

# God the Saviour in Greco-Roman Popular Philosophy

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## 1. Introduction

God is often referred to as Saviour (σωτήρ) in Greco-Roman popular philosophy. His function as saviour is described as both cosmological and ethical: On the cosmological level, God is responsible for the preservation of the world and for saving it from the conflicting natural forces that threaten to tear it apart. On the ethical level, God saves humans from the suffering caused by their folly by helping them to gain the insight to live well-ordered and rational lives. In my essay, I will trace these motifs in various popular-philosophical texts and show how God's soteriological role is reflected within popular philosophy.

Before we consider such texts, I briefly need to address the ambiguity in the meaning of the Greek terminology and the notion of a saviour god in philosophy.

## 2. The meaning of the Greek terms

It was a commonplace in traditional Greek religion to call gods σωτήρες, “saviours”: as powerful beings they were able to protect and to rescue in situations beyond human control.<sup>1</sup> For our present discussion it is important to bear in mind that the Greek words normally used for “saving,” i.e. σώζω, has two prototypical meanings: it can mean saving or rescuing from danger, or it can mean keeping something safe, preserving it in a good condition.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the cognate terms σωτήρ and σωτηρία can mean either “saviour” and “salvation,” or “preserver” and “preservation.”<sup>3</sup>

When this dual meaning is applied to the notion of “God as saviour,” the phrase could therefore mean that the god is saving people from danger or affliction, but it could also refer to the god’s role in protecting someone or something and keeping them safe. This could be e.g. protecting and delivering a person from illness, or protecting a city from danger and ensuring its prosperity. Asklepios is therefore called “the great saviour” (μέγας σωτήρ) for helping people in ill-health,<sup>4</sup> and Zeus can be addressed as Saviour (Σωτήρ) who can provide the city with all kinds of blessings, including health, safety, peace and security.<sup>5</sup> When I use the term “saviour” in what follows, it is to be understood in this two-fold meaning.

### 3. God as Saviour in philosophy

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1. See e.g. the references cited in Foerster, “σωτήρ,” 1004–1005. See also Andresen, “Erlösung,” 86–89 (“Sotergotheiten”).

2. See LSJ, s.v., I.1, 2; *Brill’s Dictionary of Ancient Greek*, s.v., 1.A, B; BDAG, s.v., 1, 2; cf. also Foerster, “σώζω, σωτηρία,” 965–969, 980–1003; *TLNT*, 3.344–49.

3. LSJ, s.vv.; *Brill’s Dictionary of Ancient Greek*, s.vv.; BDAG, s.vv.; Foerster, “σωτήρ.”

4. *IG II<sup>2</sup>* 4368 (Athens). See also Versnel, *Coping*, 413.

5. *SIG* 3,985,60–62. See also in general Schwabl, “Zeus,” 1055–1057 (§25. Z[eus], der Retter und Bewahrer).

It is not unusual to find references to God as saviour or to the saving activity of God within ancient philosophy, but the God of philosophy, generally speaking, functions on such a generalized and abstract level that it is problematic to see how salvation from God could have any meaning on the level of individual humans.<sup>6</sup>

It is easier to conceive of divine protection functioning on a cosmic scale. According to the Athenian Stranger in Plato's *Laws*, "all things have been arranged by Him who cares for the universe with a view to the preservation [σωτηρία] and excellence of the whole" (*Leg.* 10,903B). He emphasizes that this occurs for the sake of the whole, and not for the benefit of the individual (10,903CD). Plato's God is however so transcendent, beyond language and experience, that even referring to him as caring and preserving seems metaphorical. This is particularly the case in the *Timaeus*, in which we find the most detailed account of divine action on the material world.<sup>7</sup> Later, In Middle Platonism, the Divine Craftsman (Demiurge) of the *Timaeus*, who formed the world by applying the Forms to matter, became a second, intermediary principle between God and the world to safeguard the absolute transcendence of God.<sup>8</sup> This also precluded the possibility of viewing God as saviour.

