



DIVINE DISASTERS AND DISTRESSED LANDSCAPES IN *OEDIPUS REX*: AN ECO-THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Eco-theology, an emerging field in literary studies, provides a distinctive perspective on the relationship between religion, ecological issues, and human responsibility towards the environment. This paper argues that *Oedipus Rex* presents a viewpoint on divine disasters to examine the interaction of faith, religion, and the ecological crisis, as exemplified by the tragic plague that befalls Thebes. The play has been widely discussed under the Greek tragedy rubric and the exploration of human actions versus fate. However, this paper explores the concept of eco-theology, focusing on the themes of divine intervention and god's decisions responsible for the ecological crisis. By applying the theoretical propositions of John B. Cobb Jr.'s "Eco-theology," this research contends that the ecological disruption in *Oedipus Rex*, i.e., plague, serves as a form of divine retribution and triggers a theological crisis in the character of Oedipus. The shepherd's act of saving Oedipus, the rise to the throne, and the eventual downfall of Oedipus highlight the divine scheme, leading to the ecological disaster of the plague as divine retribution. Thus, this chain of events shows that the gods not only directed Oedipus's life but also paradoxically punished him with the plague for fulfilling the destiny they designed.

Keywords: *Distressed Landscapes, Divine Retribution, Ecological Crisis, Plague, Theological Crisis.*

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This paper establishes a connection between theology, ecology, and literature by conducting a textual analysis of *Oedipus Rex*. Greek theater has a dual nature, as it explores two recurring and intertwined themes: divine justice and human actions (Kane 16). In this theatrical landscape, divine authority determines the characters' decisions, offering thought-provoking reflections on the intricate relationship between individuals and the divine forces. This paper relates the concept of divine intervention with ecological crisis. Divine retribution is an old concept, as quoted in the divine texts asserting that natural calamities are sent to human communities by Gods because of the former's sins and disobedience. Rooted in history for over 1,400 years, this notion appears prominently in the Quran and the Bible and reverberates through Greek literature. For instance, in the Quran, the story of the destruction of Lut's people (Qaum-e-Lut) emphasizes divine retribution, where people went against God's words, and God punished them for their "transgressions" (Jahan 16). Similarly, the biblical story of Noah highlights the conflict between Prophet Noah and disbelievers that resulted in divine retribution, manifesting as an ecological crisis—the Great Flood (The Story of Noah 5). This idea of divine punishment may seem conventional, but this research investigates the complex relationship between divine retribution, divine disasters and distressed landscapes, in *Oedipus Rex* through the lens of eco-theology. By applying the theoretical propositions of John B. Cobb Jr.'s "Eco-theology," this research contends that the ecological disruption in *Oedipus Rex*, i.e., plague, serves as a form of divine retribution and triggers a profound theological crisis in the character of Oedipus. This theological crisis is evident in Oedipus's progression from an initial state of confidence in the gods and oracles to a later state of doubt and despair, marking a transformative journey that encapsulates the depth of his theological turmoil. Thus, this research highlights Oedipus's journey as an instructive tale, illustrating the interconnectedness between ecological imbalance, theological doubt, and human suffering.

The play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles is a tragedy that highlights the themes of divine disaster, distressed landscape, and divine retribution, demonstrated by the plague that destroys the city of Thebes. The ancient Greeks professed that their lives and the natural disasters that afflicted them were under the control of the gods (Rahman 1). Furthermore, critics claim that "gods...have planned Athens destruction" (Dimok 431). Similarly, In *Oedipus Rex*, the destruction of Thebes due to plague is also a form of divine punishment (Silberman 294). The play *Oedipus Rex* revolves around King Oedipus of Thebes, who pledges to save his city from a devastating plague. The Oracle of Delphi reveals to him that the plague is punishment for the unsolved murder of the previous king, Laius. Oedipus decides to find the murderer, but in doing so, he discovers tragic truths. He himself, unknowingly, had killed Laius, fulfilling a horrifying prophecy that he would marry his own mother. Jocasta, Oedipus's wife and mother, realizes the truth of their

relationship and hangs herself in despair. Oedipus blinds himself in agony after discovering the reality of his actions and lineage. Thus, the gods planned Oedipus's tragic fate and sent the plague as retribution.

