

The Office of Elder in Scripture

James Quillin

A Summary

Unit 1

The office of elder has its origin in the story of the visit of Jethro to Moses in Exodus 18. Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, observed him judging the people from daylight to dark. He suggested a series of graduated courts for Israel. These courts would be staffed by elders. There were to be courts of original jurisdiction, and courts of appeal. Moses would be the supreme court judge.

Unit 2

Moses taught the elders the laws and decrees of God. The elders did not make up laws, but judged cases on the basis of the express will of God which they had been taught by Moses. The giving of this law is told in the next narrative in Exodus 20 and following chapters.

Unit 3

The next important development was the gifting of the 70 elders with the Holy Spirit to accomplish their mission. This is recorded in Numbers 11. It is intermingled with the narrative of the manna. The elders who shared the load of judging Israel were given the gift of the Holy Spirit and “prophesied” as a result. That is, they spoke words for God to the people.

Unit 4

When the tribes were settled into the Promised Land, they ruled themselves by a graduated system of courts, staffed by elders. The “judge” was one appointed by God as evidenced by charismatic gifts. The judge acted as a circuit court of last appeal. Samuel was the last of these Judges. This system allowed God to be their “king.” When Israel demanded a king, they repudiated the system of a judge as the final court.

Unit 5

This system worked like this. There was no legislative body or person in the land. God was the only lawgiver in Israel. He had given his law at Sinai. It was written so anyone could read it. It was summarized in the Decalogue. Israelites were to commit it to memory by meditating on it daily and teaching it to their children. The elders who ruled sat in courts which usually convened in the shade of the gates of their villages. They did not make law, but judged cases on the basis of existing law. They were not free to make new law, but collected the cases and these cases became a commentary on the law. The elders had no authority individually, but exercised rule collectively. After the establishment of the monarchy, the kings were the judges in a court of final appeal. A narrative of Solomon's work as a judge is found in 1 Kings 3. There he exercised great wisdom in discovering the true mother of a baby in dispute.

Unit 6

During the Babylonian captivity, God's people began the worship of God in groups centered around the Scriptures rather than around the Temple sacrifices. After the return, they continued the institution of synagogues which were ruled by councils of elders, even after the rebuilding of the temple. The synagogues became extremely important in the Jews of the diaspora. There, the elders exercised rule by the application of the law to individual cases. Roman law even allowed the elders to function as civil courts for their people. So, in Corinth, when Paul and his party were to be arraigned before the city magistrate, and he found out that the charges were religious in character, he refused to hear the case but demanded that the Jews judge the matter themselves (Acts 18).

Unit 7

This is the situation that we find in the New Testament. In the Gospels and Acts, the synagogues were governed by elders. The early church was considered a sect within Judaism until the Christians were expelled by the Council of Jamnia in the 80's. Therefore, it was natural that they continued the practice of self rule by a council of elders, or presbytery, as the council is called in the Greek language of the New Testament. In the Book of Acts, Paul appointed elders in each new church that he founded. The 20th Chapter of Acts assumes the existence of elders for the missionary churches, and that they were instructed in the tasks by Paul. We cannot tell from the text how this appointment was carried out. We do see in 1 Timothy 4 that it was by the laying on of hands of elders by a council of elders that new elders were set apart for this ministry.

Unit 8

Also, in the Pastorals, we find that there were two kinds of elders. All elders ruled in the council of elders, but some of them were also teachers, (1 Timothy 5). Thus, we have ruling elders and teaching elders. The teaching elders were to support themselves by the honorariums, *tima* in Greek, given by those who were taught. From time to time the elders came together to decide issues for the whole church. We have an example of this in Acts 15, called the Jerusalem council.

Unit 9

Summary

1. Elders bear rule in church courts, not as individuals.
2. Elders do not make law, but apply the Law of God to cases.
3. Elders are gifted by the Holy Spirit for this task.
4. Elders are to seek the mind of Christ who is the head of the Church.
5. Christ rules in His Church through the Word, inspired by the Spirit.
6. All elders rule, and some also teach. Those we call ministers.
7. Ordination is by a council of elders, and is for the whole church.

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Unit 1

EXODUS 18

INTRODUCTION

The office of elder has its origin in the story of the visit of Jethro to Moses in Exodus 18. Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, observed him judging the people from daylight to dark. He suggested a series of graduated courts for Israel. These courts would be staffed by elders. There were to be courts of original jurisdiction, and courts of appeal. Moses would be the supreme court judge.

CONTEXT

1. What was Moses doing for the people?(vs. 14-16)
2. What did Jethro observe? (vs. 13-16)
3. Why was this a problem? (vs. 17-18)

REMEDY

1. What was Jethro's solution? (vs 19-28)
2. What kind of system did he offer?
3. What kind of persons were to be considered?

OUTCOME

- 1 What was Moses' response? (vs. 24-27)
- 2.What was the outcome?

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Unit 2

EXODUS 19 - 24

INTRODUCTION

Moses taught the elders the laws and decrees of God. The elders did not make up laws, but judged cases on the basis of the express will of God which they had been taught by Moses. The giving of this law is told in the narrative in Exodus 19 through 24.

