

The Noun βοηθός as a Divine Title

Prolegomena to a future HTLS article¹

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Introduction

In Christian prayer language, addressing God as “helper” is more than common. As early as about the beginning of the 2nd century C.E., it occurs in a list of divine attributes in *1 Clem.* 59.3 where God is called “the helper of those who are in danger” (τὸν τῶν κινδυνευόντων βοηθόν).² In the mid-second century C.E., we find another quotation of βοηθός in an apologetical context. Addressing the issue of theodicy, Justin Martyr quotes a putative contradiction: It is possible that God does not intercede in favor of his believers, even though “we confess God as a helper” (*2 Apol.* 5.1: εἰ θεὸν ὠμολογοῦμεν βοηθόν). No matter how Justin tries to resolve the theological problem of evil that God does not prevent, he obviously takes for granted that God can be considered a helper of humans. As for the Latin-speaking Church Fathers, the Latin translation of βοηθός, the noun *adiutor*, is very frequent, too, and it seems to need no further explanation.³

¹ I wish to express my sincere thanks to my colleagues with whom I was able to discuss several aspects of this article: Ralph Brucker (Hamburg), Jennifer Dines (Cambridge), Johann Goeken (Strasbourg), Jan Joosten (Strasbourg), Christoph Kugelmeier (Saarbrücken), Anna Passoni Dell’Acqua (Milan), and Emanuela Prinzivalli (Rome).

² The First Letter of Clement can be dated between 70 and 130 C.E., see E. PRINZIVALI / M. SIMONETTI, *Seguendo Gesù. Testi cristiani delle origini*, vol. I, Rome: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla / Milan: Mondadori, 2010, 83. As for the LXX background of the citation, see H. E. LONA, *Der erste Clemensbrief* (KAV 2), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998, 595; H. LÖHR, *Studien zum frühchristlichen und frühjüdischen Gebet. Untersuchungen zu 1 Clem 59 bis 61 in seinem literarischen, historischen und theologischen Kontext* (WUNT 160), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003, 196–198.

³ Among the numerous examples which are not quotations of earlier writings, see e.g. Jerome, ep. 140.56: *ita et homo a principio conditionis suae deo utitur adiutore et, cum illius sit gratiae, quod creatus est, illius misericordiae, quod subsistit et uiuit . . .*

The fact that the divine title “helper” is very popular in Christian theological language raises the question of whether it has a background in the New Testament literature. However, at first glance one notes that the New Testament evidence is more than meager.⁴ Indeed, the noun βοηθός never appears in the New Testament prayer texts, either in hymns like the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) or in supplications like Jesus’ Gethsemane prayer (Mark 14:36 parr.). As a New Testament *hapax legomenon*, βοηθός only occurs in Heb 13:6 which is a quotation of Ps 117:6^{LXX}: κύριος ἐμοὶ βοηθός, [καὶ] οὐ φοβηθήσομαι, τί ποιήσει μοι ἄνθρωπος; “the Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid, what can man do to me?”⁵

Given the scarcity of New Testament evidence of βοηθός as a divine title, one crucial question needs to be answered. We have to start from the fundamental fact that in Antiquity divine names and titles were not chosen indiscriminately. On the contrary, a deity had one or more names and titles which were obviously predetermined by tradition or convention. Therefore, it was of the utmost importance to use these and no other names and titles in prayers and invocations.⁶ If this assumption is right it would be logical to argue that the early Christian authors did not themselves invent the divine title βοηθός. This raises the question of where this element of prayer language comes from. To put in general terms, did the Greek speaking Christian writers follow the literary conventions of pagan prayer language? Did they find the noun βοηθός in other contexts dealing with gods? Or were they inspired by the prayer language attested in the Septuagint and in the other writings of Jewish Greek literature? Finally, do we have to take into account other sources, e.g. papyri?

The aim of this article is to shed more light on these questions which seem to be neglected in recent biblical research. In the next three sections, the following issues will be addressed: 1. Does the noun βοηθός appear in relation to a deity or to deities in general in the so-called pagan Greek literature and, if so, in which contexts? 2. Do we find occurrences of βοηθός in the papyri which contribute to a better understanding of Jewish and Christian prayer language? 3. Finally, what can be said about the use of βοηθός in the Septuagint and in later Jewish literature in Greek? The article, which does not claim to be

⁴ F. BÜCHSEL, “βοηθέω κτλ.,” *TWNT* 1 (1933), 627.

⁵ For further information on the function of the Psalm quotation in the paraenetical context of Heb 13:1–6 see the commentaries, e.g. H. F. WEISS, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KEK 13), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991, 706–707.

⁶ See e.g. W. D. FURLEY/J. M. BREMER, *Greek Hymns. Selected Cult Songs from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period. Volume One: The Texts in Translation* (STAC 9), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001, 52: “... the precise naming of the god addressed was important both from the point of view of politeness and courtesy, so as not to offend a sensitive power, and from the point of view of establishing the precise channel along which one wished divine succour to flow.”

exhaustive, will be concluded by some remarks which address the crucial question: How did God come to be called a helper?

