



LOST IN TRANSLATION

Female Elders in Titus 1-2

by Marissa Franks Burt

The pastoral epistles are often presented as prescriptive guides for leader or “elder” qualifications. Around this time last year, I happened to notice, to my great astonishment, that the New Testament Greek word for the “older women” in Titus 2:3 is *presbytidas*.¹ The English cognate *presbyter* jumped out at me. Variations on the same root word *presbuteros* also appear three times in this short book: in verses 1:5, 2:2, and 2:3, but when reading an English translation, you would never know that the words (and concept!) are related.

I have studied the Bible for thirty years in various formal contexts and have heard countless talks on the “Titus 2 woman.” Yet, I have never heard serious consideration of whether the supposedly male-only “elder” qualifications in chapter one relate to the “older men and older women” qualifications of chapter two. As I explored further, it became clear to me that this connection remains veiled to the English reader because of interpretive translation



decisions. There are three key points to note when reading this passage. First, when we read “elder,” we unintentionally have a specific modern notion about “church elders” in mind. Second, Paul’s short letter is broken up with artificial chapter subheadings that frame our reading. Third, the lack of clarity ends up impacting application.

CONTEMPORARY NOTIONS ABOUT CHURCH ELDERS

Many of us have denominationally informed understandings of who a church elder is and what a church elder does. The early church, however, did not have a formal institutional structure or crisply defined vocational ministry roles.² The book of Acts describes the budding church in action: believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42–47). They provided for one another’s needs and became renowned for their acts of service. As the church grew, the unity of

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the Holy Spirit displaced dividing lines of social class, ethnicity, gender, and economic distinctions. This was an exciting and chaotic time. Groups of missionary-apostles went from community to community to preach the gospel, baptize new converts, and disciple people. Sometimes the leaders stayed for months or years; sometimes they had to flee overnight, leaving fledgling churches behind.

Problems arose, false teaching threatened, and the new churches had questions which were answered through the instruction and correction of the epistles. This included concerns about church leadership, which the New Testament interchangeably refers to as *presbyteros*, *diakonos*, and *episkopos*.³ In the latter half of the first century, we begin to see emerging leadership constructs, though roles are not crisply defined.⁴ Titus 1:5–9 provides an example of this, when Paul indicates the purpose of his epistle:

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders (*presbyterous*) in every city as I directed you, *namely*, if any man is beyond reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of indecent behavior or rebellion. For the overseer (*episkopon*) must be beyond reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not overindulging in wine, not a bully, not greedy for money, but hospitable, loving what is good, self-controlled, righteous, holy, disciplined, holding firmly the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it.⁵

The churches in Crete—a society notorious for its treachery, greed, drunkenness, and violence⁶—needed sound teaching and healthy conduct, both within individual households and in the household of God.⁷ So Paul tells Titus to appoint *presbyterous* and immediately pivots to giving qualifications for the *episkopon*, who will be a manager in God’s house.⁸ Titus 1 catalogs godly character qualities alongside a description of the tasks entrusted to the kind of leader needed for every *polis* or community. While most English translations render these qualifications for church leaders with masculine pronouns, **there are no gendered pronouns in the text.** Instead, 1:6 opens with the sweeping neuter “anyone” (tis)!⁹

Might these qualifications speak to the need for male **and** female *presbyterous* in each community? Not one or the other, but both? Paul opens his letter with the clear instruction to appoint presbyters and then goes on in chapter two to clarify that the male and female presbyters of Titus 2 are to be sober, sensible, not addicted to wine, and teachers of the good, all repeats of qualities that define the *presbyterous* and *episkopon* of chapter one. Imagining that chapter one is about a group of vocational church leaders doing this in a specific way and chapter two is about lay people doing it in a different way shortsightedly envisions a large church community rather than the much more likely small and intimate church body. What precisely would the “elder” in a church of thirty or fifty people be doing while the older men and older women were teaching sound doctrine and modeling godliness? It is our contemporary eyes that imagine Titus is organizing congregations of several hundreds with tiered leadership and designated tasks. Furthermore, Greek-English dictionaries indicate that the multiple senses for these related terms include both age and community leadership.¹⁰ Indeed, there is often overlap, though translation decisions do not highlight this reality.¹¹ Instead of maintaining the connection

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ARTIFICIAL SUBHEADINGS

Most English Bibles include a subtitle at the end of chapter one and before chapter two.¹² But the New Testament Greek, which does not have headings or chapter breaks, suggests that Paul's discussion in Titus 2 is a continuation of the qualifications and job descriptions of a church leader. Here we see that the men and women of 2:2–3 will be doing work that includes some of the tasks assigned to the appointed leaders of 1:5–7.¹³ The flow of thought goes like this: "Titus, you were/are to appoint elders.¹⁴ The male elders are to have these qualities and be prepared for the work of modeling and imparting sound doctrine. The female elders are to have these qualities and be prepared for the work of modeling and imparting sound doctrine."