1. Environmental Ethics, Eco-Theology, and the Challenge of Disasters

Early in the 1970s, environmental ethics became a distinct branch of philosophy, challenging conventional anthropocentrism. It questions the presumption that humans are morally superior to other members of the earth's species. Furthermore, it explores the viability of rational justifications for attributing inherent value to the natural world and its non-human inhabitants (Environmental Ethics). Environmental ethics provides the ethical and philosophical foundation for the emergence of eco-theology by emphasizing humanity's moral responsibilities toward the environment and non-human life. Eco-theology builds upon this ethical framework to integrate religious and theological perspectives into discussions of ecological challenges and ethical responses. Celia Deane-Drummond, in her book *Eco-theology* (2008), defines the term eco-theology as the "reflection on different facets of theology in as much as they take their bearings from cultural concerns about the environment and humanity's relationship with the natural world" (x). Moreover, John B. Cobb Jr.'s theory of *Eco-theology* challenges the anthropocentric ethical frameworks that frequently ignore the effects of human behavior on the environment. Cobb's eco-theological understanding remains significant in dealing with unprecedented ecological issues. This helps mitigate the negative effects of human actions on the environment by advocating a more inclusive and ecologically aware approach to ethics. John B. Cobb Jr in his book, *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, says that natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, or the force of gravity, are parts of nature (71). Additionally, Cobb introduces the idea of "process theology," which is a process that results from a dynamic process of formation, growth, and changes. Everything originates in nature and eventually returns to it. Nothing in the universe occurs but in accordance with the process. Cobb refers to God as the creative process in the sense that God is the creator of the process (Sayem 33). Thus, according to eco-theological theorists, the environmental crisis, characterized by pollution, habitat destruction, and the depletion of natural resources, is not merely a scientific or political problem. It is, fundamentally, a theological challenge that requires a moral and spiritual response.

Humanity's relationship with the natural world and the environment is complex and multifaceted. While human activities have the potential to benefit society, they can also disrupt ecosystems and natural processes, leading to a higher likelihood of disasters. Merriam-Webster defines the term disaster as, "a sudden calamitous event bringing great damage, loss, or destruction" (n.d). However, in theology and philosophy, disasters are known as natural evils, as opposed to moral evils, because they do not entail human choices

(Mathuna 28). Thus, eco-theology provides a theological and ethical framework for understanding and responding to disasters in a way that considers both the spiritual and moral dimensions of these events.

Disasters are primarily caused by human beings and their attitude towards the environment (Chester 2005, Mathuna 2018). Critics argue that attributing disasters to gods implies a lack of accountability for human actions. David K Chester, in his article "Theology and disaster studies: The need for dialogue" (2005), states that the idea of an "Act of God" has been replaced with a viewpoint that sees natural disasters as the result of human frailty and characteristics of a devastated nature (1). This also emphasizes the importance of understanding the environmental and societal factors that contribute to disasters. Critics believe that such catastrophes are the consequences of collective human choices and moral failings; as Donal P. O Mathuna, in his book's chapter "Christian Theology and Disasters: Where is God in All This?" (2018) asserts, "Human sin fractured the harmonious relationships between God and humans, among humans, and between humans and the environment" (31). This means that humans become disconnected from the divine, leading to a sense of spiritual emptiness and longing. Furthermore, the damaged connection between humans and the environment results in the exploitation and degradation of nature, leading to ecological imbalances.

Even with pressing environmental crises, the tragedy or condition of an individual often captures more attention. Kousoulis, Antonis A., et al. in their article, "The Plague of Thebes, a Historical Epidemic in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex" (2012), analyze the portrayal of a lethal plague in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, comparing it to the historical plague of Athens described by Thucydides, with the goal of determining whether the plague in the play reflects a real historical event and proposing a potential causative pathogen, which is suggested to be *Brucella abortus*. The authors say,

"The first part of the play is rife with references to the plague and its consequences, in the second part there are only sporadic referrals to the epidemic. The fate of Oedipus emerges as a truly tragic one, not so much because he caused the plague, but because of the character's own personal tragedy" (155).

This demonstrates that the ecological crisis remains in the background, and the character's personal tragedy becomes the play's central theological and dramatic concern.

Human tragedy and unconscious actions directly impact the environment, and the plague in *Oedipus Rex* is the result of human actions. Lutz Goetzmann, in his article, "The Crises of Oedipus" (2023), discusses the application of the Oedipus complex to ecology, suggesting that one's unconscious attitudes and conflicts are projected onto one's relationship with the biosphere. He comments that humans put, "unconscious attitudes, i.e., our conflicts and traumata, into the relationship with the biosphere" (124). Thus, Oedipus' unconscious act of sleeping with her mother highlights the destructive nature of

human relationships, which also leads to religious conflict. George Dimock, in his article, "Oedipus: The Religious Issue" (1968), describes that the natural disaster, the plague, caused a "religious crisis" and Sophocles' main purpose was to address this disaster (430) and to explore the intricate relationship between gods and humans. In addition, Sophocles highlights the inescapable link between divine and mortal nature by acknowledging the existence of gods and their influence on human destiny (431). This understanding also shapes the narrative of Athens's impending destruction, emphasizing its inevitability as a manifestation of both divine will and human nature.

