

THE ESSENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT  
TERMS FOR LOCAL CHURCH LEADERS

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Organizational polity and officially designated leadership were natural and early phenomena in the apostolic church. In the New Testament, a variety of terms are employed to designate permanent local church leaders. The fact that these terms are synonymous has caused scholars to suggest that they are alternatives for each other in their various New Testament contexts. A degree of overlap exists in the meanings of these terms. However, their usage in the LXX, secular Greek, and in various New Testament passages indicates that each of the terms emphasizes distinct, individual features of the office. A clear understanding of the history of the terms is necessary for an appreciation of their essence and significance in New Testament contexts.

The LXX provides two meanings for πρεσβύτερος (elder). The generic meaning of old man is followed by a second meaning of one having power and authority. Πρεσβύτερος combined old age and responsible authority in the LXX and also in secular Greek where the term identified seniors, and political or religious leaders. Ἐπίσκοπος (overseer) denotes oversight in the LXX and secular Greek being used of civil and political superintendents. Ποιμὴν (shepherd) has literal foundations but was used extensively as a metaphor in the LXX and ancient Greek literature. Shepherd became a title of honor applied to Jehovah, the Jewish Messiah, Greek gods, and to human leaders to a limited degree. Οἱ ἡγούμενοι (leaders) was used to designate leaders in military and civil offices in the LXX, and to identify officials, often rendered "presidents," in Greek literature. Οἱ προϊστάμενοι (rulers) identifies rulers of families or nations in the LXX. In secular Greek political and military rulers were designated by this term emphasizing their responsibility of guarding and protecting.

In the New Testament, venerable maturity is the prominent characteristic of πρεσβύτερος. The honor, dignity and authority of the office is in view. Ἐπίσκοπος, used of Christ as the "Overseer of your souls" (1 Pet 2:25) is applied to local church leaders identifying the main function of the office, the care and guardianship of the congregation. Ποιμὴν is also used of Christ in the New Testament. When used of local church leaders ποιμὴν emphasizes the personal concern and sacrificial interest the pastor has for the sheep. Οἱ ἡγούμενοι points to men of exemplary faith and responsibility, and stresses authority with accountability. Οἱ προϊστάμενοι emphasizes one of the most basic and essential tasks of the local church leader, the task of spiritual rule of the assembly.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Statement of the Issue

Throughout the history of the Church of Jesus Christ her ranks have been faced with numberless controversies over biblical doctrine and church polity. Beginning with the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, where the basis of Gentile salvation was the issue, and continuing with the seven ecumenical councils of A.D. 325-787 many threatening theological conflicts have been resolved. This was the period of Christian history when the chief dogmas of the Church were developed.<sup>1</sup> The main creeds of Protestantism were chiseled out of the era of doctrinal dispute known as the Reformation period.

In recent decades, debate among Bible-believing Christians has centered around lesser issues. These issues do not hold the same significance as those revolving around the person of Christ or the basis of salvation, but they are important because they are biblical matters which have a profound effect on Christian living. Eschatology has held the attention of scholars and laymen for many years. The

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<sup>1</sup>Earle E. Cairns, Christianity Through the Centuries, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967), p. 141.

study of prophetic Scripture, a science gravely neglected since the period of the Dark Ages, has come to the fore in the twentieth century. The massive attention given to future events is evidenced by the scores of volumes dedicated to prophetic pursuits on the scholarly and popular levels. Another such debate focuses on the charismatic controversy and the essence of the Holy Spirit's role in the life of the believer. These issues have grasped the consideration of the Church for many years and continue to inspire her concentration to this very day.

Presently, a great deal of deliberation finds its focal point in the principles and policies of local church government. More specifically, special interest is being communicated regarding the biblical principles of local church leadership. The thinking, studying believer is asking questions about the identity and function of local church officers. What does the Bible teach about the nature and function of the pastoral office? How many of such officers should each local church have? Where does the authority rest in the local church? Answers to such questions can be acquired only when certain foundational truths regarding New Testament local church leadership have been obtained. Our understanding of the essence and significance of the terms used in the New Testament for church leaders is basic and essential to any application of New Testament principles to local church polity today.

### Statement of the Thesis

Leadership in the apostolic church was designated by the use of a variety of terms in the New Testament. Basic to the study of such terms is a detailed examination of the biblical evidence. As the infant Church grew, organization and officially designated leadership was the natural result. Early in the development of New Testament churches, a point of explicit organization was reached.<sup>1</sup> William Hendricksen clearly demonstrates that organization and official designation was an early phenomenon identifiable even before the writing of the Pastorals.

It simply is incorrect to say that at first there was nothing else than spontaneous leadership based only on spiritual endowment, and that at a later time this made way for elective office. . . . It is true, of course, that the extraordinary offices were gradually replaced by the ordinary. The Pastorals are Paul's last writings. It is not surprising, therefore, that the "ordinary" office of "overseer" or "elder" comes into prominence here.<sup>2</sup>

From early years the church had elders (Acts 11:30), and such officers were appointed on Paul's first missionary journey (14:23). Many scholars indicate that in the apostle's earliest epistles there is explicit mention of "those

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<sup>1</sup>Henry J. Ripley, Church Polity. A Treatise on Christian Churches and the Christian Ministry (Boston: Graves & Young, 1867), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup>William Hendricksen, Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles in New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957), p. 22.

who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you" (1 Thess 5:12, 13).<sup>1</sup>

The identity of the New Testament leaders is provided by the use of various designations. Some are considered to be of a more official nature than others. These would include πρεσβύτερος, or elder, and ἐπίσκοπος, or bishop. Terms with a less official tone and a more descriptive nature are ποιμήν, pastor; ἡγούμενοι, leaders; and προΐστάμενοι, rulers. The terms are commonly considered to be synonymous and the fact that the above designations all refer to the same official or officials within a local church will be demonstrated later. However, because these terms are generally understood to refer to the same office, they are also considered to be interchangeable in their various New Testament contexts.<sup>2</sup> Henry E. Dosker proposes that ἐπίσκοπος, bishop, "abounds in Pauline literature and is used as an alternative for πρεσβύτερος or elder (Tit 1:5, 7; 1 Tim 3:1; 4:14; 5:17, 19)."<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the New Testament terms for elder, bishop, pastor, leader and ruler are synonymous but are not interchangeable. They all

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>D. Edmond Hiebert, First Timothy in Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), p. 64.

<sup>3</sup>The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, s.v. "Bishop," by Henry E. Dosker, 1:479.

refer to the same office, but because of their distinctive essence and significance they are not alternatives for one another. The New Testament writers specifically chose the term which best suited the context.

#### Statement of the Approach

In order to appropriate a proper understanding of the individual terms used in the New Testament for local church leadership one has to begin with a thorough study of the biblical record. "For the student of the origins of the Christian ministry, there is a certain fascination in the titles of the ministers themselves."<sup>1</sup> That is the observation of Anthony Harvey who goes on to describe those titles as "distinctive, unusual."<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this paper is to look at those distinctions.

The stated thesis shall be supported in two major stages. First, there will be a consideration of the background of the terms. The history of each term will be traced from the Old Testament usage as presented in the Septuagint (hereafter referred to as LXX), to the term's usage in secular Greek. Second, the New Testament usage will be demonstrated by an examination of individual contexts and comparison passages. The essence and significance

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<sup>1</sup>Anthony Harvey, "Elders," Journal of Theological Studies 25:2 (October 1974):318.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

of each term will be explored, and the deliberate choice of one term over another within a particular context will be demonstrated. Conclusions will be drawn stating the significance of each term by means of the above lexical and contextual considerations.

