



## Face to Face: How Hebrew Reveals Women's Priesthood Power

By [Jared Lambert](#)

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*Can ancient Hebrew reshape how we see Eve? It reveals women as priestly partners standing face to face with God.*

In English, idioms appear only occasionally as colorful expressions, but in biblical Hebrew, idioms are constant, shaping the way meaning is conveyed.

Think of the phrase “kick the bucket.” To an English speaker, it is perfectly clear that no one is literally striking a pail with their foot. To someone learning English, however, the image is more than confusing. They would have to be told that it is an idiom, a soft turn of phrase that carries a meaning larger than the literal words.

The Hebrew Bible is filled with phrases like this: to “[harden the heart](#),” to “[lift up the face](#),” to “[walk in the way](#),” to “[know](#)” [someone](#), to “[cover the feet](#),” to “[gird up the loins](#),” to “[set the face](#),” or to “[eat bread](#).” These are simple examples, yet in a conceptual language, most phrases carry layers of idiom that remain difficult for us to perceive.

Now, you can imagine how this creates a problem for our modern understanding. For those of us who speak in hard languages like English, that creates a particular challenge. Hard languages train us to expect precision, one-to-one meanings, and fixed categories. Our minds are shaped by that rigidity, so the polysemy of this biblical Hebrew can feel foreign or even flattened when we encounter it. Ancient hearers lived in the flow of those multiple meanings and felt at home in them. We, as hard-language speakers, have to work against our instincts to even begin to comprehend the depth that biblical Hebrew carried so naturally.

## Soft vs. Hard Language

Soft languages like Hebrew are capacious. A single word can hold multiple meanings at once. Take the word *shema*. In English translations, it appears as the command “hear,” as in Shema Yisrael—“[Hear, O Israel](#).” To the ancient ear, *shema* held so much more depth than the flattened translation we hear today. It carried the sense of listening with understanding and responding in obedience. The Israelites, when specifically using the word *shema*, could not separate hearing from doing, so when they heard the call to *shema*, they understood it as a summons to act.

Hard languages, like modern English, are driven by categorization. They crave exactness: this word means this and not that. This is why idioms tend to puzzle us. If we insist that *shema* must be only “hear,” then the depth of the word is lost. For ancient Israel, *shema* joined hearing, understanding, and obedience into one living act. To flatten it into a single definition cuts away the conceptual depth that gave the word its power.

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English and other modern hard languages perform well when clarity and efficiency matter. But they struggle with conveying layers of meaning that soft languages carry naturally. God speaks to us

according to our understanding. Isn't it interesting that even today, He draws on the conceptual depth in these soft languages when communicating with us? Could it be that modern English is too rigid to hold the mysteries in the language of God? Perhaps God is still speaking in soft, polysemic, and conceptual terms. If so, we would want to invest effort to learn the conceptual depth by which God has always communicated. As Joseph Smith, the first prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, wrote to an early church editor W. W. Phelps on November 27, 1832, he offered a heartfelt plea to God: "Oh Lord God, deliver us from this prison, almost as it were, of paper, pen, and ink, and of a crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language." That prayer is more true for us today than it was for them then.

## The Puzzle of Kenegdo

The story of Adam and Eve has been told and retold for centuries. But what many of us receive today is a story shaped by layers of tradition. Generations of interpreters passed it down through debate, dogma, and politics. Artists gave it form in iconography, each picture coloring how Eve was seen. Over time, the narrative hardened into a familiar version in which Eve was created as subordinate to Adam and both were commanded to avoid the fruit.

Linguistics tells another story. When the Hebrew text is examined diachronically, tracing the earliest layers and the way meanings shifted over time, a very different picture appears. The text itself [only records Adam being directly commanded](#) concerning the fruit (see also [Moses 3:16](#), which is even clearer on this point). This sets the stage for a problem. Adam alone could not fulfill the divine command. The ancient oral tradition left a clue in the *ṭipḥa* (¶)—a cantillation mark that [signals a pause in the verse](#). Readers in antiquity would have recognized this as a deliberate stopping point. This is the moment where Adam stands in stasis. Something more was required to move the story forward.

The very next verse introduces that solution: "It is [not good](#) that man should be alone." The Hebrew word *ṭov*, usually rendered "good," can also mean "sufficient." In other words, Adam by himself lacked sufficiency. Ancient oral tradition and semantic studies show that *ṭov* [often implied functionality or adequacy rather than strictly moral](#) value.

Into this insufficiency steps the figure we too quickly name Eve. The text first introduces her as *ezer*. Most translations reduce this word to “help,” but that translation obscures the deeper meaning. Hebrew has other words for ordinary “help.” *Ezer* is different. It appears only 21 times in the Hebrew Bible, and in nearly every case, it is bound to salvation or deliverance ([Exodus 18:4](#); [Deuteronomy 33:7](#); [Psalm 33:20](#)). *Eve enters the story as ezer*, the one who brings salvation to the problem Adam could not solve.

