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Timothy Willis
timothy.willis@pepperdine.edu

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Elders in the Old Testament Community

by Tim Willis

The role of elders has been a significant one among the churches of the Restoration Movement. The Biblical basis for that role has been interpreted primarily from the prescriptions for elders (“presbyters”/“overseers”) set forth by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:1-8 and Titus 1:6-8. Yet, we have viewed those prescriptions through modern eyes; that is many of us conceive of this institution in light of our current society, in light of American democracy. We view an eldership in contrast to the ecclesiastical structures of other churches and see in it a more “democratic” system. More specifically, we view elderships as part of an overall plan of God to protect our freedom of religion from the control of some distant governing board of the church. In addition to this, there has been a push in recent years to emphasize the spiritual aspects of elders, focusing on their role as shepherds.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss some of the basic roles and functions of Israelite elders in the Old Testament as a backdrop to some general thoughts about elders of the New Testament church. Rule by elders is a rather common institution, found in communities based on strong kinship ties. When we realize this and its ramifications, we should get

a new perspective on what God, through Paul, was trying to accomplish in calling for the appointment of elders in the churches of the first century.

Categories of Old Testament Elders

A thorough study of the elders of the Old Testament community is too complicated to be presented in one essay. My own research into this topic involves investigations of groups of elders in approximately four dozen tribal societies and tribal groups living in state societies for comparison with the elders of ancient Israel, as well as detailed exegeses of references to elders in the Old Testament. What follows is a bare outline of some of my central conclusions.

I am convinced that there were three distinct categories of men in ancient Israel designated in the Old Testament as “elders” (the Hebrew term is *zeqenim* = bearded ones; this does not include numerous passages in which *zeqenim* refers to “old men” in juxtaposition to “boys” or “children”). The category of elders mentioned first in the Biblical text is “the elders of Israel,” sometimes said to have consisted of seventy men (Exodus 24; Numbers 11), which was a representative body for the entire nation. This body became the Sanhedrin sometime after the Babylonian Exile. A second category of elders is a group of administrative advisors in the royal court called “elders of the king’s house” or, simply, “the elders” (see 2 Samuel 12:17; Genesis 24:2 ; 50:7; 1 Kings 12:6-15; Psalm 105:22). This

Tim Willis teaches Old Testament at Pepperdine University. This material was presented at the Christian Scholars Conference, Pepperdine, July 20, 1988.

body faded away after the fall of Jerusalem, but its memory was preserved in some apocalyptic literature (2 Enoch 4; Revelation 4:4,10; 19:4). A third category of elders is the elders of cities. It is this group of elders which was the institutional ancestor to the elders Paul prescribes in Timothy and Titus.

City Elders

There are fourteen clear references in the Old Testament to city elders (Deuteronomy 19:12; 21:2-8; 21:19-20; 22:15-19; 25:7-9; Joshua 20:4-5; Judges 8:14-16; 11:5-11; Ruth 4:1-12; 1 Samuel 11:3; 16:4; 1 Kings 21:8-12; Ezra 10:14; Proverbs 31:23). Three official functions of these elders are mentioned. As one might expect, several passages speak of city elders serving in some judicial capacity. In reality, very few details about this role are given. Laws specifically mentioning the roles of city elders are given concerning only cases of murder (Deuteronomy 19:1-13; 21:1-9; Joshua 20:1-9), rebellious children (Deuteronomy 21:18-21), levirate marriages (Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Ruth 4:1-12), and adultery (Deuteronomy 22:13-21). There are also a few examples of the involvement of elders in land transactions (e.g., Ruth 4:1-12). Besides these, there are a few passages which mention how elders could function as representatives of their respective communities in dealings with outsiders (1 Samuel 16:1-5).

There is little evidence that the structure and functions of Israel's city elders changed much over the centuries. The most significant changes came when the people were exiled to Assyria and Babylon, and during the subsequent Diaspora. Many Jews were transplanted to non-Jewish cities at that time. In those cities, they formed a sort of city within a city, a Jewish "district" or "quarter." Leading men of the Jewish community served as elders, with the community's religious life now revolving around the synagogue. Although the form of the societal structures of the cities in which they came to dwell were sometimes quite different from those of their past, the people still maintained old customs and beliefs in their new environment. This was the situation in many Jewish communities of the Roman Empire during the first century.

A similar persistence in old tribal patterns is found in most countries in which a tribal society — i.e., a society which has a non-centralized political system — has been taken over by a state society with a centralized government. This is true whether the tribal peoples introduced the central government themselves (as in the Israelite monarchy) or whether government was imposed on them from outside by some other group. This persistence of old tribal

structures, practices, and beliefs is due in large part to the kinship bases to these communities. The basic family unit is not the nuclear family (husband-wife-children), but the "extended family" or "minimal lineage." An extended family consists of the oldest surviving member of a family and all of his descendants. A minimal lineage consists of one or more extended families all descended from a common ancestor who lived a few generations prior to the families currently living.¹ Such a group may consist of 20-200 persons. In spite of this increased size, the minimal lineage often functions much as we would expect a nuclear family to function. All the members of a minimal lineage feel common economic, emotional, moral, and legal responsibilities to one another. When one member is in need, the whole family steps in to help. When one member suffers, the whole family hurts. When one member sins, the whole family is shamed. When one member is accused of wrong or is physically threatened by others, the whole family must defend that member or bear the consequences. Elders arise from the ranks of senior members of the various extended families within these lineages.

