

# OpenTheo

## Priest, King, and Prophet

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A short introduction to the priest, king, prophet pattern in Scripture.

### Transcript

Welcome back. Today I thought I'd discuss something that I found perhaps one of the most helpful concepts in trying to understand the biblical narrative as a whole and the different elements within it, how they all fit together. And this concept is one that works on a number of different levels.

It can be used to understand our individual lives and how we grow. It can be used to understand different bodies of biblical material. It can be used to understand different offices within the life of Israel.

It can be used to understand how space is ordered. It can be used to understand the church. And it can be used in a host of other ways.

Now you may be wondering what this concept is and I'll get to that, but it's a concept I learned from James Jordan. James Jordan from whom I've learned pretty much all of the most helpful biblical theological concepts that I've used. Now, the usefulness of a concept like this is that it enables you to cluster things together, to give form and shape to things that might otherwise just be amorphous.

You may not really know how things fit together, how they're structured. If you want to remember material, that's another thing to bear in mind. One of the best ways to remember material is to connect it with other material in your mind, other things that the connections are reinforcing of each other.

And so if you remember this one particular story, for instance, and then you remember it has typological significance and comparison can be compared to another story in another part of scripture. Those two stories support each other. They mesh together.

And as you remember one, it helps you to remember the other. And so as we're thinking

through scripture, having these concepts that glue the material together, that help us to see largest patterns and structures and the connections between things. That can be incredibly useful if you want to remember scripture, to keep it in your mind and to understand how to make sense of it all.

So without further ado, this is a concept of priest, king and prophet. Now, you're familiar with all of these terms. You've heard these terms many different times before and probably you know what these different roles are.

Now, you've heard the terms and you have a basic sense, but maybe break them down a bit more. What is a priest? A priest is, as Peter Lighthouse has described, a household servant, someone who serves within the temple as the palace of God in the center of Israel. But he also guards that.

He guards that household and he serves within that household, serving food and all these sorts of things, the sacrifices, preparing that, preparing the place for guests and leading the guests through and representing the master to the guests. But beyond that, he also guards the house of Israel. He's someone who is responsible for upholding the law, for teaching the law and for maintaining that fundamental, those fundamental boundaries.

He represents his master to the people as a household servant and steward, and he makes sure that the boundaries are maintained. Now, the priest is associated with the sanctuary, which is that core realm, the realm of the temple or the tabernacle, the realm of the Garden of Eden, which is another sort of sanctuary, the very heart of the life of the people or the land or the world more generally. So Eden is this core realm where Adam is called to guard and to serve, which have priestly connotations.

Those are the same terms that are used of the Levites in the Book of Numbers. Now, out of that realm, that fundamental realm where he's told to guard and to serve, and he's given this particular commandment concerning the tree, do not eat of this tree and the day that you eat of it, you will surely die. That's a very clear command.

But then out of that realm is a pattern that will fill the whole earth. So the whole earth is to be made like the garden and then the earth is to be brought in and to dress the garden. So when we're looking at the example of Adam, that's a proto sanctuary, but we move beyond that to other examples within scripture.

The law that's given to Adam is very much a clear black and white thing. Do this, don't do that. You can eat of all these different trees, but you should not eat of this particular tree that's in the heart of the garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Now, the law more generally is associated with the priests. It's a priestly form of literature. And the priestly form of literature is shaped like that as clear commands.

Do this, don't do that. It's the most basic form of teaching. It's the fundamental teaching, the teaching that lies at the basis of Israel's life that gives it the clearest and most basic patterns within which to live its life.

And so the priest is a household servant, a household servant serving in the temple at the heart of the nation who represents God to his people in that realm. He represents his master and welcomes guests. He's someone that guards the house.

He maintains the boundaries so that people don't trespass them. But he also upholds the household of Israel. So he serves the bride and he's someone who maintains the holiness of the people.

He's responsible for teaching the law and he's responsible for upholding its boundaries. Now, in addition to the priest, we have the king. If the priest is a household servant in the house of God, the king is the vice-gerent, the king who is someone who serves, who rules under God.

So the priest is a steward within the household of the heavenly king, God himself. And the king is a ruler who rules under God alongside his temple. The king would often have his palace within the larger complex of buildings around the temple as associated with that place.

So he rules under God. He's not just a steward in the house. He's someone who has rule within the land.

And he's someone nonetheless who can be challenged by the priest because the priest represent his master. The priests are the stewards of his master. And so there's an important relationship to remember here.

The king is someone who fights wars, who guards boundaries and things like that. But he guards a larger area, the whole area of the land. And the king is also associated with a new body of literature.