1. Gods as helpers of humans in Greek literature

1.1 The evidence of prayer texts

Classical and hellenistic Greek literature contains numerous prayer texts which are available in recent editions⁷. As for the divine title βοηθός, it must be stated at the outset that a look at classical and hellenistic Greek prayer language does not show promising results. To be sure, numerous words and expressions bear on the activity of a deity which is said to intervene in favor of humans and, more concretely, to help them, e.g. πάρειμι “to be present so as to help”⁸ and ἀρήγω “to help, to succor”⁹ and its derivative nouns and adjectives¹⁰. However, it turns out to be much more difficult to find occurrences of the noun βοηθός as well as the corresponding verb βοηθέω in the extant prayer texts of the classical and hellenistic era. It is beyond doubt that speakers quote a wide range of divine titles in order to convince the respective deity to intervene on their behalf or on behalf of other persons. Still, it has to be said that the title βοηθός seems to be missing in the different types of extant prayers and supplications. This negative result is confirmed by Karl Keyßner whose list of terms of the semantic field of “help” does not mention βοηθός¹¹. It is perhaps no coincidence that in their edition of Greek prayer texts Frédéric Chapot and Bernard Laurot do not quote either an example of βοηθός¹².

1.1.1 Gods as allies in wars

A priori, we cannot rule out entirely the possibility that the divine title βοηθός might have been used by Greek speakers in the context of prayers. However, we have to bear in mind that the word βοηθός is mostly used in different contexts and not chiefly in prayers. Apart from a more or less neutral sense where

⁷ E.g. F. CHAPOT/B. LAUROT, *Corpus des prières grecques et romaines. Textes réunis, traduits et commentés* (Recherches sur les rhétoriques religieuses 2), Turnhout: Brepols, 2001.

⁸ E.g. Hermocles, *Ithyphalli* 1–2: Ὡς οἱ μέγιστοι τῶν θεῶν καὶ φίλτατοι | τῇ πόλει πάρεισιν.

⁹ E.g. Sophocles, *Electra* 115: ἔλθετ', ἀρήξατε, τεύσασθε πατρὸς φόνον ἡμετέρου.

¹⁰ For a detailed list of words expressing the idea of help see e.g. K. KEYSSNER, *Gottesvorstellung und Lebensauffassung im griechischen Hymnus* (WSAW 2), Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1932, 101–103.

¹¹ KEYSSNER, *Gottesvorstellung*, 101–103.

¹² CHAPOT/LAUROT, *Corpus des prières*, passim.

the kind of help or assistance is not specified¹³, in many cases a βοηθός appears in a military context. In concrete terms, a βοηθός – used in the singular or in the plural – refers to allies who offer support in fight¹⁴. This idea is sometimes underscored by a parallel noun or adjective, σύμμαχος, literally “fighting along with”¹⁵. It is particularly interesting to note that the word βοηθός can also be used in a figurative sense: Apart from human “helpers”, gods can be considered to be the helpers of a people, of a tribe or of a town especially when it is in military danger. Let us quote three examples each of which is part of a speech which encourages going to war against a frightening enemy:

1. In a speech attributed to Demosthenes (*Or.* 11: *In epistulam Philippi*) but actually taken from the *Philippica* of Anaximenes of Lampsacus (see *FGH* 72 F 11b), the orator raises the courage for battle of his Athenian fellow citizens by the following argument: πρώτον μὲν γὰρ εἰκός, ὃ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, τοὺς θεοὺς μεγίστους ὑμῖν ὑπάρχειν συμμάχους καὶ βοηθοὺς “for first, men of Athens, it is probable that your mightiest allies and supporters will be the gods” (§ 2). It deserves attention that the gods bear the same designations as human allies, i.e. σύμμαχοι καὶ βοηθοί (see above), as if they would hurry to help the warring army.

2. About three centuries later the Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus, in his *Roman Antiquities*, reports a speech of the Roman dictator Aulus Postumius. Before the battle of Lake Regillus (around 496 B.C.E.) he encourages his soldiers by recalling that help comes from the gods: χρῆ δὲ καὶ ὑμᾶς, ἄνδρες λοχαγοὶ τε καὶ στρατιῶται, μαθόντας, ὅτι συμμάχους ἔχετε τοὺς θεοὺς, οἵπερ αἰεὶ τὴν πόλιν σώζουσιν, ἄνδρας ἀγαθοὺς γενέσθαι περὶ τόνδε τὸν ἀγῶνα· ἐπισταμένους, ὅτι τῆς παρὰ θεῶν βοηθείας ὑπάρχει τυγχάνειν τοῖς γενναίως ἀγωνιζομένοις “But it is necessary that you too, both officers and men, knowing that you have for allies the gods, who have always preserved our city, should acquit yourselves as brave men in this battle, remembering that the assistance of the gods is given to those who fight nobly” (*Ant. Rom.* 6.6.3).