### Identification of the Terms

The scope of this study includes five terms employed in the New Testament to identify local church leaders. The first is πρεσβύτερος, "elder" or "presbyter," which is the most commonly used term in the New Testament to designate the highest permanent local church office. It is found in the gospel accounts as well as in the epistolary works, and is second only to "apostle" as the earliest title for a Christian office (Acts 11:30).<sup>1</sup> Ἐπίσκοπος, "bishop," is frequently found in Paul's writings and is often translated "overseer." This term, having been used of our Lord as the "Overseer of your souls" (1 Pet 2:25), would naturally be used of those who follow Him in the ministry of oversight.<sup>2</sup> Ποιμήν, "pastor" or "shepherd," is used infrequently in the New Testament with reference to local church leaders, but quite frequently in evangelical circles today. The context of Luke 2 is the only place where literal shepherds play an

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<sup>1</sup>Dictionary of the Apostolic Church, s.v. "Bishop, Elder, Presbyter," by Alfred Plummer, 1:149-50.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 150.

active role in the New Testament. All other contexts are metaphorical in nature (i.e., parables and figures of speech), yet, even here the literal is at the foundation.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the few citations, ποιμήν has great significance in the New Testament due to the rich background the term has inherited from the Old Testament and Christ's personal use of the term. Οἱ ἡγούμενοι, "those who lead," is from the verb ἡγέομαι which appears in the New Testament only in the present participle form.<sup>2</sup> The participle, usually found in the plural, is used to identify those who function as leaders in the church and who are worthy of the saints' respect (Heb 13:7, 17, 24). Οἱ προΐστάμενοι, "those who rule," is another participle which designates the local church leader by a brief definition of his ministry as one who presides over.<sup>3</sup>

The first two terms are official titles, πρεσβύτερος being descriptive of the person and dignity of the office, and ἐπίσκοπος being descriptive of the functions of the office. The three terms which follow are primarily

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<sup>1</sup>The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, s.v. "Shepherd," by Erich Beyreuther, 3:566.

<sup>2</sup>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. "ἡγέομαι," by Friedrich Buchsel, 2:907-08.

<sup>3</sup>John Peter Lange, Thessalonians in Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, trans. and ed. by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 90.

descriptive of the duties which characterize the office.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of their descriptive nature, the last three terms are recognized as official designations.<sup>2</sup>

A hasty reading of the epistles of the New Testament will reveal more titles than are listed here for local church leaders. Such a list would include apostle, prophet, evangelist, and teacher. Why are these titles not included in the scope of this perusal, and how do these officials relate to the government and organization of the New Testament church? The Bible presents two different groups of leaders in the New Testament. Some of these leaders were to be permanent and local. Others were "God-given, gifted individuals who were given to the church at large."<sup>3</sup> Apostles and prophets were presented to the whole church to speed the spread of the gospel message and to ensure the establishment of the infant church. These gifted individuals were not permanent officials in local churches. The responsibility of teaching and evangelism is carried out under the leadership of permanent local church offices to this hour.

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<sup>1</sup>Leonard Hillstrom, "New Testament Church Elders" (Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN, 1980), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup>Raymond E. Brown, "Episkope and Episkopos: The New Testament Evidence," Theological Studies 41 (June 1980): 328-29.

<sup>3</sup>Hillstrom, "Elders," p. 30.

Synonymous Nature of the Terms

It has been stated earlier in this work that the New Testament designations for local church leadership are synonymous, that is, they all refer to the same office. "Biblically, there is no valid ground for supposing that more than one local church office is indicated by this variety of terms."<sup>1</sup>

The greatest amount of material available dealing with the sameness of the terms is found in relation to πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος. This is due to the fact that these terms are considered to be the two most official designations for the office. It is the position of most commentators that the terms elder and bishop refer to the same office, that is, they are synonymous. William Hendrickson, commenting on the use of ἐπίσκοπος in Philippians 1:1, suggests that "a comparison between verses 17 and 28 of Acts 20, and between verses 5 and 7 of Titus 1, would seem to indicate that elder and overseer indicate the same person."<sup>2</sup> From an historical perspective, Alfred Plummer arrives at the same conclusion:

In the New Testament "bishop" and "presbyter" (or "elder") are synonyms; they are two names for the same official. The two names are still synonymous in Clement of Rome

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<sup>1</sup>Hillstrom, "Elders," p. 81.

<sup>2</sup>William Hendrickson, Exposition of Philippians in New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), p. 48.

. . . Polycarp . . . and the Didache . . . Ignasius is the earliest writer known to us who clearly separates "bishop" from "elder."<sup>1</sup>

The sameness of the terms is also indicated by their use, side by side, in the same context. When the apostle called for the leaders of the church at Ephesus, he designated them as elders, πρεσβυτέρους (Acts 20:17). Further in the same context, Paul describes the same men as overseers or bishops, ἐπίσκοπους. The same feature is found in Titus 1:5 where Paul instructs his representative to Crete, Titus, to appoint elders in every city. In verse 5 πρεσβυτέρους appears again, but in verse 7, where Paul instructs Titus concerning the qualifications of the office, ἐπίσκοπον, bishop appears. Harvey draws his readers' attention to the grammatical problem.

That you should appoint presbyters in each city . . . (of such and such a character), for the bishop must be unimpeachable . . . an inescapable dilemma. Either the conj. γὰρ has no meaning . . . or else he is still talking intelligible Greek but is using the two words . . . to refer to the same office.<sup>2</sup>

The same conclusion can be drawn when the functions of the office of elder/bishop are examined. In Acts 20, the elders, who are identified as overseers later in the same context, were challenged to shepherd or pastor the church of God (20:28). When these verses are compared to 1 Peter 5:2,

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<sup>1</sup>Plummer, "Bishop, Elder, Presbyter," 1:149.

<sup>2</sup>Harvey, "Elders," p. 330.

the challenge is found again for the elders to shepherd the flock of God, taking the oversight thereof. "The elder was to perform the task of oversight, and both elders and bishops were to care for the flock of God."<sup>1</sup>

The leadership of the New Testament local churches was summed up in two offices, that of the elder/bishop and that of the deacon. It is clear from the Scriptures considered above (Acts 20:17, 28; Tit 1:5-7; 1 Pet 5:2), that the designations elder and bishop refer to one and the same office. The first term, πρεσβύτερος, emphasizing the man and dignity of the office, and the second, ἐπίσκοπος, emphasizing the duties and responsibilities of the office.

The synonymous nature of elder and bishop is the conviction of many scholars as witnessed above. Can the same be said of the less official terms within the scope of this study? It can be demonstrated that the responsibility of oversight and shepherding are closely linked in the New Testament. Plummer explains the link between ἐπίσκοπος and ποιμήν:

In the New Testament it means an overseer of men in reference to their spiritual life, and is closely connected with the idea of shepherding; "the shepherd (ποιμήν) and overseer (ἐπίσκοπος) of your souls" (1 Pet 2:25); "the flock (ποίμνιον) in which the Holy Ghost had made you overseers (ἐπισκόπους), to tend (ποιμαίνειν) the church (ἐκκλησίαν) of God" (Acts 20:28).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hillstrom, "Church Elders," p. 87.

<sup>2</sup>Plummer, "Bishop, Elder, Presbyter," 1:150.

Permanent local church officers are designated as shepherds in three New Testament contexts: Ephesians 4:11; Acts 20:28; and 1 Peter 5:2. In the first of these contexts, there is found the only example of the noun form of ποιμήν used for local leaders. It is proclaimed in Ephesians 4:11 that Christ gave gifted individuals to the church at large. Among them are apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors or shepherds and teachers. The connection of the terms shepherds and teachers, τοὺς ποιμένες καὶ διδασκάλους, favors the consideration of these being one group. Scripture does not present evidence that there were men with the authority to teach but not to shepherd. Hendricksen concurs:

I fully agree. What we have here, accordingly, is a designation of ministers of local congregations, "teaching elders (or overseers)." By means of expounding the Word these men shepherd their flocks. Cf. Acts 20:17, 28; also John 21:15-17.<sup>1</sup> They cannot do so properly without love for Christ.<sup>1</sup>

What is presented in Ephesians 4:11 is a dual function of the local church leaders. The emphasis is upon the spiritual duties of shepherding and teaching which belong to the leading office of the church.

Another synonym which draws attention to the duties of the office of local church leaders is that term which is translated "those who lead," οἱ ἡγούμενοι. The term is

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<sup>1</sup>William Hendricksen, Exposition of Ephesians, in New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), p. 197.

found three times in the book of Hebrews, and in each instance it is used in the plural number (13:7, 17, 24). Friedrich Büchsel comments on the use of οἱ ἡγούμενοι in the book of Hebrews:

In 3:17 they are pastors responsible to God. God has entrusted the other members of the community to them, and therefore these owe their obedience. The founders of the community, who have died (as martyrs?), are also among the ἡγούμενοι, and they are set up as examples of faith (13:7). The community here is not, as in Paul, the pneumatic organism in which each is assured that he is moved by the Spirit of God. Reverent subjection to human officers with divinely given pastoral authority is now integral to Christian piety.<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that the main emphasis of οἱ ἡγούμενοι is functional and not official. Yet, it is generally agreed that "those which have the rule over you" or "those who lead you" refers to "the presidents and leaders of the congregation."<sup>2</sup>

The third designation for local church leaders with a functional emphasis is οἱ προϊστάμενοι, "those who rule." This term is found in Romans 12:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:12, and 1 Timothy 5:17 with reference to local church officers. The verbal form, προϊστημι, is a derivation of the preposition πρό, and the verb ἵστημι which together suggest the idea of

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<sup>1</sup>Büchsel, "ἡγέομαι," 2:907.

