

## Module 3: Self-Discovery Through Change and Rebirth

### Topic 2 Content: *Oedipus the King*, Scene Two and Ode Two

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 CREON]*

**CREON:** You citizens, I have just discovered  
that Oedipus, our king, has levelled charges  
against me, disturbing allegations.  
That I cannot bear, so I have come here.  
In these present troubles, if he believes  
that he has suffered any injury from me,  
in word or deed, then I have no desire  
to continue living into ripe old age  
still bearing his reproach. For me 620  
the injury produced by this report  
is no single isolated matter— [520]  
no, it has the greatest scope of all,  
if I end up being called a wicked man  
here in the city, a bad citizen,  
by you and by my friends.

**CHORUS LEADER:** Perhaps he charged you  
spurred on by the rash power of his rage,  
rather than his mind's true judgment.

**CREON:** Was it publicized that my opinions  
convinced Teiresias to utter lies? 630

**CHORUS LEADER:** That's what was said. I have no idea  
just what that meant.

**CREON:** Did he accuse me  
and announce the charges with a steady gaze,  
in a normal state of mind?

**CHORUS LEADER:** I do not know. [530]  
What those in power do I do not see.  
But he's approaching from the palace—  
here he comes in person.

*[Enter OEDIPUS from the palace]*

**OEDIPUS:** You! How did you get here?  
Has your face grown so bold you now come  
to my own home—you who are obviously  
the murderer of the man whose house it was, 640  
a thief who clearly wants to steal my throne?  
Come, in the name of all the gods, tell me this—  
did you plan to do it because you thought  
I was a coward or a fool? Or did you think  
I would not learn about your actions  
as they crept up on me with such deceit—  
or that, if I knew, I could not deflect them?  
This attempt of yours, is it not madness— [540]  
to chase after the king's place without friends,  
without a horde of men, to seek a goal 650  
which only gold or factions could attain?

**CREON:** Will you listen to me? It's your turn now  
to hear me make a suitable response.  
Once you know, then judge me for yourself.

**OEDIPUS:** You are a clever talker. But from you  
I will learn nothing. I know you now—  
a troublemaker, an enemy of mine.

**CREON:** At least first listen to what I have to say.

**OEDIPUS:** There's one thing you do not have to tell me—  
you have betrayed me.

**CREON:** If you think being stubborn 660  
and forgetting common sense is wise,  
then you're not thinking as you should. [550]

**OEDIPUS:** And if you think you can act to injure  
a man who is a relative of yours  
and escape without a penalty  
then you're not thinking as you should.

**CREON:** I agree. What you've just said makes sense.  
So tell me the nature of the damage  
you claim you're suffering because of me.

**OEDIPUS:** Did you or did you not persuade me 670  
to send for Teiresias, that prophet?

**CREON:** Yes. And I'd still give you the same advice.

**OEDIPUS:** How long is it since Laius . . . [*pauses*]

**CREON:** Did what?  
What's Laius got to do with anything?

**OEDIPUS:** . . . since Laius was carried off and disappeared,  
since he was killed so brutally? [560]

**CREON:** That was long ago—  
many years have passed since then.

**OEDIPUS:** At that time,  
was Teiresias as skilled in prophecy?

**CREON:** Then, as now, he was honoured for his wisdom.

**OEDIPUS:** And back then did he ever mention me? 680

**CREON:** No, never—not while I was with him.

**OEDIPUS:** Did you not investigate the killing?

**CREON:** Yes, of course we did. But we found nothing.

**OEDIPUS:** Why did this man, this wise man, not speak up?

**CREON:** I do not know. And when I don't know something,  
I like to keep my mouth shut.

**OEDIPUS:** You know enough— [570]  
at least you understand enough to say . . .

**CREON:** What? If I really do know something  
I will not deny it.

**OEDIPUS:** If Teiresias  
were not working with you, he would not name me 690  
as the one who murdered Laius.

**CREON:** If he says this,  
well, you're the one who knows. But I think  
the time has come for me to question you  
the way that you've been questioning me.