¹³ E.g. Aesop, *Fab.* 19: ὅτι οὕτω καὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων μάταιοι εἰσιν, ὅσοι βοηθοῖς προστρέχουσιν, οἷς τὸ ἀδικεῖν μᾶλλον ἔμφρον “thus, there are foolish people who look for helpers who have an inborn inclination towards wrongdoing”; Plato, *Phaedr.* 275e: πλημμελούμενος δὲ καὶ οὐκ ἐν δίκῃ λυοδρηθεὶς τοῦ πατρὸς αἰεὶ δεῖται βοηθοῦ· αὐτὸς γὰρ οὐτ’ ἀμύνασθαι οὔτε βοηθῆσαι δυνατὸς αὐτῷ “when ill-treated or unjustly offended it [i.e. a written text] always needs its father [i.e. the author] to help it; for it is unable to protect or help itself”. See also Plato, *Resp.* 369c.

¹⁴ Herodotus, *Hist.* 6.100; Thucydides, *Hist.* 1.53.4; Polybius, *Hist.* 3.31.5; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl.* 11.35.4.

¹⁵ E.g. Xenophon, *Mem.* 3.4.9; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl.* 14.67.3.

3. In the course of the 3rd century C.E., we find an analogous idea in Herodianus, *Ab excessu divi Marci* 3.6.7, where the future Roman emperor Septimius Severus calls on his army to attack his opponent Clodius Albinus: ἴωμεν οὖν τῇ συνήθει χρώμενοι προθυμία τε καὶ ἀνδρεία γενναίως ἐπ’ αὐτόν, θεοῦς τε ἔχοντες βοηθοῦς... “let us therefore go forth against him, relying on our customary zeal and valor, with the gods as our allies...”.

Albeit with slight differences, these three texts, which are not written in the same epoch by the same author, display a common feature, a kind of *topos*: When calling on their soldiers to fight, political or military leaders try to convince them that the gods support them in the battle. Nevertheless, although gods are considered to be “helpers”, one should not lose sight of the fact that the aforementioned texts are not to be confused with prayers. On the one hand, one has to be aware of the fact that the literary genre is different insofar as the noun βοηθός is included in a speech, more precisely in a type of sym-buleutic speech which has its *Sitz im Leben* in the organizational and psychological preparations for a war or a battle. On the other hand, the speaker does not address the deity directly by using the fitting divine titles, e.g. in the context of an invocation, but speaking of the gods as βοηθοί in the third person. These differences are not insignificant. In fact, the speakers are not primarily concerned with invoking the gods’ help in a specific situation, by reminding them that they are helpers of humans¹⁶. Rather, their aim is to encourage their human addressees by arguing that the gods are their helpers in the battle.

1.1.2 The noun βοηθός in reference to a specific deity

Apart from the previous mention of a military context, we find some scattered attestations of the noun βοηθός in reference to gods in a few Greek texts of Hellenistic and Roman times. However, in contrast to the three passages cited above, the noun does not qualify anonymous gods in the plural to a specific deity. E.g., in his *Hymn to Artemis*, Callimachus of Cyrene (3rd cent. B.C.E.) puts the following words in Artemis’ mouth: πόλεσιν δ’ ἐπιμείζομαι ἀνδρῶν μούνον ὅτ’ ὀξείησιν ὑπ’ ὠδίνεσσι γυναῖκες τειρόμεναι καλέωσι βοηθόον “and the cities of men I will visit only when women suffering from severe labour pains call me as helper” (*Hymn. Dian.* 20–22).¹⁷ A couple of centuries later, the title βοηθός is attributed to the Egyptian god Sarapis by Aelius Aristides:

¹⁶ For this idea see H. USENER, *Götternamen. Versuch einer Lehre von der religiösen Begriffsbildung*, Bonn: Cohen, 1896 (= ²1929), 336: “Zur erhofften Wirkung ist das treffende Wort die wichtigste Bedingung: man muß den Gott bei dem Namen anrufen und verpflichten, der das Vermögen, gerade in dem besonderen Falle zu helfen, einschließt.”

¹⁷ For the Greek text and a recent German translation see Kallimachos, *Werke. Griechisch und deutsch. Herausgegeben und übersetzt von Markus Asper*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2004, 402.

σὲ γὰρ δὴ πᾶς τις ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ βοηθὸν καλεῖ, Σάραπι “for everybody can call you in every time a helper, Sarapis” (Εἰς Σάραπιν, *Or.* 45.14 Keil [p. 50, 32 Jebb]). However, Sarapis is not the only god to merit this title. Among the numerous titles which serve to characterize Zeus, βοηθός is used by Aristides as well. He concludes his *Hymn to Zeus* as follows: ἀπὸ τούτου ἄρχεσθαι χρὴ καὶ τελευτᾶν εἰς τοῦτον, παντὸς λόγου καὶ πάσης πράξεως ἡγεμόνα καὶ βοηθὸν καλοῦντας ... “with him [Zeus] we should begin, and end with him, calling him leader and helper of every word and every action ...” (Εἰς Δία, *Or.* 43.31 Keil [p. 8, 27 Jebb]). Some lines earlier, in a quite long list of titles¹⁸, Zeus is referred to as ἐν δὲ νόσοις καὶ πᾶσι καιροῖς βοηθῶν Σωτῆρ “the Savior, helping in diseases and in every circumstance” (*Or.* 43.30 Keil [p. 8, 17–18 Jebb]).