Aristotle made a provision in his will for statues to be erected in Stagira to Zeus the Saviour and Athena the Saviour (Diogenes Laertius 5,16), but this concession to civic religion is not reflected in his philosophy, which emphasized the transcendence of God. God as Unmoved Mover had no interest in the sublunary world.

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6. Cf. also Tarrant, "Salvation," 25–26. Tarrant's article in general has a similar interest to my own, but he approaches the topic from the perspective of ancient philosophical texts in general, although he focuses on the first centuries of the Christian era.

7. See Most, "Philosophy," 311–312.

8. See Dillon, *Alcinous*, xxxii–xxxiii; Opsomer, "Demiurges," 51–99; Sterling, "Love," 209.

Aristotle's god or divinity is not to be conceived as a person – a father or mother who loves and, as such, is concerned in some personal way with what happens to human beings and the rest of nature.... God for Aristotle is an eternally existing, extra-physical and non-material entity, whose activity is the original and fundamental model of what it is to *be* in any way or respect, and which as such serves as the foundation for the being of everything in the physical world – and as the source of the constantly renewing series of changes that keep the world unified and functioning as a single whole over the expanse of time.<sup>9</sup>

Such a god could only be considered “saviour” in the most general sense as the cause of the preservation of the world.<sup>10</sup>

The Epicureans were even more critical of the idea that the gods could intervene to help humans. According to them, the gods' state of perfect and incorruptible happiness entails that they are not concerned with what happens on earth and therefore have no involvement with human affairs.<sup>11</sup> Instead of the gods, they venerated Epicurus as saviour because he freed humans from false conceptions about the gods.<sup>12</sup>

The situation is more complex when we consider Stoicism. Stoics had no problem with divine involvement in the world: the divine principle in Stoicism pervades all things and gives them structure and cohesion; it is the over-arching rational principle (*logos*) providing the causal nexus between

9. Cooper, “Aristotle,” 141–142. See also Most, “Philosophy,” 312–313.

10. See also Barnes, “Metaphysics,” 101–108; Most, “Philosophy,” 312–313; Flashar, “Aristoteles,” 335–338.

11. See e.g. Festugière, *Épicure*, 71–100; Erler, “Epikur,” 149–153; Mansfeld, “Theology,” 462–464; Klauck, *Context*, 391–394. See also Jung, *ΣΩΤΗΡ*, 98–100. Some of the relevant texts may be found in Long/Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, frags. 13H1, 23B-E.

12. See e.g. Foerster, “σωτήρ,” 1007; Mansfeld, “Theology,” 464; Klauck, *Context*, 390.

everything that takes place. In Stoic pantheism, God as *pneuma* or *logos* is thus always immanently present and active in the world. Humans also share in this divine rational principle and therefore participate in God. Because everything that happens forms part of the divine will, the goal of human life is to live according to nature, that is, to submit to the universal reason. Although God, in this view, is the cause of the cohesion and preservation of the world, one should not expect God to save you from danger or difficulty, because whatever happens, happens for the good of the whole.<sup>13</sup> One should rather learn to accept such events as God's will.<sup>14</sup> It therefore does not make sense to consider God a saviour in Stoicism, unless the more general meaning of saving as preserving the world is meant.

#### 4. Popular-philosophical texts

When we consider popular-philosophical texts against this background, the widespread interest in salvation from God is striking. But before we turn to the texts themselves, the notion of popular philosophy first needs to be clarified.

Popular philosophy is a rather vague concept.<sup>15</sup> It can be used in a restricted sense to refer to a moral philosophy especially associated with Cynic and Stoic philosophers and aimed at the general public.<sup>16</sup> As I have shown elsewhere, however, the concept is also used in a broader sense, to refer to

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13. See Brunschwig/Sedley, "Philosophy," 170–173; Most, "Philosophy," 314–315.

14. Cf. e.g. Epictetus, *Ench.* 8: Μὴ ζήτει τὰ γινόμενα γίνεσθαι ὡς θέλεις, ἀλλὰ θέλε τὰ γινόμενα ὡς γίνεται καὶ εὐροήσεις. "Do not look for all the things that happen to happen as you wish, but wish for the things that happen as they happen, and you will do well." See also Jung, *ΣΩΤΗΡ*, 97–98.

