do not connote athletics in and of themselves nor in light of the preceding context.<sup>21</sup> Maybe this even has to be said for the use of ἐπεκτεινόμεαι at the end of 3:13<sup>22</sup>. The meaning “stretch out”, “reach for” fits within the network of verbs used before. An indisputable reference to athletics only appears in 3:14, when Paul uses the noun τὸ βραβεῖον, generally accepted as an agonistic *terminus technicus*<sup>23</sup>. The only other place where this noun occurs in the NT is in 1 Cor 9:24 in an even more explicitly athletic context. In Phil 3:14 τὸ βραβεῖον is used in a prepositional phrase qualifying the verb διώκω which had already been used earlier without an explicitly athletic connotation. It seems likely that as a consequence of the use of τὸ βραβεῖον also the noun σκοπός at the beginning of 3:14 takes on an athletic connotation and points to the marker at the end of the race track which indicates the finish line, the goal toward which the runners are oriented<sup>24</sup>. In exegetical literature we encounter attempts to even understand ἡ ἄνω κλήσις as an agonistic term referring to the herald’s calling the winning athletes up to the podium where they would receive the crown<sup>25</sup>. This interpretation is based on several uncertainties not the least the fact that we do not know for sure where the crowning of the winners actually happened. The noun ἡ κλήσις has strong theological connotations in other Pauline contexts and is likely to best be understood along those lines, even if in Phil 3:14 ἡ κλήσις exceptionally refers to the heavenly sphere and not to a calling for an earthly task.

<sup>21</sup> Similarly V.C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif*, p. 140. Cf. U. Poplutz, *Athlet des Evangeliums. Eine motivgeschichtliche Studie zur Wettkampfmotaphorik bei Paulus*, Herders Biblische Studien, 43, Freiburg et al.: Herder Verlag 2004. See also P.F. Esler, *Paul and the Agon: Understanding a Pauline Motif in Its Cultural and Visual Context*, in: A. Weissenrieder, F. Wendt, P. von Gemünden (eds.), *Picturing the New Testament: Studies in Ancient Visual Images* (WUNT, 2/193), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2005, p. 379 who suggests that the athletic imagery begins in 3:12.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. V.C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif*, p. 140.

<sup>23</sup> See BDAG, s.v. βραβεῖον. Note, however, that according to BDAG ἄθλον and νικητήριον are the more common terms in Greek literature.

<sup>24</sup> B.B. Thurston, J.M. Ryan, *Philippians*, p. 126-127: “in parallel literature it is a mark on the finishing post at the race track on which the runner concentrates as he runs toward it”. We note, however, that neither LSJ nor BDAG mention this meaning in their lemma on σκοπός.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., G.F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 154.

We suggest that after the athletic context has been established in 3:14, it becomes necessary to note that this might make the listener (and even more so the reader) reconsider the interpretation of the immediately preceding form ἐπεκτεινόμενος. This verb then might refer to running fast and to the backward and forward movement of the hands<sup>26</sup>. It has been discussed whether the verb is to be understood as a reference to the moment of reaching the goal, or as more recent authors have tried to suggest to the first phase of the race. What Paul has said since 3:12 does not suggest that he is close to reaching the goal. On the other hand the reference to “what lies behind” and “what lies ahead” in 3:13 discourages the idea of Paul being close to either the starting or the finishing position. However, this also depends on what Paul might be referring to when using these metaphors. Is he thinking of “what lies behind” as his past before the Damascus experience or the early years after the Damascus experience? What are the things that Paul wants to actively, consciously overlook or forget? This verb might in a second movement after hearing 3:14 take on a meaning which comes from the athletic context where looking back and thinking back is disadvantageous for the competing for the prize.

As we saw above, 3:12-14 is a text full of movement. At the beginning in 3:12-13 the goal of this movement remains somewhat unclear, even though the audience will spontaneously supply “to gain Christ” (3:8) and “to know him and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings” as the goal. As the listeners or readers of 3:12-14 move through the text, they begin to realize that the goal is the heavenly calling of God in Christ Jesus and that since 3:12a the verbs might have had an athletic connotation.

