

Who were the seventy elders of Israel?

Elders in the Old Testament were men chosen to lead because of their wisdom, leadership abilities, and proven integrity. Israel had elders even before God delivered the nation from Egyptian slavery, but we don't know how many there were. God sent Moses to appeal to those elders for support before he went to Pharaoh (Exodus 3:16). Each of the twelve tribes had its own elders who represented the interests of that tribe (Numbers 1:16; 13:2-3).

In Exodus 24:1-2, we read of Israel's seventy elders: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance, but Moses alone is to approach the Lord; the others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him.'" The seventy elders are mentioned as a unit and were most likely a distinct group selected from among the many other elders in Israel. Although we don't know for certain, these seventy were probably some of the men Moses chose after taking the advice from his father-in-law, Jethro (Exodus 18:13-26). In that case, they were "capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain" (Exodus 18:25), and they "served as judges for the people at all times" (verse 26).

The seventy elders who climbed part of the way up Sinai with Moses were privileged to experience God more intimately than the rest of Israel did: "Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank" (Exodus 24:9-11).

God later instructed Moses to choose seventy elders and stand at the doorway of the tabernacle where the Lord Himself would come down (Numbers 11:16-17). It could be that these seventy elders were the same individuals whom Moses chose to ascend Sinai, although Scripture does not say definitively. God told Moses that He would place some of His Spirit's power on each of these men so that they could help Moses carry the load of an entire nation. When the Spirit of God rested upon the elders, each one prophesied for the first and only time, an indication that he had been anointed by God for this noble position.

The practice of maintaining seventy elders in Israel continued for a while, but we're not sure how long. There is no mention of the seventy elders in the years of the judges or the kings. During the Captivity, the prophet Ezekiel has a vision in which a group of "seventy elders of Israel" are engaged in idolatry in the temple (Ezekiel 8:11). The fact that there are "seventy" of these idolatrous leaders is undoubtedly an allusion to the seventy elders of Moses' day who, in contrast to Ezekiel's seventy elders, helped lead the people in the proper path. Later in Jewish history, a tribunal of seventy elders formed the Sanhedrin, rulers of Israel who acted as a supreme court. Their seventy-member size was modeled after God's ancient instructions to Moses. It was this body who unfortunately pursued the crucifixion of Jesus (Matthew 26:59).

The number 70 seems to be significant in Scripture. The Lord Jesus appointed seventy (some manuscripts say seventy-two) disciples to carry His message into nearby towns (Luke 10:1). Israel spent seventy years in captivity in Babylon (Jeremiah 29:10), Daniel's prophetic vision included seventy "weeks" (Daniel 9:24), and of course God designated seventy elders to help lead the Israelites.

Spiritual leadership is a grave responsibility, and God holds leaders to a higher standard (James 3:1). The seventy elders of Israel were granted wonderful privileges, but they also carried weighty responsibilities. When God entrusts us with spiritual leadership, we must remain humble, faithful, and obedient so that we will one day hear Him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master!” (Matthew 25:23).