This fits with both the cultural and grammatical sense of the root word I mentioned at the beginning: *presbyterous*. This word is used in classical and Koine Greek¹⁵ to describe both the aged in general and the aged people who would have led in various ways in communities. Why? Because in such cultures, **leaders would invariably be the aged people.**¹⁶ The chapter headings blur the way these terms are related and leave us wondering: Did Paul write a brief, forthright epistle to Titus with directives about appointing leaders for a church in crisis at Crete only to sandwich a few unrelated verses about the moral conduct of elderly men and elderly women in the middle of it? This kind of reading relies on our contemporary designations between lay and ordained people as well as the modern idea that an "elder" could ever be a young leader.

I believe that Paul's original instruction for local church leadership was meant to be immensely practical. In a community with disrupted household life, cultural confusion, and threats from problematic Judaizer influences, the new Christians needed grounded, wise people who could offer sound teaching and a healthy example and who also had the life experience to teach the "novices"—both the young women (*neas*) and young men (*neoterous*) of Titus 2:4, 6. Cretan Christians needed to learn how to be sensible, to stop drinking, and to care for their households. These weren't add-on Bible studies or topics for women at ladies' retreats. This was the primary work in that moment for the church in Crete, and the *presbytis* and *presbytidas* were the ones assigned to do it. We retain this idea even in complementarian churches, where in Titus 2 older women are told to train younger women. But that is only half the story. What women are not told is that the original Titus 2 women were female elders in the churches in Crete—right alongside the male elders.

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THE IMPACT ON APPLICATION

If you've ever tried to learn another language, you already know that translation relies on art as well as precision—something even more important when translating across thousands of years. Perhaps English translators want to make sure readers catch the point of age in chapter 2 and so opt for “older men/women.” But why then remove the sense of age from 1:5? Why not have Paul instruct Titus to “appoint older people” or “older leaders?” This would at least indicate that the concept is connected. Alternatively, if translators carried the sense of “presbyter” or “elder” into 2:2–3 and translated this as “male elders/presbyters” and “female elders/presbyters,” the grammatical and structural cohesiveness of the text would be clear. It would also introduce baggage that comes with the word *presbyter*. It wasn't until the second and third centuries that the title of *presbyter* became formalized and connected to a precise church office. “Elders” in 1:5 is another term that has taken on its own meaning over the centuries. Translator teams must do the best they can, but it's worth noting that our preconceived understandings about the pastoral epistles and the function of church offices can affect how we read these words.

The impact of this is huge, because the pastoral epistles are referenced to determine what women are permitted to do in churches. But are we reading them correctly, or are we putting on modern glasses fitted with lenses tinted by a youth-oriented leadership culture and formalized ministry structures—both of which were absent from the early church? Take those glasses off, and you discover collaboration between ordinary men and women—indeed, the kind of “co-laboring” that Paul frequently references.

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When I first stumbled across this and began digging, I didn't find cases being made for or against how *presbytidas* should be translated. **It simply wasn't discussed at all.** Most commentators skipped right over this, presenting Titus 1 as a passage about church leadership and qualifications of the *episkopos-presbuteros* and Titus 2 being an addendum for lay people. The evolution of formal church leadership over the past two thousand years has varied widely across denominations, but ordination often has been limited to men only.¹⁷ But this concept of mutual eldership in Crete, alongside a narrative approach to women in the New Testament, suggests women and men led together.¹⁸

Jesus's way of leading has always been about serving. The “elders” that were to be appointed in Crete were to teach, yes, but also to serve and disciple, to do the kind of work that has never been limited to any one gender. The time is short, and, despite Jesus's disciples' insistence on debating who was greatest, the Spirit continues to insist on gifting men and women equally:

And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.¹⁹

The church in Crete did not have the luxury of limiting women while assigning all the work to men, and neither has any church throughout history. I suggest that neither do we.