**OEDIPUS:** Ask all you want. You'll not prove  
that I'm the murderer.

**CREON:** Then tell me this—  
are you not married to my sister?

**OEDIPUS:** Since you ask me, yes. I don't deny that.

**CREON:** And you two rule this land as equals?

**OEDIPUS:** Whatever she desires, she gets from me. 700 [580]

**CREON:** And am I not third, equal to you both?

**OEDIPUS:** That's what makes your friendship so deceitful.

**CREON:** No, not if you think this through, as I do.  
First, consider this. In your view, would anyone  
prefer to rule and have to cope with fear

rather than live in peace, carefree and safe,  
 if his powers were the same? I, for one,  
 have no natural desire to be king  
 in preference to performing royal acts.  
 The same is true of any other man 710  
 whose understanding grasps things properly.  
 For now I get everything I want from you, [590]  
 but without the fear. If I were king myself,  
 I'd be doing many things against my will.  
 So how can being a king be sweeter to me  
 than royal power without anxiety?  
 I am not yet so mistaken in my mind  
 that I want things which bring no benefits.  
 Now I greet all men, and they all welcome me.  
 Those who wish to get something from you 720  
 now flatter me, since I'm the one who brings  
 success in what they want. So why would I  
 give up such benefits for something else?  
 A mind that's wise will not turn treacherous. [600]  
 It's not my nature to love such policies.  
 And if another man pursued such things,  
 I'd not work with him. I couldn't bear to.  
 If you want proof of this, then go to Delphi.  
 Ask the prophet if I brought back to you  
 exactly what was said. At that point, 730  
 if you discover I have planned something,  
 that I've conspired with Teiresias,  
 then arrest me and have me put to death,  
 not just on your own authority,  
 but on mine as well, a double judgment.  
 Do not condemn me on an unproved charge.  
 It's not fair to judge these things by guesswork,  
 to assume bad men are good or good men bad. [610]  
 In my view, to throw away a noble friend  
 is like a man who parts with his own life, 740  
 the thing most dear to him. Give it some time.  
 Then you'll see clearly, since only time  
 can fully validate a man who's true.  
 A bad man is exposed in just one day.

**CHORUS LEADER:** For a man concerned about being killed,  
 my lord, he has spoken eloquently.  
 Those who are unreliable give rash advice.

**OEDIPUS:** If some conspirator moves against me,  
 in secret and with speed, I must be quick  
 to make my counter plans. If I just rest 750  
 and wait for him to act, then he'll succeed [620]  
 in what he wants to do, and I'll be finished.

**CREON:** What do you want—to exile me from here?

**OEDIPUS:** No. I want you to die, not just run off—  
so I can demonstrate what envy means.

**CREON:** You are determined not to change your mind  
or listen to me?

**OEDIPUS:** You'll not convince me,  
for there's no way that I can trust you.

**CREON:** I can see that you've become unbalanced.\*

**OEDIPUS:** I'm sane enough to defend my interests. 760

**CREON:** You should be protecting mine as well.

**OEDIPUS:** But you're a treacherous man. It's your nature.

**CREON:** What if you are wrong?

**OEDIPUS:** I still have to govern.

**CREON:** Not if you do it badly.

**OEDIPUS:** Oh Thebes—  
my city!

**CREON:** I have some rights in Thebes as well— [630]  
it is not yours alone.

*[The palace doors open]*

**CHORUS LEADER:** My lords, an end to this.  
I see Iocaste coming from the palace,  
and just in time. With her assistance  
you should bring this quarrel to a close.

*[Enter IOCASTE from the palace]*

**IOCASTE:** You foolish men, why are you arguing 770  
in such a silly way? With our land so sick,  
are you not ashamed to start a private fight?  
You, Oedipus, go in the house, and you,  
Creon, return to yours. Why blow up  
a trivial matter into something huge?

**CREON:** Sister, your husband Oedipus intends [640]  
to punish me in one of two dreadful ways—  
to banish me from my fathers' country  
or arrest me and then have me killed.

**OEDIPUS:** That's right. 780  
Lady, I caught him committing treason,  
conspiring against my royal authority.

**CREON:** Let me not prosper but die a man accursed,  
if I have done what you accuse me of.

**IOCASTE:** Oedipus,  
for the sake of the gods, trust him in this.  
Respect that oath he made before all heaven—  
do it for my sake and for those around you.

**CHORUS LEADER:** I beg you, my lord, consent to this—  
agree with her. [650]

**OEDIPUS:** What is it then  
you're asking me to do?

**CHORUS LEADER:** Pay Creon due respect.  
He has not been foolish in the past, and now 790  
that oath he's sworn has power.