<sup>2</sup>Gottlieb Lünemann, The Epistle to the Hebrews, trans. by Maurice J. Evans, in Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament, ed. by Heinrich A. W. Meyer, 11 vols., reprint ed. (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1979) 9:732.

standing before or being at the head.<sup>1</sup> When used of officials and administrators in the church the word conveys the meaning of ruling, directing or presiding.

Prominent scholars disagree on the official status of οἱ προϊστάμενοι. Ernest Best would prefer that the term be understood as explanatory and not official.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:12 it forms the first explanation of the general term working and a word explanatory of the work is more appropriate than an immediate transition to "authority." Caring for forms a natural pair with admonishing, the first is positive, the second negative in emphasis. . . . Paul does not specify in what the "caring" consists; leadership is not necessarily excluded but it would not be the sole element; there would also be acts of charity, the organization and conduct of services, etc.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, the idea of caring is basic to the term's meaning along with its sense of leading. Best cautiously points out that even though the emphasis is on the term's explanatory value, leadership should not be dismissed as an element of the meaning within the context of 1 Thessalonians 5:12. F. F. Bruce agrees with Best's conclusion:

Since the three present participles are governed by a single definite article, the reference is to one group of people who perform the three specified services in the church. From its position as the second in a series of three participles, of which the first and

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<sup>1</sup>BAGD, p. 707.

<sup>2</sup>Ernest Best, The First and Second Epistle to the Thessalonians in Harper's New Testament Commentaries, ed. by Henry Chadwick, et al. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972), p. 225.

third are not official designations, προϊσταμένων is plainly not an official designation.<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, Bruce seems more firm than Best in his conclusion. However, further in Bruce's discussion of 1 Thessalonians 5:12 he admits that the verb προϊστασθαι "combines the ideas of leading, protecting and caring for."<sup>2</sup>

One must conclude, concerning the official or functional status of οἱ προϊστάμενοι, that the idea of leadership is implied in the lexical and contextual settings, but the emphasis is on the official's duty of caring. "This is best explained by the fact that caring was a basic obligation and function of the leaders of the church."<sup>3</sup> This conclusion is supported by the fact that scholars maintain that the official status of the term in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 is implied or clearly understood. Leon Morris sees this implication in the verb. "The function of leadership is implied in the expression are over you, the verb (proistemi) being one which can be used of informal leaderships of various kinds. But is also used of officials."<sup>4</sup> Other scholars,

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<sup>1</sup>F. F. Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians in Word Biblical Commentary, ed. by David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), p. 118.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>3</sup>Hillstrom, "Church Elders," p. 77.

<sup>4</sup>Leon Morris, The Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians in Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. by R. V. G. Tasker, et al. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), pp. 98-99.

such as Raymond E. Brown, see the reference to προΐσταμένοι in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 as a clear reference to an official designation.<sup>1</sup>

### Conclusion

One of the controversies which the church faces today revolves around the New Testament pattern of local church polity. Special interest is being expressed regarding what the Bible teaches with reference to leadership in the local church. Basic to a clear understanding of proper polity, as touching local church leaders, is a careful examination of the New Testament terms used to designate those leaders. These terms range widely in their official status. Elder and bishop are terms which are descriptive of certain aspects of the local church office, but are also considered to be official titles for that office. Pastor or shepherd, leaders, and rulers are terms which are less official and very descriptive of the functions of the local church office. All of these terms are synonymous, that is, they all refer to the same office.

The next step in a careful examination of the essence and significance of the New Testament terms for local church leadership should be to consider the background of these terms as used in the Greek Old Testament and secular Greek.

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<sup>1</sup>Brown, "Episkope and Episkopos," pp. 328-29.

## CHAPTER II

### BACKGROUND OF THE TERMS

In order to gain a thorough understanding of the New Testament usage of the terms for local church leadership, the student must look to the use of those terms as found in the LXX and secular Greek. By resorting to these sources a clear insight into the Jewish and Gentile usage, as well as the usage in and outside of Scripture, can be obtained.

#### Background of Πρεσβύτερος

##### Old Testament Usage

The Hebrew word for elder, זָקֵן, occurs over 100 times in the Old Testament and is used in two basic ways: 1) to mean old, or an elderly man; and 2) to express elders, or those men having a certain power of authority.<sup>1</sup>

Originally, זָקֵן meant one who wears a beard, in other words, "a fully accredited adult in the national assembly, then an old man."<sup>2</sup> These aged individuals had authority by reason of other than official standing. They were powerful by means of "personality, prowess, or stature,

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<sup>1</sup>BDB, p. 278.

<sup>2</sup>The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. "πρέσβυς," by Gunther Bornkamm, 6:655.

or influential as members of powerful families."<sup>1</sup> This identification with powerful families became an integral part of the identification of elders, especially in the Jewish community. Although mature age was the distinctive mark of Jewish elders, they were determined not by age alone, but by their identity with influential tribes. The elders were recognized as the leaders of important families.

As Old Testament history developed, the term elder also developed and gained significance in life outside of the tribal circle. Obviously, respect was linked to the term early in the Jewish community, and finally there was the use of *πρεσβύτερος* as a designation of a civil or religious office. Adolf Deissmann provides an excellent discussion of this transition:

The LXX translates *ἡρι* old man by both *πρεσβύτης* and *πρεσβύτερος*. The most natural rendering was *πρεσβύτης*, and the employment of the comparative *πρεσβύτερος* must have had some special reason. We usually find *πρεσβύτερος* in places where the translators appear to have taken the *ἡρι* of the original as implying an official position. That they in such cases speak of the elders and not of the old men is explained by the fact that they found *πρεσβύτερος* already used technically in Egypt for the holder of a communal office.<sup>2</sup>

Jewish elders maintained an active influence throughout the entire Old Testament. These leaders exercised an

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<sup>1</sup>Gunther Bornkamm, "πρέσβυς," 6:655.

<sup>2</sup>G. Adolf Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, trans. by Alexander Grieve, reprint ed. (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1979), p. 154.

active part in Jewish life and were "a constant feature of Israel's life from the days of Moses to those of Ezra, and they were as prominent under the monarchy as before it."<sup>1</sup> In the Bible, the earliest record of Jewish elders is identified with the time of Israel's exodus from Egypt. In Exodus 3:16, there is the first mention of elders when Moses is instructed by God to rally together the leaders of Israel. In verse 18, these elders were given an audience with Pharaoh and Moses was to tell the King that "The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us."

The place of authority and responsibility given to the elders among the people is evidenced by their close association with Moses and his ministry. They are seen as attendants of Moses in Exodus 17:5 when Moses passed before the people with the staff with which he struck the rock at Horeb. On the occasion of the giving of the Mosaic Law at Sinai in Exodus 19f., God instructed the patriarch to enlist the company of seventy elders who "participated in this time of worship and were probably official representatives of the twelve tribes."<sup>2</sup>

Further, in Numbers 11, Moses expressed his dissatisfaction regarding the weight of responsibility that was his

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<sup>1</sup>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, s.v. "Elder in the Old Testament," by G. Henton Davies, 2:72.

<sup>2</sup>John J. Davis, Moses and the Gods of Egypt (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), p. 239.

in caring for the needs of the chosen people. God responded to Moses' complaint by commanding him to choose seventy elders to give aid in this task. "God poured out His Spirit upon this inner circle of elders in order that they might share the government of the people, together with Moses" (Num 11:25).<sup>1</sup>

As the infant nation of Israel began the process of occupation in Canaan, the elders continued to exercise significant roles in Jewish life. Generally, these men of Israel functioned as "leaders of war, judges in disputes, and givers of wise advice and witness in administration."<sup>2</sup> According to the book of Deuteronomy, the judiciary functions of the Jewish elders became the emphasis. The elders became "the focal point of the community and constituted a council of tribal leaders."<sup>3</sup> In their judicial functions, the elders stood for the civil interests of the tribes they represented, and defended the citizens involved in various local concerns. They had significant sway over their constituency (Deut 27:1; 31:9; Josh 7:6).

