Saviour Gods and Soteria in Ancient Greece

Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/kernos/4391
DOI: 10.4000/kernos.4391
ISSN: 2034-7871

Printed version
Date of publication: 31 December 2022
Number of pages: 374-376
ISBN: 978-2-87562-343-0
ISSN: 0776-3824

Electronic reference
Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui, "Saviour Gods and Soteria in Ancient Greece", Kernos [Online], 35 | 2022, Online since 31 December 2022, connection on 15 March 2023. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/kernos/4391 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/kernos.4391

This text was automatically generated on 15 March 2023.

Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Saviour Gods and Soteria in Ancient Greece

Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui

REFERENCES


1 Soteria has been traditionally an overlooked concept in the study of Greek religion, precisely due to its centrality in Christianity. The abundant pieces of evidence often were either examined teleologically as possible precedents of Christian salvation, or neglected for fear of projecting it into Greek religion. With the exception of the notable scholarship on ruler cults using the title Soter, the many testimonies of soteria and related terminology have been usually dispatched with the platitude that it was this-worldly, as if this deprived it of any further interest. Theodora Jim’s book is a systematic and careful study of the epigraphic evidence that shows how complex and varied the experiences of soteria were along the ancient Greek world. Literary and philosophical sources are explicitly subordinated to the portrait offered by inscriptions, since they offer a more direct access to “lived religion”—of which they are but the tip of the iceberg. The problems posed by such enterprise are not light, starting with translations, since there is no adequate term in English (nor in Latin or any other major modern language) to cover the full range of meanings of the term: though Jim advocates for “deliverance”, “preservation”, “safety”, “rescue” or similar, along the book she will often use “salvation” with inverted commas, which is probably the minor evil.

2 After an introduction in which these problematic issues are explained, the first chapter tracks the semantics of the concept in classical literature. The abstract and the agent nouns are absent from Homer, who nevertheless uses the verb saoein and many diverse epithets to express deliverance/protection from a god. The agent soter appears for the
first time in two *Homeric Hymns* to Poseidon and to the Dioscuri. However, literature and vases show that the third libation to Zeus *Soter* was a ritual custom well-established in archaic age. In the fifth century, the Persian threat made the abstract *soteria* a widely shared concern, as shown by its instances in Herodotus and Aeschylus, and this context popularized the cult of divine *soteres*. Later, Thucydides’ mentions, particularly in the Melian dialogue, show how *soteria* developed a close connection to *eleutheria* during the Peloponnesian War—which includes the cultic merging of Zeus *Soter* and Zeus *Eleutherios*. A few selected texts from tragedy show the increasing Athenian quest for collective *soteria*, and the multivalence and ambiguity of the term. Some Aristophanic passages are analysed in order to ground a key tenet of this book: the language of *soteria* was not religious *per se*, but could be used colloquially for humans as a way to show gratitude, “like ‘you have saved my life’ in English, often used in small crises” (p. 39). This is surely true for the verb *soizein* and the abstract *soteria*, but it is more doubtful for *soter*, which appears remarkably more often as a divine epithet than as a neutral agent noun: Aristophanes is not an entirely trustworthy proof of an ordinary value, for humour in these passages depends heavily on addressing common men with enthusiastic salutations of divine overtones, perhaps satirizing some sporadic private proclamations of extraordinary individuals in fifth-century Athens. In any case, as Jim says (p. 44), it was “the word’s ability of the word’s *soter* to move imperceptibly across the two spheres” (i.e. from the divine to the human and viceversa) that “allowed the Greeks to see their kings as both human and/or divine at once”.

Chapter 2, “Saving the community”, studies the instances of collective *soteria*, both at the Panhellenic and at the local level. The variety of possible situations in which gods are invoked as saviours (most often with the epithet *Soter* but also other protective titles) is justly emphasized. Festivals like the Plataean *Eleutheria* or the Delphic *Soteria* show the Panhellenic sense of shared salvation from a common threat, while local *Soteria* festivals commemorate specific episodes where a deity rescued the city from enemies, tyrants, or natural disasters. However, numerous other inscriptions show that, without any crisis in the horizon, gods could also be asked for *soteria* i.e., for stability and general protection.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to “individual salvation”. While the previous chapter drew its evidence mainly from public inscriptions, this one dwells on private dedications: warfare, seafaring, and health are by far the most frequent ones, but the elasticity of the *soteria* experience is exemplified by other stranger cases: e.g. the god Pan (not invoked elsewhere as *Soter*) provided it in the Egyptian desert, according to individual graffiti in the remote shrine of El-Kanais; from elephant-hunting to lawsuits, any situation of crisis was potentially adequate for asking *soteria* to various gods (and/or thanking for it). As in public dedications, in these inscriptions general well-being and prosperity (of crops, of the household, etc.) is also a frequent request, be it prompted or not by a specific saving event. A striking instance of the combination of the punctual and the permanent is a dedication after childbirth from a woman to Eileithyia “who saves and keeps saving” (σωζούσα ἐπισωζούσα), which expresses through the second *hapax* word the wish that a single saving act may become a sign of ongoing protection.