**OEDIPUS:** Are you aware  
just what you're asking?

**CHORUS LEADER:** Yes. I understand.

**OEDIPUS:** Then tell me exactly what you're saying.

**CHORUS LEADER:** You should not accuse a friend of yours  
and thus dishonour him with a mere story  
which may not be true, when he's sworn an oath  
and therefore could be subject to a curse.

**OEDIPUS:** By this point you should clearly understand,  
when you request this, what you are doing—  
seeking to exile me from Thebes or kill me. 800

**CHORUS LEADER:** No, no, by sacred Helios, the god [660]  
who stands pre-eminent before the rest,  
may I die the most miserable of deaths,  
abandoned by the gods and by my friends,  
if I have ever harboured such a thought!  
But the destruction of our land wears down  
the troubled heart within me—and so does this,  
if you two add new problems to the ones  
which have for so long been afflicting us.

**OEDIPUS:** Let him go, then, even though it's clear 810  
I must be killed or sent from here in exile,  
forced out in disgrace. I have been moved [670]  
to act compassionately by what you said,  
not by Creon's words. But if he stays here,  
he will be hateful to me.

**CREON:** You are obstinate—  
obviously unhappy to concede,  
and when you lose your temper, you go too far.  
But men like that find it most difficult  
to tolerate themselves. In that there's justice.

**OEDIPUS:** Why not go—just leave me alone?

**CREON:** I'll leave— 820  
since I see you do not understand me.  
But these men here know I'm a reasonable man.

*[Exit CREON away from the palace, leaving OEDIPUS and IOCASTE and the  
CHORUS on stage]*

**CHORUS LEADER:** Lady, will you escort our king inside?

**IOCASTE:** Yes, once I have learned what happened here. [680]

**CHORUS LEADER:** They talked—  
their words gave rise to uninformed suspicions,  
an all-consuming lack of proper justice.

**IOCASTE:** From both of them?

**CHORUS LEADER:** Yes.

**IOCASTE:** What caused it?

**CHORUS LEADER:** With our country already in distress,  
it is enough, it seems to me, enough  
to leave things as they are.

**OEDIPUS:** Now do you see 830  
the point you've reached thanks to your noble wish  
to dissolve and dull my firmer purpose?

**CHORUS LEADER:** My lord, I have declared it more than once, [690]  
so you must know it would have been quite mad  
if I abandoned you, who, when this land,  
my cherished Thebes, was in great trouble,  
set it right again and who, in these harsh times  
which now consume us, should prove a trusty guide.

**IOCASTE:** By all the gods, my king, let me know  
why in this present crisis you now feel 840  
such unremitting rage.

**OEDIPUS:** To you I'll speak, lady, [700]  
since I respect you more than I do these men.  
It's Creon's fault. He conspired against me.

**IOCASTE:** In this quarrel what was said? Tell me.

**OEDIPUS:** Creon claims that I'm the murderer—  
that I killed Laius.

**IOCASTE:** Does he know this first hand,  
or has he picked it up from someone else?

**OEDIPUS:** No. He set up that treasonous prophet.  
What he says himself sounds innocent.

**IOCASTE:** All right, forget about those things you've said. 850

Listen to me, and ease your mind with this—  
no human being has skill in prophecy.  
I'll show you why with this example. [710]  
King Laius once received a prophecy.  
I won't say it came straight from Apollo,  
but it was from those who do assist the god.  
It said Laius was fated to be killed  
by a child conceived by him and me.  
Now, at least according to the story,  
one day Laius was killed by foreigners, 860

by robbers, at a place where three roads meet.  
Besides, before our child was three days old,  
Laius fused his ankles tight together  
and ordered other men to throw him out  
on a mountain rock where no one ever goes.  
And so Apollo's plan that he'd become [720]  
the one who killed his father didn't work,  
and Laius never suffered what he feared,  
that his own son would be his murderer,  
although that's what the oracle had claimed. 870  
So don't concern yourself with prophecies.  
Whatever gods intend to bring about  
they themselves make known quite easily.