Geography began to play a more significant role in the administration of the Jewish elders. They were

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<sup>1</sup>The New Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Elder," by J. B. Taylor, p. 356.

<sup>2</sup>Henton, "Elder," 2:72.

<sup>3</sup>Leonard Hillstrom, "The New Testament Church Elders" (Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN: 1980), p. 15.

designated as "the elders of the city" in Deuteronomy 19:12, and seventy-seven men were identified as princes and elders in Succoth (Judg 8:14). The history of this period of the judges indicates that great power rested in the grasp of the Jewish elders. In times of battle, throughout the age of the judges and into the age of the monarchy, the records show "how advisable it was for ruling kings, or their opponents, to win them over."<sup>1</sup>

Following the periods of the united and divided monarchies, the authority of the elders met its greatest challenge. How would the influence of the Jewish leaders fare in the adverse cultural setting of Babylon? According to the biblical account, the elders continued to function in prominent civil and religious roles during the exile. While the main political forces of the nation of Judah were in a state of humiliation, the elders continued to "exercise limited self-government on behalf of the people."<sup>2</sup>

When the Jews returned to their land, the elders continued to hold an influential position in Jewish life. In Ezra 10, a proclamation was made to all the exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem. The exiles had been unfaithful by marrying foreign wives and they were to assemble to hear Ezra's instructions regarding confession

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<sup>1</sup>Bornkamm, "πρόεδρος," 6:675.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

and separation. Whoever would not attend this assembly within three days would be forced to forfeit his possessions and suffer excommunication according to the dictates of the leaders and the elders (10:8). During this period, the elders played a major role in the Sanhedrin. This was an institution which arose during the exile along with synagogue. The Sanhedrin was "a council of seventy-one members which served as a kind of Supreme Court of all the Jews."<sup>1</sup>

By the time of Christ, the religious duties of the elders were becoming more distinct. Limited civil issues continued to be the responsibility of the elders but by New Testament times the Jewish elders "shared with the chief priests the power of determining religious affairs, and if necessary, of expulsion from the synagogue."<sup>2</sup>

The idea of the elder is found very early in the Old Testament. The concept has its foundation in the patriarchal, tribal system of Old Testament times. In the LXX, πρεσβύτερος has two basic meanings: that of old man, and, in many contexts, that of an official position of religious and civil authority. From the time of Moses down to the time of Christ elders played a significant part in Jewish economy and government.

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<sup>1</sup>Deissmann, Bible Studies, pp. 757-58.

<sup>2</sup>Taylor, "Elder," p. 357.

### Secular Usage

The term elder is familiar to biblical students of both testaments. However, in considering the historical usage of the term, one must recognize that the idea is not unique to scriptural contexts. In ancient times the concept of elders was not peculiar to Jewish history, and the term "did not suggest those purely ecclesiastical and religious functions with which it is now associated."<sup>1</sup> The concept of the elder is a relic of the ancient patriarchal system, and wherever such a system is found in history, wherein the foundational unit of that society is the family, "the office of elder will always be found as the keystone of that society."<sup>2</sup>

As in the Old Testament, πρεσβύτερος found wide usage in the ancient Greek world. The comparative form, πρέσβυς, was used to denote 1) aged persons, 2) a political or civil office such as an ambassador, and 3) a political title used in the constitutional records of the city-state of Sparta.<sup>3</sup> More commonly, πρεσβύτεροι occurred not as an

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<sup>1</sup>A Dictionary of the Bible, s.v. "Elder," by J. A. Selbie, 1:676.

<sup>2</sup>Cyclopaedia of Biblical Theology and Ecclesiastical Literature, s.v. "Elder," by John M'Clintock and James Strong, 3:116.

<sup>3</sup>Bornkamm, "πρέσβυς," 6:653.

official title, but as a designation of senior citizens of various groups.<sup>1</sup>

It is not difficult to understand how the secondary, official meaning of *πρεσβύτερος* naturally followed from the primary meaning of old age. It is common in most civilizations to find that authority has been exercised by those who, by reason of experience plus maturity, have been considered best qualified for leadership.<sup>2</sup> Age was often thought to be a requirement for leadership, and the term *πρεσβύτερος* combined the elements of old age and responsibility. An exception to the general rule of maturity is found in Homer's The Iliad, where leadership was the responsibility of younger men. Achilles and Odysseus were youthful leaders in war and rhetoric, even though they were mature in terms of responsibility.<sup>3</sup> With this exception in mind, it is best to concur with Selbie's conclusion regarding the history of the office of elder in the ancient Greek world: "The origin of the office is easily traced under the primitive conditions of society that prevail in the early

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Taylor, "Elder," p. 356.

<sup>3</sup>Homer, The Iliad, 2 vols., trans. by A. T. Murray, The Loeb Classical Library, ed. by E. H. Warmington, reprint ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967-71), 1:7-13; 65-75.

history of all nations, age is an indispensable condition of investment with authority."<sup>1</sup>

The concept of the elder, as understood in the term πρεσβύτερος, carried two basic meanings in the secular Greek world. Aged persons in various groups were designated by the term as well as a political or civil office. There is evidence of the idea of elder in the cultures of the "Midianites, and the Moabites, the Egyptians, the Romans, the Arabs, and the Germans."<sup>2</sup> The term also carried information about the individual's character. The plural form, πρέσβεις, always implied dignity, and the superlative, πρεσβύτατος, was used in the sense of "reverend, honor."<sup>3</sup>

#### Background of 'Επίσκοπος

##### Old Testament Usage

In wrestling with the task of translating the word ἐπίσκοπος, scholars suggest that the translator should avoid looking in his language for an exact equivalent of "bishop" as the Church understands that term today. Donald Deer suggests:

The New Testament writers probably never talked about what we call a "bishop." (Both Catholic and Protestant commentators agree on this.) Rather he should try to find the equivalent in his language of the Greek word episkopos. . . . The translators of the Old Testament into Greek, and the authors of the New Testament, were

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<sup>1</sup>Selbie, "Elder," 1:676-77.

<sup>2</sup>Hillstrom, "Church Elders," p. 27.

<sup>3</sup>LSJ, p. 1325.

making use of a word that was already in use in everyday language, referring to government overseers of all sorts.<sup>1</sup>

The LXX provides a generic meaning for ἐπίσκοπος of superintendency or oversight with the idea of carefully searching into matters of religion, government and the military (Num 4:16; 31:14; Judg 9:28; 2 Kgs 12:11; 2 Chr 34:12, 17).<sup>2</sup> The term is used of God and man in the LXX. In Job 20:29, the Hebrew term used for God is יְהוָה. In this case the Hebrew is translated ἐπίσκοπος, and God is expressed as the final Judge of all mankind.<sup>3</sup> This distinctive sense was given to ἐπίσκοπος originally in the LXX. It is a display of "God's eschatological 'visitation' in mercy or judgment."<sup>4</sup> This sense is also understood in the LXX rendering of Genesis 50:24, Luke 19:44, and 1 Peter 2:12.

When the term is used specifically of men, the general idea of oversight should be understood. It is used of inspectors, supervisors, foremen, captains and lesser officers. In Numbers 4:16, Eleazar, the son of Aaron, was in a

<sup>1</sup>Donald S. Deer, "Translating the Word, EPISKOPOS, 'Overseer,' in the New Testament," The Bible Translator 30 (October 1979):441.

<sup>2</sup>The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, s.v. "Bishop," by Henry E. Dosker, 1:478.

<sup>3</sup>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. "ἐπίσκοπος," by Hermann Beyer, 2:614-15.

<sup>4</sup>Nigel Turner, Christian Words (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980), p. 45.

position of oversight, ἐπίσκοπος, in the Tabernacle. Qualified individuals were given financial oversight in the responsibility of repairing the temple (2 Chr 34:17). The same term is found in 1 Maccabees 1:51, where Antiochus Epiphanes appointed "inspectors over all the people and commanded the cities of Judah to offer sacrifice, city by city."<sup>1</sup>

Occasionally, a worshipful gaze is intended by the term ἐπίσκοπος, as in Psalm 27:4, 5; 106:5. Ἐπίσκοπος is only used in two Old Testament contexts to refer to specific offices of oversight (2 Chr 24; Neh 11, 12).