15. I provide a short discussion of the concept in Thom, "Paul," 49–56.

16. See e.g. Goulet-Cazé, "Popularphilosophie," 154–155 = "Popular Philosophy," 617–618; also various essays in Malherbe, *Paul*; Malherbe, *Light*. Malherbe gives a brief description of popular philosophy in *Light*, 508–510.

writings that are non-technical and accessible to a non-specialist audience. Such writings often make use of ideas and motifs from more than one philosophical tradition, even if the author has a primary philosophical affiliation. The level of sophistication expected of the audience in different writings can vary from having received a general education to being well-educated.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of this understanding of popular philosophy, a number of texts from the Hellenistic and early Imperial period can be identified as “popular-philosophical.” In what follows, I will look at examples of the way God is referred to as “saviour” in various of these texts.

#### 4.1 The Pythagorean *Golden Verses*

The poem known as the *Golden Verses* derives from the Pythagorean tradition, but also makes use of Platonic and Stoic ideas. It has been variously dated from the Hellenistic to the early Imperial period, but it was in any case very well known and used by authors from different philosophical traditions from the 1st century CE onward.<sup>18</sup> As I have demonstrated previously, it is a prime example of a popular-philosophical text.<sup>19</sup>

The first part of the poem (vv. 1-49a) contains moral exhortation, but in the second part (vv. 49b-71) the author turns to the broader theological framework within which the moral exhortation needs to be put into practice. By practising the principles set out in the first part, the student will gain insight into the relationship between gods and humans (vv. 50-51), into nature (vv. 52-53), and into the cause of suffering (vv. 54-60).<sup>20</sup> According to the poem, people suffer because of a lack of understanding of what is the good and as a consequence experience moral conflict and instability (vv. 54-60). They therefore need to be saved from this pitiful condition (cf. τλήμονας, v. 55; λύσιν, v. 56).

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17. Thom, “Paul,” 49–56. See also Thom, “Popular Philosophy,” 279–295.

18. See Thom, *Golden Verses*.

19. See Thom, “Popular Philosophy,” 285–87; Thom, “Paul,” 51.

20. For a detailed discussion, see Thom, *Golden Verses*, 178–200.

God is indeed able to save humans from their misery:

Ζεῦ πάτερ, ἧ πολλῶν κε κακῶν λύσειας ἅπαντας,  
εἰ πᾶσιν δείξαις, οἷω τῷ δαίμονι χρῶνται.

Father Zeus, you would surely deliver all from many evils,  
if you would show all what kind of *daimon* they have. (vv. 61-62)

In the preceding verses, human suffering is ascribed to lack of understanding and moral purpose. Salvation therefore consists in acquiring the insight that God can provide: God saves humans by revealing their *daimon*. The meaning of δαίμων in this context is open for debate. Various possibilities have been suggested,<sup>21</sup> but a discussion of these will take us too far afield. I have argued elsewhere that “the δαίμων in [v.] 62 is a divine being intimately connected with a person’s fate, able to guide and protect one from evil.... Insight into the character of one’s δαίμων is therefore also insight into one’s fate; we will be spared many troubles by not acting against our fate ..., but by following and cultivating our fate-δαίμων instead.”<sup>22</sup> Knowledge of one’s *daimon* can help one to change one’s behaviour, but such knowledge depends on a revelation from God. In the following verses, the author refers to a supplementary revelation to which humans have access because of their divine origin:

ἀλλὰ σὺ θάρσει, ἐπεὶ θεῖον γένος ἐστὶ βροτοῖσιν,  
οἷς ἱερὰ προφέρουσα φύσις δείκνυσιν ἕκαστα.

But take courage, for mortals have a divine origin,

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21. E.g. δαίμων as fate; the personal δαίμων; δαίμων as soul; and the νοῦς-δαίμων. For a discussion of these proposals, see Thom, *Golden Verses*, 200–204.