**OEDIPUS:** Lady, as I listen to these words of yours,  
my soul is shaken, my mind confused . . .

**IOCASTE:** Why do you say that? What's worrying you?

**OEDIPUS:** I thought I heard you say that Laius  
was murdered at a place where three roads meet. [730]

**IOCASTE:** That's what was said and people still believe.

**OEDIPUS:** Where is this place? Where did it happen? 880

**IOCASTE:** In a land called Phocis. Two roads lead there—  
one from Delphi and one from Daulia.

**OEDIPUS:** How long is it since these events took place?

**IOCASTE:** The story was reported in the city  
just before you took over royal power  
here in Thebes.

**OEDIPUS:** Oh Zeus, what have you done?  
What have you planned for me?

**IOCASTE:** What is it,  
Oedipus? Why is your spirit so troubled?

**OEDIPUS:** Not yet, [740]  
no questions yet. Tell me this—Laius,  
how tall was he? How old a man? 890

**IOCASTE:** He was big—his hair was turning white.  
In shape he was not all that unlike you.

**OEDIPUS:** The worse for me! I may have just set myself  
under a dreadful curse without my knowledge!

**IOCASTE:** What do you mean? As I look at you, my king,  
I start to tremble.

**OEDIPUS:** I am afraid,  
full of terrible fears the prophet sees.  
But you can reveal this better if you now  
will tell me one thing more.



**IOCASTE:** I'm shaking,  
but if you ask me, I will answer you. 900

**OEDIPUS:** Did Laius have a small escort with him [750]  
or a troop of soldiers, like a royal king?

**IOCASTE:** Five men, including a herald, went with him.  
A carriage carried Laius.

**OEDIPUS:** Alas! Alas!  
It's all too clear! Lady, who told you this?

**IOCASTE:** A servant—the only one who got away.  
He came back here.

**OEDIPUS:** Is there any chance  
he's in our household now?

**IOCASTE:** No.  
Once he returned and understood that you  
had now assumed the power of slaughtered Laius, 910  
he clasped my hands, begged me to send him off [760]  
to where our animals graze out in the fields,  
so he could be as far away as possible  
from the sight of town. And so I sent him.  
He was a slave but he'd earned my gratitude.  
He deserved an even greater favour.

**OEDIPUS:** I'd like him to return back here to us,  
and quickly, too.

**IOCASTE:** That can be arranged—  
but why's that something you would want to do?

**OEDIPUS:** Lady, I'm afraid I may have said too much. 920  
That's why I want to see him here in front of me.

**IOCASTE:** Then he will be here. But now, my lord,  
I deserve to learn why you are so distressed. [770]

**OEDIPUS:** My forebodings now have grown so great  
I will not keep them from you, for who is there  
I should confide in rather than in you  
about such a twisted turn of fortune.  
My father was Polybus of Corinth,  
my mother Merope, a Dorian.  
There I was regarded as the finest man 930  
in all the city, until, as chance would have it,  
something really astonishing took place,  
though it was not worth what it caused me to do.  
At a dinner there a man who was quite drunk  
from too much wine began to shout at me,  
claiming I was not my father's real son. [780]  
That troubled me, but for a day at least  
I said nothing, though it was difficult.  
The next day I went to ask my parents,  
my father and my mother. They were angry 940

at the man who had insulted them this way,  
 so I was reassured. But nonetheless,  
 the accusation always troubled me—  
 the story had become well known all over.  
 And so I went in secret off to Delphi.  
 I didn't tell my mother or my father.  
 Apollo sent me back without an answer,  
 so I didn't learn what I had come to find.  
 But when he spoke he uttered monstrous things, [790]  
 strange terrors and horrific miseries— 950  
 it was my fate to defile my mother's bed,  
 to bring forth to men a human family  
 that people could not bear to look upon,  
 to murder the father who engendered me.  
 When I heard that, I ran away from Corinth.  
 From then on I thought of it just as a place  
 beneath the stars. I went to other lands,  
 so I would never see that prophecy fulfilled,  
 the abomination of my evil fate.  
 In my travelling I came across that place 960  
 in which you say your king was murdered.  
 And now, lady, I will tell you the truth. [800]  
 As I was on the move, I passed close by  
 a spot where three roads meet, and in that place  
 I met a herald and a horse-drawn carriage.  
 Inside there was a man like you described.  
 The guide there tried to force me off the road—  
 and the old man, too, got personally involved.  
 In my rage, I lashed out at the driver,  
 who was shoving me aside. The old man, 970  
 seeing me walking past him in the carriage,  
 kept his eye on me, and with his double whip  
 struck me on my head, right here on top.  
 Well, I retaliated in good measure— [810]  
 I hit him a quick blow with the staff I held  
 and knocked him from his carriage to the road.  
 He lay there on his back. Then I killed them all.  
 If that stranger was somehow linked to Laius,  
 who is now more unfortunate than me?  
 What man could be more hateful to the gods? 980  
 No stranger and no citizen can welcome him  
 into their lives or speak to him. Instead,  
 they must keep him from their doors, a curse  
 I laid upon myself. With these hands of mine, [820]  
 these killer's hands, I now contaminate  
 the dead man's bed. Am I not depraved?  
 Am I not utterly abhorrent?  
 Now I must fly into exile and there,  
 a fugitive, never see my people,  
 never set foot in my native land again— 990  
 or else I must get married to my mother