#### Secular Usage

The verbal forms of ἐπίσκοπος can mean to observe, review, superintend, watch over, scrutinize, inspect, and examine in Greek literature before the first century A.D. Liddell and Scott suggest three basic renderings: 1) an overseer, one who watches over as in The Iliad 24, 729; 22, 255; 2) political officers as in Hermann's Political Antiquities 157.8; 3) an ecclesiastical superintendent.<sup>2</sup>

The most common renderings of ἐπίσκοπος in ancient Greek literature are secular in origin. It is used of an official overseer of geographical areas, people of various

<sup>1</sup>J. B. Lightfoot, Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philip-  
pians (London: MacMillan and Company, Ltd., 1927), p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>LSJ, p. 572.

groups, building sites, religious communities, markets, and journeying preachers. The term was used for Greek gods who were witnesses and overseers of treaties or people.<sup>1</sup> Hermes, a messenger of the gods in Greek mythology, was sent by Zeus, the supreme Greek deity, to visit or watch over a child.<sup>2</sup>

In later times, after the reign of Alexander the Great, ἐπίσκοποι was used of official magistrates who had oversight of the sale of certain goods under the Romans. Ἐπίσκοποι at the city of Thera were commissioned to receive money and invest it. At Rhodes, magistrates and those who held religious offices were designated as ἐπίσκοποι.<sup>3</sup>

Josephus used the term to identify administrators of certain issues among the people. In the Jewish Antiquities, he records that Josiah appointed overseers, ἐπίσκοπους, who were to be, above all, characterized by just administration.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, ἐπίσκοπος expresses the concept of oversight. The term is found in the literature of the Classical

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<sup>1</sup>Homer, Iliad, 1:473.

<sup>2</sup>Turner, Christian Words, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup>A Dictionary of the Bible, s.v. "Bishop and Elder," by H. M. Gwatkin, 1:301.

<sup>4</sup>Josephus, Jewish Antiquities, trans. by Ralph Marcus, The Loeb Classical Library, ed. by T. E. Page, et al., reprint ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966) 4:186-87.

Greek era and on into the Roman age with both a religious and a secular significance.

#### Background of Ποιμήν

In the pastoral environment of Israel, before settlement in Canaan, family members acted as shepherds and paid tireless care to the family's flocks (Exod 2:16; Ezek 34:1). This literal understanding of the term for shepherd provides the foundation for extensive metaphorical usage of ποιμήν in the Greek Old Testament. Clear insight into this metaphor adds rich meaning to the limited occurrences of ποιμήν in the New Testament.

#### Old Testament Usage

The Hebrew equivalent of ποιμήν is רֹעֵה. The term is usually translated "shepherd," but there are instances where ποιμήν in the LXX is rendered "pastor" (Jer 1:1-23:2). Robert A. Kraft suggests that Liddell and Scott have been "misled by the erratic methods of the A.V. translators. Whether the word is used literally or metaphorically, ποιμήν in the LXX should be translated 'shepherd.'"<sup>1</sup>

Beyreuther provides a very helpful description of the literal use of ποιμήν which reflects the common life of Israel before entrance into the land of Canaan:

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<sup>1</sup>Robert A. Kraft, ed., Septuagintal Lexicography (Missoula, MT: The Society of Biblical Literature, 1972), p. 141.

Before Israel settled in Canaan, individual tribes depended on the constant wandering with their herds and flocks. . . . The shepherd's task was undertaken preferably by members of the family . . . [who] would show caution, patient care and honesty . . . [and who] had to care tirelessly for the helpless beasts (cf. Ezek 34:1ff.). Devotion to duty was proved in mighty guarding against animals and thieves.<sup>1</sup>

Metaphorically, the term ποιμήν is used in three basic ways in the LXX. It is used of God, the earthly king, and the Messiah. In Ecclesiastes 12:11, it is best to understand the reference to shepherd as an epithet for God in the light of the context. The epithet is more clearly seen in Psalm 23 where יהוה רֹעִי, the Lord is my Shepherd, is used of God.<sup>2</sup>

In a much more limited sense, shepherd can also be used of earthly kings. In Isaiah 44:28, the Lord Himself says of Cyrus, "He is My shepherd." The use of ποιμήν as an official title is limited to this instance. Israel applied the metaphor to God alone. The use of this title, as an expression of honor, was avoided by the Hebrew prophets with respect to their own earthly rulers. In the light of the faithfulness of God, human monarchs were fundamentally unfaithful. David shepherded Israel, but the title was consistently avoided (2 Sam 5:2; 1 Chr 11:2; Ps 78:71;

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<sup>1</sup>The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, s.v. "Shepherd," by E. Beyreuther, 3:654-65.

<sup>2</sup>Donald A. Fowler, "The Context of the Good Shepherd Discourses" (Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN, 1981), p. 71.

2 Sam 24:17; 1 Chr 21:17).<sup>1</sup> The prophets commonly spoke of Israel's rulers in negative terms because they were arrogant and disobedient (Jer 2:8; Ezek 34:2-10; Isa 56:11; Zech 10:3). The exceptional use of ποιμήν as an earthly title in Isaiah 44 was due to the fact that Cyrus was "concerned for the well-being of the returning exiles and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. In a totally different manner Jeremiah 25:34ff. threatened the shepherds of foreign nations with destruction" (cf. Nah 3:18).<sup>2</sup>

At the time in Israel's history when God's judgment was becoming imminent, the title of shepherd was used by the prophets to designate the future Messiah (Jer 3:15; 23:4; Ezek 34:23; 37:22, 24). The first such designation is found in Genesis 49:24, but the title was particularly emphasized in prophecy following the captivity (Zech 13:7).<sup>3</sup>

In the post-exilic times, the Pharisaic rabbis drew distinctions between the occupation of the literal shepherd and the Old Testament metaphor. Beyreuther explains:

In a time of poor pay, shepherds were suspect of dishonesty. The pious were forbidden to buy wool, milk or meat from shepherds. Civic privileges were withdrawn. . . . In legalistic Judaism Moses and David were praised as true shepherds (as leaders and teachers of the law).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Beyreuther, "Shepherd," 3:565.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Fowler, "Good Shepherd Discourses," p. 71.

<sup>4</sup>Beyreuther, "Shepherd," 3:566.

### Secular Usage

The literal meaning of herdsman was commonly used in secular Greek, and ποιμήν became specifically "shepherd" as opposed to cattle herdsman after Homer.<sup>1</sup> Metaphorically, the general meaning was that of a military or political leader. Ποιμήν was used regularly in Homeric literature as a reference to Agememnon, King of Mycenae, who led the Greeks against Troy.<sup>2</sup>

Nigel Turner holds that ποιμήν "was not a pastor or teacher in a religious sense until Biblical Greek made it so."<sup>3</sup> However, Beyreuther disagrees.

In the ancient East, shepherd at an early date became a title of honour applied to divinities and rulers alike. This usage is found in a stereotyped form in the Sumerian king-lists, in Babylonian courtly style and in the pyramid texts (the books of the dead). . . . Pastoral terminology was very much in vogue throughout the Hellenistic world.<sup>4</sup>

Plato supports Beyreuther's conclusion when he states that the human shepherd is a copy of the divine Shepherd and law-giver (The Statesman 271e).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>LSJ, p. 1294.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Turner, Christian Words, p. 314.

<sup>4</sup>Beyreuther, "Shepherd," 3:564.

<sup>5</sup>Plato, The Statesman, trans. by Harold N. Fowler, The Loeb Classical Library, ed. by E. Capps, et al. (London: William Heinemann, 1925), 271e.

Background of Οἱ ἠγούμενοι

Old Testament Usage

The term οἱ ἠγούμενοι is used in the Greek version of the Old Testament and Apocrypha of military leaders (1 Macc 9:30; 2 Macc 14:16). The term appears with reference to leaders of people of various groups (Sir 17:17; 30:27; 41:170). Usage of a similar kind is found in quotations of Old Testament texts in Matthew 2:6 and Acts 7:10.<sup>1</sup>

In 1 Maccabees 9, the Jews are found resisting the forces of Demetrius of Syria. Judas led the Jewish military forces which were weakened by continual Syrian pressure. When Judas fell in battle, the friends of Judas chose Jonathan, their fallen leader's brother, to take his place. Jonathan accepted military leadership of the Jews.

In Matthew 2:6, attention is drawn to Micah 5:2, the text chosen by Herod's chief priests and scribes to identify the prophetic significance of Bethlehem. Bethlehem is described by Micah as "by no means least among the leaders (clans) of Judah." Τοῖς ἡγεμόσιν indicates a prominent Judean tribe.