In the framework of this article, we must leave open the question of whether these quotations are exceptional or not.¹⁹ Certainly, the title βοηθός is absent from other “descriptions” of the gods, e.g. Cornutus’ *De natura deorum* who does not call by this title neither Zeus nor any other divinity of the Greek pantheon.²⁰ However, there is some evidence that the noun βοηθός was not totally incompatible with contemporary religious language. An interesting example is to be found in Epictetus’ *Discourses* written down by Arrian at the beginning of the 2nd century C.E. Among the advice that Epictetus gives his readers, one can read: τοῦ θεοῦ μέμνησο, ἐκεῖνον ἐπικαλοῦ βοηθὸν καὶ παραστάτην ὡς τοὺς Διοσκόρους ἐν χειμῶνι οἱ πλεόντες “remember God: call on him as a helper and defender, like sailors who call on the Dioscuri in a storm” (*Diss.* 2.18.29).

This quotation is interesting for various reasons. First of all, it is not a far-fetched idea to mention the attitudes of sailors whose lives are in danger (see e.g. Jonah 1:5–7). On this assumption, Epictetus argues that sailors send supplications to the Dioscuri (= Castor and Pollux) when threatened by storm. In a similar manner, the Stoic philosopher recommends his followers to pray to God as a helper and protector. Regardless of whether Epictetus tends to

¹⁸ For an analysis of these titles, see J. AMANN, *Die Zeusrede des Ailios Aristides* (TBAW 12), Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1931, 103–109.

¹⁹ It would be worthwhile to address the question of whether βοηθός appears in narrative texts as well, e.g. in Longus, *Daphnis et Chloe* 2.7.6: Ἐκάλουν τὸν Πᾶνα βοηθόν “I called upon Pan as helper”.

²⁰ This text is available in two recent editions with German translations and annotations: Cornutus, *Die Griechischen Götter: Ein Überblick über Namen, Bilder und Deutungen*, ed. H.-G. Nesselrath et al. (SAPERE 14), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009; Lucius Annaeus Cornutus, *Einführung in die griechische Götterlehre*, ed. P. Busch/J. K. Zangenberg (TzF 95), Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010. Both editions, however, use the Greek text of the old and deficient Teubner edition *Cornuti theologiae Graecae compendium*, ed. C. Lang, Leipzig: Teubner, 1881. A new critical edition is still a *desideratum*.

develop a monotheistic idea of God, it deserves attention that his advice supposes a kind of personal piety²¹ which expects help from God whatever be the situation. From this perspective, this quotation has much more in common with Christian prayer language than the aforementioned appeals launched to fight the enemies. However, it must be pointed out that the quotation does not allow clear-cut conclusions concerning the text of an underlying prayer formula. Or to put it in another way, we cannot “reconstruct” a prayer of this kind which Epictetus could have had in mind. In any case, it seems not to be impossible that Epictetus is familiar with a prayer vocabulary that includes the noun *βοηθός* among other divine titles.

2. Helpers of humans in the documentary papyri

2.1 Gods as helpers?

Given the scarcity of attestations of *βοηθός* with reference to deities, the following question remains to be asked: Do the Egyptian documentary papyri provide some material that takes us a step further? In concrete terms, do we find occurrences of *βοηθός* which enable us to better understand the use of this noun in prayer language?

When addressing this issue one has to bear in mind two facts: on the one hand, the language of most of the papyri is less literary than many prayers, hymns and narrative texts included in classical Greek literature, on the other, it is perhaps more influenced by spoken language. Thus, at least in theory papyri could be able to provide examples we have looked for in vain in Greek literature. However, on closer examination the documents one could adduce in favor of this idea seem to be rare. Apparently, one of the specific meanings of *βοηθός* in the Egyptian context, above all papyri of Roman times, is “assistant” of a tax gatherer or another civil servant²². As for *βοηθός* as a

²¹ See R. RADICE, *La concezione di Dio e del divino in Epitteto*, Milan: CUSL, 1982, 98, who recognizes a tendency towards the ideas of monotheism and a personal god in Epictetus' *Discourses*. He draws the following conclusion: “sicché, nel complesso, può dirsi che la teologia del nostro filosofo effettivamente muova verso forme di monoteismo (Dio-Demiurgo), escluda ogni aspetto sostanzialmente panteistico e attenui grandemente i motivi politeistici ... e fondi filosoficamente quella diffusa e profonda sensibilità religiosa, grazie alla quale l'autore può conferire a Dio le note e gli atteggiamenti propri di un essere personale.”

