Biblical Perspectives on Caring for the Aged and the Sick

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Insights from the Bible help us to gain a greater appreciation of the nature and characteristics of aging and to come to a deeper understanding of the nature of God. In turn we can respond more deeply in our obligation to care for the aged and aging.

There are approximately 390 million people over the age of sixty-five in the world today, and the number is expected to increase to 800 million by the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century! Here in North America, one out of eight Americans is sixty-five years of age or older. Every day more than 5,500 Americans celebrate their sixty-fifth birthday, and that number is expected to grow rapidly in the years ahead (ERLC, 1).

On Larry King Live, former president Bill Clinton recently agreed with health professionals who predict that by 2025 people will live to one hundred years old and beyond. As the percentage of older people increases, care related to the aging—along with its problems, attitudes, and responsibilities—become matters of increasing concern. Faced with these statistics and issues, we must ask ourselves how we can offer better pastoral assistance and care for the aged and the sick of our society. Interestingly, the Bible speaks much about aging (Harris 2008, 11–51). By exploring the biblical perspectives on this topic, we can hope to gain a greater

appreciation of the nature and characteristics of aging and, at the same time, to come to a deeper understanding of the nature of God in order to respond more appropriately to the needs of the aging members today.

**Aging in Ancient Biblical Times**

**Life Expectancy**

The famous saying from an ancient psalmist—“Seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty if we are strong” (Ps 90:10)—rings true in many parts of our society today as people are actually living longer. But could this impressive longevity have been a common phenomenon in the ancient biblical world? Study of skeletal remains suggests that life expectancy in the ancient biblical world was relatively short by today’s standard. Depending upon the place and time, life expectancy for men was averaging between thirty and forty-five years (Jones, 67). The life span of women was even shorter than that of men by as much as ten years. Just the opposite is true today as modern American women usually outlive their counterparts by about ten years. The mortality rate in ancient times and cities was staggering. Almost thirty percent of children were dead by the age of six, and another sixty percent of these would not reach their eighteenth birthdays. Seventy-five percent of the population had already perished by their mid-twenties. Only ten percent might have lived until the mid-forties, and as few as three percent might have made it to their sixties (Pilch, 416). Contrary to archaeological analysis of ancient bone fragments that indicate that life expectancy was relatively short due to poor hygiene conditions, diseases, wars, and accidents, biblical ancestors and heroes are reported to have lived extraordinary long lives. The oldest person in the Bible, Methuselah, lived to 969 years old. While Adam died at the age of 930, Noah lived to be 950 years old. Abraham, on the other hand, lived to 175 years, but his son Isaac lived to be 180 years old. Others had a bit shorter lifespan but not by much. For example, Jacob lived to 147, Joseph to 110, Moses 120, and Joshua to 110 years. This impressive longevity is obviously an exaggeration when viewed by our standards. What then does this type of hyperbole signify?

**Sign of Blessings**

Since old age is the final stage of life that few people in ancient biblical times could reach, it was regarded as a blessing from God (Martin-Achard, 32). The Torah states, “You must follow exactly the path that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess” (Deut 5:33; all Scripture citations come from the NRSV). According to the Law, old age is an indication of God’s favor and a reward for one’s moral life. Old age may be granted to those who honor their parents as stated in the Decalogue, “Honor your father and your mother, so that
your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Exod 20:12; see also Eph 6:1). Since few people in ancient times lived to advanced years, old age represented an exceptional achievement and therefore was entitled to deep respect. The author of Leviticus dictates, “You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord” (Lev 19:32). It is therefore not surprising for the Bible to glorify and show great honor to its heroes by having them live to a “good (or ripe) old age,” for example, Abraham (Gen 25:8), Gideon (Judg 8:32), David (1 Chr 29:28), Moses (Deut 34:7), and Caleb (Josh 14:10-11).