In Acts 7:10, where Luke alludes to Joseph's rise to power in Egypt, ἠγούμενον identifies Joseph as governor over Egypt and the Pharaoh's household.

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<sup>1</sup>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. "ἡγέομαι," by Friedrich Büchsel, 2:908.

### Secular Usage

The adjective of ἡγούμενος means front or advanced and describes something or someone with a leading position. The participle is used to describe an official often identified as a president. Liddell and Scott list secular sources where such renderings are used to designate official positions from the first to the fourth century A.D.<sup>1</sup>

### Background of Οἱ Προϊστάμενοι

#### Old Testament Usage

Προϊστήμι occurs no more than eight times in the LXX and always without Hebrew equivalent. Three basic meanings can be derived from these instances: 1) to be head of a family or household (2 Sam 13:17; Amos 6:10). This meaning can be rendered "uncle," or even "undertaker"; 2) to rule over the people (1 Macc 5:19); 3) to take trouble or be burdened (Isa 43:24).<sup>2</sup>

#### Secular Usage

The verb is used once in Homeric literature in Iliad 4, 156. This is the sole reference before the fifth century. The meaning is to set before or over someone or something. The term is used in the participle form, προϊσταμένος,

<sup>1</sup>LSJ, p. 763.

<sup>2</sup>The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, s.v. "Presbyter," by Hans Bietenhard, 2:194.

for official military or political leaders.<sup>1</sup> The office designated by this term would have the responsibility of guarding and protecting those over whom one is placed.<sup>2</sup>

#### Conclusion

The etymology of each of the terms used in the New Testament for local church leaders indicates that these terms have distinct and unique meanings. Some are more official than others, and the number of examples in ancient literature varies greatly.

The next step is to examine how these terms are actually used in the New Testament.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 2:193.

<sup>2</sup>BAGD, p. 707.

## CHAPTER III

### NEW TESTAMENT CONTEXTS

Permanent local church offices in the New Testament are two in number. The first is the office of elder identified by the terms πρεσβύτερος or elder, ἐπίσκοπος or overseer, ποιμήν or shepherd, οἱ ἡγούμενοι or those who lead, and οἱ προϊστάμενοι or those who rule. In the New Testament church the spiritual welfare of the congregation was entrusted to the men holding this office. The second is the office of deacon. Although this office was less authoritative, it was a necessary vehicle of service which was to be performed only by qualified individuals.

Attention will now be drawn to the terms in New Testament contexts which designate the office of elder (overseer, shepherd, leader, ruler). Although these terms are synonymous, in the sense of each designating the same office, their use in various New Testament contexts indicates that they are distinct. The essence and significance of each term allows for areas of similarity between them, and demonstrates that each term is uniquely descriptive of certain features of the office of local church leadership.

The two terms most frequently used in the New Testament to identify the chief office of the local church are

elder, πρεσβύτερος, and overseer or bishop, ἐπίσκοπος. These terms, as well as the other less official designations within the scope of this study, will be considered in order of their official significance.

### Πρεσβύτερος

The term πρεσβύτερος is used in three ways in the New Testament. The first use is to designate an office within Judaism. Jewish elders were an important part of the Sanhedrin as well as honored officials in the system of synagogue worship. This meaning is common to the Gospels and Acts. Second, the term is used with its generic meaning of one of a mature age. Πρεσβύτερος is a comparative form of the word πρέσβυς which means simply an old man.<sup>1</sup> In Luke 15:25, the "older son" who became angry at his father's response to the young prodigal is designated by πρεσβύτερος. The term is used commonly to refer to older individuals as in John 8:9; Acts 2:17; and 1 Timothy 5:1-2. The term refers to older men when Peter instructs the νεώτεροι, younger men, to act in submission to πρεσβυτέρους.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the term πρεσβύτερος is the most common word used in the New Testament to designate the permanent local church office of elder.

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<sup>1</sup>BAGD, pp. 699-700.

<sup>2</sup>Leonard Hillstrom, "New Testament Church Elders" (Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN, 1980), p. 81.

The rise of the office of elder to prominence in the New Testament church grew naturally out of the inevitable needs of developing congregations. The apostles were never intended to be permanent officers in local assemblies. Early in the history of the Church, the apostles began to exit the scene and men of exceptional quality were needed to assume the full responsibility of leading local congregations.

The office of elder is first mentioned in the New Testament in the book of Acts (11:30). The elders, πρεσβυτέρους, at Jerusalem were to receive the gift for the relief of the Judean brethren from Barnabas and Saul. The office was established with authority, at least in the area of finances, at this early stage of Christian history.

As one moves through the book of Acts, several helpful references are made to the character and responsibilities identified with the local church elders. In Acts 14:23, Barnabas and Paul appointed elders in the recently established churches of Asia. This appointment was preceded with prayer and fasting and followed by commendation to divine protection. In Acts 15, elders were prominent at the Jerusalem Council. These men worked as one with the apostles in determining solutions to important doctrinal issues. In chapter 20 verses 17-38, Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders reveals the depth of their relationship with the apostle, and the

weight of their responsibility as spiritual leaders of the church. Paul uses terms in this context to enhance the reader's understanding of the office of elder which in other contexts are themselves used as official designations of that same office. The elders, πρεσβυτέρους, are further identified as overseers, ἐπίσκοπους, who are instructed to shepherd, ποιμαίνεν, the church of God (Acts 20:17, 28). The officer who, with respect to his maturity and dignity, is called elder is also called bishop or overseer with respect to the essence of his responsibility.<sup>1</sup> The same individual is identified further in his role as pastor by the injunction to shepherd God's people.

The epistles to Timothy and Titus provide a wealth of insight into the New Testament office of elder. These letters deal largely with issues of local church polity and how the believer ought to conduct himself in the household of God. In relation to elders, Paul instructs his representatives concerning the appointment, character, official qualifications and financial remuneration of the candidates.

The term πρεσβύτερος appears five times in the Pastoral Epistles. In 1 Timothy 5:1-2, Paul instructs Timothy, being a young man himself, as to the manner with which he should deal with different age groups. These first two

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<sup>1</sup>William Hendricksen, Exposition of Philippians in New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), p. 48.

instances of πρεσβύτερος refer to maturity of age and not to the office of elder. In 1 Timothy 5:17, 19 and Titus 1:5, the official designation appears. Local church leaders who rule well and work hard at communicating the word accurately and effectively are to be the recipients of double honor. The elder is here described in his function as a ruler, προϊστάμενος, and preacher/teacher.

The term πρεσβύτερος, as it is used to identify local church leaders, combines the elements of dignity with respect to character, and maturity with respect to age. The term, even in its official sense, cannot be separated from its generic meaning of venerable maturity.<sup>1</sup> Harvey aptly explains:

Christians named their leaders "elders," not only because they were familiar with the term from the Greek Bible, but because in the early days authority did in fact rest in the hands of the older and senior members of the church.<sup>2</sup>

The prominent idea of the word, as it is used in New Testament contexts, is that of "mature spiritual experience and understanding."<sup>3</sup> As an official designation it expresses a broad scope of ministries, and the authority and honor with which the elder functions.

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<sup>1</sup>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. "πρέσβυς," by Gunther Bornkamm, 6:652.

<sup>2</sup>Anthony Harvey, "Elders," Journal of Theological Studies 25:2 (October 1974):326-27.

<sup>3</sup>Hillstrom, "Church Elders," p. 44.

Ἐπίσκοπος

The term ἐπίσκοπος is derived from a combination of the preposition ἐπί, meaning over, or in the presence of, and σκοπός, meaning a superintendent, guardian or overseer.<sup>1</sup>

The word overseer, having been used of the Lord Jesus Christ as the "Overseer" of souls (1 Pet 2:25), would naturally be applied to the officers of local churches who maintained His ministry of guardianship. It is more likely that the use of this title by early Christians arose in this manner and not purely as a result of the use of ἐπίσκοπος by secular society to identify civil magistrates.<sup>2</sup>

The term is found in the noun form five times in the New Testament (Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:2; Tis 1:7; 1 Pet 2:25), and the verbal form, ἐπισκοποῦντες, once in 1 Peter 5:2, the term refers to the local church office. In 1 Peter 2:25, Christ is identified as the "Overseer of your souls."