## CONCLUSION

Scholars do not agree as to the presence or extent of athletic imagery in Phil 3:12-14 nor is there any consensus as to what its theological significance might be. Our investigation in this short study has brought to the fore that Paul uses the athletic imagery of a runner striving for the prize in a text where he emphasizes that he himself, despite his single-minded option for Christ (3:7-8), has not reached the goal of his life as a Christ follower. In this context athletic imagery offers several advantages to Paul. It allows him to focus on the efforts of the athlete to reach the goal and the prize and to remind the addressees that since the goal is worthwhile the efforts to reach it are equally valuable. In addition it also allows him to emphasize that the goal has not yet been reached, but can be reached if the necessary efforts are undertaken. At the same time, in 3:14 Paul adapts the athletic imagery

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<sup>26</sup> See P.F. Esler, *Paul and the Agon*, p. 380.

by counterbalancing the effort – reward scheme that is inherent in the athletic world with the scheme of giving - receiving (grace) in explaining the price as a heavenly calling. Paul does not use the athletic images in an attempt to spiritualize human efforts in the scheme of salvation, but the athletic images help him to concretize the very much needed efforts in striving for the goal of heavenly perfection. In Paul's theology the Christ event and the implied salvation are usually seen to refer to the cross and resurrection of Christ. With the athletic imagery Paul is able to introduce the idea of being fixed on a goal to be reached in the future and a prize to be attained in the time to come.

In 3:12-16 Paul strongly reminds his readers of the “not yet” (οὐκ ἤδη) of salvation in Christ despite the important past salvation events connected to the life of Christ and his own life. The goal is not yet reached for anyone, not even for Paul who presents himself as an example to be imitated. “Paul's goal is never realized in the present, but always lies in the future”<sup>27</sup>. By means of the use of athletic imagery Paul is able to supplement the interest in the past of the earthly Jesus by an emphasis on the future-orientedness of the message he is preaching and living.

In the days of Paul, in a movement characterized by the enthusiasm of newness (cf., e.g., *καινή κτίσις* in 2 Cor 5:17 and Gal 6:15), this future orientation had to be defended against enthusiasts who had misunderstood his preaching, thinking that everything had already happened and that they had reached the state of perfection. Today, as Christianity can look back over hundreds of years of history, at least in some parts of the world, and is often experienced as mainly past-oriented, the clear orientation to the future that comes out as the main message of Phil 3:12-16 is an important corrective and a reminder to change perspective<sup>28</sup>.

„... PĘDZĘ KU NAGRODZIE” TEOLOGICZNE ZNACZENIE JĘZYKA ATLETYKI  
W LIŚCIE DO FILIPIAN 3,12-16

Streszczenie

Tematem niniejszego artykułu jest potencjalny język atletyki w Flp 3,12-16. Główny akcent skupia się na pytaniu, jak przyjęcie istnienia w nim języka atletyki przyczynia się do lepszego zrozumienia tego tekstu, a przede wszystkim jego teologicznej treści. Artykuł składa się z trzech części. W części pierwszej autor analizuje poprzedzający i następujący kontekst Flp 3,12-16. Przychyła się przy tym ku pogładowi zwolenników struktury koncentrycznej: 3,1-11 (A), 3,12-16 (B), 3,17-4,1 (A'). W częściach obramowania (A i A') chodzi o polemikę Pawła z jego przeciwnikami, przy czym głównym zamiarem Pawła

<sup>27</sup> V.C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif*, p. 149.

<sup>28</sup> See R. Bieringer, M. Elsbernd, *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective* (Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia, 61), Leuven-Paris-Dudley MA: Peeters 2010.

jest wezwanie Filipian do tego, by „mocno stali w wierze”. Część druga artykułu zawiera krótką analizę egzegetyczną tekstu 3,12-16, która jest skoncentrowana na najważniejszych pojęciach (zdobyć, ruch, myślenie) oraz na celu niebiańskiej doskonałości, z którymi te pojęcia są związane. W części trzeciej zostają zanalizowane potencjalne atletyczne obrazy w 3,12-16. W oparciu o powszechną akceptację rzeczownika τὸ βραβεῖον w 3,14 jako agonistycznego *terminus technicus*, inne rzeczowniki i czasowniki, które same w sobie nie mają znaczenia atletycznego, zostają zinterpretowane jako odnoszące się do atletyki w kontekście tej perykopy. Na zakończenie autor artykułu zauważa, że Paweł jako przeciwwagi dla schematu „wysiłek-nagroda”, typowego dla języka atletycznego, używa języka powołania, wprowadzając schemat „dawanie-otrzymanie”. W ten sposób Paweł podkreśla ukierunkowanie na przyszłość, które jest charakterystyczne dla przesłania, które głosi i którym żyje.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Nowy Testament, egzegeza biblijna, List do Filipian, Paweł, Listy Pawłowe, język atletyczny.