22. Thom, *Golden Verses*, 204. In Plato, *Tim.* 90C, the *daimon* is the faculty of reason; in Epictetus, *Diatr.* 1,14,12-17 it is one’s conscience; see Long, *Epictetus*, 164–166.

to whom Nature displays and shows each sacred object. (vv. 63-64)

Because of their kinship with the gods, human beings can understand the mysteries of nature, which presumably will also help them avoid wrongful actions resulting in suffering.<sup>23</sup> There are therefore two, complementary sources of knowledge that will help the addressee obtain deliverance from evils: a revelation from God, as well as an understanding of the human condition based on one's close relationship with the divine. Mastering this, both cognitively and through habitual practice, will enable one to save one's soul from these sufferings (κρατήσεις ὧν σε κελεύω..., ψυχὴν δὲ πόνων ἀπὸ τῶνδε σωώσεις; vv. 65-66).<sup>24</sup> According to the *Golden Verses*, salvation depends on a collaboration between God and human beings.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4.2 Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*

Apart from a quotation by Stobaeus (*Ecl.* 1,1,12), there is no definite ancient testimony to how well Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus* (*SVF* 1,537) was known or how it was used.<sup>26</sup> It may have been

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23. For a detailed commentary on these verses, see Thom, *Golden Verses*, 205–212. Here it is important to note that θάρσει implies a reassurance on how to escape the evils referred to in the preceding verses, and that Nature acts as hierophant. The verb used for the revelation by Nature (δείκνυσιν) is the same as that used for Zeus in v. 62. Cf. also the promise that insight into nature will help people not to have false expectations (vv. 52-53).

24. See the commentary on these verses in Thom, *Golden Verses*, 212–215.

25. Cf. also vv. 48b-49a: ἀλλ' ἔργεῦ ἐπ' ἔργον / θεοῖσιν ἐπευξάμενος τελέσαι. "But to work! / and pray to the gods to grant the fulfillment." See Thom, *Golden Verses*, 177.

26. For a text, translation, and commentary see Thom, *Hymn to Zeus*.



known to the author of Acts<sup>27</sup> and may have served as foil for the hymn to Venus in the Epicurean poet Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* (ca. middle of the 1st century BCE),<sup>28</sup> but neither can be proved. We also do not know when it was composed during the Stoic scholar Cleanthes' career.<sup>29</sup> The *Hymn* makes use of traditional hymnic conventions and motifs, with relatively few technical terms. It was probably intended for a public performance<sup>30</sup> and would have been accessible also to educated readers outside the Stoic school.<sup>31</sup> It therefore provides us with another clear example of a popular-philosophical text.<sup>32</sup>

The main focus of the *Hymn* is the cosmic disturbance caused by the irrational behaviour of humans who disregard God's universal reason according to which everything in the world is ordered (vv. 7-8, 12-17, 20-22).<sup>33</sup> Consequently, they suffer from living a morally incoherent and fragmented life (vv. 23-31).

According to Cleanthes, Zeus is able to save humans from this sorry state (cf. δύσμοροι, v. 23). Zeus is in the first place able to restore the cosmic harmony and stability that is disrupted by human disobedience:

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27. Pesch, *Apostelgeschichte 2*, 139; Thom, "Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*," 479–480.

28. See Neustadt, "Zeushymnos," 393–395; and especially Asmis, "Lucretius' Venus," 458–470.

29. Cleanthes lived from 331/30 to 230/29 BCE and was head of the Stoa from 262/61; see Thom, *Hymn to Zeus*, 3.

30. See Thom, *Hymn to Zeus*, 13.

31. Asmis, "Myth," 413–429 suggests that it could be read on two levels: both as a Stoic philosophical text and as a conventional hymn. For reading the poem on different levels, see also Thom, "Justice," 1–21.

32. See Thom, "Popular Philosophy," 288–291; Thom, "Paul," 51.

33. See Thom, "Problem," 45–57.

ἀλλὰ σὺ καὶ τὰ περισσὰ ἐπίστασαι ἄρτια θεῖναι  
καὶ κοσμεῖν τ᾿ἀκόσμητα, καὶ οὐ φίλα σοὶ φίλα ἐστίν·  
ὧδε γὰρ εἰς ἓν πάντα συνήρμοκας, ἐσθλὰ κακοῖσιν,  
ὥσθ' ἕνα γίγνεσθαι πάντων λόγον αἰὲν ἐόντα.