²² See already F. H. PREISIGKE, *Fachwörter des öffentlichen Verwaltungsdienstes Ägyptens*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1915 (= Hildesheim: Olms, 1975), 40: “Hilfsarbeiter bei verschiedensten Behörden”; J. H. MOULTON/G. MILLIGAN, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament illustrated from the papyri and other non-literary sources*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1930, 114; O. MONTEVECCHI, *La papirologia. Ristampa riveduta e corretta con addenda*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1998, 172.

divine title, the *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* by James Hope Moulton and George Milligan²³ only mentions a papyrus written around the year 356 C.E., P.Lond. 2.410 (= P.Abinn. 34), lines 7–9: μετὰ τὸν θεὸν οὐδὲν [sic] ἔχομεν ἡμῆς [sic] βοηθὸν ὑμῶν “after God, we have no helper than you”²⁴.

To this might be added a text of older date quoted by Hermut Löhr²⁵: *UPZ* 1.52, a petition dating from the 2nd century B.C.E. (after 161 B.C.E.), lines 8–9, where the petitioner declares: οὐθένα ἔχομεν [sic] βοηθὸν [sic] ἀλλ’ ἢ σὲ καὶ τὸν Σάραπιν “we have no other helper besides you and Sarapis”. The name “Sarapis” could certainly refer to the god Sarapis who is considered a helper in the given context (see above the quotation of Aristides’ Hymn on Sarapis). Therefore, this papyrus, that goes back to the Hellenistic era, would be a good example of the pagan use of the divine title βοηθός even though there are still some doubts. Indeed, “Sarapis” is a name used not only for the Egyptian god but for human beings as well (see e.g. P.Lond. 2.257). If this were the case, the petitioner would speak of two human “helpers”: Sarapion and Sarapis. We cannot definitely rule out this possibility although there is a strong case for identifying Sarapis with the Egyptian god, the petition being addressed only to Sarapion.

Be this as it may, even if we investigate more in depth the numerous occurrences of βοηθός in the papyri this would lead to a negative conclusion: In the extant papyri this noun refers only in exceptional cases to a god. Certainly, this result might be corrected by new findings, but in the present circumstances it would be too hypothetical to assume that the key of interpretation of later Christian use of βοηθός lies in the quoted papyri.

2.2 Human helpers

In a certain sense a prayer represents a direct speech in which a human person speaks to a deity. Interestingly, it turned out to be difficult to find examples of prayers where a deity is referred to as βοηθός although this title occurs in Greek hymns. In view of the fact that the name of Sarapis appears in the context of a petition (see above 2.1), it seems advisable to trace the line back to other contemporary papyri. In particular, it could be useful to pursue an idea by Orsolina Montevocchi who happens to mention the title βοηθός when speaking of the courtly vocabulary of the papyri²⁶. Although the evidence

²³ MOULTON/MILLIGAN, *Vocabulary*, 114.

²⁴ For this text, see R. S. BAGNALL/R. CRIBIÖRE, *Women’s Letters from Ancient Egypt 300 BC – AD 800*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006, 358–359.

²⁵ LÖHR, *Studien*, 197.

²⁶ O. MONTEVECCHI, *La papirologia*, 77; see also A. PASSONI DELL’ACQUA, “La metafora biblica di Dio come roccia e la sua soppressione nelle antiche versioni”, *EL* 91 (1977), 417–453: 432.

seems to be quite meager, it is nowadays possible – thanks to computer concordances of the papyri – to provide some more significant material. In fact, given a certain number of examples it is no exaggeration to state that the title βοηθός has a specific *Sitz im Leben* in petitions, particularly in their conclusions. It will suffice to quote three examples:

1. In the course of the 3rd century B.C.E., a certain Paeis, according to his own statements in unlawful detention, writes a petition to Zenon, claiming that he is his only helper (P.Lond. 7.2045, line 4): οὐκ ἔχομεν βοηθὸν ἄλλον οὐθένά ἀλλὰ σέ “we have no other helper than you”.²⁷

2. In an *enteuxis* (petition) submitted to the king Ptolemy in 220 B.C.E., a person named Ptolemaios of Macedonian origin claims compensation because his pigs have been killed. The concluding formula of the petition reads as follows (P.Enteux. 70 = P.Lille 2.21, lines 13–14): βασιλεῦ, ἐπὶ σέ κ[ατα]φυγών, τ[ὸν] κοινὸν εὐεργέτην καὶ βοηθόν, [τεῦ]ξομαι τῆς παρὰ σου βοηθείας “King, fleeing to you, the common benefactor and helper, I will obtain help from you”.

3. In another *enteuxis* submitted to the king in 220 B.C.E., a merchant whose name is unknown concludes his request as follows (P.Heid. 6.376, lines 17–18): ὅπως ἐπὶ σέ καταφυγών, βασιλεῦ, τὸν πάντων βοηθὸν [sic] καὶ εὐεργέτην, τύχω τοῦ δικαίου “in order to obtain what is just, by fleeing to you, King, helper and benefactor of all”.