Her title is extended with the word *kenegdo*. Translations often render it as “meet” or “fit,” as in “an *help meet* for him.” This choice at least hints at equality, which was remarkable in the world of the translators at the time. But it still falls short of what the Hebrew conveys. *Kenegdo* literally means “standing opposite of” or “face-to-face with.” It’s an idiom that, taken at face value, describes one who stands across from another as an equal counterpart. Yet, as with all idioms, its real meaning lies in the depth of the concept it conveys.

Each time God entrusts a servant, the language is “face to face.” Jacob names the place *Peniel* because he saw God “*face to face*” and his life was preserved. Moses speaks with the Lord “face to face, *as a man speaketh unto his friend*” at the moment of his prophetic calling. The Levites stand before the Lord face to face to minister, signifying *presence and commission*. In each of these earliest instances and many more, the idiom marks the moment of authorization. Understanding the nature of soft language, to stand face to face is to receive priesthood.

Adam was not authorized to move forward in the story. Eve enters as the one who bears authorization. She stands face to face, fulfilling the very definition of priesthood. This idiom is difficult for hard-language speakers to grasp, yet in the Hebrew Bible it is unmistakably tied to authority.

The garden scene follows the same pattern. Eve is introduced not as subordinate but as salvation, as a priestly partner, as the one authorized to open the way forward. Let’s reiterate that one more time. Priesthood, at its core, is the authority of God given to act where others cannot. The narrative of Genesis sets up Adam in a position where he cannot move forward, bound by the

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command he received. Into that insufficiency enters Eve. She is introduced as *ezer*, the one who brings salvation, and as *kenegdo*, the one who stands face to face. The language ties her directly to the priesthood idiom that will echo throughout the Old Testament. This is not a derivative gift but the very solution God placed at the heart of the temple narrative.

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## Standing Face to Face in Nauvoo

The idiom of priesthood begins in Eden, but it does not end there. Eve as *ezer kenegdo*, standing face to face and embodying salvation and priesthood, is reborn in that same language when Joseph Smith restored the Relief Society, a women's group of Latter-day Saints, in Nauvoo, Illinois. The archetype did not just disappear. Joseph Smith reestablished the Eden pattern when he invited women into the temple ritual.

In the Kirtland Temple, the first temple of the Church of Jesus Christ, women had no organized ritual role. They witnessed, sang, and rejoiced at visions, but the temple order remained incomplete. By the time the Latter-day Saints had moved to Nauvoo, three years after the Kirtland Temple, questions about women's authority had come to the forefront of Joseph Smith's mind. In March 1842, he organized women into the Relief Society. Emma Smith was sustained as president, fulfilling the earlier revelation that she was to be an "[Elect Lady](#)." To the women gathered, Joseph Smith declared, "I now [turn the key to you](#) in the name of God."

Week after week, Joseph Smith expanded their charge. He taught that [women could heal, prophesy, and bless](#) with divine sanction. He even described their role as "[to save](#)," echoing the ancient role of *ezer* in Eden. Eliza R. Snow recorded that Joseph Smith promised the sisters they would form "[a kingdom of priests](#) as in Enoch's day." The culmination of this vision came in the Nauvoo Temple, where women participated alongside men in the ordinance they called "the endowment." They clothed themselves in the same garments, entered the same covenants, and received the same blessings.

This was the difference between Kirtland and Nauvoo. In Kirtland, women stood as witnesses. In Nauvoo, they stood face to face with men in ritual, equal counterparts in the order of the priesthood, clothed in the same robes, speaking the same covenants.



That balance echoes all the way back to Eden. Eve was the one who moved creation forward, standing as salvation, ezer kenegdo, face to face with Adam when he could go no further. In Nauvoo, women once again stood in that role. They moved salvation forward, clothed in priesthood, equal in covenant, bearing authority in the same idiom restored. The archetype of Eve was never a symbol frozen in the past. It was restored as living practice, carried into the temple, where **women and men stood together** as counterparts in the image of God.

The **temple is not finished**. Its forms unfold in time, **line upon line, precept upon precept**. What Eden revealed in Eve as ezer kenegdo—salvation standing face to face—was restored again in Nauvoo, where women received what Joseph Smith called “**keys**.” There they receive the same endowment of priesthood power, and the same promises of future blessing and authority from God **beside their brethren**. Yet that restoration itself remains incomplete. The archetype of Eve continues to rise. Revelation never arrives in a single moment. Joseph Smith taught that **light comes in increments**, the way morning breaks upon the horizon. In the same way, the role of women as priestly partners was glimpsed in Eden, renewed in Nauvoo, and will be revealed with greater clarity as time moves forward. The archetype of Eve is not locked in the past. It is the pattern of the Elohim themselves, the **image of God, male and female**, and it continues to unfold.

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If the garden was the beginning, and Nauvoo was a renewal, then the future still holds further unveiling. The temple is the vessel of that unveiling, carrying us deeper into the truths that were spoken from the beginning. We can trust that revelation will not stop. It will grow, it will deepen, and it will carry us into the fullness of what it means to stand face to face with God, as Adam and Eve once did.

About the author

Jared Lambert

Jared Lambert has worked as the Sacred Materials Linguist for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and as a military linguist in the United States Army. He is currently pursuing a PhD in history with a focus on religious historiography and the influence of language on scriptural interpretation.