But you know how to make the uneven even  
and to put into order the disorderly; even the unloved is dear to you.  
For you have thus joined everything into one, the good with the bad,  
that there comes to be one ever-existing rational order for everything. (vv. 18-21)

Zeus can secondly save people from their ignorance by giving them insight into the principle of his rule:

ἀλλὰ Ζεῦ πάνδωρε, κελαινεφές, ἀρχικέραυνε,  
ἀνθρώπους ῥύου <σύ γ'> ἀπειροσύνης ἀπὸ λυγρῆς·  
ἦν σύ, πάτερ, σκέδασον ψυχῆς ἄπο, δὸς δὲ κυρῆσαι  
γνώμης ἧ πίσυνος σὺ δίκης μέτα πάντα κυβερνᾷς·

But all-bountiful Zeus, cloud-wrapped ruler of the thunderbolt,  
deliver human beings from their destructive ignorance;  
disperse it, Father, from their souls; grant that they obtain  
the insight on which you rely when governing everything with justice. (vv. 32-35)

These two ways of saving in fact amounts to the same thing: when humans use and live according to the insight they obtain from God, they become reintegrated into the cosmic order. They will then live according to the universal law and, in the metaphor of the *Hymn*, join in the chorus continuously praising God's works (vv. 37-39).

The problem with this presentation of God's saving activity is of course that according to orthodox Stoic doctrine God as the active, rational principle is not separate from the world and that

humans as rational beings share in the universal reason. Humans should therefore save themselves by recognizing the rational principle within them and by living in accordance with it. There is no need (or possibility) of an external saviour. Scholars thus tend to explain away the personalist and theistic presentation of God in the *Hymn* as a metaphorical depiction of the rational principle expressed in terms of traditional mythology.<sup>34</sup> There has, however, always been tension between pantheism and theism within Stoicism.<sup>35</sup> The fact that God was considered to be most strongly present in the governing part of the cosmos could give rise to the view that he somehow “transcends” mortals and that he could be viewed as a “person” because his rationality is not different in kind from human rationality.<sup>36</sup> The “popular” nature of the *Hymn to Zeus* furthermore probably lead to allowances being made for the general need of a divine saviour outside and beyond the individual human being.<sup>37</sup>

#### 4.3 Pseudo-Aristotle, *On the Cosmos*

The Pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *On the Cosmos* is another text accessible to the non-specialist, educated reader.<sup>38</sup> Although it originated within a Peripatetic context, it was also influenced

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34. Cf. Gleii, “Zeushymnus,” 590; Sier, “Zeushymnos,” 106; Asmis, “Myth,” 428–429.

35. Cf. Long, *Epictetus*, 147–148.

36. Algra, “Theology,” 167–168.

37. Cf. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, “Kleanthes,” 1.325: “Trotz aller Philosophie bricht natürliche Religiosität durch, das Gefühl der eigenen Unzugänglichkeit und die Sehnsucht nach einer himmlischen Hilfe.”

38. For text, translation and introduction, see Thom, *Cosmic Order*. For *On the Cosmos* as popular-philosophical text, see Thom, “Popular Philosophy,” 291–294; Thom, “Paul,” 51–52.

by Platonism and responded to Stoic doctrines.<sup>39</sup> The dating is uncertain, but it was probably written in the late Hellenistic or early Imperial period.<sup>40</sup>

The notion of salvation from God in *On the Cosmos* is decidedly different from that found in our previous two texts. According to the latter, humans need to be saved from the misery caused by their mistaken decisions and actions. Salvation consists mainly in obtaining the right insight into the position of humans within the world and their relationship to God. In *On the Cosmos*, on the other hand, salvation is primarily the preservation of the world in view of conflicting forces at work in the world.

*On the Cosmos* begins with two alternative definitions of “cosmos”:

Κόσμος μὲν οὖν ἐστὶ σύστημα ἐξ οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς καὶ τῶν ἐν τούτοις περιεχομένων φύσεων. Λέγεται δὲ καὶ ἑτέρως κόσμος ἢ τῶν ὅλων τάξις τε καὶ διακόσμησις, ὑπὸ θεοῦ τε καὶ διὰ θεὸν φυλαττομένη.

