The Zeus Problem of *Olympian 9* and the Near Eastern Flood Traditions

Pindar's *Olympian 9* appears to feature the earliest preserved Ancient Greek testimony of the universal cataclysmic Flood. However, the myth presents the reader with serious difficulties. First of all, Pindar never states who decided to launch the destruction, or why, but only that the eventual salvation was due to "the skills of Zeus" (52 Ζηνὸς τέχναις). Furthermore, in the middle section of the myth (after a section on Deucalion and Pyrrha, but before the Flood itself), Pindar advises that one should "praise the old wine, but also the flowers of the new songs" (48-49 αἴνει δὲ παλαιὸν μὲν οἶνον, ἄνθεα δ' ὕμνων / νεωτέρων), thus suggesting that his version of the myth makes some changes to the established tradition.

Despite Pindar's silence on the matter, scholars often take it for granted that Zeus was responsible for the Flood in *Olympian 9* (see Gerber 2002: *ad* 50-53), relying on a widely held assumption that the Greek accounts of the Flood, including the one attested in Pindar, were imported from the Near East. Thus, according to Caduff (1986: 132), "[d]ie Abhängigkeit der Deukalionsage von orientalischen Traditionen steht wohl außer Zweifel" (see also West 1997: 493; Bremmer 2008: 101-116). If in the Near East, as argued by West (1997: 490), "[t]he Flood results from an initiative of the highest god," and the Greek Flood is influenced by the Near East, then the gaps in Pindar's myth can safely be filled with the help of Near Eastern materials, and Zeus can be assumed to have launched the destruction in Pindar's ode. Furthermore, in this reading, Pindar's praise of new songs will refer to his innovative treatment of local mythographic traditions about the Locrian dynasty (Caduff 1986: 81), rather than any changes he might have made to the Flood myth.

In this paper, I propose a different way in which Near Eastern myths can help us understand Pindar's Flood story. I argue that Pindar purposefully introduced some ambiguity about the extent of Zeus' involvement in the launching of the Flood, and that already Near Eastern comparanda suggest anxiety about the responsibility of the supreme god. I compare Pindar's version of the myth to several Akkadian texts about universal destruction – most notably, the Flood poem *Atra-ḫasīs* (2nd millennium BCE), and the *Poem of Erra* (1st millennium BCE), about the destruction wrought by the titular god of chaos. Rather than providing a unique, official version of universal destruction, Mesopotamian accounts feature possible alternatives for different aspects of the story, including that of responsibility for the destruction. Such variations on the destruction myth may have circulated around the Eastern Mediterranean and poets such as Pindar could have been aware of different options and able to use them for their own poetic purposes.

I suggest that in eliding the account of the Flood's beginning, Pindar seeks to minimize Zeus' unflattering responsibility. Akkadian texts provide evidence that a universal destruction such as the Flood could be seen as a grave error in judgment on the part of the deity who caused it: in *Atra-ḫasīs*, the mother goddess protests the decision as unreasonable in a furious diatribe (III iii 20 – vi 4), while, in the *Poem of Erra*, the benevolent god Išum directs a long accusatory speech against Erra (III D 3 – IV 127). Earlier in *Olympian 9*, the potentially blasphemous myth about Heracles' fight against three gods caused Pindar to reiterate his well-known scruples against speaking ill of the gods, and the same scruples might have caused him to change parts of the Flood myth that could be potentially damaging for Zeus.

Furthermore, Mesopotamian comparanda also provide evidence for minimization of the chief god's role in launching universal destruction. For instance, *Atra-ḫasīs* lets the divine

assembly, and several other smaller gods, share part of the blame, while in the *Poem of Erra* a renegade god temporarily indisposes the chief god Marduk and takes control of events.

To sum up, this paper has a double aim: to shed some new light on a particularly difficult passage of Pindar's poetry, but also to suggest that a comparison with the Mesopotamian texts of universal destruction, rather than representing simple one-sided influence, may offer a glimpse into intellectual concerns and religious trends that circulated around the Eastern Mediterranean in Antiquity, and that provide crucial context for understanding and interpreting not only Near Eastern, but also early Greek poetry.

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