

**Module 3: Self-Discovery Through Change and Rebirth**  
**Topic 2 Content: *Oedipus the King*, Scene One and Ode One**

OEDIPUS: king of Thebes  
PRIEST: the high priest of Thebes  
CREON: Oedipus' brother-in-law  
CHORUS of Theban elders  
TEIRESIAS: an old blind prophet  
BOY: attendant on Teiresias  
IOCASTE: wife of Oedipus, sister of Creon  
MESSENGER: an old man  
SERVANT: an old shepherd  
SECOND MESSENGER: a servant of Oedipus  
ANTIGONE: daughter of Oedipus and IOCASTE, a child  
ISMENE: daughter of Oedipus and IOCASTE, a child  
SERVANTS and ATTENDANTS on Oedipus and IOCASTE

*[Enter OEDIPUS from the palace]*

**OEDIPUS**

You pray. But if you listen now to me,  
you'll get your wish. Hear what I have to say 250  
and treat your own disease—then you may hope  
to find relief from your distress. I shall speak  
as one who is a stranger to the story,  
a stranger to the crime. If I alone  
were tracking down this act, I'd not get far [220]  
without a single clue. That being the case,  
for it was after the event that I became  
a citizen of Thebes, I now proclaim  
the following to all of you Cadmeians:  
Whoever among you knows the man it was 260  
who murdered Laius, son of Labdacus,  
I order him to reveal it all to me.  
And if the murderer's afraid, I tell him  
to avoid the danger of the major charge  
by speaking out against himself. If so,  
he will be sent out from this land unhurt—  
and undergo no further punishment.  
If someone knows the killer is a stranger, [230]  
from some other state, let him not stay mute.  
As well as a reward, he'll earn my thanks. 270  
But if he remains quiet, if anyone,  
through fear, hides himself or a friend of his  
against my orders, here's what I shall do—  
so listen to my words. For I decree  
that no one in this land, in which I rule  
as your own king, shall give that killer shelter  
or talk to him, whoever he may be,

or act in concert with him during prayers,  
 or sacrifice, or sharing lustral water.\* [240]  
 Ban him from your homes, every one of you, 280  
 for he is our pollution, as the Pythian god  
 has just revealed to me. In doing this,  
 I'm acting as an ally of the god  
 and of dead Laius, too. And I pray  
 whoever the man is who did this crime,  
 one unknown person acting on his own  
 or with companions, the worst of agonies  
 will wear out his wretched life. I pray, too,  
 that, if he should become a honoured guest  
 in my own home and with my knowledge, 290 [250]  
 I may suffer all those things I've just called down  
 upon the killers. And I urge you now  
 to make sure all these orders take effect,  
 for my sake, for the sake of the god,  
 and for our barren, godless, ruined land.  
 For in this matter, even if a god  
 were not prompting us, it would not be right  
 for you to simply leave things as they are,  
 and not to purify the murder of a man  
 who was so noble and who was your king. 300  
 You should have looked into it. But now I  
 possess the ruling power which Laius held  
 in earlier days. I have his bed and wife— [260]  
 she would have borne his children, if his hopes  
 to have a son had not been disappointed.  
 Children from a common mother might have linked  
 Laius and myself. But as it turned out,  
 fate swooped down onto his head. So now I  
 will fight on his behalf, as if this matter  
 concerned my father, and I will strive 310  
 to do everything I can to find him,  
 the man who spilled his blood, and thus avenge  
 the son of Labdacus and Polydorus,  
 of Cadmus and Agenor from old times.\*  
 As for those who do not follow what I urge,  
 I pray the gods send them no fertile land,  
 no, nor any children in their women's wombs— [270]  
 may they all perish in our present fate  
 or one more hateful still. To you others,  
 you Cadmeians who support my efforts, 320  
 may Justice, our ally, and all the gods  
 attend on us with kindness always.

**CHORUS LEADER**

My lord, since you extend your oath to me,  
 I will say this. I am not the murderer,  
 nor can I tell you who the killer is.

As for what you're seeking, it's for Apollo,  
who launched this search, to state who did it.

**OEDIPUS**

That is well said. But no man has power [280]  
to force the gods to speak against their will.

**CHORUS LEADER**

May I then suggest what seems to me 330  
the next best course of action?

**OEDIPUS**

You may indeed,  
and if there is a third course, too, don't hesitate  
to let me know.

**CHORUS LEADER**

Our lord Teiresias,  
I know, can see into things, like lord Apollo.  
From him, my king, a man investigating this  
might well find out the details of the crime.