Cosmos, then, is a system of heaven and earth and the entities contained within them. But as an alternative the arrangement and order of the universe, preserved by God and because of God, is also called cosmos. (*Mund.* 2,391b9–12)

The first is a typical Stoic definition of cosmos, but the second is Pseudo-Aristotle’s adaptation of an alternative Stoic definition,<sup>41</sup> in order to make God independent of the cosmos. In the

39. See Thom, “Cosmotheology,” 107–120.

40. See Thom, “Introduction,” 3–8.

41. See Chrysippus, *SVF* 2,527, vol. 2, p. 168,11–15 Arnim *ap.* Arius Didymus, frag. 31, p. 465,14–17 Diels = Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 1,21,5, vol. 1, p. 184,8–12 Wachsmuth: Κόσμον δ’ εἶναί φησιν ὁ Χρύσιππος σύστημα ἐξ οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς καὶ τῶν ἐν τούτοις φύσεων· ἢ τὸ ἐκ θεῶν καὶ ἀνθρώπων σύστημα καὶ ἐκ τῶν ἕνεκα τούτων γεγονότων. Λέγεται δ’ ἑτέρως κόσμος ὁ θεός, καθ’ ὃν ἡ διακόσμησις γίνεται καὶ

first half of the treatise (chs. 2-4) the author concentrates on the first definition by providing an overview of the different parts of the cosmos and of the various geological and meteorological phenomena in the sublunary world. This overview shows that there are many opposing and conflicting forces in the world that have the potential for destruction. In the second part of the treatise (chs. 5-6) the author thus addresses the question how it is possible for the world to be preserved despite these conflicting phenomena. In so doing, he turns to the second definition of cosmos: God is the cause of the preservation of the cosmos.<sup>42</sup>

Preservation of the cosmos is a dominant theme in the treatise.<sup>43</sup> God is explicitly called “truly both Preserver and Deliverer” (σωτήρ τε καὶ ἐλευθέριος ἐτύμως) in the final chapter (*Mund.* 7,401a24-25), but his saving activity is at first addressed in a rather oblique manner. In chapter 5 the author uses different terms to describe how the equilibrium between opposing forces in the cosmos is maintained. He first suggests that “perhaps nature longs for opposites and creates consonance from these” (ἴσως δὲ τῶν ἐναντίων ἢ φύσις γλίχεται καὶ ἐκ τούτων ἀποτελεῖ τὸ σύμφωνον; *Mund.* 5,396b7-8). A little further on he states, “In this way, then, a single harmony has arranged the composition of the universe, I mean heaven and earth and the cosmos as a whole, by means of the mixture of the most opposite principles” (Οὕτως οὖν καὶ τὴν τῶν ὅλων σύστασιν, οὐρανοῦ λέγω καὶ γῆς τοῦ τε σύμπαντος κόσμου, διὰ τῆς τῶν ἐναντιωτάτων κράσεως ἀρχῶν μία διεκόσμησεν ἀρμονία; *Mund.* 5,396b22-25). He next calls this harmony a power:

τελειοῦται; cf. also *SVF* 2,529,3-4; Posidonius, frag. 334 Theiler = 14 Edelstein-Kidd *ap.* Diogenes Laertius 7,138.

42. See Thom, “Cosmotheology,” 109–111.

43. Thom, “Cosmotheology,” 111–112; cf. *Mund.* 5,396b33–34; 5,397a31, b5; 6,397b16; 6,398a4, b10; 6,400a4 (σωτηρία); 6,397b20; 7,401a24 (σωτήρ); 5,397a3 (σωστικός); cf. also 2,391b12; 4,396a32; 5,397b7 (φυλάττω).

