

## *Oedipus the King*

Sophocles

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The story begins with a priest and a chorus of Thebans arriving at the palace of the King, Oedipus, to aid them with the plague. Oedipus sends his brother-in-law Creon to ask the Oracle at Delphi for help. The Oracle says that the cause of the plague is the murderer of the previous King, Laius, who is still at large. King Oedipus calls the blind prophet Tiresias for help, claims to know the answers to Oedipus' questions but refuses to speak. Oedipus, enraged by his refusal, says the prophet himself is an accomplice to the murder that Tiresias tells Oedipus that he himself (Oedipus) is the murderer. The two argue vehemently and eventually Tiresias leaves, muttering that when the murderer is discovered he shall be a native citizen of Thebes; brother and father to his own children; and son and husband to his own mother. Oedipus's wife Jocasta enters and attempts to comfort Oedipus, telling him he should take no notice of prophets. Many years ago she and Laius received an oracle that never came true, saying Laius would be killed by his own son, but, as all Thebes knows, bandits at a crossroads on the way to Delphi killed Laius. The mention of this crossroads causes Oedipus to pause and ask for more details. He asks Jocasta what Laius looked like, and suddenly becomes worried that Tiresias' accusations were true.

Oedipus then sends for the one surviving witness of the attack to be brought to the palace from the fields where he now works as a shepherd. Jocasta, confused, asks Oedipus why he is so nervous and he tells her that many years ago, at a banquet in Corinth, a man drunkenly accused Oedipus of not being his father's son. Bothered by the comment Oedipus went to Delphi and asked the oracle about his parentage and, instead of answers, was prophesized that he would murder his father and sleep with his mother. Upon hearing, Oedipus resolved to quit Corinth and never return as to never permit these atrocities to happen. While travelling he came to the very crossroads where Laius was killed, and encountered a carriage that attempted to drive him off the road. An argument ensued and Oedipus killed the travellers, including a man who matched Jocasta's description of Laius. Oedipus hoped he was wrong in his realization as the story went that several robbers murdered Laius. If the shepherd confirmed that many men attacked Laius, then Oedipus is innocent. A man arrives from Corinth with the message that Oedipus's father has died and Oedipus, to the surprise of the messenger, is ecstatic. However he still fears that he may somehow commit incest. The messenger tells him not to worry because Merope, Queen of Corinth, was not in fact his real mother. It is revealed that this messenger was formerly a shepherd on Mount Cithaeron and was given a baby who he then adopted. Another shepherd gave him the baby who had been told to get rid of the child. Oedipus asks the chorus if anyone knows who this man is, or where he might be now and they respond that he is the same shepherd who was witness to the murder of Laius, and whom Oedipus had already sent for.

Jocasta, who has by now realized the truth, desperately begs Oedipus to stop asking questions but he refuses and Jocasta runs away. When the shepherd arrives Oedipus questions him but he begs to be allowed to leave without answering further. Oedipus presses him, finally threatening him with torture or execution. It is revealed that the child he gave away was Laius' own son and Jocasta had given the baby to the shepherd to secretly be exposed upon the mountainside in fear of the prophecy that had never come true. Everything revealed, Oedipus curses himself and fate before leaving the stage. The chorus laments how even a great man can be felled by fate, and following this, a servant exits the palace to speak of what has happened. Jocasta enters the house, running to the palace bedroom and hanging herself there. Shortly

afterward Oedipus enters, calling his servants to bring him a sword so that he may kill himself, raging through the house until he comes upon Jocasta's body. Oedipus takes her down and removes the long gold pins that held her dress together, plunging them into his own eyes in despair. A blind Oedipus now exits the palace and begs to be exiled as soon as possible.

This book ties in with ancient Gnosticism, a set of beliefs in common with early Christianity, Judaism, and other Greco-Roman cultures stresses Gnosis (spiritual knowledge of the esoteric) as a means of salvation from the material world. The central dogma deals with dualism between the visible, material world and an esoteric spiritual world. Gnosticism states that man stands on the border of these two realms, the genesis of his purest self (the soul) lying within the invisible world, whilst the soul falls into the visible world. The physical body appears as a hindrance and burden, a metaphysical grave for the pure soul, conceiving salvation as the disembodiment of the soul from its entanglement in the physical world back to heaven. This simply states that matter is ipso facto the source of evil, and redemption occurs through a "heavenly redeemer" who descend to deliver fallen and lead them back to heaven. There exists a huge trove of literature that supports the relationship between man and the world in a Gnostic manner, an example being Oedipus the King. The strong conjunction of fate and redemption underlies the entire play, showing up through misreading of the Oracle and redemption for the sin of incest. Oedipus' body is a burden for him, carrying forward in the line of sins he undertakes. King Laius, the true father of Oedipus, rapes his student Chrysippus the charioteer, bring death and curses upon him and his family. Here Laius crosses the border from the Gnostic spiritual world to the Gnostic material world, attaching himself to his material throne, life, and libido rather than seeking atonement (at-one-ment). Laius, now fearful of the Oracles prediction of his death, he pins together the legs of his son and tell his wife Jacosta to kill him. Unable to kill her own born, she leaves the job towards a maidservant who gives him to a shepard who names him Oedipus, or swollen feet. Through cataclysmic event and passings Oedipus murders his father and commits incest with his mother, eventually blinding himself. A literal and metaphorical reference to eyesight appears throughout Oedipus the King. Clear vision serves as a metaphor for insight and knowledge, but the clear-eyed Oedipus is blind to the truth about his origins and inadvertent crimes. The prophet Tiresias, on the other hand, although literally blind, "sees" truth and relays his revelations. Only after Oedipus has physically blinded himself does he gain a limited prophetic ability, as seen in the third play, Oedipus at Colonus. It is deliberately ironic that the "seer" can "see" better than Oedipus, despite being blind. The Gnostic purview on God and an essential frappe of the Christian, Jew, and Greco-Romanic cultures serves as a compass towards the actions and inevitable fate of King Oedipus.

This book serves as a huge reminder of the strength of fate and destiny. This book I recommended to people over the age of sixteen at the least as it does deal with some very powerful sentiments and actions; incest being an example.

**Recommended Titles:**

*Oedipus at Colonus*

*Antigone*