**OEDIPUS**

I've taken care of that—it's not something  
I could overlook. At Creon's urging,  
I have dispatched two messengers to him  
and have been wondering for some time now 340  
why he has not come.

**CHORUS LEADER**

Apart from that,  
there are rumours—but inconclusive ones [290]  
from a long time ago.

**OEDIPUS**

What kind of rumours?  
I'm looking into every story.

**CHORUS LEADER**

It was said  
that Laius was killed by certain travellers.

**OEDIPUS**

Yes, I heard as much. But no one has seen  
the one who did it.

**CHORUS LEADER**

Well, if the killer  
has any fears, once he hears your curses on him,  
he will not hold back, for they are serious.

**OEDIPUS**

When a man has no fear of doing the act, 350  
he's not afraid of words.

**CHORUS LEADER**

No, not in the case

where no one stands there to convict him.  
But at last Teiresias is being guided here,  
our god-like prophet, in whom the truth resides  
more so than in all other men.

*[Enter TEIRESIAS led by a small BOY]*

**OEDIPUS**

Teiresias, [300]  
you who understand all things—what can be taught  
and what cannot be spoken of, what goes on  
in heaven and here on the earth—you know,  
although you cannot see, how sick our state is.  
And so we find in you alone, great seer, 360  
our shield and saviour. For Phoebus Apollo,  
in case you have not heard the news, has sent us  
an answer to our question: the only cure  
for this infecting pestilence is to find  
the men who murdered Laius and kill them  
or else expel them from this land as exiles.  
So do not withhold from us your prophecies [310]  
in voices of the birds or by some other means.  
Save this city and yourself. Rescue me.  
Deliver us from this pollution by the dead. 370  
We are in your hands. For a mortal man  
the finest labour he can do is help  
with all his power other human beings.

**TEIRESIAS**

Alas, alas! How dreadful it can be  
to have wisdom when it brings no benefit  
to the man possessing it. This I knew,  
but it had slipped my mind. Otherwise,  
I would not have journeyed here.

**OEDIPUS:** What's wrong? You've come, but seem so sad.

**TEIRESIAS:** Let me go home. You must bear your burden 380 [320]  
to the very end, and I will carry mine,  
if you'll agree with me.

**OEDIPUS:** What you are saying  
is not customary and shows little love  
toward the city state which nurtured you,  
if you deny us your prophetic voice.

**TEIRESIAS:** I see your words are also out of place.  
I do not speak for fear of doing the same.

**OEDIPUS:** If you know something, then, by heaven,  
do not turn away. We are your suppliants—  
all of us—we bend our knees to you. 390

**TEIRESIAS:** You are all ignorant. I will not reveal  
the troubling things inside me, which I can call  
your grief as well.

**OEDIPUS:** What are you saying? [330]  
Do you know and will not say? Do you intend  
to betray me and destroy the city?

**TEIRESIAS:** I will cause neither me nor you distress.  
Why do you vainly question me like this?  
You will not learn a thing from me.

**OEDIPUS:** You most disgraceful of disgraceful men!  
You'd move something made of stone to rage! 400  
Will you not speak out? Will your stubbornness  
never have an end?

**TEIRESIAS:** You blame my temper,  
but do not see the one which lives within you.  
Instead, you are finding fault with me.

**OEDIPUS:** What man who listened to these words of yours  
would not be enraged—you insult the city! [340]

**TEIRESIAS:** Yet events will still unfold, for all my silence.

**OEDIPUS:** Since they will come, you must inform me.

**TEIRESIAS:** I will say nothing more. Fume on about it,  
if you wish, as fiercely as you can. 410

**OEDIPUS:** I will. In my anger I will not conceal  
just what I make of this. You should know  
I get the feeling you conspired in the act,  
and played your part, as much as you could do,  
short of killing him with your own hands.  
If you could use your eyes, I would have said  
that you had done this work all by yourself.

**TEIRESIAS:** Is that so? Then I would ask you to stand by [350]  
the very words which you yourself proclaimed  
and from now on not speak to me or these men. 420  
For the accursed polluter of this land is you.