γῆν τε πᾶσαν καὶ θάλασσαν αἰθέρα τε καὶ ἥλιον καὶ σελήνην καὶ τὸν ὅλον οὐρανὸν  
 διεκόσμησε μία ἢ διὰ πάντων διήκουσα δύναμις, ἐκ τῶν ἀμίκτων καὶ ἑτεροίων, ἀέρος τε καὶ  
 γῆς καὶ πυρὸς καὶ ὕδατος, τὸν σύμπαντα κόσμον δημιουργήσασα καὶ μιᾷ διαλαβοῦσα  
 σφαίρας ἐπιφανείᾳ τάς τε ἐναντιωτάτας ἐν αὐτῷ φύσεις ἀλλήλαις ἀναγκάσασα ὁμολογήσαι  
 καὶ ἐκ τούτων μηχανησαμένη τῷ παντὶ σωτηρίαν.

A single power pervading all things has set in order all the earth and sea, ether, sun, moon and the whole heaven, having created the whole cosmos from the unmixed and diverse, from air and earth and fire and water, and by holding them individually with the single surface of a sphere, compelled the most opposite elements in it [sc. the cosmos] to agree with one another, and from these brought about preservation for the whole. (*Mund.* 5,396b27-34)

This “agreement” (ὁμολογία) is further described as “having an equal share” (ἰσομοιρία), being “in equilibrium” (τὴν ἴσιν ἀντίστασιν), “equality” (τὸ ἴσον) and “concord” (ὁμόνοια) (*Mund.* 5,396b34-397a4).

If we only consider chapter 5, the preservation (σωτηρία) of the cosmos may seem like a natural consequence of the way the cosmos is structured, but the broader context of the treatise corrects this interpretation. The way the structuring function of harmony is described (τὴν τῶν ὅλων σύστασιν, οὐρανοῦ λέγω καὶ γῆς τοῦ τε σύμπαντος κόσμου, ... μία διεκόσμησεν ἁρμονία) resembles the structuring by God found in the definition of cosmos quoted above (cf. especially διεκόσμησεν and διακόσμησις). Harmony, as the power pervading all things (μία ἢ διὰ πάντων διήκουσα δύναμις), is identical with the power of God that, according to chapter 6, pervades the whole cosmos and is the cause of the preservation of things on earth (τὴν δὲ δύναμιν διὰ τοῦ σύμπαντος κόσμου διήκουσαν ... αἰτιὸν τε γίνεσθαι τοῖς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς σωτηρίας; *Mund.* 6,398b8–10).

What in chapter 5 appeared to be a function of the constitution of the world is in fact caused by God: God, according to chapter 6, is “the cause holding the universe together” (τῆς τῶν ὅλων συνεκτικῆς αἰτίας; *Mund.* 6,397b9); “God is really the preserver of all things and the begetter of everything however it is brought about in this cosmos” (σωτὴρ μὲν γὰρ ὄντως ἀπάντων ἐστὶ καὶ

γενέτωρ τῶν ὅπωςδῆποτε κατὰ τόνδε τὸν κόσμον συντελουμένων ὁ θεός; *Mund.* 6,397b20-22).<sup>44</sup>

Despite appearances, there is indeed a divine saviour who safeguards the stability of the world. God is invisible, but can clearly be seen from his actions in the world (*Mund.* 6,399b19-25).<sup>45</sup>

In order to maintain his transcendence and dignity, God does not, however, act directly himself, but uses his power (δύναμις) as intermediary.<sup>46</sup> He accomplishes everything “without indeed enduring the hardship of a creature hard at work for itself, but by making use of an untiring power, by means of which he prevails even over things that seem to be far away” (οὐ μὴν αὐτουργοῦ καὶ ἐπιπόνου ζῴου κάματος ὑπομένων, ἀλλὰ δυνάμει χρώμενος ἀτρύτῳ, δι’ ἧς καὶ τῶν πόρρω δοκούντων εἶναι περιγίνεται; *Mund.* 6,397b22–24; cf. also 6,400b6-13).

