

Presbyters, Not Priests: The Early Church and Its Contexts

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There was a time when etymology was an important medium for determining the meaning of words. A good example of this can be found in an old article by Maurice Bloomfield (1855–1928), an Austrian-born, American philologist and Sanskrit scholar.¹ On the basis of his knowledge of Sanskrit, he gives an interesting etymological explanation of the Greek word *πρεσβύς*, arguing that the explanation of the Sanskrit word *purogavá* contains the key to the etymology of the Greek word. The Vedic noun *purogavá* is usually translated by “leader,” as though it meant originally, “going in front.” Bloomfield sees the component *βύς* related to the Greek word *βούς*, “bull,” and argues that the word refers to the “leading steer,” or “fore-steer.” He then derives that usage from the practice of early agricultural society of having an ox lead other oxen in pulling a cart. *Se non è vero, è ben trovato*, the Italians would say.²

The contributors to this volume consider the identity and functions of ancient “presbyters.” Our focus is on the Greek term *πρεσβύτερος* in the early Christian literature of the first and second centuries, including its background and horizons in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the early Jewish and Greco-Roman sources. In Bloomfield’s reconstruction, the term *πρεσβύς* would involve leadership, most probably based on experience. Leadership based on experience and life wisdom will certainly be encountered in the various chapters in this volume, for “presbyters” (*πρεσβύτεροι*) were evidently a kind of leader in the early church, and their presence is widely attested from the earliest times. There is, however, no consensus about the identity of presbyters, their relationship to Christian leaders described by other terms (e.g. *ἐπίσκοπος*, *διάκονος*), and their functions within the early Christian communities.

The term *πρεσβύτερος* (“presbyter”) is derived from the Greek word *πρεσβύς*, and is a comparative of that word, meaning “older” or “elder.” In the Greek literature of classical antiquity, in Jewish, Christian, and other texts, we find regularly the original etymological root meaning of “older” versus “younger.” The word most commonly occurs in the plural *πρεσβύτεροι*, but when a singular does occur it is, for example, about an older child compared to a younger one.

¹ Maurice Bloomfield, “The Etymology of ΠΡΕΣΒΥΣ,” *AJP* 29 (1908): 78–81.

² Even if it’s not true, it’s well made up.

Consistent with this, the plural may also indicate the age difference between multiple siblings.³ Quite early on, however, *πρεσβύτεροι* came to be used in an extended sense, to refer to a role with a certain status and authority within a community.⁴ This more formal usage is evident in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the Septuagint, in the New Testament and other early Christian texts, as well as in the literature, papyri, inscriptions, and coins of the Greco-Roman world. An initial set of questions, then, concern whether, and where, and when *πρεσβύτερος* came to refer to a role with a definite set of functions, or even an office. Moreover, since the term *πρεσβύτερος* is not unique to the early Christian literature, a further set of questions concern whether the use of *πρεσβύτερος* in Christian contexts is similar to its use in other contexts or takes on distinctively Christian meanings.

The early Christian texts of the first centuries, of course, also employ a variety of other terms alongside *πρεσβύτερος* for Christian leaders. In the writings of early Christianity, we find that two terms gain special importance: *ἐπίσκοπος* and *διάκονος*. These terms, or their equivalents, while not entirely unknown in the Hebrew Scriptures, Jewish texts, and the Greco-Roman sources, appear in the earliest Christian literature, and took on a unique significance in the Christian world. We must consider, then, the relationship of the term *πρεσβύτερος* to other terms for Christian leaders, especially *ἐπίσκοπος* and *διάκονος*, and the functions assigned to the *πρεσβύτεροι* within the early Christian communities relative to the functions assigned to leaders described by other terms.

It is important to note, however, that the early Christian texts do not use sacerdotal terms for Christian leaders, that is, terms associated with cultic sacrifice. The Greek noun *ιερεὺς* (“priest”, but in the sense of “sacrificer” or “diviner”) is used in Greek literature to indicate someone who, as representative of the people, offers sacrifices.⁵ The LXX regularly uses this word to translate the Hebrew word *כֹּהֵן* (“priest”),⁶ but *ιερεὺς* is never used in the Scriptures of

³ Philo and Josephus use the comparative (*πρεσβύτερος*) and superlative (*πρεσβύτατος*) forms in a wide range of ways, and they also use it for referring to humans who were older in age than others. See the chapter on Philo by Gregory Sterling and the article on Luke and Josephus by Bart Koet in this volume. In the New Testament, *πρεσβύτερος* is sometimes used in this original, basic sense, or in contexts that allude to it (e.g. Luke 15:25; 1 Tim 5:1). Cf. Joseph Ysebaert, *Die Amtsterminologie im neuen Testament und in der alten Kirche* (Breda: Eureia, 1994), 220.