In the Philippians passage, special mention is made of the overseers and deacons in Paul's salutation. The probable reasons for this special mention enlightens the student as to the ministry which belonged to the ἐπίσκοπος. One possible reason for singling out these offices is that

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<sup>1</sup>A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament, s.v. "Ἐπίσκοπος," by G. Abbott-Smith, p. 174.

<sup>2</sup>Dictionary of the Apostolic Church, s.v. "Bishop, Elder, Presbyter," by Alfred Plummer, 1:150.

Paul wanted to express his appreciation for the initiative taken by the overseers and deacons in gathering contributions which were sent for Paul's needs (Phil 4:10-20). Other possibilities are that Paul was applying a gentle admonishment to these leaders to carry out his instructions, or that the apostle was endorsing their authority publicly due to the presence of enemies of the Church.<sup>1</sup> The answer is not clear, but if any of these possibilities are correct, the leaders of the church at Philippi were responsible to watch over the spiritual and material affairs of the assembly.

In 1 Timothy 3:1-2 and in Titus 1:7, the singular of ἐπίσκοπος is used. In 1 Timothy 3:1, Paul speaks of the godly desire some will have for the important work of oversight. The office of overseer is indicated by the term ἐπισκοπή from ἐπισκοπέω, to inspect, oversee. Two aspects of this office are suggested here. First, the overseership is an office which involves hard work. The office of overseer is not merely an honorable estate, but involves toil, ἔργου. Second, the office is good and worthy. Homer A. Kent explains Paul's meaning:

Paul says it is a good work. The adjective he employs is kalos, which means not only good intrinsically, but outwardly also. It is attractive to beholders. The overseership is not only beneficial to the one possessing

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<sup>1</sup>Hendricksen, Philippians, p. 49.

it, but if properly exercised is appreciated by those who behold it.<sup>1</sup>

In 1 Peter 5:2, oversight and pastoral duties are closely associated. Peter encourages the elders to shepherd, ποιμνάτε, the flock of God while taking the oversight, ἐπισκοποῦντες. The work of oversight is to be accomplished voluntarily and eagerly. Material reward should not be the motivator, but the overseer can look forward to spiritual reward from the hand of the Chief Shepherd Himself.

The office of bishop or overseer is designated by a single word in the New Testament, ἐπίσκοπή. Perhaps the best rendering is "overseership."<sup>2</sup> In English versions, the translation "office of a bishop," in 1 Timothy 3:1, may lead some to an improper understanding of the emphasis of the terms used to designate the local church leaders. In the contexts discussed, it is not the office which is emphasized, but the duties and responsibilities of oversight.<sup>3</sup> The office is uniquely identified by the term ἐπίσκοπος. "It designates the office of the overseer or bishop by means of its chief work, the care and oversight of the church (cf. 1 Pet 5:2; Acts 20:28)."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Homer A. Kent, The Pastoral Epistles (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), p. 124.

<sup>2</sup>D. Edmond Hiebert, First Timothy in Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), pp. 63-64.

<sup>3</sup>Kent, Pastoral Epistles, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup>Hiebert, First Timothy, pp. 63-64.

Ποιμήν

This term, designating New Testament local church leaders, primarily draws attention to the pastoral functions of the office. Ποιμήν occurs nine times in the Synoptic Gospels, six times in the gospel of John, once in Hebrews, once in 1 Peter and once in the book of Ephesians. The corresponding verb form, ποιμαίνω, occurs two times in the Synoptics, once in John, Acts, 1 Corinthians, 1 Peter, Jude, and four times in Revelation.

The rich, metaphorical background of this term influences its use throughout the New Testament. The emphasis on the figurative use of ποιμήν is demonstrated by the fact that the term is used literally in only one passage (Luke 2:8).

Ποιμήν is used in John 10:11, 14, where the Lord identifies Himself as the Good Shepherd. The unique relationship between the Good Shepherd and His flock is examined in this passage, as it is in other passages using other metaphors (John 15:1-16). Close links with the Old Testament metaphor of the shepherd is obvious, and most scholars see Jesus' statements in John 10 in the light of Old Testament scriptures, especially Ezekiel 34.<sup>1</sup> Most of the statements made by Christ regarding His care for His flock can be

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<sup>1</sup>Donald L. Fowler, "The Context of the Good Shepherd Discourses" (Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN, 1981), p. 234.

related to the concepts presented by Ezekiel in his prophecy.<sup>1</sup>

According to the witness of John and the Synoptics, Jesus Christ is the messianic Shepherd promised in the Old Testament scriptures. He begins to fulfill the function of the shepherd by gathering the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Luke 19:10; Ezek 34:15, 16).<sup>2</sup> However, this function is interrupted because the Shepherd must die and rise again for His flock (Isa 53; Zech 13:7; Matt 26:31-35). The unique relationship the Good Shepherd has with His sheep, as described in John 10, is possible only by the voluntary death of the Shepherd.<sup>3</sup>

In Ephesians 4:11, the rendering "pastor" is found. This is the only occurrence of ποιμήν where such a rendering is justifiable.<sup>4</sup> All other occurrences should be rendered "shepherd." The noun is used specifically of the local church official in this passage along with other designations for gifted individuals given by Christ to the church. A close connection exists between teaching and shepherding as evidenced by the Greek construction of τοὺς ποιμένας καὶ

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, s.v. "Shepherd," by Erich Beyreuther, 3:567.

<sup>3</sup>Erich Beyreuther, "Shepherd," 3:567.

<sup>4</sup>Dictionary of the Apostolic Church, s.v. "Pastor," by Alfred Plummer, 2:135.

διδασκάλους, shepherds and teachers. What is designated here is ministers of local assemblies who are teaching elders.<sup>1</sup> These officials function as shepherds by expounding the apostolic doctrine for their flocks (John 21:15-17). Providing the proper spiritual nourishment for the congregation is an essential aspect of the leader's ministry.

The epistle to the Hebrews is replete with allusions and direct quotations from the Old Testament. With this in mind, the identification of Christ as the Great Shepherd is not surprising.<sup>2</sup> In Hebrews 13:20, Christ is seen, as He is throughout the epistle, as "surpassing all prototypes."<sup>3</sup> Delitzsch suggests that Hebrews 13:20 owes its origin to Isaiah 63:11 where Moses is seen leading God's flock, dividing waters before them.<sup>4</sup> Christ even surpasses Moses, who was revered by first century Jews as being one of Israel's greatest shepherd figures.

Christ is further identified as the Chief Shepherd, ἀρχιποιμήν, in 1 Peter 5:4. The under-shepherds or elders of the local church will be rewarded for their faithful

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<sup>1</sup>William Hendricksen, Exposition of Ephesians in New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), p. 197.

<sup>2</sup>Fowler, "Good Shepherd Discourses," p. 144.

<sup>3</sup>Beyreuther, "Shepherd," 3:568.

<sup>4</sup>Gottlieb Lünemann, The Epistle for the Hebrews, trans. by Maurice J. Evans, in Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament, ed. by Heinrich W. Meyer, 11 vols., reprint ed. (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1979), 9:741.

ministry when the Chief Shepherd appears. The ministry of the under-shepherd is given tremendous significance by this identification with the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

In 1 Peter 2:25, Christ is described as the Shepherd and Overseer of souls. The connection between the ministry of shepherding and overseeing is seen here. Guarding or watching over the sheep is a basic element of the function of the shepherd.

Christ's description of Himself as the Shepherd of God's people is, in a sense, a description of His official capacity over the Church.<sup>1</sup> The New Testament faithfully continues to employ the metaphorical use of ποιμήν for official figures in the local church.<sup>2</sup> Ποιμαίνειν aptly describes the function of the leaders of the local assembly. These officials have the responsibility of guarding, guiding, and finding appropriate nourishment for the flock. The term shepherd provides a distinct and fit description of the task of local church leaders.

There is a fitness in the shepherd's work for the setting forth of the highest ministries of men for the weal of their fellows, out of which the name, shepherds of their people, has been continually transferred to those who are,

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<sup>1</sup>Encyclopedia Britannica: Macropedia, s.v. "Sacred Kingship," by Claus Westermann, 8:118-22.

<sup>2</sup>Fowler, "Good Shepherd Discourses," p. 235.

or should be, the faithful guides and guardians of others committed to their charge.<sup>1</sup>

### Οἱ ἠγούμενοι

Two participles are used to designate leaders of local churches by drawing attention to the functions of the office. Οἱ ἠγούμενοι, those who lead, and οἱ προϊστάμενοι, those who rule, are used sparingly in the New Testament as compared to the frequent use of the more official titles. The term for those who lead is found in Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24, and in each verse the term is used in the plural.