In the rest of chapter 6 the author uses extensive images and comparisons to explain how it is possible for God to accomplish diverse things on earth at a distance by means of his power.<sup>47</sup> Two in particular are of interest for our topic. The first comparison is that of a keystone in a vault which keeps the vault stable. The second is that of Phidias’s statue of Athena on the Acropolis, which is supposed to have contained an image of the sculptor’s face in the middle of her shield. The statue was constructed in such a way that the whole statue would collapse if someone tries to remove the image. In the same way God maintains the harmony and preservation of the universe (τὴν τῶν ὅλων ἁρμονίαν τε καὶ σωτηρίαν). The author immediately points out, however, that God is not at the centre

44. Compare also the description of the cosmos as the “begetter of all things” (τοῦ πάντων γενετῆρος ... κόσμου; *Mund.* 5,397a4-5) with the description of God as begetter of everything in the cosmos.

45. See on this topos also Thom, “Paul,” 59–61.

46. Tarrant, “Salvation,” 27 sees here “a struggle between immanence and transcendence” which the author tries to overcome by means of “God’s *dynamis* as the penetrative force, as the vehicle of communication.”

47. See the excellent analysis by Betegh/Gregoric, “Analogy,” 574–591.

of the cosmos, but above everything, in a pure region (*Mund.* 6,399b29-400a10). It is not clear how the mechanics of this analogy is supposed to work.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps God by his very existence ensures the stability of the world.<sup>49</sup>

God's role as saviour in *On the Cosmos* therefore does not concern individuals or their moral dilemmas. There is one curious exception in *Mund.* 6,400a33-b6, where the author refers to an example of episodic intervention in the world: the deity (τὸ δαιμόνιον) saved (σώζειν) two young men and their parents during an eruption of Mount Aetna because of their piety.<sup>50</sup> Here the author seems to turn away from philosophy to popular religion.<sup>51</sup> The treatise also concludes (401b23-29) with a quotation of two excerpts from Plato's *Laws* (716A, 730C) referring to Justice (δίκη) as God's companion who upholds the divine law and exhorting the reader to participate in Justice in order to be happy. Although justice is not an explicit motif in *On the Cosmos*, the prominent position of justice at the end of the treatise seems to imply that an understanding of God's ordering of the world will enable one to practise justice as well, thus giving a moral significance to such understanding.<sup>52</sup> The general thrust of the treatise is, however, that God as saviour preserves the cosmos as a whole by ensuring its stability and continued existence.<sup>53</sup>

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48. See also Betegh/Gregoric, "Analogy," 583–584.

49. Cf. also Tarrant, "Salvation," 27: "It is in the essence of such a God [sc. an unmoved mover] to be *stable*, always what it is; and that part of its influence on the sublunary world should be the *stability* that can be imparted to sublunary species" (emphasis original).

50. Cf. τὸ τῶν εὐσεβῶν γένος ἐξόχως ἐτίμησε τὸ δαιμόνιον. "The deity especially honoured the family of pious men" (*Mund.* 400b1).

51. See Thom, "Cosmotheology," 118.

52. In the second extract, the author replaced "Truth" with "Justice," an indication of its significance here; see Thom, "Cosmotheology," 119.

53. Cf. also Tarrant, "Salvation".



## 5. Conclusion

Although our selection of popular-philosophical texts is taken from different philosophical traditions (Pythagorean, Stoic, Aristotelian), it is too small to be representative of all such texts. At the same time, the motifs encountered in the texts we investigated may be considered broadly representative of popular philosophy.

In both the *Golden Verses* and in Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*, there is a strong emphasis on salvation by means of obtaining the right insight and understanding. In the *Golden Verses* this is insight into one's own position within the world and in relation to God; in the *Hymn to Zeus* it is insight into the way the world is structured and administered by God. Both these texts require human participation for salvation to become effective: in the *Golden Verses* humans have to master and practise a certain way of life; in the *Hymn to Zeus* they have to assent to and live according to God's universal law underlying nature.

In the *Hymn to Zeus*, however, God's saving role is not only confined to providing insight. He is also able to restore the harmony and stability of the cosmos. One may say that the way the world is structured by God already entails such correction of cosmic disturbances. *On the Cosmos* is not interested in disturbances caused by human incalcitrance. In this text, God's salvation consists in preserving the world from destruction and in maintaining its stability despite the conflicting and chaotic forces present in the world. By doing so, he provides a stable framework for humans to live a life of justice.

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