⁴ CGL 1:1215 lists five semantic domains for *πρεσβύτερος* as a substantive: (1) of an older generation, *older*; (2) of a person living in an earlier time than someone else, *more ancient*; (3) of a person’s counsel, *mature*; (4) comparatively of a duty, *more important*; of evil, *graver*; and (5) of a functional role, *senator* (at Rome), *elder* (of the Jewish Sanhedrin), or *elder* (in a Christian church). For a concise summary of the use of *πρεσβύτερος* in the Greek and Jewish worlds, see André Lemaire, *Les ministères aux origines de l’Église. Naissance de la triple hiérarchie: évêques, presbyters, diacres*. *Lectio Divina* 68 (Paris: Cerf, 1971), 17–27.

⁵ See only LSJ, 821.

⁶ In the Hebrew scriptures, of course, the priest (here, as we note, also with the meaning of “one who offers sacrifices” rather than “older” [wise] man) also represented God to the people.

the New Testament, or in other early Christian literature, to refer to church leaders.⁷ Similarly, in the early Christian literature in Latin, *sacerdos*, the Latin word for “one who offers sacrifice,” is also not used. Only much later did *sacerdos* begin to be used for Christian leaders, and even then it was first applied only to the “bishop.”⁸ It is unfortunate, therefore, that even the presence of the word *πρεσβύτερος* in the early Christian texts has sometimes been obscured by being translated as “priest” (e.g. Douay-Rheims).

There are already quite a few studies on presbyters; is there then a need for new research? Studies on the sources of the diaconate in the Christian church were scarce, prompting a project on this subject co-edited by two of the editors of this volume.⁹ There have, however, been a good number of studies on presbyters and the origins of pastoral leadership in the Christian church, whether this has been characterised as the origins of “the priesthood,” “the episcopate,” or “the eldership.”¹⁰ In many of these studies, a single scholar has attempted to

⁷ Granted, in the Scriptures of the New Testament, the church is described, in terms that echo biblical language for Israel (Exod 19:6), as “a royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9; cf. 2:5), or “a kingdom and priests to our God” (Rev 5:10; cf. 1:6). Paul also characterises once his ministry in priestly terms (Rom 15:16), and several texts characterise Christian worship and service as “sacrifice” (Rom 12:1; Phil 4:18; 1 Pet 2:5; Heb 13:15). Nowhere, however, are Christian leaders styled “priests,” using the noun *ιερεύς*, and the “sacrificial” language applied to Christians is always employed metaphorically to refer to praise and service; cultic sacrifice is unknown.

⁸ A good description of the process by which presbyters adopt the title *sacerdos* from the *ἐπίσκοπος* is to be found in an excellent article by J. Waldram, “Van Presbyter tot Priester. De betekenisverschuiving van het woord “sacerdos” van de derde tot de achtste eeuw,” in Wim A. M. Beuken, et al., eds., *Proef En Toets: Theologie Als Experiment: Bijdragen Bij Gelegenheid Van Het Tien-Jarig Bestaan Van De Katholieke Theologische Hogeschool Te Amsterdam* (Amersfoort: De Horstink, 1977), 144–65. See also Jean Tillard’s survey, “The Rise of a ‘Sacerdotal’ Vocabulary for Describing the Ministry,” in *What Priesthood Has the Ministry?* Grove Booklet 13 (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books, 1973), 20–28.

⁹ Bart J. Koet, Edwina Murphy, and Esko Ryökäs, eds., *Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity: The First Two Centuries*. WUNT II 479 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018) and Bart J. Koet, Edwina Murphy, and Esko Ryökäs, eds., *Deacons and Diakonia in Late Antiquity: The Third Century Onwards*. WUNT II 606 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2024).