and kill my father, Polybus, who raised me,  
the man who gave me life. If anyone  
claimed this came from some malevolent god,  
would he not be right? O you gods,  
you pure, blessed gods, may I not see that day! [830]  
Let me rather vanish from the sight of men,  
before I see a fate like that roll over me.

**CHORUS LEADER:** My lord, to us these things are ominous.  
But you must sustain your hope until you hear 1000  
the servant who was present at the time.

**OEDIPUS:** I do have some hope left, at least enough  
to wait for the man we've summoned from the fields.

**IOCASTE:** Once he comes, what do you hope to hear?

**OEDIPUS:** I'll tell you. If we discover what he says  
matches what you say, then I'll escape disaster. [840]

**IOCASTE:** What was so remarkable in what I said?

**OEDIPUS:** You said that in his story the man claimed  
Laius was murdered by a band of thieves.  
If he still says that there were several men, 1010  
then I was not the killer, since one man  
could never be mistaken for a crowd.  
But if he says it was a single man,  
then I'm the one responsible for this.

**IOCASTE:** Well, that's certainly what he reported then.  
He cannot now withdraw what he once said.  
The whole city heard him, not just me alone. [850]  
But even if he changes that old news,  
he cannot ever demonstrate, my lord,  
that Laius' murder fits the prophecy. 1020  
For Apollo clearly said the man would die  
at the hands of an infant born from me.  
Now, how did that unhappy son of ours  
kill Laius, when he'd perished long before?  
So as far as these oracular sayings go,  
I would not look for confirmation anywhere.

**OEDIPUS:** You're right in what you say. But nonetheless,  
send for that peasant. Don't fail to do that. [860]

**IOCASTE:** I'll call him here as quickly as I can.  
Let's go inside. I'll not do anything 1030  
which does not meet with your approval.

*[OEDIPUS and IOCASTE go into the palace together]*

**CHORUS:** I pray fate still finds me worthy,  
demonstrating piety and reverence  
in all I say and do—in everything  
our loftiest traditions consecrate,  
those laws engendered in the heavenly skies,

whose only father is Olympus.  
They were not born from mortal men,  
nor will they sleep and be forgotten. [870]  
In them lives an ageless mighty god. 1040

Insolence gives birth to tyranny—  
that insolence which vainly crams itself  
and overflows with so much stuff  
beyond what's right or beneficial,  
that once it's climbed the highest rooftop,  
it's hurled down by force—such a quick fall  
there's no safe landing on one's feet.  
But I pray the god never will abolish  
the rivalry so beneficial to our state. [880]  
That god I will hold on to always, 1050  
the one who stands as our protector.\*

But if a man conducts himself  
disdainfully in what he says and does,  
and manifests no fear of righteousness,  
no reverence for the statues of the gods,  
may miserable fate seize such a man  
for his disastrous arrogance,  
if he does not behave with justice [890]  
when he strives to benefit himself,  
appropriates all things impiously, 1060  
and, like a fool, profanes the sacred.  
What man is there who does such things  
who can still claim he will ward off  
the arrow of the gods aimed at his heart?  
If such actions are considered worthy,  
why should we dance to honour god?

No longer will I go in reverence  
to the sacred stone, earth's very centre,  
or to the temple at Abae or Olympia, [900]  
if these prophecies fail to be fulfilled 1070  
and manifest themselves to mortal men.  
But you, all-conquering, all-ruling Zeus,  
if by right those names belong to you,  
let this not evade you and your ageless might.  
For ancient oracles which dealt with Laius  
are withering—men now set them aside.  
Nowhere is Apollo honoured publicly,  
and our religious faith is dying away. [910]

## Notes

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

\*There is some argument about who speaks which lines in 622-626 of the Greek text. I follow Jebb's suggestions, ascribing 625 to Creon, to whom it seems clearly to belong (in spite of the manuscripts) and adding a line to indicate Oedipus' response.

\*This part of the choral song makes an important distinction between two forms of self-assertive action: the first breeds self-aggrandizement and greed; the second is necessary for the protection of the state.

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