The word priest means different things to different people, depending on your upbringing or religious context. But priests play a big role in the biblical story. In the Bible, priests represent God to the people and the people to God. Unfortunately throughout the Bible, those who are called to priestly duties often fail to live up to their calling. But all of these stories point to the ultimate royal priest, Jesus, the one who will restore the blessings of Eden so that all humanity can become the royal priests we were made to be.

In the first episode of our Royal Priest series, we’re looking at the sacred mountain-temple, Eden, and the first humans, Adam and Eve, who are called to rule creation on God’s behalf and represent his image to all creation. Use these study notes to dig deeper into the ideas introduced in our video Royal Priests of Eden.
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**Introduction to Priests in the Bible**

In order to understand this important biblical theme, we have to first look at what it means to be a priest according to the Bible.

A priest is someone who presides over the overlapping boundary of Heaven and Earth. Their primary function is to represent God to people and people to God. Priests act as mediators between Heaven and Earth, between the divine and human. They are embodied representatives of the divine.

The first person called priest (Heb. kohen / כֹּהֵן) in the Bible is Melchizedek, who was the king-priest over ancient Jerusalem (Genesis 14).

After that we meet a series of priests.

- Genesis 41:45: Joseph in Egypt marries the daughter of a priest in Egypt.
- Exodus 2:16: Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, is the priest of Midian, a tribal group inhabiting the deserts southeast of Canaan.
- Exodus 31:10: Aaron is to be appointed as the high priest of Israel.

But there is a core problem that arises when talking about priests in the Bible. Priests are introduced in the Bible in a way that leaves ambiguous who they are and what they do. This is not a bug—it’s a feature of the storyline.

**God’s Presence Embodied in Human Form**

Priest is a biblical category used to describe someone whose job it is to represent and embody God’s heavenly divine presence on Earth, specifically in sacred spaces and roles.

But priests are not the only ones who do that. There are actually three overlapping roles in the Bible where people represent God. In addition to priests there are:

- **Prophets**: Represent God’s power and purpose to people on Earth, specifically to those in covenant relationship with God.
- **Kings**: Represent God’s presence and powerful rule on Earth in the context of a group’s social and political life.
Priest, prophet, and king are all later biblical categories that only partially represent something core to each category: the concept of God’s presence, word, and power embodied in human form.

The priesthood is only one part of this triad, focused specifically on the role of representing God in a sacred space. But the core idea is more fundamental.

The story of the Hebrew Bible is about how all humanity was created as God’s image and made to rule and represent the divine presence, power, and purpose on Earth. It is only after the introduction of human rebellion that these roles break off from one another and separate.

The story of Jesus is about how all of these separate roles are reunited in the person of Jesus, which is why Jesus is depicted as a prophet, king, and priest, but mainly called “the son of humanity,” or “the human one.”

When we only focus on the theme of priesthood in the Bible apart from its narrative dynamic that begins with humans as the image of God, we are putting the cart before the horse, so to speak.

To explore the theme of priesthood in the Bible, we must begin with the concept of the image of God introduced in Genesis 1.
Humanity As God’s Royal Image

Within the framework of the six days of Genesis 1, the appointment of humanity as God’s image is clearly the climactic act of God’s work, as this moment is saved for the last. This key moment in Genesis 12:26-28 is designed as a literary symmetry.

And God said, 
“Let us make human 
in our image, 
according to our likeness; 
and let them rule 
over the fish of the sea 
and over the birds of the sky 
and over the cattle 
and over all the land, 
and over every creeper that creeps on the land.”

And God created human in his image, 
in the image of God he created him; 
male and female he created them.

And God blessed them, 
and God said to them, 
“Be fruitful and multiply, 
and fill the land, 
and subdue it; 
and rule over the fish of the sea 
and over the birds of the sky 
and over every living creature that creeps on the land.”

GENESIS 1:26-28

Notice the use of the term “rule” in this passage (“and let them rule over,” “in order that they may rule”). In Hebrew grammar and syntax, when you have a verb of command or invitation, called an imperative (ex: “Be fruitful and multiply”), followed by a clause that also has what’s called a jussive (ex: “and let them rule...”), this is a classical Hebrew way of making a purpose statement. For more on this, see Thomas Lambdin’s Introduction to Biblical Hebrew (1971 edition), section 107c.

As noted above, the purpose of humanity’s appointment as the divine image is royal rule over creation. In Genesis 1, it is clear that God alone has the unique mastery and power over the chaotic nothingsness—he alone can speak reality into an ordered existence. But now, humanity is appointed as God’s delegated ruler, as embodied physical images of the divine rule.

“Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear, so humans are placed on the earth in God’s image as God’s sovereign emblem.”
— Gerhard von Rad, Genesis, pg. 60.
“The imago Dei refers to human rule, that is, an exercise of power on God’s behalf in creation... This delegation of, or sharing in, God’s rule suggests the image is ‘representative,’ designating the responsible office and task entrusted to humanity in administering the earthly realm on God’s behalf... [However] the meaning of ‘rule’ goes well beyond our contemporary hermeneutical preconceptions. The royal metaphor... integrally includes wisdom and artful construction. The God who rules creation by his authoritative word is also the supreme artisan who constructs a complex and habitable cosmic structure... The humans are called to imitate or continue God’s own creative activity by populating and organizing the remaining unformed and unfilled earth. God has, in other words, started the process of forming and filling, which humans, as God’s earthly delegates, are to continue.” — J. RICHARD MIDDLETON, THE LIBERATING IMAGE: THE IMAGO DEI IN GENESIS 1, PGS. 88-89.

History of Ancient Near Eastern Royal Representatives

To understand the significance of this calling for humanity, it’s important to look at how other ancient Near Eastern cultures referred to royal figures as representatives of their deities.

The statue of the Syrian king Hadad-iti (9th century B.C.) is dedicated to Adad (Baal), the patron storm God of Syria. The statue is described in precisely the language of Genesis 1:26: The statue of the king represents Adad’s authority, which Hadad-iti embodies and represents.

In Egyptian royal ideology, the Pharaoh was called “the image of Re” (the sun deity, chief of the Egyptian pantheon).

Pharaoh Ahmose I (1550-1525 B.C.) was called “the prince of Re, the child of Qeb, his heir, the image of Re whom he created, the representative for whom he has set himself on earth.”

Queen Hatepshepsut (1479-1457 B.C.) is described as the “superb image of Amon, the image of Amon on earth, the image of Amon-Re to eternity, his living monument on earth.”

Amenhotep II (1427-1400 B.C.) was titled “image of Re,” or “image of Horus,” or “holy image of the lord of gods.”

Amenhotep III (1390-1352 B.C.) was called by Amon “my living image, creation of my members, whom Mut bore for me.”

For more examples and discussion, see David J.A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” Tyndale Bulletin vol. 19 (1968), pgs. 53-103.
“Central to this ideology was the divinity of the pharaoh, by which he was set apart from all other human beings... [T]he central function of the king was his cultic, intermediary function of uniting the earthly and divine realms. The pharaoh was thought, in a fairly strong sense, to be a physical, local, incarnation of the deity, analogous to that of a cult statue or image of a god, which is also such an incarnation... The king... was a place where the god manifested himself and was a primary means by which the deity worked on earth.” — J. RICHARD MIDDLETON, THE LIBERATING IMAGE: THE IMAGO DEI IN GENESIS 1, 109-110.

Mesopotamian (Assyrian and Babylonian) examples:

- A letter from Adad-shumu-usur as court astrologer in the reign of Assyrian king Esarhaddon (670s B.C.): “The king, the lord of the world, is the very image of Shamash.”
- Another letter from Adad-shumu-usur to Esarhaddon, where he describes both the king and his late father: “The father of the king, my lord, was the very image of Bel, and the king, my lord, is likewise the very image of Bel.”
- Discussed in Simo Parpola, Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars, letters #196 and #228.

In ancient royal ideology “the king is the image of the god. This widely attested functional similarity between the king and god in Mesopotamia, whereby the king represents the god by virtue of his royal office and is portrayed as acting like the god in specific ways, provides the necessary background for understanding the descriptions of the king as the image of a god... [This] provides the most plausible set of parallels for interpreting the imago Dei in Genesis 1... Humanity is dignified with a status and role...that is analogous to the status and role of kings in the ancient Near East. Genesis chapter one...thus constitutes a genuine democratization of ancient Near Eastern royal ideology. As imago Dei, humanity is called to be the representative and intermediary of God’s power and blessing on earth.” — J. RICHARD MIDDLETON, THE LIBERATING IMAGE: THE IMAGO DEI IN GENESIS 1, 121.

God’s Idol Statue in His Cosmic Temple

The words “image” (Heb. tselem / צלם) and “likeness” (Heb. demut / דמות) are most commonly used to refer to physical statues of stone or wood, and these words are usually translated “idol” or “statue” in such contexts.

Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, “When you cross over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and destroy all their figured stones, and destroy all their molten images and demolish all their high places.

**NUMBERS 33:51-52**

All the people of the land went to the house of Baal and tore it down; his altars and his images they broke in pieces thoroughly.

**2 KINGS 11:18**
“Genesis 1:26 can only be understood against the background of an ancient Yahweh statue...humanity is regarded as the statue of God... The terms “image” and “likeness” are used as synonyms denoting a statue. Humans were thus created to be the living statues of the deity... There was no need of a divine image because humans represented Yahweh as a statue would have done.” — H. NIEHR, “IN SEARCH OF YAHWEH’S CULT STATUE IN THE FIRST TEMPLE,” PP. 93-94.

“The priestly image-of-God-in-humanity theology says that idolatry is ruled out of court because to locate the divine presence and action in another part of creation or in that which we create is to absolve ourselves of our own responsibility to bear divine presence and action...Idolatry [from this perspective] is to cling to those objects made in our image and believe that they will affirm our being and guarantee security and prosperity. The true humanity in the biblical vision is one which affirms, gives security to, and makes multiply the life of creation.” — CRISPIN FLETCHER-LOUIS, “GOD’S IMAGE, HIS COSMIC TEMPLE, AND THE HIGH PRIEST,” P. 85.

“[T]his unifying image in humankind has a sacramental as well as an essentially corporal function: Adam beings are animate icons... the peculiar purpose for their creation is ‘theophanic’: to represent or mediate the sovereign presence of the deity within the central nave of the cosmic temple, just a cult-images were supposed to do in conventional sanctuaries. [This means that] humanity is an inherently ambivalent species, whose...existence blurs, by design, the otherwise sharp distinction between creator and creation.” — S. DEAN MCBRIDE, “DIVINE PROTOCOL: GENESIS 1:1-2:3 AS PROLOGUE TO THE PENTATEUCH,” PP. 16-17.

What we can conclude from the above is that in biblical theology, the royal-priestly image of God is an incarnation of the divine presence.

Adam and Eve as Priests in the Garden

The language of Genesis 1-2 positions Adam and Eve as royal priests and the garden of Eden as a sacred mountain-temple, the meeting place of Heaven and Earth.

And Yahweh God took the human and he rested him in the garden of Eden to work it and to keep it. And Yahweh God commanded the human, saying, “From every tree of the garden you may surely eat; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad you shall not eat from it, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.”

GENESIS 2:15-17
What should we make of humanity’s purpose outlined in this passage—to work and to keep the garden?

**Genesis 2:15 [literal translation]**

And Yahweh Elohim took the human and placed him into the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

These two verbs, “work” and “keep,” are packed with significance, as they portray the ideal vocation of humanity.

‘Abad (עבָד): “To work,” “to serve,” or “to worship”

| ‘Abad: To work | Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your ‘abad, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any ‘abad, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. | EXODUS 20:8-10 (NIV) |
| ‘Abad: To serve | May peoples ‘abad you, and nations bow down to you. Be master of your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you. Cursed be those who curse you, And blessed be those who bless you. | GENESIS 27:29 |
| ‘Abad: To worship | And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will ‘abad God on this mountain.” | EXODUS 3:12 (NIV) |
| ‘Abodah: Priestly service | But you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for everything concerning the altar and inside the veil, and you are to do your ‘abodah. | NUMBERS 18:7 |
| | With the help of Zadok a descendant of Eleazar and Ahimelek a descendant of Ithamar, David separated them into divisions for their appointed order of ‘abodah. | 1 CHRONICLES 24:3 |

The Hebrew word shamar (שָׁמָר), meaning “to serve and keep,” is used in the Bible to reference a priestly service of worship. These verbs are used together as a phrase only elsewhere in descriptions of the priests and Levites working in and around the temple.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Bring the tribe of Levi near and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may serve him. They shall shamar the mishmeret for him and the mishmeret of the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, to ‘abad the ‘abodah of the tabernacle. They shall also shamar all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, along with the duties of the sons of Israel, to ‘abad the ‘abodah of the tabernacle. You shall thus give the Levites to Aaron and to his sons; they are wholly given to him from among the sons of Israel.

NUMBERS 3:5-9 (NASB95)

They may, however, assist their brothers in the tent of meeting, to shamar the mishmeret, but they themselves shall ‘abad no ‘abodah. Thus you shall deal with the Levites concerning their obligations.

