Who is “Worthy of Honour”? Women as Elders in Late Second Temple Period Literature

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ABSTRACT

Groups and individuals known as “elders” (Greek: presbyteros, gerousia; Hebrew: zaqan) are often found in ancient Jewish texts and inscriptions. Their ubiquity in such texts and inscriptions is accompanied by very little information about their actual function. Generally, this may be because we have some kind of impression that a group of older men in patriarchal and androcentric societies might form a kind of local authority and would naturally be referred to as elders. In the works known as Judith and Susanna, female protagonists are set against or in contrast to elders. There is a presumption that these elders are an influential, all-male, locally authoritative, collective. This article will explore power dynamics within these texts where the elders function as a specific narrative device, often as a foil to exemplary female characters, and consider how this gendered reading of such a group forms contemporary understandings of ancient Judaism.

KEYWORDS

elders, Judith, Susanna, gender, inscriptions, synagogue, Second Temple period

Introduction

To begin this article, I want to raise three questions. First, when we read of the “elders” in Jewish texts of the late Second Temple period, who are we imagining? Second, when female characters interact with “elders,” how do our assumptions about the “elders” affect our perception of these female characters? That is, do the interactions between Judith and the elders or Susanna and the elders reinforce the authority of these “elders” or subvert it? Third, to what extent does reimagining the membership of the category “elders” affect gendered readings of the narratives of Judith and Susanna? Can women be classified as elders in the Second Temple period, or do we see oppositional arrangements between prominent women and male patriarchal authority? The

1 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for their comments. Their generous reading and comprehensive feedback greatly improved this piece. I would also like to thank the Enoch Seminar (especially Kelley Coblentz Bautch, Shayna Sheinfeld, Rodney Caruthers II and Joshua Scott), for the invitation to present at the “Studies in Second Temple Judaism: A Global Enterprise” conference where I received much support and feedback for a version of this piece. This article was influenced in part by consulting the work of Shayna Sheinfeld, Sara Parks and Meredith Warren. They have also been generous with their time, and I have benefitted from conversations with each of them. I would also like to thank Laura Quick for her comments and questions on this piece. Finally, my thanks to Ellena Lyell and Susannah Rees for their work in bringing together this important issue and their guidance and communication.
texts of Judith and Susanna provide two examples to discuss these questions and the answer will affect future readings of these texts and others. These two texts contribute to our understanding of the presentation of gender in late Second Temple period texts, and it is significant that while these texts have a great deal to offer on the respective roles of women and men in society, neither text explicitly contrasts the office of elder with women. That is to say, in texts that otherwise have a lot to say about gender roles and performance in Jewish communities, there is no rejection of the possibility that women could function as elders.

**Elders in Second Temple Period Literature**

A brief survey of the instances and roles of elders in Second Temple period literature shows both ubiquity yet ambiguity. For the sake of this article, this survey is necessarily brief, but I will attempt to sketch out some of the main contexts and actions of the elders in such literature. Michael Walzer reports that the elders are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible around 140 times, mostly referring to a kind of role, “and in only a small number of cases is the reference nonpolitical, to old men or women generally.”² He further points out that, at least in biblical narratives, the elders have no foundation; their presence and authority is simply assumed wherever they appear.³ Cat Quine has suggested that the elders stand in for the people when Ahab consults them with regard to matters of warfare. The elders are a necessary authority which a good king should engage with in order to succeed.⁴ Regarding a counterpart term, *gerousia*, Lester Grabbe states that “the name implies a ‘council of elders’ … and seems to be part of the tradition about an advisory council to the high priest.”⁵ Beyond these broad characterisations, very little can be gleaned from our sources about the formation, members or social functions of elders in ancient Jewish communities.

Elders appear throughout the Masoretic Text and Septuagint in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, 1 Esdoras, Ezra, Judith, 1, 2 and 3 Maccabees, Psalms, Odes of Solomon, Wisdom of Solomon, Ben Sira, Joel, Zechariah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Susanna.⁶ They feature