**Duties and Responsibilities**

While old age is a blessing, it nevertheless comes with a price. The aged are to seek after Wisdom and completely depend upon her. Only then wisdom will be an attribute of the aged. Those who have wisdom not only acquire understanding but are also rewarded with long life, as recorded in Proverbs: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life” (Prov 9:10-11). Since wisdom is associated with the aged, their duty is to provide wise counsel to the younger generation. “Remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you” (Deut 32:7). The aged members of the community serve as spiritual guides and leaders whose responsibility is to preserve traditions, as the prophet Joel admonishes, “Hear this, O elders, give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your ancestors? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation” (Joel 1:2-3).

The Bible describes an old person as having “gray hairs” (e.g., Gen 44:31). The book of Daniel portrays the image of God as the “ancient of days” who sits enthroned with hair like “pure wool” (Dan 7:9). It is fitting therefore for Proverbs to say, “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life” (Prov 16:31). The book of Revelation uses a similar image in describing the royal messiah, namely as one who has “white hair” and a beard (Rev 1:7-17). Interestingly, the word “elder” (zaqen in Hebrew or presbyteros in Greek) comes from the Hebrew word zaqan, which literally means “beard” or “someone old enough to grow a beard” (Harris 1992, 10). It is only fitting therefore for the twenty-four elders to surround the heavenly throne of God and worship the Lamb day and night (Rev 4:4; 5:5-14).

Respected for their age due to wisdom and moral conduct, the elders gained power and prestige in the local affairs of the people from the time of the Exile (Deut 32:7; Jer 29:1-2; Ezek 8:1) down to the time of Jesus, when the elders became powerful Jewish leaders, such as the Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees, and many served in the Sanhedrin (Matt 16:21; Mark 8:31; Acts 4:5). Furthermore, the aged are obligated to continue acting morally and responsibly (Carter, 41). The author of Titus gives concrete guidance to the elders as follows: “Tell the older men to be temperate, serious, prudent, and sound in faith, in love, and in endurance. Likewise,
tell the older women to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good” (Titus 2:2-3). While during the time of Paul, the leaders of his communities were patrons or matrons, or young men or women with charismatic gifts (Rom 16:1-16), the early church leaders after Paul’s time gradually became “overseers” (episkopos) of the church who were also called “elders” (presbyteros) (Titus 1:5-7) and were exclusively men. For Timothy, the office of bishops is a noble position, which requires a person to be “above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money” (1 Tim 3:2-3). While the division of ministries is not yet clear cut at the time of Pastoral Letters, the role of the “overseers” (episkopos) seemed to be more in terms of supervisory and administrative responsibility, while the “elders” (presbyteros) were to focus on the ministry of “preaching and teaching” (1 Tim 5:17).

**Protection and Care**

Gray hair and wrinkled skin are signs of aging. Since these are rare gifts given to very few people, younger people are to honor and respect them (Harris 2008, 74). Biblical legal tradition reinforces this universal motif by not simply demanding respect but by legally protecting the older generation, especially aging parents (Prov 16:31; 10:17). Adult children are to take care of their parents once they have become old or fallen sick (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16). “Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old” (Prov 23:22). Sirach too focuses on caring for aging parents. Even were a father to lose his mental faculties, a son should not despise a father: “My child, help your father in his old age, and do not grieve him as long as he lives, even if his mind fails, be patient with him; because you have all your faculties do not despise him” (Sir 3:12-14). The author of Sirach even talks about giving back to parents for all they have done (Sir 7:27-28).

The Bible often expresses outrage against verbal and physical abuse of vulnerable parents: “Whoever strikes father or mother . . . curses father or mother shall be put to death” (Exod 21:15, 17). Severe warnings and harsh penalties guard against filial neglect and disrespect: “Cursed be anyone who dishonors father or mother” (Deut 27:16; cf. Deut 21:18-21; Lev 19:32; 20:9). The letter to Timothy goes even a step further by extending protection beyond blood ties, admonishing in this way: “Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters—with absolute purity” (1 Tim 5:1-2).

