

## SECTION 2

### The Biblical Basis for Leadership by Older Men

#### Chapter 4

#### Shepherding by Elders

*Proven leadership* was key for the men of Israel who wished to be elders.

The Hebrew word for elder, *zaken* (zah'-ken), connoted men who had proven themselves worth following. Over the course of their lives these men exhibited servant-like character qualities that took into consideration the welfare of others within their family, clan, and tribe. Because the nation of Israel saw itself as a singular "extended family," each body of elders possessed an inherent interest in the directions and decisions that were made: Their own kin would be affected.

The role of elder was a life's goal to which men who sought wisdom aspired. *Zaken*, by definition, means "gray-bearded," and suggests wisdom gained by many years of life experiences. In Middle Eastern culture, the oldest members of a family were respected and given deference. Thus, the elders—the wisest and most respected men of the families—were venerated and honored.

Biblically, wisdom is generally considered to be embodied in older people: "*Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?*" . . . "*I thought, 'Age should speak; advanced years should teach wisdom'*" (Job 12:12; 32:7). Not all older people are wise, however. Some have wasted their lives as fools by remaining hardened in their ways or mocking those who truly are astute.<sup>1</sup> But in general, men are expected to grow in wisdom as they advance in years. And those who evidenced wisdom were sought by God's people as true leaders.

Dr. Ron Moseley offers this cogent insight: "In Judaism, those who had reached the age of *forty* were considered to have attained understanding, and those who were over *fifty* were considered worthy to counsel the younger people."<sup>2</sup> These men were esteemed for their maturity, wisdom, and experience. No problem was too trivial to be disregarded by these spiritual leaders. They were dependent on the Hebrew Scriptures to determine God's will for those in their care. The elders were also responsible, along with the priests, to ensure that the people were instructed in the Law of God. Faithful obedience to God by applying His Word was paramount, and these older men served to make sure the people did just that.

#### God Recognizes the Shepherding Role of Elders

Let's head back in time to explore the historical context for elders. Even before the Exodus, God noted the position and influence of elders. These men served as both a support base for Moses and as representatives of the nation of Israel as a whole. From the burning bush He commanded Moses,

*Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, "The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt." The elders of Israel will listen to you. Then you and the elders are to go to the king of Egypt and say to him, "The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. Let us take a three-day journey into the desert to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God" (Exodus 3:16,18).*

The elders were to accompany Moses as a unified leadership before the king of Egypt to request permission to worship God in the desert. But these men were far more than silent witnesses. In order to disseminate God's commands to His people, Moses first addressed the elders because of their recognized influence. He knew that their leadership would carry weight with the rest of the people: *"Then Moses **summoned all the elders** of Israel and said to them, 'Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb'. . . So Moses went back and **summoned the elders** of the people and **set before them** all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak"* (Exodus 12:21; 19:7).

Later, God commanded Moses to select seventy of these family heads for His specific purposes. Each of these seventy had proved himself and was *known* by Moses to be a leader among the people. Because of the intensity of responsibility that this role entailed, empowerment by the Holy Spirit was crucial:

*The Lord said to Moses: "Bring me **seventy of Israel's elders** who are **known** to you as **leaders and officials** among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. . . So Moses went out and told the people what the Lord had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the Tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took of the Spirit that was on him and **put the Spirit on the seventy elders**" (Numbers 11:16,24,25a).*

The elders operated as a collective body. Their wisdom, rule, counsel, and advice were crucial to the religious and social welfare of Jewish society. The *plurality* of elders within each community helped to forestall a "power play" by any one individual who might view himself higher than he should.

Let's consider for a moment the impact this heritage of oversight had on the early Church. The Church was called to be a living organism that drew its power from the Holy Spirit. Therefore the leaders too were Spirit-appointed: *"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the **Holy Spirit** has made you overseers. Be **shepherds** of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood"* (Acts 20:28).

Elders were not elected by popular whim or personal prestige. Because of their age, the fruit and outcome of their lives were readily apparent. Also, others were already following their leadership. In effect, these men were *not made* elders. Rather, they were *recognized* by God and man as leaders. They were accountable to God for the diligence with which they ministered His care to equip the saints for service.

The community of believers needed to be trained and encouraged to minister to one another through their gifting. As they reached out to non-believers, they needed to see the example of these godly, wiser believers.

What a blessing to see that the Holy Spirit chooses those whom He knows are best suited to serve! And key to that suitability is *humility*. We know from Scripture that those who humble themselves before the Lord will be the ones lifted up by Him (James 4:10). The character trait of humility does not seek elevation. On the contrary, those who are humble of spirit seldom see the profound impact they are having on others.