The minimal lineage in the Old Testament is called a "father's house" (*beyt 'ab*; pronounced "bait av"). This is most obvious from the story of Achan in

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Joshua 7:16-18. This is the man who caused Israel to be defeated at Ai by keeping goods captured at Jericho. God designated Achan as the culprit through lot-casting. By this method, he was able to narrow the field of candidates by working his way through the different levels in Israel's tribal structure. First, he indicated the culprit's tribe (Judah), then his "clan" (also translated "family"; Zerah), and then his "house" (Zabdi). Zabdi was Achan's grandfather. Zabdi was deceased by this time. This is known

because Achan was a grown man with a wife and children, and his father or grandfather would have been of the generation which died in the Wilderness. (On "father's house," see also Num 1:1ff.: 26:1ff.) Still, Achan was considered to be part of Zabdi's minimal lineage, the "house of Zabdi."

The corporate responsibility of the minimal lineage is indicated most clearly by stories like that told in the book of Ruth, and by laws of redemption (e.g., Lev 25:47-49, which calls for one's brother or uncle or uncle's son to redeem one who has been sold into slavery to a foreigner). One must keep in mind this strong sense of family corporateness when one reads laws involving elders, because elders in tribal societies usually do not get involved in a dispute unless it affects more than one extended family or more than one minimal lineage in a community. For example, in Deut. 21:18-21, there is a law requiring parents to hand over a rebellious son for punishment. This law seems extreme to us; however, the involvement of the city's elders—among other things in the text—indicates that the son's rebellion is such that it affects the reputation and well-being of the entire community.

Perhaps one of the greatest misconceptions we have about elders in tribal communities is the way they interact with the rest of the members of their community. Because of our American society, we tend to impose our experiences with democratic representative bodies and typical business meetings upon what we read about with elders. For example, we often talk about elders as "officers" in the church, which gives a particular flavor to our perception of the way in which they exercise authority. I have found elderships in tribal societies to be more democratic and less business-like than we imagine. One brief example will illustrate this.

The following is excerpted from a description of the Ibo tribesmen of Nigeria. This particular example has been picked because it describes so many characteristics which are typical of meetings in many of the tribal societies about which I have read. The author here uses "elder" and "leader" interchangeably.²

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The day-to-day routine business (of an Ibo village) was carried out by persons referred to in government reports as 'the elders.' More important business was dealt with at village council meetings, for example, matters involving decisions affecting the whole community. . . . (A collection of villages is called a town.) Matters which affected all the villages in a town were determined at a town council meeting

convened by the 'elders' of its component villages. . . . The members of the council meeting were graded on a basis of age into elders, . . . men, and young men. Age however was considerably modified by achievement . . .

The meeting was opened by a village leader (i.e., an elder) who introduced and explained the subject to be discussed. Any person who wished was then free to address the meeting . . . Veteran leaders took care to speak towards the end of the discussion when they could judge the general feeling of the meeting and put forward arguments which would win general support . . .

When the leaders felt that the matter had been fully discussed and some degree of unanimity had been reached they . . . retired. . . to consult. They stood out of earshot of the meeting, literally putting their heads together. All appeared to be talking at once, but gradually the babel subsided as a decision was arrived at. They then returned to the meeting and one of them, 'the spokesman,' usually a leader accepted by his fellows as their best public speaker, announced the decision, pausing after each important point for the assembly to indicate its assent by acclamation. . .

The assembly always accepted the elder's decision for the simple reason that it was in fact their own decision. The elders, when they retired, were not making a new decision but consulting how to give precise definition and expression to the general feeling expressed by the meeting."

One aspect of this meeting should be highlighted. Any man is welcomed to attend. Tribesmen typically give two reasons for this: (1) the community wants a true consensus opinion on the matter at hand, and (2) this meeting provides a forum in which the younger men can see how a respectable person (an elder) conducts himself.

But what do individuals have to do to attain the status of elder in the community? Not every old man becomes an elder. What sets off certain individuals as “elders?”

Research has led me to descriptions of the characteristics (qualifications, if you will) of elders from a variety of societies. What is surprising is that an almost identical set of basic characteristics of elders of a local community appears in each of these societies. These qualifications usually include the following: (1) an elder is a senior member of a large extended family; (2) he is wealthy, but also generous and hospitable; (3) his character exemplifies the standards of ethics and morality which the community esteems most highly; (4) he is well-versed in his people’s “secret knowledge” (religious practices, customs, and history); and, (5) he is known in the community for his oratorical skills, especially his skill of persuasion.

