

Module 3: Self-Discovery Through Change and Rebirth

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

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

OEDIPUS: *[looking out away from the palace]*

You elders, although I've never seen the man 1330 [1110]
we've been looking for a long time now,
if I had to guess, I think I see him.
He's coming here. He looks very old—
as is appropriate, if he's the one.
And I know the people coming with him,
servants of mine. But if you've seen him before,
you'll recognize him better than I will.

CHORUS LEADER: Yes, I recognize the man. There's no doubt.
He worked for Laius—a trusty shepherd.

[Enter SERVANT, an old shepherd]

OEDIPUS: Stranger from Corinth, let me first ask you— 1340
is this the man you mentioned?

MESSENGER: Yes, he is—
he's the man you see in front of you. [1120]

OEDIPUS: You, old man, over here. Look at me.
Now answer what I ask. Some time ago
did you work for Laius?

SERVANT: Yes, as a slave.
But I was not bought. I grew up in his house.

OEDIPUS: How did you live? What was the work you did?

SERVANT: Most of my life I've spent looking after sheep.

OEDIPUS: Where? In what particular areas?

SERVANT: On Cithaeron or the neighbouring lands. 1350

OEDIPUS: Do you know if you came across this man
anywhere up there?

SERVANT: Doing what?
What man do you mean?

OEDIPUS: The man over here—
this one. Have you ever run into him? [1130]

SERVANT: Right now I can't say I remember him.

MESSENGER: My lord, that's surely not surprising.
Let me refresh his failing memory.
I think he will remember all too well
the time we spent around Cithaeron.
He had two flocks of sheep and I had one. 1360
I was with him there for six months at a stretch,
from early spring until the autumn season.
In winter I'd drive my sheep down to my folds,
and he'd take his to pens that Laius owned.
Isn't that what happened—what I've just said? [1140]

SERVANT: You spoke the truth. But it was long ago.

MESSENGER: All right, then. Now, tell me if you recall
how you gave me a child, an infant boy,
for me to raise as my own foster son.

SERVANT: What? Why ask about that?

MESSENGER: This man here, my friend, 1370
was that young child back then.

SERVANT: Damn you!
Can't you keep quiet about it!

OEDIPUS: Hold on, old man.
Don't criticize him. What you have said
is more objectionable than his account.

SERVANT: My noble master, what have I done wrong?

OEDIPUS: You did not tell us of that infant boy, [1150]
the one he asked about.

SERVANT: That's what he says,
but he knows nothing—a useless busybody.

OEDIPUS: If you won't tell us of your own free will,
once we start to hurt you, you will talk. 1380

SERVANT: By all the gods, don't torture an old man!

OEDIPUS: One of you there, tie up this fellow's hands.

SERVANT: Why are you doing this? It's too much for me!
What is it you want to know?

OEDIPUS: That child he mentioned—
did you give it to him?

SERVANT: I did. How I wish
I'd died that day!

OEDIPUS: Well, you're going to die
if you don't speak the truth.

SERVANT: And if I do,
there's an even greater chance that I'll be killed.

OEDIPUS: It seems to me the man is trying to stall. [1160]

SERVANT: No, no, I'm not. I've already told you— 1390
I did give him the child.

OEDIPUS: Where did you get it?
Did it come from your home or somewhere else?

SERVANT: It was not mine—I got it from someone.

OEDIPUS: Which of our citizens? Whose home was it?

SERVANT: In the name of the gods, my lord, don't ask!
Please, no more questions!

OEDIPUS: If I have to ask again,
then you will die.

SERVANT: The child was born in Laius' house.

OEDIPUS: From a slave or from some relative of his?

SERVANT: Alas, what I'm about to say now . . .
it's horrible.

OEDIPUS: And I'm about to hear it. 1400 [1170]
But nonetheless I have to know this.

SERVANT: If you must know, they said the child was his.
But your wife inside the palace is the one
who could best tell you what was going on.

OEDIPUS: You mean she gave the child to you?

SERVANT: Yes, my lord.

OEDIPUS: Why did she do that?

SERVANT: So I would kill it.

OEDIPUS: That wretched woman was the mother?

SERVANT: Yes.
She was afraid of dreadful prophecies.

OEDIPUS: What sort of prophecies?

SERVANT: The story went
that he would kill his father.

OEDIPUS: If that was true, 1410
why did you give the child to this old man?

SERVANT: I pitied the boy, master, and I thought
he'd take the child off to a foreign land
where he was from. But he rescued him,
only to save him for the greatest grief of all. [1180]
For if you're the one this man says you are
you know your birth carried an awful fate.

OEDIPUS: Ah, so it all came true. It's so clear now.
O light, let me look at you one final time,
a man who stands revealed as cursed by birth, 1420
cursed by my own family, and cursed
by murder where I should not kill.

[OEDIPUS moves into the palace]

CHORUS: O generations of mortal men,
how I count your life as scarcely living.
What man is there, what human being,
who attains a greater happiness [1190]
than mere appearances, a joy
which seems to fade away to nothing?
Poor wretched Oedipus, your fate
stands here to demonstrate for me 1430
how no mortal man is ever blessed.

Here was a man who fired his arrows well—
his skill was matchless—and he won
the highest happiness in everything.
For, Zeus, he slaughtered the hook-taloned Sphinx
and stilled her cryptic song. For our state,
he stood there like a tower against death, [1200]
and from that moment, Oedipus,
we have called you our king
and honoured you above all other men, 1440
the one who rules in mighty Thebes.

But now who is there whose story
is more terrible to hear? Whose life
has been so changed by trouble,
by such ferocious agonies?
Alas, for celebrated Oedipus,
the same spacious place of refuge
served you both as child and father,
the place you entered as a new bridegroom. [1210]
How could the furrow where your father planted, 1450
poor wretched man, have tolerated you
in such silence for so long?

Time, which watches everything
and uncovered you against your will,
now sits in judgment of that fatal marriage,
where child and parent have been joined so long.
O child of Laius, how I wish
I'd never seen you—now I wail

like one whose mouth pours forth laments.
To tell it right, it was through you
I found my life and breathed again,
and then through you my eyesight failed.

[1220]
1460

Notes

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

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