

WORD STUDIES
IN CONTEXT:

PASTORAL
EPISTLES

PREPARATION
FOR
EXEGESIS

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1 TIMOTHY 5.17-25: ELDERS IN THE FELLOWSHIP

Paul transitions from speaking generally about interaction with groups of believers (older men, younger men, older women and younger women) and begins to focus on particular groups within the community. The first group was widows (cf. 1Ti 5.3-16). The second group focuses on elders.

1 TIMOTHY 5.17-19: HONOR RESPONSIBLE ELDERS

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. (1Ti 5.17-19)

VERSE 17

Let the elders who rule well

The Greek word translated "elders" is πρεσβύτερος, seen previously in 1Ti 5.2 having the meaning of "older man". The present context, 15 verses removed from the previous instance, is somewhat different. Instead of generally denoting an older man deserving of respect, this instance points to a position of leadership worthy of honor. The usual meaning of this sense is

‘elder’ or ‘presbyter’.¹ The word is used similarly in the epistle to Titus:

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint *elders* in every town as I directed you—if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. (Tt 1:5-6, emphasis added)

In Titus,² elders are those appointed to leadership of the church in a town.³ These elders are likely owners of the house in which the church meets⁴ and therefore are likely older, respected men in the community. However, the qualifications for elders, as listed in Titus, are similar to the qualifications listed for overseer in 1 Timothy 3.⁵ Is the overseer of chapter 3 an elder? Are the terms “elder” and “overseer” synonymous?

In the Ignatian church (early second century) the order of hierarchy seems to be that of overseer (bishop), followed by elders (presbyters), followed by deacons:

Since, then, I have observed, by the eyes of faith, your entire congregation through those I have already mentioned, and loved it, I urge you to hasten to do all things in the harmony of God, with the bishop presiding in the place of God and *the presbyters* in the place of the council of the apostles, and the deacons, who are especially dear to me, entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father before the ages and has been manifest at the end.⁶

¹ BDAG, p. 862. Occurs 67x in NT.

² [Note: the following argument is essentially a sketched outline and needs to be fleshed out and thought through. It may end up as an excursus instead of text in the body of the work. Proceed with caution.]

³ Likely held in a house; and likely one house church per town. Over one hundred towns were known on the island of Crete in the first century. Cf Bruce W. Winter festschrift, article on Crete.

⁴ Cf. Campbell, *The Elders*. Cf. Campbell p. 173.

⁵ See notes on 1Ti 3.1-7.

⁶ Ign. *Magn.* 6.1 (Ehrman, emphasis mine)

The Ignatian ecclesiology is somewhat more developed when compared to the nascent ecclesial state encountered in the Pastoral Epistles. Ignatius, in his *Letter to the Trallians*, provides more detail:

So too let everyone respect the deacons like Jesus Christ, and also the bishop, who is the image of the Father; and let them respect the *presbyters* like the council of God and the band of the apostles. Apart from these a gathering cannot be called a church.⁷

The order is evident in the picture Ignatius paints. The bishop is in analogous position to the Father—one of leadership and control. The presbyters (elders) are akin to the council of God. Deacons are compared to Jesus Christ, thus they are different from the presbyters, serving the interest of the bishop much like Jesus Christ is a model of obedience and complete submission to the Father.

Ignatius' description of ecclesial order, however insightful it is for understanding church order and terminology in the early second century, is a later snapshot that does not necessarily match the picture during the time in which the Pastoral Epistles were written. According to Campbell,⁸ the elders (πρεσβύτερος) in the Pastoral Epistles are house-church leaders. They are well-to-do older men; natural leaders with houses and finances capable of supporting such an endeavor.⁹ The overseer (ἐπίσκοπος) is an elder who oversees the house-churches in a particular locality (e.g. Ephesus or Crete). In this scheme, the deacons are attached to the overseer, serving as agents to support his ministry. Campbell holds that one function of the Pastoral Epistles is to spur migration from a loose house-church model (such as that in Acts and elsewhere in Paul) to something more

⁷ Ign. *Trall.* 3.1 (Ehrman, emphasis mine)

⁸ Campbell, pp. 194-205, on which the balance of the paragraph is based.