So if the priest is associated with the law, with the books of the law, things like Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, we have the king associated with the wisdom literature. With things like Psalms and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. And this kingly literature is not just about do this and don't do that.

It's not just about the law. It's about wisdom. It's about knowing what is right and what's wrong.

It's about having the knowledge of good and evil in situations where the law does not speak as directly. So the law is characterized by faithful reception that you hear and you obey. Whereas the king and wisdom are shaped by wise perception, this ability to look into a situation you've not seen before and to see the right thing to do, having

internalized the law.

Now, remember, the king was someone who had written out a copy of the law for himself. He was someone who was steeped in the law. If you read Psalm 119 as a psalm of the king, it's a psalm that describes just how deeply embedded the king was in the law and how it made him wise to rule.

Now, wisdom is also associated with this knowledge of good and evil. So when Solomon comes to rule, he has this dream and he prays or he asks to receive wisdom, to rule God's great people and to know what is right and wrong, to know good and evil. And so the knowledge of good and evil is given to Solomon.

It's a knowledge of good and evil that is similar to the knowledge that the angel of the Lord has as he rules over the people. It's a knowledge that fits someone for judgment, the ability to command, the ability to make life and death decisions and the ability to be someone who maintains this vast land under God. And so the king is associated with the land.

He's associated with the wisdom literature and he's associated with that growth into a new form of maturity. Now, we talked about the priest earlier. There are prototypical forms of priesthood, things that are lower forms of priesthood as a sort of priestly assistant.

Some of the Levitical roles that played before someone would enter into full priesthood at the age of 30. Then you can have things like the offering of sacrifices prior to the establishment of a greater priestly system. The firstborn son might have been a sort of priestly figure within the family.

The firstborn sons have their place taken by the Levites within the book of Numbers. And so there's a development into this role. Likewise with the king, the king is someone who maybe develops in a number of different ways from an earlier prototypical form of, let's say, the judge, who's a warrior who leads the people into battle.

But he's not the more glorious form of a king. Later on, we have that kingly form, that person who's set up as a ruler under God alongside God over his people. The king is also maybe described to be described as a sort of chief worshipper.

He's someone who can represent the whole congregation, the whole people of God before God in worship. So the priest maintains the boundaries. He represents his master as the steward of the house, and he upholds and protects and guards the faithfulness of the bride.

But the king can represent the whole nation, and he can represent the nation as the chief worshipper. So there are two key roles there. Now the prophet is another role, and there are ways that that has earlier forms.

So the seer is an earlier form of the prophet. The seer is someone who knows the will of God, who knows the word of God, and can deliver that to people, can tell people, give people spiritual insight in their situation. The prophet takes things a bit further.

The prophet is someone who has a membership within the divine council. So the priest is a household servant within the temple, a steward of God's house. The king is a ruler under God, a vicegerent in kingship of the people of God.

And the prophet is a member of the divine council who delivers the messages of the divine council to the people, who consults with God concerning his judgments, and also someone who represents the people to the divine council. So some examples of this can be seen in someone like Abraham. Abraham is initially described as a seer, but then God declares that his determination to bless Abraham and his family is something that means that he will not make this big decision concerning Sodom without consulting with Abraham.

And so he talks with Abraham, talking through his decision. Other examples could be Isaiah. At the beginning of the book of Isaiah, in Isaiah chapter 6, Isaiah has this vision.

He sees the Lord high and lifted up and trained with his robe filling the temple. And then there's the affairs of the divine council. And he participates in that.

And he's sent by the council to the people as a representative of the council with this word of judgment. Now, the prophet takes that word that bit further. If the priest is very much do this, don't do that, black and white, the fundamental word of the law and the king is the word of wisdom, the word that says there is a time for this, a time for that.

And let's recognize this particular time and what's appropriate here. The prophet takes things that step further. So the prophet is someone who has a word that can build up and can tear down.

A prophet has a word that is deep within him that is something that he takes into himself. So the eating of the book, for instance, in Ezekiel, this word that burns within him and is expressed as he speaks out to the people. He's almost an incarnation of that word that he's been given to speak.

And he represents that. He speaks it forcefully in a way that is powerful. As he's a member of the divine council, he has this power to, Jeremiah has a power to, root up kingdoms and to plant kingdoms, to build and to tear down.

And so there's a development here as well from the very basic form of do this, don't do that, this receptive hearing and obeying to this perceptive insight into what is right to do in this situation and what is wrong to do in that situation. And knowing the times and this wisdom of being able to judge what particular situation we're in and what is the appropriate thing to do. There's a movement beyond that then to this stage of the

prophetic word that gives us this greater power, this power that represents God in pulling up, tearing down and planting and building up.