¹⁰ To mention only a few: Rudolf Sohm, *Kirchenrecht*, vol. 1. SHDR 8 (Leipzig: Dunker & Humblot, 1892); J. Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869), Part IV; Lemaire, *Les ministères*: Karl Kertelge, *Gemeinde und Amt im neuen Testament* (Munich: Kösel, 1972); Robert Zollitsch, *Amt und Funktion des Priesters*. Freiburger Theologische Studien 96 (Freiburg: Herder, 1974); Joachim Rohde, *Urchristliche und früh-katholische Ämter* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1976); David L. Bartlett, *Ministry in the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993); Ysebaert, *Amtsterminologie*; James Tunstead Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity*. SNTW (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994); Francis A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops. The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Newman, 2002); Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*. StBL 57 (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); Roger T. Beckwith, *Elders in Every City: The Origin and Role of the Ordained Ministry* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003). Recent contributions

reconstruct the entire history of the origins of pastoral leadership in the church, and has therefore needed to cover many sources over an extensive period of time.¹¹

While these studies have undoubtedly made valuable contributions to our understanding of presbyters in the early church, there are some potential drawbacks to such solo works on a subject like this. One is that there are so many sources to assess, a scholar can never be a specialist in all of them.¹² Another is that researchers always wear glasses (or multiple glasses) that (co)define their gaze. For issues that are ultimately about ministry in the church, the model of the tradition in which a researcher has been immersed often plays a role, even if they have subsequently left it.¹³ Indeed, it may be that a tradition of interpretation, whether of a church council such as Trent, or a leading figure such as Luther or Calvin, becomes a quasi-canonical interpretation, such that the canonical text can only be read in keeping with that tradition of reading. Yet further, the glasses of a particular scholarly discipline can also lead to a certain myopia. For example, specialists on the New Testament, and on Christian literature of the second century, often operate in their own scholarly worlds, such that studies in one area do not always inform the other. Another possibility of one-sidedness is the cultural context in which the phenomenon of the growing community of the disciples of Jesus is placed. The authors of the New Testament texts self-consciously connect their writings to the Scriptures of Israel, but also write in the immediate context Second Temple Judaism, and against the broader horizon of the Greco-Roman world.¹⁴ To have the necessary expertise in all three contexts demands

include: Jochen Wagner, *Die Anfänge des Amtes in der Kirche Presbyter und Episkopen in der frühchristlichen Literatur*. TANZ 53 (Tübingen: Francke, 2011); Alistair C. Stewart, *The Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Communities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), both with substantial bibliographies. Compare also: Günther Bornkamm, “πρέσβυς, πρεσβύτερος,” *TDNT* 6:651–83.

¹¹ Note, also, important studies on the place of women in these sources: Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in The Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*. BJS 36 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982); Ute Eisen, *Amtsträgerinnen im frühen Christentum. Epigraphische und literarische Studien*. Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte 61 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996); Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, eds. and trans., *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2005).

¹² An example of a judgment somewhat under-questioned is the assertion that Ignatius was a first witness to the triple leadership model of *episkopos*, *diakonos*, and *presbuteros*. That representation is too easily repeated in many reconstructions of leadership in the early church without any real assessment of the thesis; for a nuance of this view, see Bart J. Koet, “The Bishop and His Deacons, Ignatius of Antioch’s View on Ministry: Two-fold or Three-fold,” in Koet, Murphy, and Ryökäs, *Deacons: First Two Centuries*, 149–63.

¹³ Cf. Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, who assesses how Catholic and Protestant church views play a role, consciously or unconsciously, in a description of the ministry models of the early church.

¹⁴ This is clearly outlined in the first chapter of Peter Tomson, *If This Be from Heaven: Jesus*

much from a scholar, and so it is not surprising that one or other of these contexts is often less prominent in any given study.¹⁵

The purpose of the present collection of articles is to overcome as much as possible these constraints. From the reviews of the book on the sources of the diaconate it became clear that there is a need for a deeper and more systematic analysis of original source texts than had been usual in the literature about pastoral leadership. Such a deepening occurs when the texts in question are discussed by specialists on those texts. When studying the history of a phenomenon such as *πρεσβύτεροι*, there is great value in gathering specialists in different disciplines from a range of different cultural and ecclesiastical contexts. It is hoped that a kind of complementarity will then emerge that is more difficult to achieve when the study is conducted by a single individual.

