

An Elder is to Act as Dayan

Instruct them about the statutes and laws, and teach them the way to live and what they must do. But you should select from all the people able men, God-fearing, trustworthy, and hating bribes. Place [them] over the people as officials of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. They should judge the people at all times. Then they can bring you every important case but judge every minor case themselves. In this way you will lighten your load, and they will bear [it] with you. – Exodus 18:20-22 HCSB

Leadership would be great if it weren't for the people! People are messy. They fuss, they fight, they complain and are easily distracted. Any good leader knows that a large part of the job is mediation.

Moses figured this out real quick. Because he was leading millions of these cantankerous creatures, he needed help. So, at the suggestion of his wise father-in-law, he appointed judges.

These judges had to be righteous people.¹ They had to be intelligent.² They had to judge righteously and impartially.³ There were inferior and superior judges⁴ and even circuit courts!⁵

Their role was primarily to teach the people [Halakha](#). However, the way they did this was to officiate as judges in disputes and decide the case according to the ordinances of the Lord.⁶ Because all decisions were to be based on the Word of God, a [Dayan](#) obviously had to be well-versed in the Scriptures. In fact in order to help him judge well, the king was to personally write out a copy of the Torah in the presence of the Levites.⁷

Each town and village was to have at least one appointed judge as well as some officers. These servants were to judge righteously, never deny justice, show partiality, nor ever accept a bribe but to have as their single-minded pursuit justice and justice alone.⁸

The chosen elders were vested with representative, judicial and executive authority⁹ and when they gathered together for their work they were collectively called the Council.¹⁰

With this historical background in mind, let's consider the New Testament's instruction concerning elders. We see first of all that elders are to be marked by their good character.¹¹ We also see that they are to render their decisions according to the Scriptures.¹²

No wonder Paul, a Jew by birth, was frustrated with those who took their squabbles to unbelieving judges saying, "Can it be that there is not one person among you who will be able to arbitrate between his brothers? Instead, brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers!"¹³

This is why the [tzaddikim](#) should appoint elders¹⁴ who are qualified to act as Dayan (judges), and who will form a [Beit Din](#) (a council of Dayan) in matters of interpersonal conflict or theological debate.

Then, as long as the elders are teaching the Scriptures¹⁵ and modeling [zedekah](#) faithfully,¹⁶ the [tzaddikim](#) should obey them.¹⁷

¹ Exodus 18:21-22; Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 1 Kings 3:9; Psalm 58:1; 72:1, 4

² Deuteronomy 1:12-13

³ Deuteronomy 1:16-17

⁴ Deuteronomy 17:8-11

⁵ 1 Samuel 7:16

⁶ Ezekiel 44:23-24

⁷ Deuteronomy 17:18

⁸ Deuteronomy 16:18-20

⁹ Exodus 4:29; 5:15, 19; 6:14-25; 12:21; Numbers 11:16-30

¹⁰ Psalm 107:32; Mark 15:43; Luke 22:66

¹¹ 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1

¹² 2 Timothy 2:15

¹³ 1 Corinthians 6:1-6

¹⁴ Titus 1:5

¹⁵ Titus 1:9

¹⁶ Titus 1:7

¹⁷ Hebrews 13:17