

The Name *Savior* as Applied to Gods and Men Among the Greeks

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THROUGHOUT THE ANCIENT GREEK AND ROMAN WORLD it was the custom for each city to have at least one deity as its particular guardian and protector, whose function it was not only to look over the welfare of the city proper but also to come in some special way to the aid of any citizen requesting divine intervention. This protection applied to citizens of colonies of the mother city as well as to those remaining within the walls of the original settlement, the allowance being ever-present, of course, for the assimilation of additional gods or goddesses native to the location colonized. Thus, the citizen of the Greek city-state looked to the patron deity for both material and spiritual protection, and attributed a helping and saving nature to him, as can be seen by the frequent epithet σωτήρ or "Savior" given to the protecting god.

The name σωτήρ had been used as an epithet of Zeus in Greek tragedy and comedy. Some of the more important occurrences are found in the works of Aeschylus, who employs it in speaking of the practice of dedicating the third cup of wine to Zeus:

λοιβάς Διὸς μὲν πρῶτον ὄραίου γάμου
Ἡρας τε . . .
τὴν δευτέραν δὲ κραῖσιν ἥρωσιν νέμω
.
τρίτον Διὸς σωτήρος εὐκταῖαν λίβα.¹

We find it later in Aristophanes, used also in a reference to Zeus:

ἕα θεοί, Ζεῦ σῶτερ, εἰσὶν ἐλπίδες.²

Menander likewise used it with the name of Zeus:

¹ Aesch., *Fr.* 55. See also Pindar, I. 6.5.

² Aristoph., *Th.* 1009.

καὶ τοῦτον ἡμᾶς τὸν τρόπον γαμεῖν ἔδει ἅπαντας, ὃ Ζεῦ σῶτερ,
ὡς ὠνούμεθα.³

Outside the realm of drama, we find it notably in the works of Plato, *e.g.*,

... τὸ δὲ τρίτον Ὀλυμπικῶς τῷ σωτήρι τε καὶ τῷ Ὀλυμπίῳ
Διί...⁴

If Zeus could claim pre-eminence in the exercise of these functions, however, he could not similarly claim priority in their attribution. Homer had long before used the name as befitting not only Poseidon, who is called "Savior of the ships,"

διχθὰ τοι, Ἐννοσίγαιε, θεοὶ τιμὴν ἐδάσαντο, ἔππων τε δμητῆρ
ἔμεναι σωτῆρα τε νεῶν,⁵

but also the Dioscuri, or Castor and Pollux,

σωτῆρας τέκε παῖδας ἐπιχθονίων ἀνθρώπων ὠκυπόρων τε νεῶν,
ὅτε τε σπέργωσιν ἄελλαι χειμέριαι κατὰ πόντον ἀμείλιχον.⁶

They perform their functions as "savior-children of men upon the land and ships upon the sea, when the wintry winds rage over the savage deep."

Aeschylus referred to Hades as νεκρῶν σωτήρ and spoke of Hermes and the Olympian gods in general as σωτέρες. Aeschylus and Sophocles both used the title σωτήρ generally with the name of Apollo.⁷

An epithet as expressive as "Savior," however, cannot long remain with a restricted application, and so we find as early as Herodotus that it was applied to men as well as to Gods:

νῦν δὲ Ἀθηναίους ἂν τις λέγων σωτῆρας γενέσθαι τῆς Ἑλλάδος
οὐκ ἂν ἀμαρτάνοι τὸ ἀληθές.⁸

³ Men., *Fr.* 523, K. 2.

⁴ Plato, *Rep.* 583 B. See also *Phlb.* 66D, *Chr.* 167 A.

⁵ Homer, *Hymn* 72.5.

⁶ Homer, *Hymn* 33.6.

⁷ For the reference to Hades, see Aesch., *Ag.* 1387; for that of Apollo, Aesch., *Ag.* 513, Soph., *O. T.* 150 and *passim*.

⁸ Herod. VII. 139.

Aeschylus applied it to Electra and Orestes who, returning to avenge the murder of their sire, were "saviors of their father's house."⁹ Sophocles used it in reference to Teiresias, the blind prophet, who in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* knows the divine origin of the plague infesting the city and whose duty it is to reveal the identity of the malefactor involved:

... ἦς σὲ προστάτην
σωτῆρά τ', ὄναξ, μοῦνον ἐξευρίσκομεν.¹⁰

Finally, Euripides uses the name in an indefinite sense where in the *Medea* the chorus asks what deliverance from evil is to be found:

... τίνα προξενίαν
ἢ δόμον ἢ χθόνα σωτῆρα κακῶν
ἔξευρήσεις;¹¹

The evidence presented above should provide a sufficient indication of the literary importance of the title "Savior." Yet, one might rightly ask how important all this was to the average Athenian citizen of the classical age or "world-citizen" in later Hellenistic times. Indeed, the evidence for this is no less convincing, particularly in the Hellenistic age when the king became the protector of the realm on a grand scale. This, of course, would normally be taken for granted as one of the perfunctory duties of any king, but Alexander the Great had combined its temporal aspects with the divine in a way which had been unknown before. As Bühler remarks,

Er war ja nicht, was Jude und Christ unter Gott verstehen, auch nicht der Allgott der Orphiker und der von den Stoikern als Urquell alles Wissens verehrte Zeus. Alexanders Gottheit ist Gottmenschentum, Gottkönigtum.¹²

The title σωτήρ was common among the successors of Alexander and is found in references to the Ptolemies as well as to Roman emperors and governors of Egypt.