⁹ Campbell argues that this is generally true of elders, that it is an ad-hoc position of honor filled by people we would call “pillars of the church” whether or not they serve any official function or duty in the church community. Campbell, p. 96.

formal. The Pastoral Epistles were written at the beginning of this shift; the Ignatian epistles represent ecclesiology after the shift was complete.¹⁰

The elders, then, “rule well” over a house church. The Greek word translated “rule” is *προϊστημι*, which was used earlier in the description of qualifications for the overseers in 1Ti 3:

He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? (1Ti 3.4-5, emphasis added)

The sense of *προϊστημι* in 1Ti 5 is roughly the same as that in 1Ti 3; the elders (*πρεσβύτερος*) are in a position of authority.

be considered worthy of double honor

The Greek word translated “be considered worthy” is *ἀξιόω*, here in the sense of ‘consider worthy’ or ‘deserving’.¹¹ The word is used similarly in Hebrews:

For Jesus *has been counted worthy* of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. (Heb 3.3, emphasis added)

How much worse punishment, do you think, *will be deserved* by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? (Heb 10.29, emphasis added)

In Hebrews, *ἀξιόω* is used to show what one is worthy of receiving; be it honorable or dishonorable. Ignatius uses the word in the same way:

Pray on behalf of the church in Syria; I am being taken from there to Rome in chains—even through I am the least of those who believe there—since *I have been deemed worthy* to be

¹⁰ [Note: Would a simple timeline graphic help here?]

¹¹ BDAG, p. 94. Occurs 7x in NT, only here in PE.

found honorable to God. Farewell in God the Father and in Jesus Christ our mutual hope.¹²

Ignatius claims to have been “deemed worthy” to be “found honorable” to God. In 1Ti 5.17 Paul claims that elders who serve properly are worthy of “double honor”. The word translated “honor” is τιμή, here having to do with ‘honor’ or ‘esteem’.¹³ The verb form of the word (τιμάω) was used earlier in 1Ti 5.3 (“honor widows who are truly widows”) and the noun form (τιμή) is used later, at the start of chapter 6:

Let all who are under a yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all *honor*, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. (1Ti 6.1, emphasis added)

In 1Ti 6.1, Christian slaves are to treat their masters with honor; this serves to protect the name of God from slander.¹⁴ Similarly, Christians are to treat the ones esteemed as elders with honor.¹⁵

especially those who labor in preaching and teaching

Those elders “who labor in preaching and teaching” are especially worthy of receiving honor. The Greek word translated “especially” is μάλιστα, here with the sense of ‘above all’, ‘particularly’ or ‘especially’.¹⁶ Here it serves to project or further describe the role of the elders being honored; it is functioning epexegetically.¹⁷

The word translated “labor” is the Greek verb κοπιάω. Here (as in 1Ti 4.10) it has the sense of ‘work hard’, ‘toil’, ‘strive’ or

¹² Ign. *Eph.* 21.2 (Ehrman, emphasis added)

¹³ BDAG, p. 1005. Occurs 41x in NT; 6x in PE. Note that BDAG glosses 1Ti 5.17 as ‘honorarium’ or ‘compensation’, but 1Ti 6.1 as ‘honor’ or ‘reverence’.

¹⁴ See comments on 1Ti 6.1.

¹⁵ [Note: I need to discuss “double honor”, but I really need to figure out first if the honor in this specific instance has a monetary connotation as v. 18 seems to indicate. I’ll be coming back to this section.]

¹⁶ BDAG, p. 613. Occurs 12x in NT, 5x in PE: 1Ti 4.10; 5.8, 17; 2Ti 4.13; Tt 1.10. See discussion on 1Ti 4.10.

¹⁷ Campbell, *The Elders*, p. 200-201.