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⁶ Elders (Septuagint, * indicates absence in Masoretic Text): Exod 17:5; 18:12; 19:7; 24:1, 14; 34:30*; Lev 4:15; 19:32; Num 11:16, 24, 25, 30; 16:25; Deut 31:9, 28; 32:7; Josh 7:6, 23; 8:10; 9:2(?), 11, 24:1, 29; Judg (A) 2:7; 8:14, 16; 11:5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 21:16; same verses in Judg; Ruth 3:11, 4:2, 4, 9, 11, 1 Sam 4:3; 15:30; 16:4; 30:26; 2
in the works of Josephus, including in reputed documents from non-Jewish leaders,\(^7\) and Philo refers to the *gerousia* in *On Drunkenness* (quoting Deuteronomy), *On the Migration of Abraham* (quoting Exodus), *On the Life of Moses, On the Special Laws, Against Flaccus* (Flaccus arresting a 38 member council), and *On the Embassy to Gaius*.\(^8\) Elsewhere in *On the Sacrifices of Cain and Abel*, Philo states that the “elder” referred to in Leviticus 19:32 is one who is “worthy of honour and privilege and high place.”\(^9\) The elders are variously simply elders, or are associated with Israel, Judah, Galaad, specific towns, David’s house, specific cities, or Jews/Judeans, while there are councils of Jerusalem, priests, of the land and of the exiled, and in Babylon. In some younger texts, like Judith and First Maccabees, rulers are distinguished from elders. In texts like Ruth, elders can be found in city-gates and have a role in the administration of justice.\(^10\) Philo reports that Moses required the Jews to assemble every seventh day, and at these assemblies a priest or an elder reads “the holy laws to them and expounds them point by point.”\(^11\) Another interesting observation has been made by Dorothy Sly, who notes that in Philo’s rendition of the Decalogue (*On the Decalogue* 32), he “acknowledges the participation of women, yet does not carry his thought to any significant conclusion.”\(^12\) Sly posits that Philo’s exclusionary worldview clashes with the reality around him, one in which women do participate in assemblies. Furthermore, Philo’s description of an ideal woman who leads a private life and avoids public appearances


\(^9\) *Sacrifices* 77 [Colson and Whitaker, Loeb Classical Library 227.].


(Spec. Laws 3.171–174) seems to be devoid of the reality of women’s public lives.\textsuperscript{13}

In terms of references which may suggest that women were also elders, Zechariah 8:4 mentions an image of peace in Jerusalem where elder men and women sit in the streets. This is perhaps simply a reference to the long life of the Jerusalemites during this vision, but perhaps allows for some space for women occupying a defined role as a Jerusalem elder. Another reference from the Second Temple period comes from amongst the documents associated with Qumran: 4Q502, otherwise labelled Marriage Ritual [frg. 19, 2; frg. 24, 4; frg. 107, 1] contains references to the existence of a male group of elders and a corresponding group of female elders.\textsuperscript{14} On the whole, there is little direct evidence in Second Temple period texts of women occupying a kind of institutional role as local, regional, or national elders, yet there is little in the way of evidence which would directly exclude them, assuming that male group terms could contain members of various genders.

Elders in Ancient Jewish Inscriptions

There is some archaeological evidence for the activities of elders. Some scholarship on the early synagogue assumes that the elders had a prominent role, largely drawn from their inclusion on the Theodotos inscription that dedicates a likely first century CE synagogue.\textsuperscript{15} Regarding the use of the term \textit{presbyteros} in inscriptive evidence, Lee Levine writes that

\begin{quote}
The specific definition of this title may well have differed from place to place, as the prominence of elders is attested in all societies from hoary antiquity. In Jewish tradition, the term is equivalent to the Hebrew word \textit{zaqen} (= elder), which is featured prominently in biblical and post-biblical
\end{quote}


literature, including rabbinic sources. In the last, the term appears in a variety of contexts but lacks specificity regarding definition and framework.\textsuperscript{16}

Similarly, Rachel Hachlili argues that

the elders were probably the Jewish community officials who were associates, donors or the entrepreneurs involved in the construction of institutions for their congregation. Though Simonides may have been an important personality in the community or a principal benefactor, the mention of the elders in the inscription is a declaration that the building of the synagogue was a community venture, not a private family one.\textsuperscript{17}

I note that in both of these definitions, there is a large degree of ambiguity. Beyond material evidence from late antiquity, we know little about the activities of elders beyond their loose involvement in and around synagogues.

In her ground-breaking work, Bernadette Brooten documents inscriptional evidence of women as elders in synagogues, showing that women were indeed occupying such roles from at least the fourth century.\textsuperscript{18} Tomb inscriptions show even earlier evidence from perhaps the first century BCE.\textsuperscript{19} These inscriptions seem to indicate that elders had often donated towards communal institutions, but usually there is little information about what the role entailed.\textsuperscript{20}

Brooten writes, “it is clear, of course, that ‘elder’ implied different functions in different periods and probably also varied regionally.”\textsuperscript{21} Further work by Ross Kraemer details seven epitaphs, all dated between the third and fifth centuries CE which were dedicated to women who were elders.\textsuperscript{22}

While most of this evidence significantly postdates the Second Temple period, the evidence unequivocally shows that women were elders. One can doubt whether there was an equivalence between female and male elders, or whether women indeed occupied such roles.