#### “... STRIVING FOR THE PRIZE”: THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ATHLETIC LANGUAGE IN PHILIPPIANS 3:12-16

##### Summary

This study focuses on potential athletic language in Phil 3:12-16. The main focus is the question what the assumption of the presence of athletic language in this text contributes to understanding it and especially its theological meaning better. The study consists of three parts. In part 1, the author analyses the preceding and the subsequent context of Phil 3:12-16 joining the defenders of a concentric structure: 3:1-11 (A), 3:12-16 (B), 3:17-4:1 (A'). The two framing sections (A and A') focus on the opposition between Paul and his opponents, but the main point is Paul's command to the Philippian addressees to “stand firm in the Lord”. Part 2 contains a brief exegetical analysis of 3:12-16. Our analysis focuses on the most important words (gaining/attaining; movement; thinking) and the goal of heavenly perfection with which they are connected. In the third part we analyse the potential athletic images in 3:12-16 which finds its “anchor point” in the noun τὸ βραβεῖον in 3:14. Based on the acceptance of this noun as an agonistic *terminus technicus*, other verbs and nouns which are not in and of themselves referring to athletics are interpreted as having an athletic meaning in our context. The study concludes with the caution that Paul counterbalances the “effort-reward scheme” of athletic language with the “giving-receiving scheme” of his call language. In this way, Paul introduces an emphasis on the future-orientedness of the message which is characteristic of his preaching and living.

**Key words:** New Testament, biblical exegesis, Philippians, Paul, letters of the apostle Paul, athletic language.

„... DEM PREIS NACHJAGEN“. DIE THEOLOGISCHE BEDEUTUNG DER  
ATHLETISCHEN SPRACHE IN PHILIPPER 3, 12-16

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Aufsatz hat die potentielle athletische Sprache in Phil 3,12-16 zum Thema. Das Hauptinteresse liegt auf der Frage, was die Annahme des Vorliegens von athletischer Sprache in diesem Text dazu beiträgt, ihn und insbesondere seinen theologischen Inhalt besser zu verstehen. Diese Untersuchung besteht aus drei Teilen. In Teil 1 analysiert der Autor den vorausgehenden und den folgenden Kontext von Phil 3,12-16. Dabei schließt sich diese Untersuchung den Vertretern einer konzentrischen Struktur an: 3,1-11 (A), 3,12-16 (B), 3,17-4,1 (A'). In den beiden Rahmenteilern (A und A') geht es um die Polemik des Paulus gegenüber seinen Gegnern, wobei allerdings der Aufruf des Paulus an die Adresse der Philipper, „fest im Herrn zu stehen“, der Hauptpunkt des Paulus ist. Teil 2 enthält eine kurze exegetische Analyse von 3,12-16, welche sich auf die wichtigsten Begriffe (erreichen; Bewegung; denken) und auf das Ziel der himmlischen Vollkommenheit, mit dem sie verbunden sind, konzentriert. Im dritten Teil werden die potentiellen athletischen Bilder in 3,12-16 analysiert. Ausgehend von dem Substantiv τὸ βραβεῖον in 3,14, das allgemein als agonistischer *terminus technicus* akzeptiert wird, werden andere Verben und Substantive, die als solche keine athletische Bedeutung haben, in diesem Kontext als athletisch interpretiert. Die Untersuchung schließt mit dem Hinweis, dass Paulus zum „Werke-Lohn-Schema“ der athletischen Sprache mit dem Gebrauch der Sprache der Berufung das „Geben-Empfangen-Schema“ als Gegengewicht einführt. So unterstreicht Paulus die Ausrichtung auf die Zukunft, die der Botschaft eigen ist, die er verkündet und lebt.

Schlüsselworte: Neues Testament, biblische Exegese, Philipperbrief, Paulus, Briefes des Apostels Paulus, athletische Sprache.

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