Jesus often stressed the importance of servanthood among His disciples. He warned that those who were tempted toward personal recognition would miss the inner blessing of greatness in God's sight in their scramble for public adulation (see Matthew 23:11,12). Thus Jesus prohibited the use of any titles of honor—"Rabbi," "Father," "Teacher"—that would draw attention away from the Father Who alone is worthy of honor (see Matthew 23:8-10).

Historical Note: The body of elders that so often confronted Jesus in the New Testament were generally the wealthy council members of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, the scribes (experts in the Law of Moses), and the priests who offered sacrifices. Local communities at the time of Jesus, however, looked to their own autonomous group of elders for representation and guidance. For example, recall the “elders of the Jews” who came to Jesus on behalf of the centurion’s sick slave (see Luke 7:3-5). The local elders were more concerned about the daily needs of their townspeople than about events that might be happening in Jerusalem.

## Elder: A Position of Honor in the Family and Faith Community

A Jewish person belonged to a *family* which was part of a *clan* which was part of a *tribe* which was part of the *nation* of Israel. Leadership at each level was provided by the appropriate elders. The council of elders within the Hebrew community directed the course of life for the whole “family” of Jews who lived there. Every Jew knew that the elders over the city where they resided could be found at the city gate to address issues and problems. We see this in Proverbs 31:23, “*Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.*”

The synagogue operated as extended spiritual family. The influence of elders within the synagogue structure was as profound as that exercised at the city gates. As pointed out by Ron Moseley, leaders of a synagogue “would join together to form a tribunal for judging cases concerning money, theft, immorality, admission of proselytes, laying on of hands, and a host of other things mentioned in the Sanhedrin section of the Mishnah.”<sup>3</sup> Again, the elders functioned as a plurality to better ensure impartiality and justice.

As undershepherds of Christ, new covenant elders were under His authority. As brothers in the faith, they were also mutually accountable to one another to guard and instruct the flock. Just as a husband was the head of his household (a family), so, too, the elders led, protected, and trained up the family of believers. Note the “family” words employed over 250 times in the New Testament: *brothers* and *sisters*. And what functions and purposes do such intimate family members do for one another? They build each other up by obeying the fifty-four “one-anothering” commands found in the New Testament!

Just as each synagogue was autonomous, so too was each New Testament faith community—that is, each extended spiritual family. These faith communities, although self-governing and independent, recognized their “family” sense of belonging to each other as did the Jews worldwide. That is why they could be called on to contribute donations for the needier congregations, to share apostolic letters, and to pray for and entertain in their homes believers from other congregations.

A significant example of personal sacrifice for the good of “family” in the larger spiritual context is seen in Acts 11:29,30: “*The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.*” The believers knew that they could trust the elders of Judea to disburse their offering where it would most benefit their needy family in Jesus.

The practice of gathering funds for the needy had long been practiced in the synagogue. Jewish men known as “almoners” collected money (alms) and distributed it to the poor, a practice hearkening back to the exile period. The same charity was encouraged by James regarding the care of widows and orphans (see James 1:27), as well as by the apostles and their concern for the care of widows (see Acts 6:1-4). Paul extended this concept of “family” responsibility by commanding Timothy to make sure that widows who were really in need were helped by the Ephesian faith community (see 1 Timothy 5:3-10).

This sense of connectedness cries out for restoration. Families today, even in the Church, are fragmented, with little sense of relational responsibility. Several years after we were married, Mike's dad phoned to ask how much money we had in the bank. One of Mike's relatives was out of work and his wife was having a baby. Dad recognized the need and felt responsible for the family to join together to meet it. Because Dad held a place of honor in the family, he could exercise the privilege and responsibility to intervene when necessary.

Paul exhibited the same caring concern when he encouraged the Corinthians to give generously: *"Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: 'He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little'"* (2 Corinthians 8:13-15).

## **Succession: An Inherent Process for Family and Faith Community**

The Bible proclaims that our spiritual father Abraham's trust in God was credited to him as righteousness. Trust in the shed blood of Jesus does the same for believers today. Yet Abraham was chosen by God because He could trust him with an important responsibility: *"For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him"* (Genesis 18:19). God knew that Abraham would instruct in His ways the children who would succeed him.

Preparing others to be successors is a critical factor for those who would lead God's people. The Psalmist reinforced this:

*We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands"* (Psalm 78:4-7).