\textsuperscript{17} Rachel Hachlili, \textit{Ancient Synagogues – Archaeology and Art: New Discoveries and Current Research} (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 524–525.


\textsuperscript{20} Brooten, \textit{Women Leaders}, 52.

\textsuperscript{21} Brooten, \textit{Women Leaders}, 53.

during the Second Temple period, but these are assumptions that perhaps too quickly acquiesce to the implications of texts like Proverbs 31, where the woman of valour’s husband sits in the city gates with the elders of the land while she does other things. Such texts are as likely to create a version of reality as to reflect it, and this arrangement where the city gates and eldership form a gender divide may be an example of the author’s desired reality. As for my own definition of “elder,” I do not think that I can improve on what has been said before, only that following Brooten, we should be prepared to include women in any such definition. Unless a text specifically rules out such a possibility, I do not think we should rule out women as elders. With this in mind, I will now discuss how elders are presented in Judith and Susanna, and whether this inclusion makes any difference to our reading.

**Judith**

Having briefly covered the ambiguous nature of references to the “elders” in texts for the Second Temple period, I will now discuss where they appear in Judith. Both terms *presbyteroi* and *gerousia* appear throughout Judith (Jdt 4:8; 6:16, 21; 7:23; 8:10; 10:6; 13:12; 15:8). In the first instance, the *gerousia* appear to simply add weight to Joakim the high priest’s orders that the mountain passes into Judea be secured in anticipation of an invasion. In Judith 4:6–7 Joakim acts alone in his decision, but in verse 8, the Israelites do as ordered by Joakim “and the senate (gerousia).” This may recall similar instances where the *gerousia* “authenticate” or “legitimise” written documents (cf. 1 Macc etc.). Deborah Levine Gera suggests that the reference to the “council of elders of all the people of Israel” in Judith 4:8 may simply be a reference to a national governing body, or may more precisely refer to a specific institution known from the Hellenistic period of the “gerousia.” In Judith 6:16, the elders of Bethulia are called together by the “rulers”

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23 The purpose and genre of a text will impact the extent to which such idealised realities are put forth. For example, see the presentations of how women’s bodies are portrayed in wisdom literature: Bernard G. Wright and Suzanne M. Edwards, “‘She Undid Him with the Beauty of Her Face’ (Jdt 16.6): Reading Women’s Bodies in Early Jewish Literature,” in Religion and the Female Body in Ancient Judaism and Its Environments, ed. Géza G. Xeravits (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 95–103. Here, I will only note that we must be attentive to the larger gendered ideals of ancient authors and texts, and may often only be able to recover the reality of ancient women’s lives via the “slippages” that occur in texts. Sara Parks, Shayna Sheinfeld and Meredith J.C. Warren (Jewish and Christian Women in the Ancient Mediterranean [London: Routledge, 2022], 28) define “slippage” as an instance where something of the reality behind a text breaks through “by accident, simply because the author was talking about something else and happened to mention something to do with women.” On the problems of accessing real women behind textual representations, see Parks, “Women and Gender in the Apocrypha,” in The Oxford Handbook of the Apocrypha, ed. Gerben S. Oegema (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 479–480. Carey A. Moore, Judith: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 151–152. Deborah Levine Gera (Judith [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014], 179) notes the *gerousia* mentioned in Jewish Antiquities 12.138, 142; 1 Macc 12:6; 2 Macc 1:10; 4:44; 11:27; 3 Macc 1:8. This may correspond to the hever
(archontas) of the town—Uzziah, Chabris and Charmis. The “young men” (neaniskos) and “women” (glynaikes) of the town come to the assembly of the elders. This may indicate that women are not counted among the elders of Bethulia in Judith, although there is room for some ambiguity. Gera suggests that these elders may function like the elders in Deuteronomy 21:19; 25:7 or Ruth 4:1–2. Following the questioning of Achior, Uzziah holds a banquet for the elders (Jdt 6:21). The elders later bear witness to the townspeople who cry out against Uzziah and the other rulers (Jdt 7:23). Here they seem to mediate between the rulers and the townspeople although exactly what they are doing in such a role is unclear. In Judith 8:10, Judith sends her servant (slave?) to summon the Chabris and Charmis, here referred to as the elders of the town (cf. Jdt 10:6). Translations include Uzziah here although he is not mentioned, although according to Gera, he must be present as the “primus inter pares” or “first among equals.” Here, Judith vigorously critiques them (Jdt 8:11–27), but they are once again called rulers rather than elders in her speech.

