



## **Predestination in *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles**

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#### **Abstract**

*Greek myths have influenced many civilizations in the areas of literature and art. Greek mythology does not contain just the stories of Gods. They also convey the stories of Human heroes such as Heracles, Pygmalion etc. Many of these legendary figures are on par with Gods in popularity. One such legendary hero was Oedipus whose rise and fall was predestined.*

*In Greek's mythology, God's often interfere in human life. This is evident in the great epics of Homer and Virgil. Gods even took sides, when kings were fighting wars against each other. They even had grudges against kings who didn't honour them with ceremonial prayers. Likewise Apollo curses King Laius that Laius's son would kill him and marry Laius wife. Keeping this curse in mind King Laius sends away his child to be left in the wilderness to die. But Gods always have their way in fulfilling what they have cursed. Oedipus, the son of King Laius fights with all human strength and will power against the destiny set by God. Oedipus, after knowing the curse unwittingly escapes from his adopted parents and falls into the traps set by Gods. If gods have designed the events of our lives and left little choice for us to live, why then he created hell? In this case, we are not responsible for our acts because we have been predestined to do them, by Gods. Oedipus' final defeat as a predestined child gives rise to pity and fear.*

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**Introduction:** Reason is the gift bestowed on the crown of Human Civilization. With this reasoning what is clear to us is that everything is a mystery. Who are we? Where do we come from? What is our role here? Where do we go from here? Is there life after death? These are the questions for which search is unending with answers never yielding. Then where are the answers? Are they with god? If we are all predestined, then we are puppets in the hands of fate. Why then did God create us? Are we not free and have our choice? Are we the caged birds of heavenly creation?

Oedipus's destiny was prophesized by the Oracle at the time of his birth. He fights with all the human strength and will, but who can win against fate? In Shakespeare's words, "As flies are to wanton boys, so we are to god, they kill us for their sport"<sup>1</sup>.

**Theory of predestination:** Predestination is a theory or belief that everything that happens has been decided in advance by God and that humans can't change it. Predestination in Christian theology is that the eternal destiny of a person is predestined by God's unchangeable decree. However, it does not mean denial of free will. Many exponents believe that, it is only the individual's final destiny that is predetermined, not the individual's actions which remain free. There are single predestination and double predestination concepts.

**Single Predestination:** "God's gift is independently willed by him and is in no sense response to some human acts"<sup>2</sup>. Some Christians have asserted that their relation to God depends only on God's eternal decree established before the foundation of the world. This point of view implied twice in the New Testament i.e. in Rom. 8 & Eph 1.

**Double Predestination:** It means that God has purposefully chosen some men and angels for eternal life and has left the rest to perish. This can be seen in the writing of St. Augustine and later, it was developed by Swiss reformer John Calvin. In his words, "We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which he determined within himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal conditions: Rather, eternal life is Foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others" (Institutes 3.21.5). This kind of belief freeze people from worry.

Karma is another concept found in Hinduism and Buddhism. The suffering in this life is the result of our actions in the previous birth and that others are not to be blamed for your sufferings.

**Oedipus is Predestined:** In Greek's mythology, God's often interfere in human activities and they take sides in waging wars. This we can see in the great epics of Homer and Virgil. For example in Aeneid, the hero Aeneas after the destruction of Troy is destined by Apollo to go to Italy and build an empire. On his way to Italy, he landed in the country called Carthage, ruled by a widow called Dido. Aeneas gets married to Dido and lives happily. But god Jove sends his son Mercury to remind Aeneas to go to Italy. When Aeneas is preparing to go, Dido curses Aeneas for cheating her and helpless Aeneas says,

"If I had fate's permission  
To live my life my way, to settle my troubles  
At my own will, I would be watching over  
The city of Troy and caring for my people  
Those whom the Greeks had spared and Priam's palace  
Would still be standing; for them vanquished people  
I would have built the town again. But Now  
It is Italy I must seek, great Italy, Apollo orders, and his Oracles  
Call me to Italy; I follow Italy not because I want to<sup>3</sup>.  
For which Dido says "fine business for the gods, the kind of trouble  
That keeps them from their sleep<sup>3</sup>".

Likewise when Oedipus was born the oracle of Delphi said that the child would kill his father and marry his mother. Here it is very clear that the destiny of Oedipus is set and he can never escape. So Oedipus is a destined child.

The war with fate began when King Laius and Jocasta sent away their child to be left in the Wilderness of mount Cithaeron with spike driven in his feet. The child is near to death, but he is not destined to die now. So the child goes into the hands of a shepherd of Corinth, who gives it to the childless king Polybus and Queen Merope. They in turn brought up the child as their own. The child grows up without knowing his true parents, until one day a drunkard tells him that he was an adopted child.

On hearing this shocking revelation Oedipus goes to the Oracle to know his real parents. But the Oracle said that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Here we should note that the Oracle didn't answer his question, but set his mind in the way it wanted to. Believing that Polybus and Merope are his real parents, he decides to leave the kingdom Corinth. On his way he encounters King Laius at a place where three roads met. And in the quarrel that followed Oedipus kills King Laius and four of his men. Oedipus is unaware that half of the prophecy is fulfilled. This incident clearly shows that he is predestined child because Laius with his me could have easily overpowered Oedipus.