The first characteristic (family) gives him a significant constituency—and, consequently, a significant voice—in the community. The next two characteristics (generosity and moral/ethical uprightness) demonstrate to his family and the broader community that he has the interests of the community, not just his personal interests, at heart. The final two characteristics (knowledge and oratorical skills) are necessary tools for him to have if he is going to represent his group effectively. As in the example given above, consensus is central to the decision-making process. Even in criminal cases, it is felt that no settlement has been reached unless it is obvious that both parties in the case will agree with the correctness of the verdict of the elders before it is given. The elders, therefore, must be masters of persuasion. They must use their oratorical skills, along with their extensive knowledge of the community’s past for historical and legal precedents, to achieve a consensus, if one does not emerge naturally. If a consensus is not reached, there will probably be a rift in the community.

Similar characteristics can be inferred for Israel’s elders from the Old Testament. A delineation of some of the principal characteristics of an Israelite elder appears in Job 29 and 31, Job’s final defense before his three friends. Job speaks of his earlier life as the life of the ideal elder. He describes his

economic status in terms of the size of his family (his children) and of his herds (milk) and orchards (oil) (29:5-6). Thus we know that he was the head of a large and wealthy family. He points to his generosity, hospitality, and ethics in the acts of benevolence which he performed habitually (29:12-16; see 31:1-40). He was famous for his skills in speaking and persuasion, holding the attention of all who came to the gate of the city (29:7,11, 21-23). His fame apparently spread beyond his own relatives, for even “princes” and “nobles” stopped talking to listen to him (29:9-10), and he was like a “chief” and a “king” to the people (29:25). As is the case in similar societies, these characteristics of persuasive speech and wisdom would have been most significant for situations of potential community strife. The counsel of an elder like Job would have carried much weight.

Although Job 29 does not mention any knowledge of ancient traditions, laws, and stories, this characteristic of elders is mentioned elsewhere. For example, in Deut 32:7, Moses invokes the people to turn to their “fathers” and their “elders” to hear the stories of God’s past deeds. In sum, typical characteristics of tribal elders are found in Israel’s descriptions of her own elders.

New Testament Elders

When we turn to the New Testament, we find many similarities between the elders of the church and elders in typical kinship-based communities, including those of ancient Israel. A comparison of the “qualifications” of elders in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1 to common characteristics of those elders

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brings this out. Elders in kinship-based communities are senior members of respected families; a Christian elder is to be one “who manages his household well” (1 Timothy 3:4-5), and whose children are also part of the community of believers (Titus 1:6).

Typically, kinship-based elders are wealthy, but they also are generous and hospitable; a Christian elder, whatever his standard of living, is to be "hospitable," "no lover of money," "not greedy for gain" (1 Timothy 3:2,3; Titus 1:7). Elders lead exemplary lives in regard to the ethics and morality of their communities; a Christian elder should be "above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, dignified" (1 Timothy 3:2); and he must be "a lover of goodness, master of himself, upright, holy, and self-controlled" (Titus 1:8). Elders carry on the traditions and beliefs of their people; a Christian elder is "not a recent convert" (1 Timothy 3:6), and "he must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine..." (Titus 1:9). Finally, elders must be good speakers, able to persuade the members of their community of measures which benefit the whole community, as well as serving as worthy representatives for their community to outsiders; a Christian elder, we are told, should be "an apt teacher" (1 Timothy 3:2), he should not be "quarrelsome" (1 Timothy 3:3), "he must be well thought of by outsiders" (1 Timothy 3:7), "not...quick-tempered or ...violent" (Titus 1:7).

The commonalities between elders of typical kinship-based societies and elders of the New Testament church are too pervasive to be overlooked. Paul's prescriptions for the elders in the churches of Ephesus and Crete were nothing new to the world, nor were they unique to Israel prior to the advent of Christianity. Those characteristics are, in fact, typical of elders in most kinship-based societies.

This realization should make us stop and reexamine our idea of why the "qualifications of elders" are given in Timothy and Titus. Here is one traditional idea:

Through the medium of the Holy Spirit

God has revealed to mankind the plan to be used in the governing of His Church... (This) plan is perfect and if conscientiously followed, His children will live in harmony and their work will be done regularly, systematically and enthusiastically.³

This perception of elderships is managerial, very business-like. The church has a task to do, and God has revealed the most effective way to organize it so that it can accomplish that task. My own perception of what Paul prescribes, in light of the similarities to typical elderships, is that Paul is not concerned so much with giving us a divinely-ordained "structure" or "plan" as he is trying to create a **community** of believers. He wanted a community to emerge where one had not existed before, consisting of people previously unrelated, but now related (a family) in a very special way.

I hope that the church can recapture that community mentality. This will require more than adherence to certain structural patterns so that things can run smoothly. It will require a renewed spirit of family, true family, among church members. The role which elders play in this is very important. They must earn and maintain the respect of the members of their congregations by modelling the Christian life to those members. They must model lives of generosity and hospitality, lives of exemplary moral and ethical character. They must be repositories of knowledge and wisdom for their congregation, and they must constantly work for unity and consensus. They are not a governing board or an administrative structure. They are shepherds (1 Peter 5:1-3) and fathers (Deuteronomy 32:7). They are respected senior leaders of a **community**, of a **family** of believers.