Gera further writes that this speech contains a clear indictment against “the leadership of the elders of Bethulia [which] is deliberate and pointed; they have not behaved in a manner befitting leaders.” The elders do not again appear in chapter 8; only in verse 35 do Uzziah and the rulers reply to Judith. Judith apparently “needs the elders’ cooperation in order to leave the city freely.” Upon her return, the elders are summoned to welcome Judith back into the town (Jdt 13:12). Uzziah is present, and praises Judith. This is the last mention of the elders of Bethulia. Judith is greeted by Joakim and the “senate” (gerousia) of Jerusalem (Jdt 15:8).

What about Judith’s relationship to the elders? There is little in the text which indicates she has much to do with them. Aside from her reprimand, she interacts with them very little, especially if Uzziah is not counted among them. Gera writes that “we can hardly imagine her joining Uzziah and his companions as one of the city elders, and once she returns home, she is, yehudim known on Hasmonean coins since the time of Hyrcanus I (134–104 BCE), see Ya’akov Meshorer, Gabriela Bijovsky and Wolfgang Fischer-Bossert, Coins of the Holy Land: The Abraham and Marian Sofaer Collection at the American Numismatic Society and the Israel Museum, eds. David Hendin and Andrew Meadows (New York, NY: The American Numismatic Society, 2013), 242–248.

In correspondence, Laura Quick suggested that these terms may function in hendiadys, indicating that the people of the town who come to the assembly are the young men and the young women. As such, this could distinguish these women from older women who were already at the assembly.

Gera, Judith, 228.

Here paralleling the later actions of Holofernes. See Gera, Judith, 368.

Gera, Judith, 273.

Gera, Judith, 274.

Gera, Judith, 275.

Gera, Judith, 292.

Janelle Peters (“Judith and the Elders of 1 Clement,” Open Theology 7 [2021]: 60–68, doi:10.1515/opth-2020-0145) notes that in antiquity, Judith was refashioning to be more cooperative with the elders of Bethulia.
of necessity, domesticated.\textsuperscript{34} I, for one, can imagine her becoming an elder. Aside from the implication in Judith 6:16, that the women and young men come to hear the assembly, there is no indication that women could not be counted among the elders. Yet commentators are consistently either against this possibility or overlook it. For instance, Athalya Brenner refers to the elders as a wholly male group in contrast to the female Judith.\textsuperscript{35} Erich Gruen notes that while Judith is a gendered role-reversal, it “does not challenge conventional social expectations.”\textsuperscript{36} Judith has to do what she does because men have failed. Judith returns to her widowhood and private life after her exploits. Once again, Gruen writes that “the inventive constructs of fertile writers largely reasserted the values of their society and the place of women within it.”\textsuperscript{37} As put by Lawrence Wills, “one might argue that, although Judith does not become a village elder, \textit{like many male heroes} she retires at the end to a position outside of society.”\textsuperscript{38} Further, that “warrior women” like Judith “are associated with weak or effete men—compare the elders, Judith’s dead husband, and Achior as well.”\textsuperscript{39} This is not to claim that the Book of Judith presents no views on gender roles. Indeed there are numerous important readings of gender presentation in Judith, between Judith’s presentation as a reembodied male hero or representation of the masculine divine,\textsuperscript{40} gender reversals between Judith and other male figures,\textsuperscript{41} and her use of sexuality to achieve her goals.\textsuperscript{42} These valid readings are not undone if we read the elders as a potentially

\textsuperscript{34} Gera, \textit{Judith}, 472.


\textsuperscript{37} Gruen, “Hellenistic Judaism,” 66.


\textsuperscript{39} Wills, \textit{Judith}, 47.


mixed group, and the Book of Judith does not advance a dichotomy between male eldership and women, even if such a dichotomy would further serve the book’s rhetorical purpose.

What we do not know limits us to assumptions, and these assumptions should be cast aside. We assume the place of Uzziah amongst the elders, and Judith’s removal from them. The former is not supported directly by the text, but as a prominent man, Uzziah is often thought to have been an elder. Neither is Judith’s eldership alluded to in the text, but commentors take this as a tacit implication that elders are entirely male.