Since God is always on the side of the oppressed and weak and furthermore promotes justice and righteousness, protection of widows—who are usually poor and vulnerable—is heavily emphasized throughout the Bible. Exodus writes, “You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans” (Exod
22:22-24). Jesus seems to have a very special place for widows in his teaching and healing. Jesus protects the vulnerable widow when he heals her possessed daughter from a distance (Mark 7:24-30) and restores the life of another widow’s son (Luke 7:11-17). Jesus praises the courage and determination of the widow who challenges the unjust judge to act uprightly (Luke 18:1-8) and acknowledges the generous widow who gave all she had (Luke 21:1-4). Thus, it is the responsibility of the Christian community to care and protect the rights of the weak: “If any believing woman has relatives who are really widows, let her assist them; let the church not be burdened, so that it can assist those who are real widows” (1 Tim 5:16).

One dominant portrait of Jesus, particularly from the Synoptics, is that of the healer. Jesus healed many who were sick and possessed (Mark 1:32-34). He healed Peter’s mother-in-law who had a fever (Mark 1:30-31), a leper (Mark 1:40-45), a paralytic (Mark 2:1-12), a man with an unclean spirit (Mark 5:1-20), a woman with a hemorrhage (Mark 5:25-34), a young girl (Mark 5:21-23, 35-43), a crippled woman (Luke 13:10-13) and many more (Mark 6:53-56). It seems that a significant part of his mission involves the healing ministry, for this is what he came to do, saying, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mark 2:17). The charism of Jesus’ healing is also noticeably holistic, focusing not only curing illnesses (bodily) but above all healing the whole person (spiritually). In order to collaborate in his mission, Jesus entrusted his disciples with the task of healing and caring for the sick (Mark 6:13; Matt 10:1, 7-8; Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-12). After the Easter event, the apostle Peter in the Acts of the Apostles took up the ministry of his master by going about healing those who were sick. In the name of Jesus, Peter healed a crippled beggar (Acts 3:1-10), a paralyzed man named Aeneas (Acts 9:32-35), a dead widow named Tabitha (Acts 9:36-43), and many others (Acts 5:12-16).

Inspirited by the examples of Jesus and the apostles, caring for the sick has become the hallmark of the church’s corporal works of mercy (Borobio, 42). For Christians, when we care for the aged and the sick, we are first of all treating that person as one created in the image of God (Gen 1:27) and, furthermore, who is Christ himself, for he says, “I was sick and you took care of me” (Matt 25:36). The church therefore bears a great responsibility in caring for the sick as demonstrated in the Letter of James, which became the classic biblical foundation for the sacrament of the anointing: “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven” (Jas 5:14-15).

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An Aging Paradigm:  
The Case of Eli and Samuel (1 Sam 1–4)

We now turn to a biblical story for illustration. The first few chapters of the book of Samuel focus on the moral and religious crisis that Israel was facing and portray how God once again intervened to save Israel by raising up a new leadership. More specifically, 1 Samuel 1–4 chronicles the tale and destiny of two families: the priestly house of the aged Eli and his corrupted sons, and the barren Hannah and her obedient son Samuel. A brief examination of these two families provides a paradigm of moral behaviors, responsibility, and cross-generational relationships around the issues of aging.

Eli and His Sons (Hophni and Phinehas)

The book of Samuel begins by informing the readers that the “two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord” (1 Sam 1:3). But they were “scoundrels” who had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people (2:12). They abused their role and authority by forcing people, even threatening them with violence (2:16), to give them the choice cut of the sacrificial meat, including the fatty portions meant for the dedication to the Lord. Their wicked behavior and blatant corruption were despicable and gravely sinful in the eyes of God (2:17). Furthermore, they even had sexual relations with women serving in the sanctuary (2:22). Having heard of his sons’ disgusting behavior, Eli confronted them, but they refused to listen to the voice of their father (2:25). We are told that Eli was very old (2:22) when he confronted his sons. It seems that the confrontation came too late. Furthermore, when a man of God came to pronounce judgment on Eli and his family, readers discover that while his sons engaged in despicable activities, Eli was partly to blame because he too participated in their practices by “fattening” (2:29) himself with the choice portions that were taken from the sacrificial offerings that were meant for the Lord. This is what God says to Eli: “Why then look with greedy eye at my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded, and honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choices parts of every offering of my people Israel?” (2:29) Even after the judgment was declared, Eli did nothing to correct his sons’ from blaspheming God and to restrain (3:13) them from these corrupted practices. As a consequence, the family of Eli came to a traumatic end with the two sons killed in battle and Eli dying a painful death. Shocked by the news of the ark’s capture, Eli fell from his seat, broke his neck, and died at an old age (4:18). While Eli lived to an age of ninety-eight (4:15), his time was one of misery. Besides being shamed by this two disobedient and immoral sons, Eli was completely blind (4:15) and fat (4:18). Perhaps by neglecting his duties and responsibility as a wise old figure, he failed to put his house in order and furthermore to control his appetite that clearly caused physical deterioration. As for Hophni and Phinehas, their disrespect for their aged father not only brought
sorrow to their father but cut short their own lives (Exod 20:12; Lev 19:32). Their attitude and behavior reinforce the lessons from biblical legal traditions that warned against filial neglect and disrespect (Exod 21:15, 17; Deut 27:16; Lev 20:9).