⁹ Aesch., *Ch.* 264.

¹⁰ Soph., *O.T.* 304ff.

¹¹ Eur., *Medea* 360ff.

¹² J. Bühler, *Kultur der Antike* (Stuttgart, 1957) I, 282ff. It will be remembered that Alexander visited the grave of Achilles near Troy in an effort to emphasize his divinity before setting out to the East, not to mention other religious observances at Tyre and Egyptian Alexandria, and the ever-increasing demands upon his men to pay him divine honors typical of those rendered to Oriental monarchs.

The greatest "Savior," however, in classical and Hellenistic times was the divine healer Asclepius, to whose temples, particularly at Pergamum, Cos and Epidaurus, crowds of lame and ill came at appointed times to pass the night in expectation of a visitation and healing by the god. In these cities, where an Asclepium, or temple to Asclepius, was located, the title σωτήρ was frequently bestowed upon the god and upon his attendant, Hygeia, the goddess of health.¹³

The search for Asclepius as a "Savior" in Homer, incidentally, is futile. He is mentioned in the Iliad in three places: II, 731; IV, 193, and XI, 517, each time simply as being the father of Machaon and Podaleirios, the "good physicians" who accompanied the Greek forces at Troy. Nevertheless, that Homer neglects to mention his divinity does not rule out the existence of his cult even in the Homeric age, for Kerényi has shown well that any *argumentum ex silentio* in this respect cannot be defended.¹⁴

The two greatest centers of this "savior-god" (his divinity was definitely established by the fifth century) were Epidaurus, in the Peloponnesus, and Cos, an island off the coast of Asia Minor. Kerényi hypothesizes that the religious element originated at Epidaurus, then spread east to Cos where the school of physicians which already has achieved a high degree of competency adopted it.¹⁵

It is certainly evident from the inscriptions on the votive tablets still extant that until the early imperial age of Rome these "health resorts" relied upon the workings of the religious imagination for their cures, much as do the present-day Christian shrines of Tenos and Lourdes.¹⁶

¹³ Alice Walton, *The Cult of Asclepius* (Boston, 1894), p. 68.

¹⁴ C. Kerényi, *Asklepios*, tr. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1959), p. xvff.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁶ W. H. D. Rouse, in *Greek Votive Offerings* (Cambridge, 1902), p. 207, maintains that men such as Plato and Sophocles would have rejected temple cures as childish and that the richer citizens undoubtedly went to physicians, pointing out the fact that the names of those offering dedication after cures lack the demotic adjective (which would indicate their citizenship), and hence were either foreigners or humble tradesmen. Thraemer, however, in his Pauly-Wissowa article, col. 1686, says that not only the *abergläubisches Volk* but also noted literary men frequented the temples. He does not cite his evidence for this statement.

The divine Asclepius was mythically the son of Apollo, and, just as did the sun-god, saved mankind from the ravages of disease and pestilence:

. . . καὶ αὐτὸν σώζειν εἰδότες καὶ μέντοι καὶ τὸν σωτήρα καὶ νόσον ἀντίπαλον Ἀσκληπιὸν φύσαντα.¹⁷

Moreover, this saving nature of Asclepius is attested to by Hippocrates and Suidas, as well as more than once by Aelian, not to mention the catalogue of inscriptions which comprises Volume I of Edelstein's *Asclepius*.¹⁸ Concerning his importance as healer and "Savior" among the Greeks, Edelstein says,

Most human beings have a desire to live, but the Greeks delighted in the beauty of life and in the brightness of light more perhaps than any other people. Even Achilles did not refrain from exclaiming: "Nay, seek not to speak soothingly to me of death, glorious Odysseus. I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as a hireling of another, of some portionless man whose livelihood was but small, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished." (Homer, *Od.* XI, 488-91, Loeb, A.T. Murray.)

To men who thus judged about the value of life, Asclepius was indeed the savior, he who granted "that we may see the sunlight in joy, acceptable with bright Hygeia, the glorious." It was with good reason that his temples became a new center of religious life for the ancients. One might well say of all of them what Aristides says of the sanctuary of Pergamum: "Here fire-brands friendly to all men were raised on high"; here, "the stern-cable of salvation for all was anchored in Asclepius."¹⁹

The traditions of the savior-god Asclepius, as well as his title, were usurped in Christianity not, as in many cases with the earlier chthonic deities, simply by the lesser saints, but notably by the founder of the religion himself. However, the difference in the salvation was obvious: the σωτηρία of Asclepius had been a practical concern with salvation from disease and disability, whereas that of Christ had the spiritual and theological aspects of a salvation in the life to come, and included divine healing only as a minor, but nevertheless related, function.