Sphinx took the city into her control and gave a riddle to be solved. Oedipus comes and solves the riddle. After that he becomes the king and marries queen Jocasta who is none other than his own mother. If it was just a riddle Teresias could have solved it, but that didn't happen. So, it is clear that the fate had arranged everything in such a way that only Oedipus had to solve the riddle and full fill the prophecy. We may say that Oedipus could have used his reason even before marrying the queen because she was of his mother's age. That didn't take place because he was fated to be blind for the things that are destined to happen.

The play begins with Oedipus on the throne and Thebes being attacked by plague. This plague is an act of fate to make public that the prophecy has come true. As a responsible king, he sends Creon to the Oracle which says that the murderer of King Laius should be banished. Oedipus starts the investigation and on the suggestion of the Chorus, he calls upon Teiresias. Teiresias in the beginning refuses to reveal the truth and when Oedipus provokes him, he reveals it. Teiresias pointing at Oedipus says, "You are the cursed polluter of this land<sup>4</sup>", for this Oedipus in anger, accuses Teiresias and Creon of a coup and says he cannot be brought down. To this Teiresias answers, "It is not for me to bring you down, that is in Apollo's hands and he will do it<sup>4</sup>". Here his anger is seen as the cause for his downfall but it is the game of the fate.

When Oedipus and Creon are arguing angrily, Jocasta comes and says that Teiresias is wrong because King Laius was destined to be killed by his own son and who would marry her. But, this

never happened, because the child was left in the woods to die. She also said that Laius was killed by robbers at a place where three roads met. Oedipus asks, "Which three roads?" and Jocasta said that the three roads that lead to Thebes, Delphi and Daulis. Oedipus is upset and says "O God what wilt Thou do to me"<sup>4</sup>. On his request, Jocasta gives details of King Laius. Oedipus feels that he might have killed King Laius and says "am I unwittingly self-cursed"<sup>4</sup>. And later he sends for the only witness.

Oedipus narrates his story and feels ashamed that his victim might be Laius and he says, "Can it be any but some monstrous god of evil that has sent his doom upon me?"<sup>4</sup>. His hope is in the arrival of the only witness. Meanwhile Jocasta goes and prays to Apollo to make things better. At the same time a messenger arrives from Corinth and tells about the death of Polybus. Yet Oedipus is not convinced because his mother is still alive and for which Jocasta says "fear? What has a man to do with fear, chance rules over lives, and the future is unknown"<sup>4</sup>. But the messenger reveals the truth that Oedipus was an adopted child. He said that he himself gave the child having received it from a shepherd at Mount Cithaeron who belongs to Thebes. He also said that there was a spike driven in the child's leg by which Oedipus got his name.

To Jocasta things are very clear and she asks Oedipus not to go further to know the truth. Oedipus rejects her offer and the queen goes inside and hangs herself. Thebe's shepherd who is the only witness in Laius death is brought. The Corinthian messenger identifies Thebe's shepherd as the one who gave the child to him long back. But Thebe's shepherd rejects it first and later accepts by revealing the whole truth that Oedipus is the child of Laius and Jocasta. Oedipus goes inside the palace to see the queen. He finds her dead and he takes her brooches and plucks out his eyes.

When chorus asks him how he could remove his eyes? Oedipus says "Apollo friends Apollo. Has laid this agony upon me; not by his hand; I did it". Later he also says "I am lost, hated of the gods, no man so damned"<sup>4</sup>. Oedipus life is the fate's game, the shepherd who saved the child met again after so many years to reveal the truth that almost puts Oedipus to death. Oedipus lives to see the curse which he laid on Laius murderers fall on him and he becomes the answer to the riddle of Sphinx.

At Colonus Oedipus did not die like an ordinary man; he was carried by divine agency to live as a demigod. Because Oedipus was a victim of the curse, laid by God on his father Laius. Oedipus is a predestined child and so he had his place in heaven.

**Critique:** We doubt that can a play be effective if the hero is the victim of fate. It all depends upon the story and the way the writer puts it. Let's look at the story first, through the oracle Oedipus comes to know that he will kill his father and marry his mother. His destiny is set and he knows that he cannot help it. But he is a human being with many good qualities and doesn't want the things prophesied by the oracle to happen. The struggle of the hero with all the human strength against fate and his final defeat gives rise to pity and fear. Though the story is known to us, it moves us when it is seen on the stage. Particularly after Oedipus plucks his eyes the whole world is on his side pointing fingers at heaven. How could Gods predestine a person to do such a heinous act? By blinding himself he is rejecting creation of God and God as well. At that moment he finds solace in darkness.

Sophocles with his artistic talent gave impeccable charm to the story. Out of one hundred and twenty plays which he authored "*Oedipus the King*" has many lessons as time goes by. Sophocles has elevated his characters than any other playwrights of his time. He was an innovative playwright tried and was successful in reducing the role of chorus. But in this play chorus has its importance. Sophocles was the most successful dramatist of his time. To Aristotle "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions"<sup>5</sup>. Aristotle praised the work for it had all the characteristics of a tragedy. Characteristics like single plot, peripetia and anagnorisis are found in the play. Irony in the play keeps mounting till the end. The fall of the Hero from great heights to the dust leads to the purgation of emotions of the audience. Poetic language is another factor that makes the play more effective. All in all, it's one of the wonderful plays of Sophocles that brought him eternal fame. To sum-up on the concept of predestination with the following little verse.

If predestined  
How cruel is God my father?  
If things all are predestined

Like slave I exist in this heaven of freedom  
Is misery your art O' Noble Lord?  
If things bad slip from my deeds  
Blame not me an innocent predestined child  
And I think, I have my place in heaven forever  
To whom then the hell exits?  
God have kindness on your own creation.

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