It is clear from these documents dating from the 3rd century B.C.E. that petitioners employed the title βοηθός when writing to the king or to another person in power. One might even go further and argue that writers or speakers do not make a clear terminological distinction between a divine and a human helper. Indeed, irrespective of whether Sarapis (see above, 2.1), Ptolemy or Zenon is considered to be the only trustworthy helper, he is called βοηθός. Finally, there is one additional observation concerning style: In contrast to texts like hymns, speeches and philosophical *diatribe*, the aforementioned petitions directly address somebody as a helper. From this point of view, they share one essential element with prayers.

3. God as helper in the Septuagint and in extra-biblical texts

3.1 Preliminary observations

In the LXX, the noun βοηθός has about 60 occurrences. Roughly speaking, human βοηθοὶ are by far in the minority in comparison with God. Leaving

²⁷ For this document, see C. ORRIEUX, *Les papyrus de Zénon. L'horizon d'un grec en Égypte au III^e siècle avant J.C.*, Paris: Macula, 1983, 128–129.

aside the few cases where the word probably denotes allies (1 Chr 12:19; Ezek 12:14; Nah 3:9, see above, 1.1.1)²⁸, only rarely does βοηθός explicitly refer to a human helper. Perhaps the most prominent case is the helper to be created for man/Adam in Gen 2:18: a “helper corresponding to him” (βοηθὸν κατ’ αὐτόν). In Gen 2:20 such a helper which is like man/Adam (ὅμοιος αὐτῷ) is still missing among the different sorts of animals. Within the deuterocanonical literature, Gen 2:18 is quoted in part by the two versions of the prayer of Tobit, Tob^{BA} 8:6 and Tob^S 8:6. Furthermore, the text is alluded to in Sir 36:29[24] (βοηθὸν κατ’ αὐτόν “a help like himself”). On the whole, the respective passages do not allow further conclusions concerning the kind of help to be offered by the wife qualified as βοηθός. Apart from Gen 2:18, 20 and the allusions to this text already quoted, the LXX texts several times employ the formula “who has/had no helper” (e.g. Job 29:12; Ps 71:12^{LXX}) or “there is no helper” (2 Kgdms 22:42; Isa 63:5; Esth C:14 [4:17¹]; Jdt 7:25)²⁹. Of course, these laconic formulas are too general to determine whether a divine or a human helper is implied in each of the cases. Be that as it may, these few LXX occurrences of βοηθός are in line with one observation made above (see 1.1.1 and note 13): The noun βοηθός can be employed without a closer description of the help needed or expected in the respective contexts.

3.2 God as helper

Most of the LXX occurrences of βοηθός appear in the Psalter as well as in some related texts. All of these quotations share one important feature insofar as the noun is explicitly referred to God.

In general, where the LXX texts translated from Hebrew are concerned, the respective equivalents of βοηθός chiefly derive from the root ‘*zr* “help”. Thus, βοηθός renders the following terms which are quoted according to the Masoretic Text (MT):

- the noun ‘*ezær* “help, helper”, which is already used in Gen 2:18, 20, in Exod 18:4; Deut 33:7, 26, 29; Ps 26:9; 32:30; 69:6; 113:17; 145:5^{LXX} (see also Sir 36:24^B),
- the participle of the verb ‘*āzar* “help”, ‘*ozær* “one who helps” (Ps 29:11; 117:7^{LXX}),
- the inflected form of the same verb, *ya’^azār* “he will help me” (Isa 50:7),
- the noun ‘*æzrāh* / ‘*æzrātāh* “help, assistance” (Ps 45:2; 62:8^{LXX}).

Moreover, βοηθός is once the Greek equivalent of *mōšīa* “savior” (2 Kgdms 22:42; the parallel text Ps 17:42 reads ὁ σῶζων instead of βοηθός).

²⁸ See M. HARL et al., *La Bible d’Alexandrie. Les Douze Prophètes 4–9: Joël, Abdiou, Jonas, Naoum, Ambakoum, Sophonie* (BibAlex XXIII 4–9), Paris: Cerf, 1999, 226.

²⁹ See for a similar formula Menander, *Dyscolus* 934: οὐδεὶς βοηθός σοι πάρεστιν “there is no helper for you”.

What is particularly noticeable is that βοηθός renders various words of the semantic field of “rock, fortress”. This phenomenon is limited to the Psalter and related texts that tend to avoid qualifying God as a rock.³⁰ The respective Hebrew equivalents are *maḥsəh* “refuge, shelter” (Ps 61:9; 70:7), *mišgāb* “stronghold, refuge” (Ps 9:10), *mā‘ōz* “refuge” (Ps 51:9), *setər* “hiding-place” (Ps 118:114), ‘*oz* “strength” (Exod 15:2; Ps 27:7; 58:18; 80:2^{LXX}), *šūr* “rock” (Ps 17:3; 18,15; 77:35; 93:22^{LXX}).

