

Study Guide: The Identity and Roles of the Twenty-Four Elders in Revelation

This study guide is designed for Christian families and Bible study groups to explore the scriptural foundation, responsibilities, and heavenly functions of the twenty-four elders surrounding the throne of God, based on Revelation 4:4 and related passages.

Part 1: Earthly Foundations — Elders in the Early Church

Core Concepts

In the New Testament, elders were foundational to the organization and spiritual governance of the early Church. As apostles established new communities, the appointment of elders was a primary requirement, serving side-by-side with apostolic leadership.

- **Mandatory Church Leadership:** Early churches did not always have pastors or worship leaders, but appointing elders was an essential requirement (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5).
- **Governance Alongside Apostles:** When significant theological questions arose—such as whether Gentile believers needed to be circumcised—the apostles and elders met together in Jerusalem to deliberate and issue binding decisions (Acts 15:23, Acts 16:4).
- **Apostolic Accountability:** Returning missionaries, such as Paul, reported their detailed accounts of ministry directly to James and the elders of the Jerusalem church (Acts 21:18–19).
- **Overlapping Roles:** The Apostle John identified himself as an elder (2 John 1), demonstrating that both roles were respected and worked in tandem.
- **Temporal vs. Eternal Roles:** In the Book of Revelation, the role of apostle is only mentioned in the past tense regarding earthly ministry, whereas the role of the elder remains active in Heaven. This indicates that the apostolic role served a temporary purpose on earth, while the elder's role is eternal.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the biblical requirement for appointing elders in every early church (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5) highlight the importance of spiritual leadership?

2. Looking at Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council, what does the collaboration between apostles and elders reveal about biblical decision-making and church governance?
3. Why might the role of an apostle disappear or be referenced only in the past tense in Revelation, while the role of an elder continues in the eternal Kingdom of God?

Part 2: Pastoral and Spiritual Leadership

Core Concepts

Elders in the New Testament were not merely administrative figures; they were required to be mature believers who led by personal example and ministered directly to spiritual and physical needs.

- **Leading by Example:** According to 1 Peter 5:1–4, elders are called to care for God’s flock willingly and eagerly rather than for personal gain or out of obligation. They are instructed not to "lord it over" the people, but to lead by setting a good example.
- **Promised Reward:** Faithful elders are promised a "crown of never-ending glory and honor" when the Great Shepherd (Christ) appears.
- **Ministry of Healing and Prayer:** James 5:14–15 explicitly commands believers who are sick to call for the church elders. Elders are instructed to pray over the sick, anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord, and offer the prayer of faith. This ministry brings healing, restoration, and forgiveness of sins.

Discussion Questions

1. Contrast the leadership style requested of elders in 1 Peter 5:1–4 with worldly leadership. What does it mean to lead "by example" rather than "lording it over" others?
2. What specific responsibilities are assigned to elders when caring for the sick in James 5:14–15? How does this reflect their role as spiritual parents?
3. How does the promised "crown of glory" in 1 Peter 5:4 connect to the crowns worn by the twenty-four elders in Revelation 4:4?

Part 3: Heavenly Roles — Worship and Prophetic Insight

Core Concepts

In the Book of Revelation, the twenty-four elders function actively in the heavenly throne room, demonstrating that their leadership extends into eternity.

- **Spontaneous Worship Leaders:** The twenty-four elders repeatedly lead and participate in throne room worship alongside the four living creatures, angels, and all created beings:
 - **Revelation 4:9–11:** They fall down before God, cast their golden crowns before the throne, and praise Him as the Eternal Creator who created all things by His will.
 - **Revelation 5:11–14:** They fall down and worship when the Lamb takes the sealed scroll.
 - **Revelation 19:4:** Following the destruction of the great harlot, the elders and the four living creatures worship God on the throne, crying out, "Amen. Hallelujah!"
- **Stewards of Divine Insight:** The elders possess deep wisdom regarding prophetic events and divine mysteries:
 - **Revelation 11:15–18:** At the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the elders worship and announce the arrival of Christ's eternal reign, the judgment of the dead, the rewarding of prophets and saints, and the destruction of those who destroy the earth.
 - **Revelation 7:** When John sees a great, unidentified multitude in white robes holding palm branches, an elder initiates conversation and explains that they are believers who came out of the Great Tribulation.

Discussion Questions

1. What symbolic act do the elders perform with their crowns in Revelation 4:10, and what does this express about their view of God's sovereignty?
2. In Revelation 7, how does the elder interact with John regarding the white-robed multitude? What does this interaction show about the elders' role as stewards of heavenly insight?

3. Read the song of the elders in Revelation 11:15–18. What key events do they reveal are taking place at the sounding of the seventh trumpet?

Part 4: Heavenly Kings and Priests

Core Concepts

The actions and instruments of the twenty-four elders in Revelation 5 reveal their Dual Identity as both royal and priestly figures.

- **Priestly Functions:** In Revelation 5:8, each elder holds a harp and "golden bowls full of fragrant incense." The text explicitly defines this incense as "the prayers of the saints." In Old Testament tabernacle worship, handling incense was strictly reserved for priests.
- **Pattern of Heavenly Priesthood:** The priestly duties of the elders suggest that the Old Testament priesthood established for Israel was patterned after an eternal heavenly reality already in place.
- **Kings and Priests:** In Revelation 5:9–10, the elders sing a new song praising the Lamb who redeemed people "out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation." They declare that Christ has made the redeemed "kings and priests to our God," who "shall reign on the earth."
- **Governmental Leadership:** Beyond their spiritual and priestly functions, their seating on twenty-four thrones around God's central throne confirms their function as governmental leaders in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the detail about elders holding golden bowls of incense (Revelation 5:8) significant in understanding their priestly role?
2. According to Revelation 5:9–10, what was the cost and scope of Christ's redemption, and what status does He give to believers?
3. How do the roles of "king" and "priest" combine spiritual leadership and governmental authority in God's eternal kingdom?