Hannah and Her Son (Samuel)

The story of Hannah and her son Samuel is masterfully crafted to contrast the wickedness and irresponsibility of Eli and his sons. Despite being the first wife of Elkanah and having no children, Hannah never ceased to hope and believe. She was ridiculed and put to shame, but she never grew weary and resentful. As a matter of fact, she prayed even more fervently to the Lord for the gift of a child and vowed to dedicate him to the Lord if her prayer were to be answered (1 Sam 1:11). Her prayer was so ardent, which she herself described as “pouring out my soul before the Lord” (1:15), that Eli mistakenly accused her of drunkenness. Although Eli wrongfully accused her and later absent-mindedly forgets her promise, Hannah displays no disrespect toward the aged priest. True to her promise, after the child is weaned, she brings Samuel to Eli at Shiloh to serve and dedicate himself to the Lord. At the presentation of the child, Hannah sings a magnificent song of praise (2:1-10) recalling God’s blessings and salvation that Mary from Nazareth seems to imitate in her Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). Her respect for Eli and for God earned her not one promised son, Samuel, but three more sons and two daughters (2:21).

While Hophni and Phinehas neglect their father and disgrace him in his old age, Samuel stays close to Eli to serve him and comfort him in the temple (2:11, 18). Furthermore, the young boy obediently responds to the call of his mentor, not once, but three times, just before the crack of dawn for “the lamp of God has not yet gone out” (3:3). Even after the Lord had issued judgment on Eli and his family, Samuel laid quietly in the sanctuary until morning and was afraid to tell Eli. It is only at his mentor’s insistence that Samuel obediently discloses everything that the Lord had said to Eli. In contrast to Eli’s two sons, Samuel shows respect to Eli and cares for him in his old age. As a result, God blesses Samuel, and so he grows “in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people” (2:26), while Hophni and Phinehas decrease in strength and in life span (2:31).

Dignity and Gifts of Aging

People are actually living much longer now than before (Rogriguez, 14-15). Longevity is no longer an uncommon phenomenon and the exceptional achievement for just a few. Even with its challenges and difficulties, longevity is still perceived by many and in many cultures as a sign of blessing and a rare gift of divine favor. While the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, recognizes the realism of infirmities that are associated with old age, the Bible still elevates the
dignity and gifts of the elderly as prominent contributors of society. They are wisdom figures, leaders, models of moral living, and mentors of younger generations. Thus, it is not surprising that the Bible demands that younger people honor and respect the aged and care for them. Since respecting the aged is honoring God, one will merit blessings and lengthen his or her days, as demonstrated in the story of Eli and Samuel. The brief examination from the biblical perspectives shows that society has a moral obligation to care for its aging members. Furthermore, Christians are to be especially sensitive to the needs of the aged and to actively minister to them as if it were Christ himself who is sick. Though society might neglect their duties and responsibilities and Christians might even forget their vocation to care for their very own, God will certainly not forget, for God comforts the aged, saying, “Even to your old age I am the same, even when your hair is gray I will bear you; it is I who have done this, I who will continue, and I who will carry you to safety” (Isa 46:4).

References