Supported by this ample evidence, Chapter 4 tackles the problems posed by the fact that *Soter/Soteira* is a trans-divine epithet, i.e. that can be applied to many gods (and in some cases may be used without a theonym), though Zeus and Artemis are by far those who most often get it. Jim’s diachronic analysis shows that from the fourth century BC,
numerous gods received the epithet along the whole Greek-speaking Mediterranean (this expansion is graphically shown by stupendously detailed maps with the location of each Soter-god witnessed by inscriptions). In the second part of the chapter Jim explains, cautiously and judiciously, the possible reasons for the proneness (or lack thereof) of some gods to receive this cult epithet. Particularly persuasive is her hypothesis about ship-saving gods: Poseidon is above all a threatening power whose potential anger must be appeased with the title Soter not to cause trouble (or cause it to the enemies), while the Dioscuri come to help in the danger of the storm and are therefore thanked with the same title; instead, the Samothracian gods who are known to save sailors never receive the title in a single preserved instance: it is probably their non-anthropomorphic sort of epiphany that seemed alien to the imaginations of how a soter should act when helping mortals—i.e. in a humanlike form.

6 This anthropomorphism of the Soter-gods takes us to Chapter 5, on Hellenistic kings, who very often adopted the title. This phenomenon and its antecedents in Sicilian tyrants have been well studied in the last decades; however, Jim’s systematic treatment of the different major dynasties is still helpful for its clarity and consistency. The flexibility and proximity to human experience of the religious notion of soteria made the epithet soter adequate for those rulers seen as capable of protecting the community. Later, it was used automatically without the need of any “saving deed” that justified it, as an effective title for the cities and individuals to cope with royal rule, and for kings to ground their prestige and highlight their closeness to the divine. The epithet’s increasing popularity among sovereigns (and then Roman Emperors), did not entail any decrease in its usage for gods. On the contrary, the previous chapters show that most dedications to saviour gods appear in Hellenistic and Imperial times.

7 The last chapter compares Greek soteria with the much-studied meanings of the term in early Christianity, where it appears from the outset (Paul’s Epistles) with a radically new meaning, i.e. redemption from sins and promise of a blessed afterlife (hence Jesus’ and God’s title Soter). At the same time, in other Christian texts, like the Gospels, soteria appears often as this-worldly safety and healing. How Paul came to modify the meaning of the word remains unclear, since in mystery religions the expressions of otherworldly concerns do not seem to use soizein terminology until late antiquity (famously Firm. Mat. Err. 22.1, discussed in p. 233), where it may be influenced by competition with Christianity. Neither is in the LXX the eschatological meaning of the word prominent. The large corpus of Jewish-Hellenistic literature, unexplored in the book, may offer clues to the ways of (re)interpreting the Bible in Second Temple Judaism, and to the adaptation of many Greek concepts in the frame of mind in which Paul was raised. In this chapter, inevitably, the analysis is wide-ranging and based on literary sources on which there is infinite bibliography, so it is rather more sweeping than earlier chapters. However, its main goal, making clear the difference of Christian soteria with the previously studied Greek evidence, is achieved.

8 A brief conclusion and four appendixes on specific issues, the last of which tackles the complexities of Roman reception of soter-cults and the cult of Salus, complete the volume.

9 To sum up, Jim’s book (particularly chapters 2, 3, and 4) is an excellent account, with well-chosen and well sorted examples, of the wide variety of individual and communal experiences of being saved by gods in Greek antiquity. Not only historians of Greek religion will find it interesting and helpful. Any further studies on the literary and
philosophical values of soteria in ancient Greece will have to depart from her careful analysis of the epigraphic evidence.

NOTES

1. B. CURRIE, “Aristophanes and the Cult of the Saviour”, Mythos 14 (2020), analyses thoroughly Aristophanes’ mentions to show the precedents of Hellenistic saviours in classical times, not in civic cult but in private celebrations of benefactors. As for the other texts cited as examples of soter as a human title by Jim (in the wake of A.D. NOCK, “Soter and Euergetes”, Essays on Religion and the Ancient World, Oxford 1972, p. 720–735), most of them use it precisely to relate mortals to the gods: Aesch. Suppl. 980; Pind. Ol. 13.54; Hdt. 7.139 (with the formula “after the gods”, cf. J.D. MIKALSON, Athenian Popular Religion, 1983, p. 13–17). Only in Aesch. Ag. 897 and Cho. 264 (and imitating tragic air, Ar. Nub. 1161) soter appears as a private “saviour of the household”, always in a solemn tone far from colloquial triviality: as in Soph. OT 1030, it shows the unsurmountable distance between the saviour and the saved, who could not possibly survive without the soter, a distance which is likely to confer divine overtones in most cases.

2. This transition is a central interest of G. CAMASSA, Statuto del corpo e annuncio di salvezza, Roma, 2022, whose two-volume study on ancient salvation has appeared simultaneously.

AUTHORS

MIGUEL HERRERO DE JÁUREGUI
Universidad Complutense de Madrid