Now the priest was someone rooted in the sanctuary. The king was someone who worked within the wider realm of the land. The prophet is different again.

The prophet is someone who addresses the wider nations. He addresses the wider world, the empire. Prophets are people like Daniel within, caught in Babylon.

The prophet is someone like Jonah who goes to Nineveh. The prophet is someone who works within this diaspora or who speaks to the other nations roundabout. And as it says within the prophets, God does not do something without consulting his prophets.

This is one of the roles that the prophet has as a member of the divine council. God consults with the prophets and then the prophets deliver his judgments. Those judgments are delivered to the whole world.

Now let's think about how this concept can help us to understand certain things within scripture. So for instance, let's think about the material within scripture itself, particularly focused just on the Old Testament here. But within the Old Testament, we see a movement from priestly material, the law, do this, don't do that, this very basic commandment, to wisdom, which comes in the era of the kings.

So Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Job, this material is kingly wisdom literature. And then you have the prophetic literature, which comes after that. And these are movements within periods of Israel's history.

So it's a growing up of Israel as its life spreads out, it grows up into different forms of speech. So it starts off as a servant within the house, a steward within the house. Then it becomes a co-ruler under God and then ends up speaking the words of the divine counsel to the wider world.

So there's a growth here. Now, this is similar to forms of growth that we have within our own lives. If you're learning something, for instance, you start off with the most basic commandments.

Do this, don't do that. If you want to learn the piano, you're told the very basic scales. You learn the scales.

And then as you move up from that, maybe you have wisdom to be able to not just follow a piece, but improvise a bit and develop upon a piece that you've been given. And maybe add some bits here or change some bits there. And then beyond that, priestly prophetic literature, as it were, is something where there's something that goes further, this vision of something new, this creative vision that creates some new reality.

So the inspiration of composition could be an example of a more prophetic way of encountering the world. Now, the prophet is also someone that founds a new covenant order in many cases. So the prophet is someone who can found a new reality.

So Moses, for instance, is a prophet. He represents the counsel of God. He's someone who speaks to God as a man speaks to his friend.

And he's someone who is the means by which this new covenant order of the law is established. So he plays a number of roles within that. He also plays a judge-like role.

And so there are ways in which Moses could be seen as prophet, priest and king because he's the prophet that founds the new order as he represents God's word to the people. He's like God to Aaron. He's also a priest, someone who performs some of the duties of the tabernacle in setting apart Aaron as the priest.

He's also a king, someone who rules over Israel and the person who his rule is spread to the various elders. And then as the elders are given his spirit, that they represent his rule there in other ways as well. So he can be seen as a prophet, priest, king type character.

So these things overlap and each of these characters develop from more rudimentary forms from the seer into the prophet or from the judge into the king. In the same way, we can see Israel's life as a whole develops in this way and our lives develop in this way. Now, these different realms are significant as well.

That's the different ways that the realms are ordered. So the realm of the priest is almost concentrically ordered. You have the sanctuary in the heart and then you have different areas moving out.

If you're talking about the king, the king is someone who is very much someone about the boundaries of the land more generally, ordering out the land. Whereas the prophet is someone who is often quite peripatetic. He wanders around from place to place.

He moves in itineraries and he moves like the spirit. He's someone who blows where the spirit leads and often disappears or someone who goes to other places and avoids persecutors. But he's someone who's not easy to tie down in the same way.

Whereas the priest is very rooted within the sanctuary, the king roams throughout the land as the rule of it centered in the city. The prophet is someone that wanders and goes throughout the wider world. We see this development within the store of Israel, that the store of Israel begins very much around this sanctuary.

It begins around the tabernacle as the tabernacle is set up and then the camp of Israel is ordered around that. Then they're encamped in the land and as they're settled within the land, they have a king and the king gives order to that larger area of the land around

them. And then as the prophets develop, you have ministry to the wider world and God being involved very directly through Israel with the nations round about them.

And you have these nations coming in and being involved. And then you have the prophets going out further into the world, people like Jonah or Daniel. And these figures are involved within the wider realm of the nations and they show God's power within them.

And they show God's witness within them as people from the wider nations are converted. So there's a gradual progression out into the world. The other thing that we can see perhaps is a relationship between the different animals that are seen within the vision of Ezekiel.

So James Jordan has suggested that there is a connection between the bull and the priest. Now that's quite an obvious one as you see within the priestly literature. There is the bull as the sacrifice for the high priest and then you have the lion who represents the king.

And then you have the eagle who represents the prophet, someone who has the wings like the cherubim who are members of the divine council. Someone who has that far sight ahead, who brings vision and someone who moves like the eagle in other ways. Whereas the lion is someone who has a regal authority, who's the lion of the tribe of Judah.

