



# PAULA FREDRIKSEN

## *Paul at the Races*

*Some sports fans consider athletics a religion. It used to be.*

By the time you read this column, it will be June. The seasons will have shifted, the winter gone, and a young man's fancy will have turned to thoughts of baseball. But I write to you in February, from Boston, on the eve of the Super Bowl. The entire town has been electrified with hope and dread for a week, ever since the Patriots beat Pittsburgh last Sunday.

A new and powerful sense of community charges the atmosphere. Filling the car the other day, I listened as the hip African-American kid pumping gas and the tweedy, aging professorial type waiting for it urgently exchanged opinions on Bledsoe versus Brady. Later, picking up my daughter at her school, I watched as two eighth-grade boys, resplendent in yarmulkes, speculated excitedly with the traffic cop (Irish), the security guard (Jamaican), and a computer-tech car-pool mom (Russian) on what the future in New Orleans might hold. Even my husband, himself a fan, has been startled by the intensity. "Athletics," he informed me, "has become religion."

His remark had an unlikely effect. I thought immediately of Philo of Alexandria, the elder contemporary of Jesus and Paul, and of Paul himself, especially of his letter to the Romans with its metaphors from the sports world. "No," I responded. "Athletics started out as religion."

Ancient Mediterranean civic culture was a type of religious worship. Activities that we tend to think of as "secular"—attending the theater, watching races, convening a city council or giving testimony in a court

of law—were all part of the worship of the traditional gods. This made good sense, because for a city, a province or an empire to flourish, people had to enlist the good will of heaven. Showing respect for the deity through all sorts of prescribed ceremonies was a good way to do this. In our terms, public cult would be an item in the defense budget.

Ancients solicited the gods' good will through innumerable public ceremonies involving dance, song, procession, offerings and communal eating. The *ephebes*—an organization of adolescent males educated through the city's *gymnasium*—would hymn the gods' praises at important municipal events such as athletic or musical and rhetorical contests. Competition in these events itself constituted worship, since the games were an offering dedicated to the gods. (Gymnasia routinely housed altars to the three divinities Hermes, Heracles and Eros, who together represented the pedagogical goals of eloquence, strength and friendship.)

Rome integrated itself politically within the Hellenistic city by inserting Roman festivals—especially those celebrating the divinity of the emperor and of the royal family—into the already congested liturgical calendars of its municipalities. Emperors (living and dead) were worshiped through athletic events and especially through gladiatorial contests. Eventually the sites of this pious activity metamorphosed into huge public spaces like the Roman circus: Cult as contest became cult as spectacle.

Which brings us to Jews like Philo and Paul; that is, to Greek-speaking Jews of good Hellenistic education. By the mid-first century, Diaspora Jews had had more than 400 years to find ways to live with and to integrate themselves into the civic life of their cities of residence. It was awkward, since civic life was religious life, and Jews in principle were not to worship others' gods. (This annoyed some pagans no end because it struck them, with good reason, as civically disloyal and irresponsible, as well as downright discourteous.) Different communities negotiated different deals with local authorities. In Rome, for example, Augustus allowed Jewish citizens to pick up their ration of corn on Sunday when the dole fell on a Sabbath. Jews in other places won different concessions, such as permission not to appear in court on Sabbath or holidays and exemption from public rites when offering testimony. Jews were allowed to pray *for* the emperor and the empire rather than pray *to* them.

Sometimes, however, Hellenistic Jews do not seem very worried about the worship of foreign gods. One area of unconcern was athletics. Young Jewish men in Egypt, for example, gained access to the gymnasium education, and thus joined the ranks of their city's *ephebes*. How do we know this? Because Jewish names turn up on inscriptions listing members of the *ephebate*. But *ephebes* had municipal responsibilities that were also religious:

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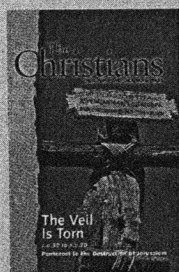
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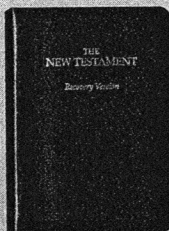
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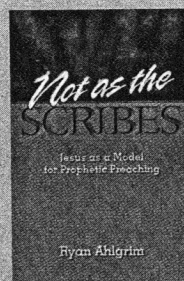


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singing, competing and eating together. How did Jewish ephebes manage? Did they sing hymns but not "mean" them? Stand near the altars, but not share the meat? Eat, but only food from home? And also avoid the wine? We do not and cannot know. Behavior probably varied.

Adult Jewish males, on the evidence of Philo and of Paul, certainly watched these events. (Philo's Greek education was excellent. For all we know, he as an adolescent participated in organized athletics, an important part of the curriculum.) We know they know their sports because their writing abounds in athletic imagery. Again, this may seem unremarkable: Looking, as opposed to doing, is a passive activity. But these ancient athletic events were embedded in civic cult. The analogy is not Philo and Paul at the Super Bowl, but Philo and Paul at high mass on a holy day of obligation. Yet neither says a word against it.

Indeed, Paul, at a dramatic high point in his letter to the Romans, uses the imagery of the Greek footrace to make a Jewish theological point, as Professor Stanley Stowers of Brown University has shown.<sup>1</sup> Paul describes the Jews' zealous racing toward righteousness. They are well trained and toned, thanks to the Torah. But all of a sudden Gentiles-in-Christ, who weren't even in the race until recently, have pushed ahead. How? God has tripped Israel, and they have stumbled. (The Greek word, *paraptoma*, means both "misstep" and "sin," Romans 11:12.) Have they fallen? No. Falling disqualifies the runner from continuing—as everybody knows. But Paul's point is that Israel is still very much in this race, the race to final redemption. God has arranged things so that both Jew and Gentile will complete the course at the same time. Israel, in fact, is a divinely guaranteed winner, because when all the nations come in, Israel too will attain redemption (Romans 11:25-26).

Much more could be said about how Jews and, later, Christians kept their place in the Greek city, and about how popular culture affected and even structured the piety of religious minorities. When hagiographers described martyrs, struggling in the arena, as "athletes of Christ," they meant more than you may have realized. I wish I could say more, but it's almost six o'clock—game time and dinner time. And as the ancients knew full well, cultic activity requires cultic foods. I'm off to get the pizza.

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 313-316.

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