**OEDIPUS:** You dare to utter shameful words like this?  
Do you think you can get away with it?

**TEIRESIAS:** I am getting away with it. The truth  
within me makes me strong.

**OEDIPUS:** Who taught you this?  
It could not have been your craft.

**TEIRESIAS:** You did.  
I did not want to speak, but you incited me.

**OEDIPUS:** What do you mean? Speak it again,  
so I can understand you more precisely.

**TEIRESIAS:** Did you not grasp my words before, 430  
or are you trying to test me with your question? [360]

**OEDIPUS:** I did not fully understand your words.  
Tell me again.

**TEIRESIAS:** I say that you yourself  
are the very man you're looking for.

**OEDIPUS:** That's twice you've stated that disgraceful lie—  
something you'll regret.

**TEIRESIAS:** Shall I tell you more,  
so you can grow even more enraged?

**OEDIPUS:** As much as you desire. It will be useless.

**TEIRESIAS:** I say that with your dearest family,  
unknown to you, you are living in disgrace. 440  
You have no idea how bad things are.

**OEDIPUS:** Do you really think you can just speak out,  
say things like this, and still remain unpunished?

**TEIRESIAS:** Yes, I can, if the truth has any strength.

**OEDIPUS:** It does, but not for you. Truth is not in you— [370]  
for your ears, your mind, your eyes are blind!

**TEIRESIAS:** You are a wretched fool to use harsh words  
which all men soon enough will use to curse you.

**OEDIPUS:** You live in endless darkness of the night,  
so you can never injure me or any man 450  
who can glimpse daylight.

**TEIRESIAS:** It is not your fate  
to fall because of me. It's up to Apollo  
to make that happen. He will be enough.

**OEDIPUS:** Is this something Creon has devised,  
or is it your invention?

**TEIRESIAS:** Creon is no threat.  
You have made this trouble on your own.

**OEDIPUS:** O riches, ruling power, skill after skill [380]  
surpassing all in this life's rivalries,  
how much envy you must carry with you,  
if, for this kingly office, which the city 460  
gave me, for I did not seek it out,  
Creon, my old trusted family friend,  
has secretly conspired to overthrow me  
and paid off a double-dealing quack like this,  
a crafty bogus priest, who can only see  
his own advantage, who in his special art  
is absolutely blind. Come on, tell me [390]  
how you have ever given evidence  
of your wise prophecy. When the Sphinx,

that singing bitch, was here, you said nothing 470  
to set the people free. Why not? Her riddle  
was not something the first man to stroll along  
could solve—a prophet was required. And there  
the people saw your knowledge was no use—  
nothing from birds or picked up from the gods.  
But then I came, Oedipus, who knew nothing.  
Yet I finished her off, using my wits  
rather than relying on birds. That’s the man  
you want to overthrow, hoping, no doubt,  
to stand up there with Creon, once he’s king. 480 [400]  
But I think you and your conspirator in this  
will regret trying to usurp the state.  
If you did not look so old, you’d find  
the punishment your arrogance deserves.

**CHORUS LEADER:** To us it sounds as if Teiresias  
has spoken in anger, and, Oedipus,  
you have done so, too. That’s not what we need.  
Instead we should be looking into this:  
How can we best carry out the god’s decree?

**TEIRESIAS:** You may be king, but I have the right 490  
to answer you—and I control that right,  
for I am not your slave. I serve Apollo, [410]  
and thus will never stand with Creon,  
signed up as his man. So I say this to you,  
since you have chosen to insult my blindness—  
you have your eyesight, and you do not see  
how miserable you are, or where you live,  
or who it is who shares your household.  
Do you know the family you come from?  
Without your knowledge you’ve become 500  
the enemy of your own kindred,  
those in the world below and those up here,  
and the dreadful feet of that two-edged curse  
from father and mother both will drive you  
from this land in exile. Those eyes of yours,  
which now can see so clearly, will be dark.  
What harbour will not echo with your cries? [420]  
Where on Cithaeron\* will they not soon be heard,  
once you have learned the truth about the wedding  
by which you sailed into this royal house— 510  
a lovely voyage, but the harbour’s doomed?  
You’ve no idea of the quantity  
of other troubles which will render you  
and your own children equals. So go on—  
keep insulting Creon and my prophecies,  
for among all living mortals no one  
will be destroyed more wretchedly than you.

**OEDIPUS:** Must I tolerate this insolence from him?  
Get out, and may the plague get rid of you! [430]  
Off with you! Now! Turn your back and go! 520  
And don't come back here to my home again.

**TEIRESIAS:** I would not have come, but you summoned me.

**OEDIPUS:** I did not know you would speak so stupidly.  
If I had, you would have waited a long time  
before I called you here.

