

Module 3: Self-Discovery Through Change and Rebirth

Topic 3 Content: *Oedipus the King*, Scene Three and Ode Three

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

[IOCASTE enters from the palace and moves to an altar to Apollo which stands outside the palace doors. She is accompanied by one or two SERVANTS]

IOCASTE: You leading men of Thebes, I think
it is appropriate for me to visit 1080
our god's sacred shrine, bearing in my hands
this garland and an offering of incense.
For Oedipus has let excessive pain
seize on his heart and does not understand
what's happening now by thinking of the past,
like a man with sense. Instead he listens to
whoever speaks to him of dreadful things.
I can do nothing more for him with my advice,
and so, Lycean Apollo, I come to you,
who stand here beside us, a suppliant, 1090 [920]
with offerings and prayers for you to find
some way of cleansing what corrupts us.
For now we are afraid, just like those
who on a ship see their helmsman terrified.

[IOCASTE sets her offerings on the altar. A MESSENGER enters, an older man]

MESSENGER: Strangers, can you tell me where I find
the house of Oedipus, your king? Better yet,
if you know, can you tell me where he is?
CHORUS LEADER: His home is here, stranger, and he's inside.
This lady is the mother of his children.

MESSENGER: May her happy home always be blessed, 1100
for she is his queen, true mistress of his house. [930]

IOCASTE: I wish the same for you, stranger. Your fine words
make you deserve as much. But tell us now

why you have come. Do you seek information,
or do you wish to give us some report?

MESSENGER: Lady, I have good news for your whole house—
and for your husband, too.

IOCASTE: What news is that?
Where have you come from?

MESSENGER: I've come from Corinth.
I'll give you my report at once, and then
you will, no doubt, be glad, although perhaps 1110
you will be sad, as well.

IOCASTE: What is your news?
How can it have two such effects at once?

MESSENGER: The people who live there, in the lands
beside the Isthmus, will make him their king.*
They have announced it. [940]

IOCASTE: What are you saying?
Is old man Polybus no longer king?

MESSENGER: No. He's dead and in his grave.

IOCASTE: What?
Has Oedipus' father died?

MESSENGER: Yes.
If what I'm telling you is not the truth,
then I deserve to die.

IOCASTE: [to a servant] You there— 1120
go at once and tell this to your master.

[SERVANT goes into the palace]

Oh, you oracles of the gods, so much for you.
Oedipus has for so long been afraid
that he would murder him. He ran away.
Now Polybus has died, killed by fate
and not by Oedipus.

[Enter OEDIPUS from the palace]

OEDIPUS: Ah, Iocaste,
my dearest wife, why have you summoned me 1130
to leave our home and come out here? [950]

IOCASTE: You must hear this man, and as you listen,
decide for yourself what these prophecies, 1130
these solemn proclamations from the gods,
amount to.

OEDIPUS: Who is this man? What report
does he have for me?

IOCASTE: He comes from Corinth,
bringing news that Polybus, your father,
no longer is alive. He's dead.

OEDIPUS: What?
Stranger, let me hear from you in person.

MESSENGER: If I must first report my news quite plainly,
then I should let you know that Polybus
has passed away. He's gone.

OEDIPUS: By treachery,
or was it the result of some disease? 1140 [960]

MESSENGER: With old bodies a slight weight on the scales
brings final peace.

OEDIPUS: Apparently his death
was from an illness?

MESSENGER: Yes, and from old age.

OEDIPUS: Alas! Indeed, lady, why should any man
pay due reverence to Apollo's shrine,
where his prophet lives, or to those birds
which scream out overhead? For they foretold
that I was going to murder my own father.
But now he's dead and lies beneath the earth,
and I am here. I never touched my spear. 1150
Perhaps he died from a desire to see me—
so in that sense I brought about his death. [970]
But as for those prophetic oracles,
they're worthless. Polybus has taken them
to Hades, where he lies.

IOCASTE: Was I not the one
who predicted this some time ago?

OEDIPUS: You did,
but then I was misguided by my fears.

IOCASTE: You must not keep on filling up your heart
with all these things.