‘struggle’.¹⁸ “Preaching and teaching” is not a formal responsibility list; it is rather an explanation of the tasks that the elders are expending energy and effort to accomplish. The *Epistle of Barnabas* uses κοπιᾶω similarly:

Think about the day of judgment night and day, and seek out the company of the saints every day, either *laboring* through the word and going out to comfort another, being concerned to save a life through the word, or working with your hands as a ransom for your sins.¹⁹

These elders labor in preaching and teaching. The word translated “preaching” is λόγος. It is a versatile word that takes on nuance depending on context. In this instance, it is not personified and therefore does not have to do directly with Jesus Christ as λόγος.²⁰ It is one half of the object of the preposition ἐν. Here, λόγος represents the communication that is the work of the elders; hence ‘preaching’ or ‘speaking’.²¹ The word λόγος is used similarly in First Corinthians:

And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my *speech* and my message²² were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1Co 2.3-5, emphasis added)

The other half of the object of ἐν is the word translated “teaching”, διδασκαλία. It is used in the Pastoral Epistles to refer to the sound doctrine, the proper representation of the Gospel.²³ The elders who exert themselves in speaking and teaching, working hard to properly proclaim the gospel and to teach and edify believers under their care, are deserving of honor.

¹⁸ BDAG, p. 558. Occurs 23x in NT, 3x in PE: 1Ti 4.10; 5.17; 2Ti 2.6.

¹⁹ *Ep. Barn.* 10.19 (emphasis added)

²⁰ e.g. Jn 1.1.

²¹ BDAG, p. 599.

²² The word ‘message’ is a translation of the Greek word κήρυγμα, typically translated ‘preaching’; hence my preference for translating λόγος in 1Ti 5.17 as ‘speaking’ instead of ‘preaching’.

²³ See comments on “sound doctrine” at 1Ti 1.10.

VERSE 18

Verse 18 appeals to scripture to provide justification for the double honor due to the hard-working elders who exert themselves in speaking and teaching.

For the Scripture says

The Greek word γραφή is translated “Scripture” in this instance, though it may more generally mean ‘writing’.²⁴ Here it does refer to Scripture as two passages of Scripture are referenced in the balance of the verse. The word γραφή occurs similarly in Second Timothy, describing writings that were “breathed out by God”:

All *Scripture* is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, (2Ti 3.16, emphasis added)

The referred Scriptures, in this case, are two quotations.

“You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain”
and, *“The laborer deserves his wages”*

Both citations are found in Deuteronomy (cf. De 25.4 and 24.15). Paul uses De 25.4 in First Corinthians:

For it is written in the Law of Moses, *“You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.”* Is it for oxen that God is concerned? (1Co 9.9, emphasis added)

The quoted passage refers to threshing oxen; that they not be muzzled. If they hunger during their labor, then they are able to feed upon the grain that they are threshing. They are able to refresh themselves with the fruits of their labor. Paul goes on to explain his citation of Deuteronomy further:

Does [God] not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do

²⁴ BDAG, p. 206. Occurs 50x in NT; 2x in PE: 1Ti 5.18; 2Ti 3.16.

not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. (1Co 9.10-12)

The second quotation, “the laborer deserves his wages” hearkens back to De 24.15 though something more like its present form is attributed to Jesus in Matthew:

Acquire no gold nor silver nor copper for your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics nor sandals nor a staff, for *the laborer deserves his food*. (Mt 10.9-10, emphasis added)

The underlying principle can be traced back to several sources (e.g. Le 19.13; De 24.15) that affirm the principle that the one who works (slave or otherwise) is deserving of his agreed-upon wages.

Both of these citations show that the worker—in this case the elder—is worthy of receipt of the “double honor” mentioned in 1Ti 5.17.