Why should it matter if someone is prepared to take up a mantle of counsel and leadership? One fact affects all families: Everyone dies at some point. As our society has moved off the farm, *succession*, or who will serve in place of a certain individual, has been forgotten. Except for those in some family-owned businesses, few of us think about succession. Yet God wants His people to be diligent about the spiritual inheritance we leave to succeeding generations. He desires that each generation *"bring up [their children] in the training and instruction of the Lord."* Regrettably, the 50% divorce rate in the church today has proved that we are not succeeding in passing along a vibrant trust in Jesus.

Succession was a vital feature in Hebraic society. The oldest son received a double portion of the family inheritance, not to spend on himself, but to maintain the family property and carry on the family estate. As the oldest, he represented the authority of his father in the family. That is why it was extraordinary for Jacob to favor the younger Ephraim over Manasseh in his blessing, and for Jacob to be favored in God's sight over the older Esau. Everyone could recognize the privilege and the responsibility of the successor.

Our spiritual heritage indicates that each family and faith community faces two crucial questions: "Who will *succeed* the current leaders? How well are potential successors being

*trained to lead?"* Moses understood the importance of succession. For many years he trained Joshua to succeed him. The succession was complete when Moses passed on the mantle of leadership to the younger man in front of the whole nation: *"Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, 'Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their forefathers to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance'"* (Deuteronomy 31:7).

Yet it wasn't long after the people entered the Promised Land that something failed to get passed along: *"After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel"* (Judges 2:10). Even great men may fail to properly train the next generation. Samuel was confronted by the elders of Israel because they did not want his sons to succeed him: *"So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, 'You are old, and your sons **do not walk in your ways**; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have'"* (1 Samuel 8:4,5). The consequences of his failure to train up successors was profound.

Unlike a tangible inheritance passed along regardless of the heir's qualifications, succession in leadership demands specific requirements of judgment, maturity, and wisdom. Succession in a family or faith community places great emphasis on understanding the *processes* needed if future leaders are to be skillfully prepared. Those who succeed must bear at least the same concern for the welfare of the family or faith community as those who are passing on the "mantle." If not, the family or congregation will suffer the consequences.

An illustration of this concept: As the time drew near for Mike to return to the US from his first of three deployments to Vietnam, the enlisted men in his detachment came to him with a serious concern. Mike's soon-to-arrive replacement, Gerry, had a reputation as a man who would claw his way to the top no matter what. The men shared their fear that Gerry would care more about his own advancement than for their welfare. Mike knew that what they were saying was true.

Gerry met the ship in Hong Kong. On their last night in port, Mike took him to a viewing deck on top of a hotel that overlooked the harbor. Grabbing Gerry by his shirt collar, he hung him out over the edge. As the startled man gaped at the street some thirteen stories below, Mike rebuked him. "My men are afraid that you're going to push to advance your career even if it costs them their lives. I want your promise right now that you'll care for them as I have. And if you don't promise, I'll drop you." In tears he gave Mike his word.

Months later the entire detachment returned to the States. The enlisted men couldn't rave enough about what a fine officer Gerry had been. Gerry came to Mike to thank him for the tough love he'd shown him. That rebuke had altered his entire outlook and persuaded him that an officer should put his men first. (But he never did ask Mike if he really would have dropped him!)

Time and again Paul admonished the congregations of believers to aim for spiritual maturity. Mature people display an awareness and concern for the well-being of others. Colossians 1:9-12 depicts the results: fruit born in every good work; growth in the knowledge of God; strength from Him for great endurance and patience; joyful thanksgiving. As these inner qualities deepened in the lives of early followers of Jesus, the evidence was obvious to those around them. The men who were mature in these qualities would then be encouraged to lead other spiritual families so that the Kingdom could spread.

A leader who has a shepherd's heart, which is really akin to our Father's heart, can readily discern the training and preparation a young man needs to succeed him. Family successors came from *within* the ranks, not from outside. Eldership was home-grown through the many varieties of relationships that influence a person's development. An elder's per-

sonal trust and exercise of scriptural obedience required a lifetime of individual decisions. Unfortunately for our faith communities today, however, a spiritual intermediary from the outside, such as a “clergy” person, *lessens the NEED* for personal intimacy or relational responsibility within the Body. Intimate Body life led by qualified mature men is absolutely vital for the accountability and encouragement so needed to develop future leadership.

1. For further discussion of the various types of fools presented in the Old Testament, see *Our Father Abraham* by Marvin Wilson.
2. “Evidence of the Jewish Background of the Early Church” *Restore!* Summer 1996, p. 40. Taken from Philip Blackman, *Mishnah; Avot 5:21* (New York: Judaica Press, 1983).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 39.