Quiz

Section 1: Multiple Choice

1. According to Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5, what was required when establishing new New Testament churches?
 - A) Appointing worship leaders
 - B) Constructing church buildings
 - C) Ordaining elders
 - D) Establishing schools
2. In Acts 15, to whom did Paul and Barnabas bring the question regarding Gentile circumcision?
 - A) The Roman governor
 - B) The apostles and elders in Jerusalem
 - C) The high priest in the Temple
 - D) The congregation in Antioch
3. What distinction is noted between the role of an apostle and the role of an elder in the Book of Revelation?
 - A) Apostles are given higher thrones in Heaven.
 - B) The role of apostle is mentioned only in the past tense regarding earthly ministry, while elders remain active.
 - C) Elders are no longer present in Heaven.
 - D) Apostles replace elders in the throne room.
4. According to 1 Peter 5:2–3, how are elders instructed to shepherd God's flock?
 - A) By lording it over the people assigned to them
 - B) Grudgingly and for personal financial gain
 - C) Willingly, eagerly, and by leading through good example
 - D) By remaining distant from the congregation

5. What are the golden bowls of incense held by the elders in Revelation 5:8 defined as?
- A) The financial offerings of Israel
 - B) The good works of the apostles
 - C) The prayers of the saints
 - D) The blood of sacrifices

Section 2: True or False

1. [**True / False**] John the Apostle referred to himself as an elder in 2 John 1.
2. [**True / False**] According to James 5:14–15, sick believers should call for church pastors to perform sacrifices.
3. [**True / False**] When the living creatures give glory to God, the twenty-four elders cast their crowns before the throne.
4. [**True / False**] In Revelation 7, John explains to the elder who the multitude wearing white robes are.
5. [**True / False**] The song sung by the elders in Revelation 5:9–10 indicates that redemption is restricted exclusively to the Jewish people.

Section 3: Short Answer

1. What promised reward do elders receive when the Great Shepherd appears, according to 1 Peter 5:4?
2. What two specific roles do the elders declare Christ has made redeemed believers into in Revelation 5:10?
3. What exclamation do the elders and four living creatures make in Revelation 19:4 following the destruction of the great harlot?

Answer Key

1. **C — Ordaining elders.** (*Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5 show that while early churches might not have had pastors or worship leaders, appointing elders was required.*)
2. **B — The apostles and elders in Jerusalem.** (*Acts 15:23 notes the council decision came from "the apostles and elders, your brothers in Jerusalem."*)

3. **B — The role of apostle is mentioned only in the past tense regarding earthly ministry, while elders remain active.** (*Revelation does not mention active apostles in Heaven, indicating the apostolic role was temporary on earth while the elder's role is eternal.*)
4. **C — Willingly, eagerly, and by leading through good example.** (*1 Peter 5:2–3 explicitly instructs elders not to lord over people or serve for gain, but to lead by example.*)
5. **C — The prayers of the saints.** (*Revelation 5:8 explicitly defines the fragrant incense in the golden bowls as "the prayers of the saints."*)
6. **True.** (*2 John 1 opens with: "This letter is from John, the elder."*)
7. **False.** (*James 5:14–15 instructs the sick to call for the elders of the church to pray and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.*)
8. **True.** (*Revelation 4:9–10 describes the elders falling down and casting their crowns before the throne whenever the living creatures give glory.*)
9. **False.** (*John did not know who they were; the elder explained to John that the multitude came out of the Great Tribulation.*)
10. **False.** (*Revelation 5:9 states that the Lamb redeemed people "out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation."*)
11. **"A crown of never-ending glory and honor."** (*1 Peter 5:4.*)
12. **Kings and priests.** (*Revelation 5:10 states He has made them "kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth."*)
13. **"Amen. Hallelujah!"** (*Revelation 19:4.*)

Glossary

Term	Source Context Definition
Elder	Spiritual and governmental leaders ordained in early local churches and present on thrones surrounding God's throne in Heaven. Serves as spiritual parents, examples, prayer ministers, worship leaders, and trusted stewards of divine wisdom.

Apostle	A foundational earthly ministry leadership role in the early Church that worked alongside elders (e.g., Acts 15). The role is mentioned strictly in the past tense regarding earthly work in Revelation, suggesting it served a temporary earthly purpose.
Great Shepherd	A title for Jesus Christ used in 1 Peter 5:4, who will grant a crown of never-ending glory and honor to faithful elders upon His appearance.
Golden Bowls of Incense	Celestial vessels held by the twenty-four elders in Revelation 5:8, filled with fragrant incense which represents the prayers of God's people (saints). Reflects a priestly role in Heaven.
Kings and Priests	The dual role assigned to the redeemed by the Lamb in Revelation 5:10. Combines priestly spiritual access and intercession with kingly governmental authority to reign on the earth.
Seventh Trumpet	The prophetic trumpet judgment in Revelation 11:15–18 signaling the return of Jesus Christ, the end of the Great Tribulation, the establishment of God's eternal reign, judgment of the dead, rewarding of the saints, and destruction of earth's destroyers.
Twenty-Four Thrones	The seats surrounding the central throne of God in Revelation 4:4, occupied by twenty-four elders clothed in white garments with golden crowns, symbolizing their high spiritual and governmental authority.