Some critics oppose the idea that human actions are responsible for the destruction of the land; rather, they hold the view that gods send disasters (Silberman 1986, Zhang 2023). Many ancient religions, such as Greek mythology and Roman mythology, developed in response to natural phenomena, including disasters. The view is that calamities happen because the gods are furious and send disasters to punish sinful humanity (Mathuna 28). Tong Zhang, in his article, "Suffering as Divine Punishment" (2023), also claims that natural disasters and suffering are considered divine punishment (1). Greek Tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, presents plague as a punishment from gods. Lauren Silberman in his article, "God and Man in Oedipus Rex", asserts that Oedipus' pursuit of the truth and his endurance of the harsh reality of his own fate aligns with the theme of divine retribution. Silberman articulates, "In Oedipus Rex, the gods are the ultimate guarantors of retribution, the divine order has no room for the moral sentiments of human beings" (Silberman 294). However, the divine order depicted in the play does not consider or accommodate the moral sentiments or ethical considerations of human beings and the environment. In many religious and philosophical traditions, human-centric worldviews have prevailed, neglecting ecological and environmental ethics. This neglect results in environmental degradation and disregard for the well-being of the biosphere. Similarly, the divine order in *Oedipus Rex* does not focus on the characters' moral sentiments or ethical considerations.

Thus, the present study delves into Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to investigate the relationship between human actions, ecological imbalance, and theological challenges. While numerous studies have explored various aspects of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, including its treatment of the plague as a religious challenge (Dimock 1968), historical epidemic (Kousoulis 2012), and a consequence of human unconscious actions (Goetzmann 2023), there is a notable gap in the examination of the play from an eco-theological perspective. Existing research primarily focuses on the immediate implications of the plague within the narrative, often overlooking the broader theological and ecological dimensions. This research bridges this gap by investigating the ecological imbalance and the plague from Cobb's Eco-theological perspective, shedding light on how it leads to theological challenges for the character of Oedipus.

2. Representation of Distressed Landscape in *Oedipus Rex*

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the landscape of Thebes is depicted as distressed, reflecting the complex themes of human error and divine retribution. As the play opens, the dialogue between Oedipus and the Priest shows the devastating plague that ravages Thebes. The priest tells Oedipus that Thebes' inhabitants are afflicted by a dreadful plague, drought and starvation, driving the Theban populace to the verge of extinction (Akhter et al. 10). The priest reports, "The storm as you see, has hit our land...Above the waves of this new sea of blood" (Sophocles 6). This establishes that Thebes is covered in a disaster. Moreover, Sophocles uses images from nature such as "storm" (6) and "sea of blood" (6) to emphasize the devastation and suffering caused by the natural calamity. Critics assert that Sophocles uses fragmented phrases to outline the nature of the epidemic (Kousoulis et al 154). Moreover, "Sophocles' specific vocabulary for plague in *Oedipus the King* shows the relation between epidemic and tragic drama. Greek literature uses the words *nosos* to signify disease in general and *loimos* for plague in particular" (Boyask 375). However, the ecological concern in *Oedipus Rex* is dramatically conveyed in the dialogues, with phrases such as "fiery plague" (Sophocles 11), indicating the plague's fierce and destructive impact; "the land is sore distressed" (line 79), portraying the suffering of the people; and "Thebes die a new death each moment; her children, Le in dust, death agents, and no-one, Spares them a tear; their wives and gray-haired mothers, Flock screaming to the altars, and pray for their own lives" (Sophocles 11) illustrating the intense despair and anguish engulfing the Thebans. Moreover, In the play, the priest labels plague as a curse from heaven, he remarks, "the curse of heaven, plague...Has struck and runs like wildfire through the city" (Sophocles 6). This highlights that the plague is sent from heaven as a punishment that has destroyed the cattle, women, and inhabitants of Thebes, creating a distressed landscape. The creation of the distressed landscape of Thebes follows Cobb's concept of eco-theology, that everything in the universe occurs but in accordance with the process (change) (Sayem 33). Within the divine order, the distressed landscape of Thebes can be seen as a manifestation of a process where divine retribution is inflicted in response to human actions.