OEDIPUS: But my mother's bed—
I am afraid of that. And surely I should be? 1160

IOCASTE: Why should a man whose life seems ruled by chance
live in fear—a man who never looks ahead,
who has no certain vision of his future?
It's best to live haphazardly, as best one can.
Do not worry you will wed your mother. [980]
It's true that in their dreams a lot of men
have slept with their own mothers, but someone
who ignores all this bears life more easily.

OEDIPUS: Everything you say would be commendable,
if my mother were not still alive. 1170

But since she is, I must remain afraid,
although what you are saying is right.

IOCASTE: But still,
your father's death is a great comfort to us.

OEDIPUS: Yes, it is good, I know. But I do fear
that lady—she is still alive.

MESSENGER: This one you fear,
what kind of woman is she?

OEDIPUS: Old man,
her name is Merope, wife to Polybus. [990]

MESSENGER: And what in her makes you so fearful?

OEDIPUS: Stranger,
a dreadful prophecy sent from the god.

MESSENGER: Is it well known? Or something private, 1180
which another person has no right to know?

OEDIPUS: No, no. It's public knowledge. Loxias*
once said it was my fate that I would marry
my own mother and shed my father's blood
with my own hands. That's why, many years ago,
I left my home in Corinth. Things turned out well,
but nonetheless it gives the sweetest joy
to look into the eyes of one's own parents.

MESSENGER: And because you were afraid of her 1190
you stayed away from Corinth? [1000]

OEDIPUS: And because 1190
I did not want to be my father's killer.

MESSENGER: My lord, since I came to make you happy,
why don't I relieve you of this fear?

OEDIPUS: You would receive from me a worthy thanks.

MESSENGER: That's really why I came—so your return
might prove a benefit to me back home.

OEDIPUS: But I will never go back to my parents.

MESSENGER: My son, it is so clear you have no idea
what you are doing . . .

OEDIPUS: [*interrupting*] What do you mean, old man?
In the name of all the gods, tell me. 1200

MESSENGER: . . . if that's the reason you're a fugitive 1210
and won't go home. [1010]

OEDIPUS: I feared Apollo's prophecy
might reveal itself in me.

MESSENGER: You were afraid
you might become corrupted through your parents?

OEDIPUS: That's right, old man. That was my constant fear.

MESSENGER: Are you aware these fears of yours are groundless?

OEDIPUS: And why is that? If I was born their child . . .

MESSENGER: Because you and Polybus were not related.

OEDIPUS: What do you mean? Was not Polybus my father?

MESSENGER: He was as much your father as this man here, 1210
no more, no less.

OEDIPUS: But how can any man
who means nothing to me be the same
as my own father?

MESSENGER: But Polybus
was not your father, no more than I am. [1020]

OEDIPUS: Then why did he call me his son?

MESSENGER: If you must know,
he received you many years ago as a gift.
I gave you to him.

OEDIPUS: He really loved me.
How could he if I came from someone else?

MESSENGER: Well, before you came, he had no children—
that made him love you.

OEDIPUS: When you gave me to him, 1220
had you bought me or found me by accident?

MESSENGER: I found you in Cithaeron's forest valleys.

OEDIPUS: What were you doing wandering up there?

MESSENGER: I was looking after flocks of sheep.

OEDIPUS: You were a shepherd, just a hired servant
roaming here and there?

MESSENGER: Yes, my son, I was.
But at that time I was the one who saved you. [1030]

OEDIPUS: When you picked me up and took me off,
what sort of suffering was I going through?

MESSENGER: The ankles on your feet could tell you that. 1230

OEDIPUS: Ah, my old misfortune. Why mention that?

MESSENGER: Your ankles had been pierced and tied together.
I set them free.

OEDIPUS: My dreadful mark of shame—
I've had that scar there since I was a child.

MESSENGER: That's why fortune gave you your very name,
the one which you still carry.*

OEDIPUS: Tell me,
in the name of heaven, why did my parents,
my father or my mother, do this to me?

MESSENGER: I don't know. The man who gave you to me
knows more of that than I do.

OEDIPUS: You mean to say 1240
you got me from someone else? It wasn't you
who stumbled on me?

MESSENGER: No, it wasn't me.
Another shepherd gave you to me. [1040]

OEDIPUS: Who?
Who was he? Do you know? Can you tell me
any details, ones you know for certain?