VERSE 19

Do not admit

The phrase “Do ... admit” is translated from the Greek word παραδέχομαι, here with the sense of ‘accept’.²⁵ The word is used similarly in Acts:

“When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because *they will not accept* your testimony about me.’ (Ac 22.17-18)

As Paul’s testimony concerning Christ would not be received, so too unsubstantiated charges against an elder are to not be received. Ignatius records another instance:

I have learned that some people have passed through on their way from there with an evil teaching. But you did not permit

²⁵ BDAG, p. 761. Occurs 6x in NT, only here in PE.

them to sow any seeds among you, plugging your ears so as not *to receive* anything sown by them.²⁶

The *Epistle to Diognetus* provides witness to this usage as well:

For how is it not completely unwarranted *to accept* some of the things created by God for human use as made well, but to reject others as useless and superfluous?²⁷

Each of these instances has to do with acknowledging, receiving or accepting something as true. Ignatius used *παραδέχομαι* to describe the rejection²⁸ of “seeds” sown by false prophets. The author of *Diognetus* used it similarly to show an arbitrary distinction. The use here in First Timothy is much the same, accusations against elders are not acknowledged unless they are properly lodged, with corroborating witnesses.

a charge against an elder

The Greek word *κατηγορία* is translated “a charge”. The sense is that of ‘accusation’.²⁹ It is also used in the epistle to Titus:

... if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the *charge* of debauchery or insubordination. (Tt 1.6, emphasis added)

The word is used similarly in the gospel of John:

So Pilate went outside to them and said, “What *accusation* do you bring against this man?” (Jn 18.29, emphasis added)

Josephus also uses *κατηγορία*:

... so I returned as fast as ever I could, and found the whole council assembled, and the body of the people gotten together, and Jonathan and his colleagues bringing *vehement*

²⁶ Ign. *Eph.* 9.1a (Ehrman, emphasis added)

²⁷ *Ep. Diog.* 4.2 (Ehrman, emphasis added)

²⁸ That is, not receiving where “not” comes from the negative particle.

²⁹ BDAG, p. 533. Occurs 3x in NT: Jn 18.29; 1Ti 5.19; Tt 1.6.

accusations against me, as one who had no concern to ease them of the burdens of war, and as one that lived luxuriously.³⁰

That κατηγορία, in these cases and in First Timothy, has to do with an accusation or charge of some sort seems plain.

except on the evidence of two or three witnesses

The Greek word translated “except” is the adverb ἐκτός. Here it has the meaning of ‘unless’ or ‘except’, though in general it has to do with being outside of something.³¹ Similar usage is found in First Corinthians:

Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, *unless* someone interprets, so that the church may be built up. (1Co 14.5, emphasis added)

... and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—*unless* you believed in vain. (1Co 15.2, emphasis added)

The phrase “on the evidence of two or three witnesses” may be an allusion to the gospel of Matthew:

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence *of two or three witnesses*. (Mt 18.15-16, emphasis added)

Or perhaps a recollection from Second Corinthians:

This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence *of two or three witnesses*. (2Co 13.1, emphasis added)

Or perhaps from the Torah:

One witness shall not suffice against a person in any injustice and in any wrongdoing and in any sin that he may sin. By the

³⁰ Jos., *Life* 1.284 (Whiston, emphasis added)

³¹ BDAG, p. 311. Occurs 8x in NT; only here in PE.

mouth of two or three witnesses shall any word be sustained.
(De 19.15, NETS)³²

Whatever the source, the thought that charges must be substantiated by the testimony “of two or three witnesses” is not a foreign one, it is rooted in Torah, in the sayings of Jesus, and witnessed in earlier Pauline letters. Accusations hurled against elders that are unsubstantiated are to be ignored; charges testified to by two or more must be considered and dealt with.

1 TIMOTHY 5.20-22: REBUKE IRRESPONSIBLE ELDERS

As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. (1Ti 5:20-22)

VERSE 20

As for those who persist in sin

This phrase comes from two Greek words. The first is the definite article, here in the plural accusative functioning as a relative pronoun, hence “those”. The second word is the participial form of the verb ἁμαρτάνω, translated “who persist in sin”. The verb is the generic verb meaning ‘to sin’,³³ here substantive and therefore relating to the ones who are sinning. Similar usage is found in First John; the below instance of ἁμαρτάνω is a participle:

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to

³² [Note: Citation from provisional edition]

³³ BDAG, p. 49. Occurs 43x in NT; 2x in PE: 1Ti 5.20; Tt 3.11.