3. The Lethal Plague: Tragic Motif and Divine Retribution

The protagonist in the play are horrified by the plague due to its lethal nature. The motif of the plague in the play links with the historical and cultural underpinnings of the time and enhances the tragic impact of the play within the context of Greek theatre. Boyask claims that the depiction of the Theban plague reflects the real-life Athenian plague, a calamity that influenced Greek literature (374). The play's portrayal of the plague, especially in the context of the Athenian audience's recent experiences, intensifies the tragic elements, as it mirrors their own struggles and reinforces the omnipotence of the

gods (374). Moreover, the impact of the historical plague on Athenian tragedy indicates that the themes explored in *Oedipus Rex* are part of a broader cultural and religious response to the plague. This historical backdrop adds a layer of authenticity to the Theban plague, emphasizing its role as divine retribution and deepening the tragedy's emotional and spiritual resonance. The motifs of drought, famine, plague, and the overarching sense of physical decay occur because of the city's moral, spiritual and theological crisis. In the context of John Cobb's Eco-theological viewpoint, which claims that disasters are part of nature (71), the drought, famine, and the plague also act as natural disasters. These disasters represent divine retribution for the city's collective moral failings, particularly the unresolved crimes and the ethical blindness of Oedipus. The oracle also declares that religious pollution is the main cause of the plague, and the god Apollo has commanded the inhabitants of Thebes to banish the hitherto unidentified "miasma" (a Greek word meaning morally noxious pollution) from the town (Kousoulis et al. 154). This shows that the distressed landscape of Thebes symbolizes societal ills and the interconnectedness of human actions, divine retribution, and natural consequences.

Oedipus is a tragic figure caught in the web of divine punishment, symbolized by the plague. Albeit he ruled the people of Thebes because of his deeds, he was ruined entirely by the plans of the gods (Li 116). The incident when Oedipus' parents, King Laius and Queen Jocasta, left him to die and a shepherd saved him points toward god's intervention in his life. Oedipus was destined to be saved by the shepherd and preserved to fulfil the prophecy related to his painful destiny (116). John Cobb's theory of Eco-theology proposes that "the divine reality is present in all events, and the divine purpose is working itself out in and through them" (Sayemm 33). Thus, Oedipus life's trajectory—from his astonishing survival as an infant to his ultimate demise—is an expression of the will of the gods, with the plague acting as a divine indictment for Thebes' and Oedipus' misdeeds. When Oedipus came to know about the prophecy, he tried his best to circumvent reality, but the gods controlled his actions, leading him towards the fulfilment of divine judgment (Rahman 1). Critics claim that "the plague was a divine manifestation and that any attempt to avoid that issue would be even more fatal than the plague" (Dimok 431). Oedipus ran from Corinth, killed King Laius, saved Thebes from the sphinx, and married his mother, Jocasta. All of his actions indirectly fulfilled the prophecy and directed him to his predestined and inescapable fate (Rahman 1), highlighting the "human helplessness in the hands of the gods" (Cairns 121). However, Oedipus is committed to saving his people from the wrath of the gods. He sent Creon to find the solution to the disaster, and Creon informs,

"Phoebus commands us, in plain terms, to rid
Our land of some pollution, nourished here," (Sophocles 8)

The Above reference to Phoebus (Apollo) commanding the removal of pollution spotlights the notion of the plague as an act of divine retribution. Critics support this argument by claiming that the gods are “the ultimate guarantors of retribution” in *Oedipus Rex*, and “the divine order has no room for the moral sentiments of human beings” (Silberman 294). Apollo, the god associated with prophecy, truth, and healing, implies that the city is suffering from spiritual or moral contamination (pollution) that Thebes harbored. This also reveals god's intervention in the world to punish and correct human wrongdoings, positioning the plague as a response to a perceived transgression against divine law. Furthermore, Sophocles’ use of the theme of the ecological crisis as divine retribution enhances the tragic impact of the play within the context of Greek theatre. Crisp asserts that divine intervention in literature does not diminish but “enlarge and dignify” (363) human motivation. In the play, the divine-induced plague does not undermine Oedipus's agency; instead, it amplifies the consequences of his actions, reinforcing the tragedy's depth.

In Greek mythology, the gods influence human lives and control human actions through strongly believed prophecies (Naiburg 450). Similarly, in *Oedipus Rex*, the prophecies by the gods determine Oedipus's life course, his actions and divine punishment. Oedipus firmly believes in the power of prophecy. He summons the prophet Tiresias to seek a solution to the ecological disaster he perceives as sent by the gods. Oedipus's dialogue, “Or any means of prophecy you know. Come save the city; save yourself and me, And heal the foulness spread by Laius’ blood” (Sophocles 15) reflects the characters' strong belief in the gods and their role in human affairs. This plea for help to save Thebes from the ecological catastrophe emphasizes the belief that these tragedies are direct expressions of divine will. The prophecy of gods and the appeal to a blind prophet for help demonstrate a strong belief that the gods actively govern the natural and moral order of the world. Critics maintain that the punishment in the form of an ecological crisis that is written for Oedipus is “absolute priority of divine will” (Silberman 294). Thus, the ecological crisis in Thebes transcends being an unfortunate incidence and instead represents a manifestation of divine retribution.