Every local church can be divided into two groups: those who lead and those who follow. In Hebrews 13, the saints are called upon to respond to their leaders in an appropriate fashion. These instructions from the author of Hebrews provide helpful insights into the character of the leaders of the church. In verse seven, the leaders are spoken of as men of exemplary faith. They are to be remembered as those who faithfully proclaimed the word of God and maintained a faithful confession, not lapsing back into Judaism. In verse 17, the leaders are recognized as figures of authority who are to be obeyed. They carried the weighty responsibility of being accountable to God for the spiritual condition of the saints. The saints are invited to submit

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Chenevix Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), p. 85.

to them so that their responsibilities of caring for the congregation can be discharged with joy and not grief.<sup>1</sup>

Authority and accountability are stressed in the use of οἱ ἡγούμενοι to identify local church leaders. The leadership of these individuals provides an uncommon example of faith and responsibility before God.

#### Οἱ Προϊστάμενοι

The second participle emphasizing the function of local church leadership is found in Romans 12:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 1 Timothy 3:5, and 1 Timothy 5:17.

In Romans 12:8, Paul describes the manner with which spiritual gifts are to be exercised. In verse 8, ὁ προϊστάμενος, the one who rules, is to perform in that capacity with diligence and zeal. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12, Paul employs a similar description of local church officers. The plural participle, τοὺς προϊστάμενους, those who have charge, is modified by the prepositional phrase, ἐν κυρίῳ, in the Lord. The capacity of rule or having charge over the saints is in no way to be despotic. This authority is tempered by genuine love and concern because it is exercised in the Lord.

In 1 Timothy 3:4, 5 the participle is used in the context of the qualifications of the overseer. The ability

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<sup>1</sup>F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), pp. 407-08.

to oversee the affairs of the local church is determined, in part, by the candidate's ability to manage, or rule over his own household. If he is capable of exercising his role as head of his family, then he is qualified to have charge over the church of God.<sup>1</sup>

In 1 Timothy 5:17, the leaders are identified again by a brief description of their function and not by their official titles.<sup>2</sup> One of the most basic and important functions of the elder or overseer is the task of spiritual rule over the congregation. This function is here modified by the adverb *καλῶς* meaning "that which is done excellently, in a commendable way."<sup>3</sup> Some of the leaders will excel in the area of preaching and teaching. All of the elders took part in the teaching ministry (1 Tim 3:2); however, some would apply greater energy and toil to the task. The labors of these officers must not be ignored, but rewarded.

*Προϊστάμενας* identifies local church leaders by a distinct description of their function as rulers over the congregation. This authority is exercised firmly and

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<sup>1</sup>The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, s.v. "Presbyter," by Hans Bretenhard, 2:197-98.

<sup>2</sup>John Peter Lange, Thessalonians in Commentary on the Holy Scripture, trans. and ed. by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 90.

<sup>3</sup>Kent, Pastoral Epistles, p. 181.

responsibly, but not autocratically. The leader rules with strength and with loving concern.

#### Conclusion

Each of the five terms identified and discussed in this chapter refers to the same local church officials. Some are official in nature, others emphasize function rather than official status. While an overlap in meaning should be recognized between the terms, each one asserts some distinct, essential aspect of the local church leaders in their respective New Testament contexts.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

Organization and officially designated leadership was a natural and early phenomenon in the apostolic church. The New Testament discloses a variety of terms to designate local church leadership. These terms are considered to be synonymous, that is, they all point to the same official or officials, but this fact does not render these terms as alternatives for one another in the New Testament contexts. Some of the terms are of an official nature, such as *πρεσβύτερος* and *ἐπίσκοπος*. Others identify the local church officials with a brief description of the functions of the office, such as *ποιμήν*, *οἱ ἡγούμενοι* and *οἱ προϊστάμενοι*. There is often a degree of overlap in the meanings of these terms. However, their Old Testament and secular usage, and their usage in various New Testament contexts indicates that each of the terms emphasizes distinct, individual features concerning the office, the man holding the office or the function of the office.

A clear understanding of the etymology of the New Testament terms for local church leadership is necessary for an appreciation of their essence and significance in the New Testament. The LXX presents two basic meanings for

πρεσβύτερος. The generic meaning of an old man or one who wears a beard provides a good foundation for the study of this term. A second meaning was that of a man having certain authority and power. This second meaning began with reference to patriarchal family leaders and gradually developed to include civil and religious heads of nations. As in Old Testament history, the term for elder was used widely in the ancient Greek world. The term was used to designate senior citizens of various groups and to identify political and religious leaders. Πρεσβύτερος combined old age and responsible authority.

The term ἐπίσκοπος was used of God and man in the LXX to denote superintendency or oversight. It was used in only two Old Testament contexts to identify specific offices of leadership, and was used most often to denote inspectors, supervisors, foremen, captains and lesser officers. The common renderings of ἐπίσκοπος in ancient Greek literature are secular as to their origin. The term is used to designate administrators who would watch over goods, people, and civil issues. The concept of oversight is clearly expressed in the use of ἐπίσκοπος in secular and religious Greek settings.

The literal meaning of ποιμήν, shepherd, provides a colorful foundation for extensive metaphorical usage of the term in the Old Testament. In the LXX, the term is found

with reference to God, the Messiah, and to human rulers to a very limited degree. The cautious, patient concern the shepherd had for his flock was seen as virtues which characterized Jehovah, as the Shepherd of Israel, and the future Davidic Messiah. Ποιμήν was used literally and metaphorically in ancient Greek literature. Shepherd became a title of honor and respect applied to gods and human rulers alike.

Οἱ ἡγούμενοι was used to designate leaders in military and civil positions in the LXX. In secular Greek the term described officials often rendered "presidents."

The term for rulers, οἱ προϊστάμενοι, in the LXX, designates the head of a household, the ruler of a people, or even the individual who bears a great burden. The secular renderings involved the responsibilities of guarding and protecting which a political or military ruler would have.

The etymological foundations of the terms provide helpful insights into the use of the words in New Testament contexts. The terms often overlap in their meanings. Caring and guarding are elements of both ἐπίσκοπος and ποιμήν. Authority and responsibility characterize οἱ ἡγούμενοι and οἱ προϊστάμενοι. However, these similarities do not mean the terms are interchangeable. Clear distinctions also characterize each term.

In the New Testament, the prominent characteristic of πρεσβύτερος is venerable maturity. Mature spiritual insight and understanding is encompassed by this term. The ministry of the office is certainly in view, but the honor, gravity and authority attached to the office is also suggested.

The word ἐπίσκοπος, overseer, is used of Christ in the New Testament as the "Overseer of your souls" (1 Pet 2:25), and is, therefore, naturally applied to ministers who take up His ministry of guardianship or oversight. When the term is used to designate local church leaders it does so by identifying the main function of the office, the care and watchful guardianship of the congregation.

Like the term for overseer, ποιμήν, shepherd, is used of the Lord Jesus Christ in the New Testament. He is identified as the Good Shepherd who voluntarily gave His life for His sheep, the Great Shepherd whom God raised from the dead, and the Chief Shepherd who will reward His under-shepherds for faithful pastoral ministry upon His return. When used as a designation for local church leaders ποιμήν emphasizes the same functions of local church shepherds as it does for the Shepherd and Overseer of souls, Jesus Christ. The term draws attention to the personal concern and sacrificial interest the pastor has for the sheep. He feeds, guards and protects the sheep even at the risk of endangering his own well being.

The term οἱ ἡγούμενοι, those who lead, points to men of exemplary faith and responsibility. The chief characteristics of the local church office which are highlighted by this term are authority and accountability.

The second participle emphasizing the function of leadership in the New Testament is οἱ προϊστάμενοι, those who rule. One of the most essential tasks of the local church leader is that of spiritual rule of the assembly. The contexts in which this term is found indicate this rule is to be exercised firmly, conscientiously and with loving concern.

This study has been profitable in two respects. First, this project has revealed the colorful variety in the terms which designate local church leadership. Even though similar shades of meaning are observed, each term offers distinct and unique insight into the ministry and dignity of the office. Second, this study has clearly indicated that local church leaders are as much functionaries as they are dignitaries. One must agree with the evaluation of the apostle Paul. "It is a trustworthy statement; if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do" (1 Tim 3:1).

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