PREPARATION

1. How was Moses to prepare the elders? (19:1-6)
2. What did Moses do? (vs. 7-9)
3. How did the elders respond? (vs. 7-9)

THE LAW

1. The 10 Commandments (20:1-17)
2. Case Law based on the 10 Commandments (20:21-23:19)
3. Promises given for obedience. (23:20-33)

THE COVENANT

1. The gathering of the elders.(24:1-2)
2. The reading and recording of the Law. (vs. 3, 4a)
3. The covenant sacrifices.(vs. 3-8)
4. The covenant vows. (v. 7)
5. The blood of the covenant. (vs. 6-8)

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Unit 3

Numbers 11

INTRODUCTION

The next important development was the gifting of the 70 elders with the Holy Spirit to accomplish their mission. This is recorded in Numbers 11. It is intermingled with the narrative of the manna. The elders who shared the load of judging Israel were given the gift of the Holy Spirit and “prophesied” as a result. That is, they spoke words for God to the people.

PREPARATION

1. What was the current crisis? (vs. 1-9)
2. What did Moses do? (vs. 10-15)
3. What did God do? (vs. vs. 1, 16-17)

THE HOLY SPIRIT

1. God gave the Spirit. (vs. 24-25)
2. Their reaction to the Spirit. (v. 25)

THE ABSENT ELDERS

1. What happened to those absent from the meeting? (26-28)
2. How did they react to the outpouring of the Spirit? (v. 26)
3. Joshua's jealousy.(v. 28)
4. Moses' wish. (v. 29)
5. The fulfillment of that wish. (Joel 2:28, Acts: 2:4)

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Unit 4

Judges 2

INTRODUCTION

When the tribes were settled into the Promised Land, they ruled themselves by a graduated system of courts, staffed by elders. The “judge” was one appointed by God as evidenced by charismatic gifts. The judge acted as a circuit court of last appeal. Samuel was the last of these Judges. This system allowed God to be their “king.” When Israel demanded a king, they repudiated the system of a judge as the final court.

PREPARATION

1. What was the reoccurring crisis? (Judges 2:7-19)
2. What did God do? (Judges 2:18)

THE DEUTERONOMIC THEOLOGY

1. A repeating cycle. (Judges 2:16-19)
2. God's intention.(Judges 2:18)

TRANSITION TO A MONARCHY

1. What was the role of the Holy Spirit? (Judges 3:10, 6:34,)
2. How were the Judges chosen? (Judges 3:10,
3. What was the role of the Covenant and Law?
4. How was the role of the Judges different from that of a King?

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Unit 5

1 Kings 3

INTRODUCTION

This system worked like this. There was no legislative body or person in the land. God was the only lawgiver in Israel. He had given his law at Sinai. It was written so anyone could read it. It was summarized in the Decalogue. Israelites were to commit it to memory by meditating on it daily and teaching it to their children. The elders who ruled sat in courts which usually convened in the shade of the gates of their villages. They did not make law, but judged cases on the basis of existing law. They were not free to make new law, but collected the cases and these cases became a commentary on the law. The elders had no authority individually, but exercised rule collectively. After the establishment of the monarchy, the kings were the judges in a court of final appeal. A narrative of Solomon's work as a judge is found in 1Kings 3. There he exercised great wisdom in discovering the true mother of a baby in dispute.

PREPARATION

1. What was the current case?
2. What did Solomon do?

THE KING AS JUDGE

1. Why was the case brought to the king?
2. What do you think the women expected?

THE KING'S DECISION

1. What was the source of Solomon's wisdom?
2. How did the decision affect the women?
3. What was the flaw in the King acting as Judge?
4. How did this work out in the future of Israel and Judah?

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Unit 6

Ezekiel 8, Ezra 5, Acts 18

INTRODUCTION

During the Babylonian captivity, God's people began the worship of God in groups centered around the Scriptures rather than around the Temple sacrifices. After the return, they continued the institution of synagogues which were ruled by councils of elders, even after the rebuilding of the temple. The synagogues became extremely important in the Jews of the diaspora. There, the elders exercised rule by the application of the law to individual cases. Roman law even allowed the elders to function as civil courts for their people. So, in Corinth, when Paul and his party were to be arraigned before the city magistrate, and he found out that the charges were religious in character, he refused to hear the case but demanded that the Jews judge the matter themselves (Acts 18).

PREPARATION

EZEKIEL 8

EZRA 5

ACTS 18

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Unit 7

Acts 15, 20, 1Timothy 4

This is the situation that we find in the New Testament. In the Gospels and Acts, the synagogues were governed by elders. The early church was considered a sect within Judaism until the Christians were expelled by the Council of Jamnia in the 80's. Therefore, it was natural that they continued the practice of self rule by a council of elders, or presbytery, as the council is called in the Greek language of the New Testament. In the Book of Acts, Paul appointed elders in each new church that he founded. The 20th Chapter of Acts assumes the existence of elders for the missionary churches, and that they were instructed in the tasks by Paul. We cannot tell from the text how this appointment was carried out. We do see in 1 Timothy 4 that it was by the laying on of hands of elders that new elders were set apart for this ministry.

1. **Acts 15.** Elders in action.
2. **Acts 20.** Paul's charge to the elders at Ephesus.
3. **1Timothy 4.** An early ordination.