4. The Plague of Thebes: A Theological Challenge in Oedipus Rex

The plague that befalls Thebes acts as a natural disaster, which leads to a theological crisis in Oedipus. John Cobb's concept of *Eco-theology* supports this argument by claiming that “disasters are not merely natural occurrences but can be seen as theological challenges” (Sayem 33). For instance, in *Oedipus Rex*, when Tiresias exposes the truth about Laius's death and the messenger reveals Oedipus's true parentage, Oedipus expresses apprehension. He says, “I am terrified of proving Phoebus true” (Sophocles 88), indicating his fear of the accuracy of Apollo's prophecy. Furthermore, Tiresias' dialogue,

“What will come will come. Even if I shroud it all in silence” (Sophocles 75), highlights the inevitability of divine will, showing that the gods planned the events leading to ecological crisis as a form of divine punishment. The moment when Oedipus recognizes fulfilling the prophecy presents a significant theological challenge. This challenge involves reconciling the devastation of the ecological crisis in Thebes – the plague – with the idea that it is a consequence of divine will. Critics say that Oedipus's decisions bring him closer to realizing the gods' punishment, with the plague as a constant reminder of the divine wrath (Dilman 21). Moreover, Critics also affirm that “the plague and finding the killer of Laius depend on the gods” (Cairns 110). Thus, the plague becomes a symbol of the divine response to the moral complexities within Thebes, implying that natural calamities carry deeper theological implications.

In addition, Cobb's "process theology" concept suggests that everything is part of a dynamic process of formation, growth, and change and that nothing occurs outside of this process (Sayem 33). Similarly, the plague in Oedipus Rex is part of the process where human actions lead to ecological disruptions, which challenge theological and moral understandings. Oedipus's journey from trust in prophecies and oracles to doubt signifies this theological crisis. After blinding himself, Oedipus blames Apollo for the devastating plague and his tragic situation. He declares, "It was Apollo, my friends who contrived my ruin, who worked my fall" (Sophocles 49). Apollo sets the stage for Laius and Oedipus to meet, and his intervention in Oedipus's life makes the former responsible till the end of the play. “Apollo seems to intervene, and it is plausible to think that this intervention undermines Oedipus own responsibility” (Crisp 366). Critics also claim that the Chorus gives a significant “social element by blaming Ares, the god of war (lines 190–191), “Ares whose hot breath I feel, though without targe or steel he stalks, whose voice is as the battle shout” (2,3) (Kousoulis et al. 155). After blinding himself, Oedipus exiles himself from the land of Thebes. Thus, Oedipus' transformation from an admired king to a disgraced exile accentuates Cobb's narrative of a “process theology”, which views all events as interconnected within a continuous evolutionary process (Sayem 33). Similarly, Oedipus's life story demonstrates how his decisions and their consequences are woven into a dynamic sequence of cause and effect. This sequence not only shapes his personal destiny but also impacts the natural and social environment of Thebes. Thus, the plague symbolizes divine intervention, reflecting the belief that such ecological catastrophes are acts of the gods, shaping both individual destinies and the collective experience.

In conclusion, the integration of the plague as a manifestation of divine retribution in *Oedipus Rex*, set against the setting of contemporary Athenian experiences and cultural beliefs, amplifies the tragic impact of the play within the context of Greek theatre (Boyask 374). The anthropocentric framework, which Cobb critiques, considers the plague as a direct result of human sins or as a punishment (71). Furthermore, Cobb insights into the

connection between human beings and the broader natural environment imply that the degradation of the non-human world diminishes human well-being (274). In the context of *Oedipus Rex*, this interdependence is evident in the ecological crisis of the plague, which mirrors the human catastrophe and represents a broader ecological paradigm. The eco-theological perspective sees plague as an environmental imbalance triggering a divine response, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human actions, theological implications, and nature's reactions. In *Oedipus Rex*, the shepherd's act of saving Oedipus, the latter's rise to the throne, and eventual downfall highlight the divine scheme, leading to the ecological disaster of the plague as divine retribution. Thus, this chain of events stresses that the gods not only directed Oedipus's life but also paradoxically punished him with the plague for fulfilling the destiny they designed.

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