3.2.1 The noun βοηθός as a divine title in the Psalter

The previous observations would not be complete if we did not give special attention to two details of the translation technique underlying the LXX Psalter:

α) In the LXX Psalter βοηθός is used exclusively when referring to God and not in relation to other gods or to humans. The only exception might be found in a rather neutral context where the absence of any helper is stated: ὅτι ἐρρύσατο πτωχὸν ἐκ χειρὸς δυνάστου καὶ πένητα, ὃ οὐχ ὑπῆρχεν βοηθός “for he delivers the needy from the hand of the mighty, the poor who have no helper” (Ps 71:12).

β) There are grounds for assumption that βοηθός is the standard equivalent of the Hebrew noun ‘*ezər* “help, helper”. However, some exceptions should be noted. In fact, when ‘*ezər* does not refer to God, the LXX Psalter prefers the noun βοήθεια, e.g. in Ps 19:3; 88:20^{LXX}. Thus, the translator leaves no room for doubt that God is to be considered the only βοηθός of humans. An instructive example is Ps 120[121]:1: “I lift my eyes to the hills – from where will my help [MT: ‘*əzrī* ‘my help’] come?” Unlike other psalm quotations where the translator inserts βοηθός, he avoids using this word in favor of ἡ βοήθειά μου. Perhaps he did not want to convey the idea that God as a helper comes down from the hill. Anyway, the translation is concordant. The following verse makes clear that help (ἡ βοήθειά μου, MT: ‘*əzrī* “my help”) comes from the Lord.

Thus, as an intermediate conclusion one can notice that the LXX Psalter has the tendency to reserve the title βοηθός exclusively for God. Of course, this is not the only divine title employed in the Psalter. Needless to say, many psalms share one important element with many pagan ancient prayers insofar as they combine various divine titles, especially in the invocation (e.g. Ps 17[18]:2–3). Other divine titles used in the immediate context are e.g. καταφυγή “refuge” (Ps 9:10; 17:3; 45:2; 58:17–18; 93:22^{LXX}), ἀντιλήπτωρ

³⁰ See PASSONI DELL’ACQUA, “La metafora biblica”, passim; S. OLOFSSON, *God is my Rock. A Study of Translation Technique and Theological Exegesis in the Septuagint* (CB.OT 31), Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990, passim.

“helper, protector” (Ps 17:3; 39:18^{LXX}), ὑπερασπιστής “one who holds a shield over someone, protector” (Ps 17:3; 32:20; 39:18; 113:17^{LXX}), and ῥύστης “savior, deliverer” (Ps 17:3; 69:6^{LXX}).

The specific contexts of the Psalter occurrences of βοηθός cannot be reduced to one common denominator. The following examples are by no means exhaustive. Generally speaking, and leaving aside the prophetic texts within this article, we can roughly distinguish between two types of quotations. In the third person, God is confessed as the βοηθός of the poor (Ps 9:10) or of the Israelites returning to Him in their distress (Ps 77:35^{LXX}). Persons whose helper is the God of Jacob are praised (Ps 145:5^{LXX}), whereas the man who did not make God his help is criticized (Ps 51:9^{LXX}). In the context of lamentation and confidence, however, believers declare in the first person that God is or has become their personal helper (e.g. Ps 17:3; 26:9; 27:7; 32:30; 39:18; 58:18; 61:9; 62:8; 69:6; 70:7; 80:2; 93:22^{LXX})³¹. Furthermore, they proclaim: “our God ... is a helper” (Ps 45:2) or “the Lord is a helper to me” (Ps 117:6–7). Only once does such a formula occur in the vocative (Ps 18:15^{LXX}: βοηθέ μου).

3.2.2 Examples of βοηθός as a divine title in extra-biblical texts

The word βοηθός is scarcely attested in the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Its characteristic LXX meaning can be found e.g. in the novel *Joseph and Aseneth*, which extensively uses the terminology of the LXX Psalter³². Once she has abandoned her idols, Aseneth prays to the Lord, the helper of the afflicted (*Jos. Asen.* 12.13: διότι σὺ εἶ ὁ πατήρ τῶν ὀρφανῶν καὶ τῶν δεδιωγμένων ὑπερασπιστής καὶ τῶν τεθλιμμένων βοηθός³³ “you are the father of the orphans, the protector of the persecuted and the helper of the afflicted” (see also the analogous declaration in *Jos. Asen.* 11.13).

In the works of *Josephus* the divine title βοηθός occurs chiefly in prayers and speeches. In his prayer Isaac says that God has promised to his posterity “to be their kind helper and giver of still greater blessings” (*Ant.* 1.272: βοηθός εὐμενής καὶ δοτὴρ αἰεὶ τῶν κρειττόνων). In situations of great danger Moses exhorts the Israelites to keep in mind that the Lord is a βοηθός, e.g. when Israel is pursued by the Egyptian army (Exod 14:9–31). Trusting in the Lord who as a helper is capable of making small things great, Israelites should

³¹ See also Sir 51:2. The ms. B has a different text, see A. J. GUERRA MARTÍNEZ, *El poder de la oración. Estudio de Sir 51,1-12*, Estella: Verbo Divino, 2010, 89–97.