In this interdisciplinary study, then, we focus on the term *πρεσβύτερος* in the early Christian literature of the first and second centuries, including its background and horizons in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the early Jewish and Greco-Roman sources. We have invited experts on the primary sources to consider who presbyters were and how they functioned within a community. These specialists are drawn from diverse confessional and national backgrounds and bring expertise in the distinct but related fields of Hebrew Bible, Septuagint, Second Temple Judaism, New Testament, Classics, and Patristics.

Our goal in this book is to offer more systematic attention to the different contexts in which the term *πρεσβύτερος* (*ἱκλ* / *presbyter*) appears. The first sections focus on presbyters in the Hebrew Scriptures, Second Temple Judaism, and the Greco-Roman World. Specific attention is paid to the *זקני* in the Torah, the Historical books, the Prophets, and the literature of Qumran, and also to the *πρεσβύτεροι* in the Septuagint, Philo, the Greco-Roman documentary sources, coins, and inscriptions. Part 3 focusses on *πρεσβύτεροι* in the writings of the New Testament, assessing the most important texts in which our key term appears. In Part 4 contributors examine presbyters in early Christian texts from the second and early third centuries down to Tertullian.

Contributors to the volume were asked to focus on the following questions, recognising that not every question will apply to every text.

(1) What is a “presbyter” (*ἱκλ* / *πρεσβύτερος* / *presbyter*), as described in the text?¹⁶ To what degree is age a factor? To what extent does the word “presbyter”

and the New Testament Authors in Their Relationship to Judaism. The Biblical Seminar 76 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 27–69, here 27–28.

¹⁵ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 190–93, 197, 306–8, 349 highlights the leadership structures of the Jewish synagogue as the source of Christian patterns of organisation. By contrast, Stewart, *Original Bishops*, 55 considers that “the origin of the Christian *episkopos* lay in the financial officers of pagan *collegia*.”

¹⁶ We note that there are different translations for the Hebrew *זקני*, the Greek *πρεσβύτερος*, and the Latin *presbyter*. Since, for example, both *πρεσβύτερος* / *presbyter* and *ιερεύς* / *sacerdos*

(whether singular or plural) designate a publicly recognised or official leadership role in a community?

(2) What does a “presbyter” do? That is, what tasks are associated with a “presbyter”? (Often, we’re not given an exhaustive list).

(3) What is the function of a “presbyter,” including their relationship to other official leaders (especially to those styled ἐπίσκοπος and διάκονος), the congregation (or Jewish community), outsiders, the Scriptures, the liturgy, synods etc.

(4) What, if any, indications are given regarding the gender of a “presbyter”?

(5) Is reference made to “presbyter” (singular) or to “presbyters” (plural)? To what extent does the plural indicate a corporate body/council? Are other terms used to refer to “presbyters” meeting in councils (e.g., πρεσβυτέριον, γερούσι(α)? If so, what can we say about how such councils were composed and what functions they performed?

(6) What role does the socio-historical context play in our understanding of the identity and functions of “presbyters”?

(7) Did “presbyters” receive a salary?

(8) Is there any mention of the marital status / celibacy / former marriages / children of “presbyters”?

(9) Is there any mention of a *cursus honorum* and, if so, how do “presbyters” relate to it?

It is for the reader of this volume to judge whether our authors succeeded in presenting the primary texts themselves without importing later ideas into the description of presbyters as described in the source. Although the aim was to present only one source text, or a defined collection of source texts, it is perhaps inevitable – and not necessarily regrettable – that some authors have involved other texts in their discussions. We therefore do not claim an idealised objectivity for this volume, nor methodological purity. What we present is a consideration of a wide range of sources on the topic of presbyters by a combination of seasoned and emerging scholars from diverse specialities and backgrounds, which we hope has resulted in a rich volume with a variety of perspectives.

We are very pleased that as the first reader of the articles in this book, Frances Young has written a reflection on them. She, as one of the experienced seniors (πρεσβύτεροι) of the study of the early church, is in an excellent position to outline what this collection provides and to think about the leadership of those older people, the πρεσβύτεροι, who led the way for the flock like a shepherd, as once the leading ox pulled the cart.

have been translated by “priest” (or equivalent) in some traditions, we think that it is better to use the English words “presbyter” or “elder” in order to avoid misunderstandings.