**TEIRESIAS:** I was born like this.  
You think I am a fool, but to your parents,  
the ones who made you, I was wise enough.

**OEDIPUS:** Wait! My parents? Who was my father?

**TEIRESIAS:** This day will reveal that and destroy you.

**OEDIPUS:** Everything you speak is all so cryptic— 530  
like a riddle.

**TEIRESIAS:** Well, in solving riddles, [440]  
are you not the best there is?

**OEDIPUS:** Mock my excellence,  
but you will find out I am truly great.

**TEIRESIAS:** That quality of yours now ruins you.

**OEDIPUS:** I do not care, if I have saved the city.

**TEIRESIAS:** I will go now. Boy, lead me away.

**OEDIPUS:** Yes, let him guide you back. You're in the way.  
If you stay, you'll just provoke me. Once you're gone,  
you won't annoy me further.

**TEIRESIAS:** I'm going. 540  
But first I shall tell you why I came.  
I do not fear the face of your displeasure—  
there is no way you can destroy me. I tell you,  
the man you have been seeking all this time,  
while proclaiming threats and issuing orders [450]  
about the one who murdered Laius—  
that man is here. According to reports,  
he is a stranger who lives here in Thebes.  
But he will prove to be a native Theban.  
From that change he will derive no pleasure.  
He will be blind, although he now can see. 550  
He will be a poor, although he now is rich.  
He will set off for a foreign country,  
groping the ground before him with a stick.  
And he will turn out to be the brother  
of the children in his house—their father, too,  
both at once, and the husband and the son  
of the very woman who gave birth to them.  
He sowed the same womb as his father



and murdered him. Go in and think on this. [460]  
If you discover I have spoken falsely, 560  
you can say I lack all skill in prophecy.

*[Exit TEIRESIAS led off by the BOY. OEDIPUS turns and goes back into the palace]*

**CHORUS:** Speaking from the Delphic rock  
the oracular voice intoned a name.  
But who is the man, the one  
who with his blood-red hands  
has done unspeakable brutality?  
The time has come for him to flee—  
to move his powerful foot  
more swiftly than those hooves  
on horses riding on the storm. 570  
Against him Zeus' son now springs, [470]  
armed with lightning fire and leading on  
the inexorable and terrifying Furies.\*

From the snowy peaks of Mount Parnassus\*  
the message has just flashed, ordering all  
to seek the one whom no one knows.  
Like a wild bull he wanders now,  
hidden in the untamed wood,  
through rocks and caves, alone  
with his despair on joyless feet, 580  
keeping his distance from that doom  
uttered at earth's central navel stone. [480]  
But that fatal oracle still lives,  
hovering above his head forever.

That wise interpreter of prophecies  
stirs up my fears, unsettling dread.  
I cannot approve of what he said  
and I cannot deny it.  
I am confused. What shall I say?  
My hopes flutter here and there,  
with no clear glimpse of past or future. 590  
I have never heard of any quarrelling,  
past or present, between those two,  
the house of Labdacus and Polybus' son,\*  
which could give me evidence enough  
to undermine the fame of Oedipus,  
as he seeks vengeance for the unsolved murder  
for the family of Labdacus.

Apollo and Zeus are truly wise—  
they understand what humans do.  
But there is no sure way to ascertain 600  
if human prophets grasp things any more  
than I do, although in wisdom one man [500]  
may leave another far behind.

But until I see the words confirmed,  
I will not approve of any man  
who censures Oedipus, for it was clear  
when that winged Sphinx went after him  
he was a wise man then. We witnessed it.  
He passed the test and endeared himself  
to all the city. So in my thinking now  
he never will be guilty of a crime.

610 [510]

## Notes

**The numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text; the numbers without brackets refer to the English text.**

\**lustral water*: water purified in a communal religious ritual.

\**Agenor*: founder of the Theban royal family; his son *Cadmus* moved from Sidon in Asia Minor to Greece and founded Thebes. *Polydorus*: son of Cadmus, father of Labdacus, and hence grandfather of Laius.

\**Cithaeron*: the sacred mountain outside Thebes.

\**Zeus' son*: a reference to Apollo. The *Furies* are the goddesses of blood revenge.

\**Parnassus*: a famous mountain some distance from Thebes, but visible from the city.

\**Polybus*: ruler of Corinth, who raised Oedipus and is thus believed to be his father. The house of Labdacus is the Theban royal family (i.e., Laius, Jocasta, and Creon).

*This translation by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC (now Vancouver Island University)*