³² For details see E. BON, “Psalter Terminology in *Joseph and Aseneth*”, *Die Septuaginta – Text, Wirkung, Rezeption* (WUNT), ed. Siegfried Kreuzer, Martin Meiser, Marcus Sigismund, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014 (forthcoming).

³³ Quoted from *Joseph und Aseneth*, ed. C. Burchard, with the assistance of C. Burfeind and U. B. Fink, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003.

not despair (*Ant.* 2.333). Before sending spies to the land of Canaan (Num 13:1), and aware of the dangers involved in occupying the promised land, Moses invites the Israelites to honor God who is above all Israel's helper and ally (*Ant.* 3.302: ὃς ἐστὶν ἐπὶ πᾶσιν ἡμῖν βοηθός καὶ σύμμαχος). It is beyond doubt that Josephus draws his inspiration from the literary genre dealt with above, i.e. speeches of political or military leaders (see above 1.1.1).

Concluding Remarks

At the end of this article it is time to return to the questions that have been raised in the introduction. How did God come to be called βοηθός, particularly in the context of prayers? In my mind, three answers are possible:

1. On an inner-biblical level, the idea that the God of Israel is a helper is emphasized by two etiological texts. In Exod 18:4 the name of the second son of Moses, Eliezer, is explained as follows: “For the God of my father was my help [*kī* ^a*lohī* [’]*ābī* *b*^e*’**æzrī*].” The LXX renders the words in question by ὁ γὰρ θεὸς τοῦ πατρὸς μου βοηθός μου “for the god of my father is my helper”. It should be highlighted that neither the Hebrew nor the Greek texts use a verb (e.g. “for the God of my father *has helped me*”) but a noun, qualifying God as a helper. In contrast to Exod 18:4, the LXX translation in 1 Kgdms 7:12 offers far more than a word-for-word rendering of the underlying Hebrew text. In fact, setting up a stone and naming it “Ebenezer” Samuel gives the following explanation of his act: “Thus far YHWH has helped us” (*’ad hennāh* *’azārānū YHWH*). The LXX not only translates this clause but also inserts a translation of “Ebenezer”: καὶ ἐκάλεσεν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἀβενεζερ, λίθος τοῦ βοηθοῦ, καὶ εἶπεν Ἔως ἐνταῦθα ἐβοήθησεν ἡμῖν κύριος, literally “he called its name Abenezzer, stone of the helper, and said: ‘Thus far the Lord has helped us’”. These two examples show that the divine title “helper” is not chosen by chance but that it is deeply rooted in the historical experience of Israel. Therefore, the LXX translators obviously did not completely invent a divine title. Rather they developed an idea that was already present in the Hebrew biblical traditions.

2. Nevertheless, there is still a question remaining: Why would the LXX translators have chosen the term βοηθός? First of all, we have to take into account the fact that the translators were familiar with specific linguistic conventions which are abundantly attested in papyri. Thus we can infer that they were influenced by their social environment when choosing their theological vocabulary. Even though the number of examples presented above is quite limited, it is possible to conclude that βοηθός was appropriate in two contexts: in petitions submitted to a king or to a leading functionary and in prayers and supplications. These two literary genres have at least one point in common:

Whether explicitly or implicitly, they express the idea of dependency. This implies that an individual (or more than one person) expects support and assistance from an authority which is considered capable of offering it. However, it would be a mistake to think that the translators' work was limited to introduce a term into the Greek translation of Holy Scripture which they found in their Egyptian environment. As has been shown above, their aim was probably to convey the idea that God is the βοηθός *par excellence*. For this purpose they rendered various Hebrew terms by βοηθός although the respective Hebrew nouns do not require such a translation. Anyway, it is clear that the translation technique adopted in the Greek Psalter does not leave any room for another important βοηθός.

3. In conclusion, it must be acknowledged that this specific use of βοηθός had a real impact on later Jewish authors who did not translate from Hebrew texts. It would be interesting to quote additional material which points in the same direction. Nonetheless, these documents show clearly that the "career" of the divine title βοηθός did not come to an end when the Septuagint was finished. On the contrary, Jewish authors did not refrain from using this title in new contexts which were completely independent of biblical psalms or related texts, e.g. the prayers in Josephus' *Antiquities*. Of course, we have to take into consideration that in a Hellenistic context the specific use of βοηθός with reference to God was not completely incompatible with non-Jewish religious conventions. Even though explicit prayer texts of non-Jewish origin are not available, it should not be excluded that gods could be considered helpers, βοηθοί, in all sorts of situations. Certainly, it seems impossible to answer the question why the New Testament prayers do not employ this word. However, if Christian writers from the 2nd century C.E. onwards used it among other divine titles (e.g. *1 Clem.* 36.1; Justin, *Dial.* 30.3) it is probably because of their double heritage: Jewish and pagan.