MESSENGER: Well, I think he was one of Laius' servants—
that's what people said.

OEDIPUS: You mean king Laius,
the one who ruled this country years ago?

MESSENGER: That's right. He was one of the king's shepherds.

OEDIPUS: Is he still alive? Can I still see him? 1250

MESSENGER: You people live here. You'd best answer that.

OEDIPUS: [*turning to the Chorus*] Do any of you here now know the man,
this shepherd he describes? Have you seen him,
either in the fields or here in Thebes?
Answer me. It's critical, time at last
to find out what this means. [1050]

CHORUS LEADER: The man he mentioned
is, I think, the very peasant from the fields
you wanted to see earlier. But of this
Iocaste could tell more than anyone.

OEDIPUS: Lady, do you know the man we sent for— 1260
just minutes ago—the one we summoned here?
Is he the one this messenger refers to?

IOCASTE: Why ask me what he means? Forget all that.
There's no point in trying to sort out what he said.

OEDIPUS: With all these indications of the truth
here in my grasp, I cannot end this now.
I must reveal the details of my birth.

IOCASTE: In the name of the gods, no! If you have 1060]
some concern for your own life, then stop!
Do not keep investigating this. 1270
I will suffer—that will be enough.

OEDIPUS: Be brave. Even if I should turn out to be
born from a shameful mother, whose family

for three generations have been slaves,
you will still have your noble lineage.

IOCASTE: Listen to me, I beg you. Do not do this.

OEDIPUS: I will not be convinced I should not learn
the whole truth of what these facts amount to.

IOCASTE: But I care about your own well being—
what I tell you is for your benefit. 1280

OEDIPUS: What you're telling me for my own good
just brings me more distress.

IOCASTE: Oh, you unhappy man!
May you never find out who you really are!

OEDIPUS: [*to Chorus*] Go, one of you, and bring that shepherd here.
Leave the lady to enjoy her noble family. [1070]

IOCASTE: Alas, you poor miserable man!
There's nothing more that I can say to you.
And now I'll never speak again.

[*IOCASTE runs into the palace*]

CHORUS LEADER: Why has the queen rushed off, Oedipus,
so full of grief? I fear a disastrous storm 1290
will soon break through her silence.

OEDIPUS: Then let it break,
whatever it is. As for myself,
no matter how base born my family,
I wish to know the seed from where I came.
Perhaps my queen is now ashamed of me
and of my insignificant origin—
she likes to play the noble lady.
But I will never feel myself dishonoured. [1080]

I see myself as a child of fortune—
and she is generous, that mother of mine 1300
from whom I spring, and the months, my siblings,
have seen me by turns both small and great.
That's how I was born. I cannot change
to someone else, nor can I ever cease
from seeking out the facts of my own birth.

CHORUS: If I have any power of prophecy
or skill in knowing things,
then, by the Olympian deities,
you, Cithaeron, at tomorrow's moon [1090]
will surely know that Oedipus 1310
pays tribute to you as his native land
both as his mother and his nurse,
and that our choral dance and song
acknowledge you because you are
so pleasing to our king.

O Phoebus, we cry out to you—
may our song fill you with delight!

Who gave birth to you, my child?
Which one of the immortal gods
bore you to your father Pan,
who roams the mountainsides?
Was it some daughter of Apollo,
the god who loves all country fields?
Perhaps Cyllene's royal king?
Or was it the Bacchanalian god
dwelling on the mountain tops
who took you as a new-born joy
from maiden nymphs of Helicon
with whom he often romps and plays?*

1320 [1100]

Notes

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

**Isthmus*: The city of Corinth stood on the narrow stretch of land (the Isthmus) connecting the Peloponnese with mainland Greece, a very strategic position.

**Loxias*: a common name for Apollo.

*. . . *still carry*: the name *Oedipus* can be construed to mean either "swollen feet" or "knowledge of one's feet." Both terms evoke a strongly ironic sense of how Oedipus, for all his fame as a man of knowledge, is ignorant about his origin.

*Cyllene's king is the god Hermes, who was born on Mount Cyllene; the Bacchanalian god is Dionysus.

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