**Susanna**

There is less to discuss in this vein regarding Susanna, the Greek addition to Daniel, although I include it in this piece because like the Book of Judith, Susanna is intensely interested in presentations of gender. There are two Greek versions, the so-named Old Greek and Theodotion, with distinct differences between them. While some scholars are quite clear about what being an elder in Susanna entails, there is not much about them in the text itself. There has been some question around the identity of the two elders in Susanna, whether they correspond to “historical” figures or not. The elders are so-named in Old Greek Susanna 13, 29, 34, 36, 41 and 52. Only these two characters are called elders, and they are both reported as judges. Indeed, the people believe their testimony because of their status as elders and judges (v. 41). In Theodotion Susanna, “presbyteroi” appear in 5 (here including a quotation or allusion), 8, 16, 22, 27, 47, 8, 16, 31.

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Studies in Religion 33 (2017): 67–72, doi: [10.2979/jfemistudreli.33.2.05](http://10.2979/jfemistudreli.33.2.05). Although see how Judith can be said to resist this in Wright and Edwards, “Reading Women’s Bodies,” 86–87.


18, 41 and 50. Elsewhere, and always prefixed by either hoi or duo, presbytai appears in 19, 24, 27, 28, 34, 36 and 61. In 41, the “synagogue” believes their testimony because they are “elders of the people.” In 50, other elders invite Daniel to sit among them, as Daniel has given “the right of an elder” by God. Interestingly, Daniel is called a presbeion rather than the aforementioned presbyteroi. This term elsewhere appears in Genesis 43:33; 3 Maccabees 6:1 and Psalm 70:18, standing where bekorah appears in the Hebrew text of Genesis and ziqnah appears in the Psalms. As such, the only commentary we may draw upon the portrayal of elders in Old Greek Susanna rests on the two villains of the text, while the Theodotion text grants that other elders sit in some kind of judgement, and can add the youth Daniel to their ranks. Other groups noted in these versions includes the general “people,” and the “synagogue/assembly.” The relationship between the elders (other than that they are believed by the assembly, and can also be put to death by the assembly) is absent. In the Theodotion version, the elders have a little more of a presence, as it is they who allow Daniel to cross-examine the accusers. Other than Susanna, her slaves, and her mother in the Theodotion version, there are no identifiable female characters. For male characters, there are the two key elders/judges, Daniel, and Joakim. All other collections of characters (i.e., the people, the assembly, the remaining elders, Susanna’s children and relatives) could potentially be male, female or otherwise. There is no indication that Susanna contrasts the status of being an elder with women, only the lawless elders with the righteous young man Daniel.

Sexuality and gender are hugely important in Susanna. The narrative pivots around first an attempted rape, and then gendered violence towards Susanna via a law court. The narrative abounds in both presentations of Susanna as a particular kind of woman, who frequently establishes her innocence, and ultimately is at the mercy of patriarchy, which both victimises her and is responsible for her acquittal.

Susanna utilised the female body to present a particular view on legal interpretation, and subsumes the female body to this end, so direct readers to further analysis there. For the sake of this argument, while Susanna is keenly interested in presentations of gender, sexuality and male/female distinctions, I offer that eldership itself is not cast as an especially male category.

Conclusion

Perhaps the fact that elders are usually unnamed has resulted in the fact that women’s participation among various elderships has often gone uncredited. As far as I have found, no commentator has suggested that Bethulia’s elders were potentially women. Judith has been credited not just for her deeds, but because the male eldership was inactive. Additionally, the famous interaction between Susanna and the elders has been studied from the perspective of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal subjugation. Yet this valid analysis may also lead to an assumption about the identity of elders. I suggest that in neither of these texts do we find a clear contrast between female protagonists and male elders in such terms.

This study has some limitations, which I will briefly touch on here to prompt future research in this area. Elders appear in many ancient Jewish texts, and they are usually assumed to reference and represent a consistent group over a long period of time and between different texts. However, one should ideally make a full study of how this group functions within each text. For instance, Quine has recently examined how the “elders” validate Ahab’s kingship in 1 Kings. Future studies should appreciate how individual texts shape the function of elders internally. Furthermore, some of the material which I included in the above discussion of “elders” post-dates the Second Temple period by centuries. With the emergence of Christianity and Christianities, “eldership” is likely to have developed both internally in various Jewish communities, and in response to emerging Christian distinctiveness and eventual political and cultural hegemony in the Mediterranean. Examining the relationship between these different community relations in late antiquity and how structures of authority compared or contrasted between these communities is important, but also beyond the scope of what I have been able to discuss here.

Further questions which should be addressed include the role of elders in the development of synagogue practices and authorities, the development of law and law courts, and the blending of legal and social authority in the Second Temple period. I would suggest that

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other studies of women in relation to local power be re-examined without the assumption that women did not occupy positions of recognised authority, as we know they did in Jewish communities of late antiquity.

Bibliography