Notes

1. See New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries: Updated Edition, s.v.v. "πρεσβύτερος presbuteros," "πρεσβύτες presbutēs," "πρεσβύτες presbutis."
2. For further reading, see Nijay K. Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* (IVP Academic, 2023), particularly chapters 5–6.
3. See David Campbell, "Opening up Titus," *Opening Up Commentary* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2007), 25–26, and "Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to Titus," in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. James Tweed and Philip Schaff, vol. 13, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 524.
4. "The basic biblical pattern for New Testament church organization appears to be that the leadership was (1) to come from within the church (i.e., local in nature), (2) to meet certain standards of behavior (i.e., qualified), and (3) to be plural in composition (i.e., not a leadership dominated by one personality)." Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, "1, 2 Timothy, Titus," vol. 34, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 276–278.
5. I have chosen the NASB translation here, because it attempts a literal rendering of the Greek.
6. The Bible Project, "Book of Titus Summary: A Complete Animated Overview," Dec 21, 2016, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/titus/>.
7. Paul uses derivations of ὑγιαίνω (*hygiaino*) when he talks about the kind of teaching and conduct the elders and overseers in Crete should offer. This word carries the sense of soundness, wholeness, health, and that which brings well-being. It is used twelve times in the New Testament; three times by Luke the physician, once by John in his final epistle, and the other eight times by Paul, four of which we find in Titus: 1:9,13; 2:1,2. The repetition draws attention to the fact that things were not sound and needed to be put in order.
8. οἰκονόμον (*oikonomon*), used to describe the work of a church leader/*episkopon*, means "one who manages a household." The parallel with Titus 2:5's "workers at home" οἰκουργοῦς (*oikourgos*), which has been narrowly defined for many women, should not be overlooked. Paul is using household words to describe individual families **and also** churches as the household of God. See LSJ, s.v. οἶκο-νόμος."
9. See Philip B. Payne, "The Bible Teaches the Equal Standing of Man and Woman," *Priscilla Papers* 29, no. 1 (January 21, 2015): <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/bible-teaches-equal-standing-man-and-woman/> and Philip Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Zondervan Academic, 2009).
10. See the cognates noted in footnote 1.
11. Consider the way a parallel usage of this appears in 1 Timothy, where Paul again overlaps the concepts of *episkopon*, *presbyterous*, and older Christians. See also 1 Peter 5:5, where BDAG notably indicates "though here the πρεσβύτεροι are not only the older people, but at the same time, the 'elders.'" BDAG, s.v.v. "πρεσβύτερος," For further reading, see Kristin Caldwell, "Translation Differences Every Woman Minister Should Know (Part 2)," *Mutuality* (August 30, 2014): https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/translation-differences-every-woman-minister-should-know-part-2/#_ftn1.
12. E.g. *Conduct Consistent with Sound Teaching* (NET), *Doing Good for the Sake of the Gospel* (NIV), *Duties of the Older and Younger* (NASB), *Promote Right Teaching* (NLT).
13. For further reading, see, Aída Besançon Spencer "Leadership of Women in Crete and Macedonia as a Model for the Church," *Priscilla Papers* 27, no. 4 (October 31, 2013): <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/leadership-women-crete-and-macedonia-model-church/>.
14. Paul's opening terms of endearment paired with the pointed: "as I directed you" of 1:5 indicate that Paul is correcting Titus and reminding him of work that should have been done. This also hints at a reality that always is the case when we read epistles: the sender and recipient have a previous relationship and details known between them may not be available to us.
15. Koine Greek is the language of the New Testament, written in the common language of that time and location.
16. Consider 1 Timothy 4:12, where Timothy might be looked down on because of his youth; young leaders were the anomaly.
17. For further consideration of the evolution of holy orders and the ways women occupied them across history see Darrell Pursiful, "Ordained Women of the Patristic Era," *Priscilla Papers* 15, no. 3 (July 31, 2001): <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/ordained-women-patristic-era/> and this multipart blog series from Marg Mowczko, "Women Elders in Ancient Christian Texts," *Marg Mowczko Blog*, 2002, <https://margmowczko.com/women-elders-ancient-presbyteress/>.
18. See Marissa Franks Burt, "The Women of the New Testament: Considering What Women Were Doing in Early Church," *Marissa's Substack*, January 22, 2024, <https://mburtwrites.substack.com/p/the-women-of-the-new-testament>.
19. Ephesians 4:11–13, NASB.

For the full list of footnotes, please see this article on the CBE website.

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