NUMBERS 8:26

But you and your sons with you shall shamar to your priesthood for everything concerning the altar and inside the veil, and you are to ‘abad the ‘abodah. I am giving you the priesthood as a bestowed service.

NUMBERS 18:7
“To serve, ‘abad, is a very common verb and is often used of cultivating the soil (2:5; 3:23; 4:2, 12, etc.). The word is commonly used in a religious sense of serving God (e.g., Deut 4:19), and in priestly texts, especially of the tabernacle duties of the Levites (Num 3:7–8; 4:23–24, 26, etc.). Similarly, נסור “to guard, to keep” has the simple profane sense of “guard” (4:9; 30:31), but it is even more commonly used in legal texts of observing religious commands and duties (17:9; Lev 18:5) and particularly of the Levitical responsibility for guarding the tabernacle from intruders (Num 1:53; 3:7–8). It is striking that here and in the priestly law these two terms are juxtaposed (Num 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6), another pointer to the interplay of tabernacle and Eden symbolism already noted.” — GORDON J. WENHAM, GENESIS 1–15, 67.

“[T]he tasks given to Adam are of a priestly nature: caring for sacred space. In ancient thinking, caring for sacred space was a way of upholding creation. By preserving order, non-order was held at bay... If the priestly vocabulary in Genesis 2:15 indicates the same kind of thinking, the point of caring for sacred space should be seen as much more than landscaping or even priestly duties. Maintaining order made one a participant with God in the ongoing task of sustaining the equilibrium God had established in the cosmos. Egyptian thinking attached this not only to the role of priests as they maintained the sacred space in the temples but also to the king, whose task was “to complete what was unfinished, and to preserve the existent, not as a status quo but in a continuing, dynamic, even revolutionary process of remodeling and improvement.” This combines the subduing and ruling of Genesis 1 with the ‘bd and šmr of this chapter.” — JOHN H. WALTON, THE LOST WORLD OF ADAM AND EVE, 106-107.

Exile from Eden and From the Holy of Holies

God placed his royal images, his human priests, in his garden-temple so that humans could live in the meeting place of Heaven and Earth. But humans quickly forfeited this calling and found themselves cast out of the garden, the Holy of Holies and the hotspot of God’s presence.

And Yahweh God said, “Look, the human has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, and now so that he won’t send out his hand and take also from the tree of life (חיים), and eat and live (חי) forever...”

And Yahweh God sent him out from the garden to work the ground from which he was taken, and he banished the human.

And he made to dwell at the east of the garden of Eden, cherubim and the flame of the whirling sword to guard way to the tree of life (חיים).
The Three-Part Geography of Eden

The geography of Eden within the dry land of Genesis 1-3 depicts a three-part topography.

This conception of the garden of Eden on the dry land provides a symbolic template for Israel’s tabernacle-temple, especially as described in Ezekiel’s ideal/restored temple (Ezekiel 40-48).
The Inversion of the Eden Story’s Introduction

After humans rebel, we see the good gifts of the garden inverted in the world outside of God’s temple presence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before Humanity’s Rebellion</th>
<th>After Rebellion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God created the human and placed him in the garden.</td>
<td>The humans are banished from the garden.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God caused the tree of life and knowing good and bad to grow.</td>
<td>Humans are cut off from the two trees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before the garden, there was no human to work the ground.</td>
<td>Outside Eden, the human works the ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humans were made mortal, so that by obeying God they could remain in the garden and receive the gift of eternal life.</td>
<td>Humans are cut off and sent into the land of mortality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humans were directed to guard/keep the garden.</td>
<td>Humans are now guarded/kept from the garden.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The story’s final line about the cherubim and the “flame of the whirling sword” is a condensed hint that sends the reader forward to the design of the tabernacle and temple and into the prophetic visions of the divine throne room.

Cherubim flank the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies (Exod 25:17-22), and in the temple there are designs on the walls of the holy place and on the front doors going into the temple (1 Kgs 6:29-32).

In Chronicles, we read that the sword will appear in the hand of the angel of Yahweh again when David goes to the hilltop in Jerusalem, which at the time was the threshing floor of Ornan (1 Chronicles 21:16).

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, the story of Eden and humanity makes clear humanity’s deep need for a royal priest who will come to restore the blessings of the garden. The rest of the biblical story develops this theme of the royal priest, introducing key biblical characters, like Abraham, Moses, and David, who all point to the coming ultimate royal priest, Jesus.