These examples are then things that help us maybe understand the gospels. And the ordering of these animals is different from those within certain parts of the tradition. So Jordan suggests that Matthew is associated with the law primarily and with the ox.

And then you have Mark associated with the lion, the lion of the tribe of Judah. Jesus is the king and then Luke is associated with the eagle. Jesus is the prophet, the one who prays, the one who goes on prophetic like journeys, the one who moves about from place to place like the prophets did.

He's someone compared to Elijah and Elisha and that's the sort of ministry that takes place in there. Whereas, of course, the fourth face of the cherubim is the fourth face of the living creatures is the man. And that is associated with John's gospel with greater emphasis upon themes of incarnation within that book.

So that's an interesting, suggestive pattern. Now, I'm not entirely sure of that one, but I think there might be something there. I think it's definitely worth pursuing.

More generally, this pattern, I think, is a very helpful way to order the biblical material, to think about how these roles interact with each other. And it gives us a way in which to understand how God works within Israel, how these different things intersect and how Israel's history is a gradual development out into greater stages of glory. Now, this is one



of the things that might help us to understand how the later parts of the Old Testament are not necessarily falling away from the glory that happened before, but progression into something more glorious or more glorious, but not as spectacular.

So we think that the history of Israel came to its height in the early reign of Solomon as his riches spread out and as the nation was secure and it had these great public works and all these sorts of things. And it seems as if that's the height of its glory. And in some senses, yes, the later temple that was built after the return from exile was never as great.

But there was a development in Israel's history from this very rudimentary stage of wandering in the wilderness around the tabernacle and having the law to this stage of the kingdom, to this stage where they are spread throughout the world and God is witnessing to nations and to empires. When we see in the book of Daniel, for instance, this prophecy concerning all these different beasts of the world that God has involved the nations, the empires in the story of his people. No longer is it the story, as we see in the story of Solomon, that Solomon has involvement with some nations round about Queen of Sheba or with Pharaoh and some trade with Pharaoh and Tyre and Sidon and these sorts of things.

There's a far wider range of involvement. And in the New Testament, we see that coming out even further as the gospel reaches Rome and there is an involvement of God's truth with the whole known world. And we see that development continuing to our day.

So there's a spreading out that occurs with this pattern. And the pattern also helps us to understand our own lives. As we grow up, we move from a very childlike stage of do this, don't do that, to a stage of wisdom where we have rule and we are able to see what is appropriate in a particular time, what is appropriate in another time.

And to a stage where we have vision and a more prophetic type of rule where we speak new things into existence. Now, again, this is just a loose paradigm that can help us to understand things. In Scripture, it can help us understand the order of Israel, the different parts of the nation.

So the relationship between the sanctuary, the city, the land, and then the world and the empires. It can help us to understand the bodies of literature and it can help us to understand these different offices and how they interplay together. And then the development in Israel's history.

It helps us to understand particular narratives like the story of Adam in the garden. It can help us to understand that maybe he would eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The association of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with wisdom and kingly rule suggests that there would come a time when he would eat of it.

But that time was not yet. He jumped the gun. And so you have this tree in the garden of Eden, which is not just designed as something to trip Adam up.

It's something that's designed for him to eat when the time is right. But if he eats it at the wrong time, it will be destructive and bring death. And so that helps us to understand the themes in Scripture more generally, which are very much ordered around progression, maturation, growth, and moving out into the world as God's purpose expands.

And so later on, as we see in Scripture, these themes are seen in Christ most fully. That Christ is the priest, the king, and the prophet, the person who brings all of these things to their height. He's the great high priest who intercedes for us.

He's the one who guards us. He's the one who represents God to us, who upholds the basic form of the world. He's the one who is the king, who rules over us, who has all authority and power being given to him.

And he's the great prophet. He's the one who is part of the divine council. He's not just the example.

He's not just like the prophets that we have in the Old Testament or people like John the Baptist. He's the archetypal prophet. He's the one who is the messenger of the Lord himself.

He is the Lord come to us. And so we have these patterns that reach their fullest height in Christ. It can be expressed in a smaller form within the history of Israel.

It can be seen within the life of the church. And it can be seen on different scale, again, within our individual lives. And so this pattern is one that I find incredibly helpful.

I've not explained it as well as I could have. But I hope that this gives you some sense of how useful this concept can be and maybe help you to see how different parts of scripture fit together. How aspects of Israel's life make sense in ways that you maybe did not see before.

And maybe to see how the different areas of biblical literature are not just assortments of texts, but are progressive bodies of revelation that move with God's revelation and development and maturation of his people. I hope this helps you as it's helped me.