The early church fathers, moreover, wrote in Latin, and quite naturally for the sake of convenience sought a Latin equivalent for the Greek σωτήρ. Everyone had an idea of what σωτήρ and σωτηρία

¹⁷ Aelian, *De Nat. Animalum*, X. 49.

¹⁸ Emma J. and Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius* (Baltimore, 1945). See also Hippocrates, *Ep.* 17; Suidas *s.v.* Ἰάκωβος and Aelian, *Fr.* 98.

¹⁹ Edelstein, *op.cit.*, II. 124.

meant, and definitions among scholarly sources were not hard to find, e.g., one of the most explicit occurring in Cicero's *Second Oration against Verres*:

Etenim sic. C. Verrem praeturam in Sicilia gessisse constat, ut, cum utrisque satis facere not posset, et Siculis et togatis, officii potius in socios quam ambitionis in cives rationem duxerit. Itaque eum non solum PATRONUM istius insulae sed etiam SOTERA inscriptum vidi Syracusis. Hoc quantum est? Ita magnum ut Latine uno verbo exprimi non possit. Is est nimirum SOTER qui salutem dedit.²⁰

Ernout-Meillet gives *salus* as the equivalent of σωτηρία thus agreeing substantially with Cicero's definition. Elsewhere, under the verb *servo*, there is an equation of *Servator* with Σωτήρ as the standard Jovian epithet, and on p. 591, under *saluus*, is the comment, "Usité surtout dans la langue de l'Église, ainsi que les dérivés et composés: saluator = σωτήρ."²¹ This squares well with the remark in the *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae*, viz.,

At justissimo titulo Jesus Christus (in N.T. et Deus in eodem) Σωτήρ dicitur. Solus enim humani generis servator est. Pro hoc autem Servatoris nomine multi veteres Theologi Salvatoris (Gl.) nomen de ipso usurparunt, non satis Latine, vel potius nullo modo Latine.²²

It suggests, further, at least two possibilities:

1.) The early church fathers had a working knowledge of passages in Latin literature such as that of Cicero cited above wherein some attempt at definition had already been made, and in accepted scholarly fashion were in the habit of using at one time or another whichever of the two translations happened to fit the particular context, depending upon whether the connotation of protector (*Servator*) or savior (*Salvator*) was desired.

²⁰ Cicero, *In Verrem* II. ii. 63. Verres was the notorious Roman governor of Sicily (73-70 B.C.) who had, through repeated acts of avarice and cruelty, so enriched himself and abused those under him that the Sicilians brought accusation against him at the expiration of his term, engaging Cicero, who had been quaestor in Sicily in 77, to conduct the prosecution. The defense attorney was Hortensius who, although recognized as the greatest Roman orator, knew that his skill and sophistry could neither screen the perfidy of his client nor overcome the incontestability of the evidence against him. Thus, Hortensius, when he could not have the case postponed, relinquished it; Verres fled into exile.

²¹ A. Ernout et A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine. Histoire des mots* 4 (Paris, 1959) s.v. *servo*, *saluo*, *saluus*.

²² *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae*, ab Henrico Stephano constructus, VII. col. 1738.

2.) The usage of *Salvator* arose from a misreading of *Servator* (as the *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae* suggests) and was unrelated to any attempts at etymological analysis. It was simply a gloss which, once having been made, was perpetuated by copyists and subsequent Christian writers.

Both of these contain some plausibility; their respective probabilities would, however, have to be determined through a considerably more detailed and thorough-going study than has been presented here, such an endeavor being outside the intended scope of this paper. (One might, for instance, look for a consistency in reference to Christ as the *Servator* or preserver of humanity in this life and the *Salvator* or savior of it in the next.)

The advantages gained by the Christian god through the two-fold nature of his σωτηρία did not go unnoticed by the adherents of the old religion. In the fourth century the neo-Platonic creed developed by Salustius and the Emperor Julian claimed Asclepius as the "savior of mankind" in the enlarged sense of not only in this life but in the next as well:

... σὺ δ' ὡσπερ ἐπὶ σωτηρία τοῦ κοινοῦ τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένους
τεχθεὶς, τὴν Ἀσκληπιοῦ χεῖρα παντάχου ζηλῶν, ἅπαντα ἐπέρχῃ
λογίῳ τε καὶ σωτηρίῳ νεύματι.²³

Thus, the name "Savior," which began as an attribute of local gods and attested to their protective function over cities and their populations, kept throughout pre-Christian antiquity its temporal aspects, even when in the Hellenistic age it ceased to be strictly divine in its application and was given to rulers as an honorary title. As we have noted, not even the pre-eminent savior-god Asclepius violated this pattern until the neo-Platonic philosophy re-fashioned him in the fourth century, his activities being properly concerned with salvation in this life. It was, rather, in the person of Christ that the name "Savior" first received the theological connotations which it holds today.

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²³ Julian, *Ep.* 79, 406D.