**Module 1: Supplemental Essay**

## **Old Age in the Biblical World**

The Biblical understanding of old age may be most effectively studied in the lives of those faithful who reached an advanced age. Simeon and Anna as presented in Luke 2 serve as exemplars of aged people of God. Luke paints a portrait of two saints who have lived in close communion with God and the scriptures for years.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Two psalms offer a perspective on aging as well. Psalm 90 contrasts the eternity of God with the brief lifespan of mortals. Psalm 71 presents a prayer of gratitude and dependence in the voice of one reflecting on a life lived in intimacy with God.

The perspective of both psalms can be seen in Paul’s life. In 2 Corinthians 4:7-12, Paul writes about his vulnerability. He has constantly faced trouble and hardship, yet has seen God deliver him again and again. His attitude offers a model of how to view the trials of old age. He recognizes both the fragility of his life and the security of serving an eternal God.

Biblical literature therefore invites us to approach old age with the simplicity and peace of Simeon and Anna, and the willingness of Paul to see his suffering and death as footsteps in the path of Jesus. Nevertheless, in some contexts today, older Christians struggle to know God’s love, finding their faith practices to be inadequate for the distinctive challenges of old age. What would it take to connect them to the Spirit of God with the confidence that Simeon, Anna, and Paul displayed?

## **Textual Discussions**

## **Simeon and Anna: Luke 2:25-38**

In Luke’s gospel Simeon and Anna complement one another–one from Jerusalem, one from the diaspora, one from Judea and from the northern tribes, one male and one female.[[2]](#footnote-2) One is named a prophet, one gives a prophecy. One is said to be “righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel,… the Holy Spirit rested on him.” One “worshiped … with fasting and prayer night and day” (Luke 2:25,37). While Simeon speaks to Mary and Joseph and Anna speaks to those round about in the temple, both look forward as the Old Testament prophets did to the messianic age.

Simeon is only one of the characters in the first chapters of Luke who are linked with the Holy Spirit.[[3]](#footnote-3) Raymond Brown sees this as the Spirit of prophecy that was known in the Old Testament rather than the Spirit that Jesus poured out on his church after his ascension.[[4]](#footnote-4) Because Anna is known as a prophet, she too is connected to the Spirit as prophets are inspired by the Spirit.

Brown sees both as exemplars of the “Anawim,” a community of humbly pious Jews both faithful in temple worship and living in humble dependence.[[5]](#footnote-5) The term “Anawim” meaning “Poor ones” may have originally designated the physically poor,” but by Jesus’ day,

it came to refer more widely to those who could not trust in their own strength but had to rely in utter confidence upon God: the lowly, the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, the widows and orphans. The opposite of the Anawim were not simply the rich, but the proud and self-sufficient who showed no need of God or His help.[[6]](#footnote-6)

They would be thoroughly familiar with the psalms as worship texts from their frequent temple attendance.

Some question Simeon’s age,[[7]](#footnote-7) but his willingness to die and his connection with Anna make him a representative of the servant whose work is finished. Anna is variously considered to be either 84 or 105 in age depending on whether she lived as a widow up to the age of 84 or lived for 84 years as a widow.[[8]](#footnote-8) Anna is a “prophetess,” though there had been no prophets in Israel for 400 years.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Sarah Harris says of her: “She is an eschatological preacher who, coupled with Simeon, demonstrates the inclusive and radical nature of the coming kingdom; she is the first of the witnesses who speak the word of God to the people.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

## **Praise and Trust in Old age: Psalm 71**

Psalm 71 characterizes the praise and trust of the *Anawim*, who would be thoroughly familiar with the psalms as worship texts from their frequent temple attendance, specifically in the context of old age. Verse 6 comments on a life lived in trusting dependence on God:[[11]](#footnote-11) “From my birth I have leaned upon you, my protector since my mother’s womb.” The psalmist mixes thanksgiving and lament in his song. He has seen God’s rescue in the past and looks for it in current troubles which include the diminishment of old age:[[12]](#footnote-12) “Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent” (v.9). Verses 17-18 declare that the psalmist will continue his lifelong habit of praising God as long as God gives him opportunity. His “old age and gray hairs” will not stop him from “proclaim[ing] your might to all the generations to come.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The psalmist’s commitment to praise is reflected in the song of Simeon. Simeon has seen the salvation, which [God has] prepared in the presence of all peoples“ (Luke 2:30-31), while the psalmist declares that the number of God’s “deeds of salvation” is “past [his] knowledge“ (Ps. 71:15).

The psalm embodies the spirit of the *Anawim* in its acknowledgement of trials and hardships in which the psalmist’s only hope is God: “O God, do not be far from me; O my God, make haste to help me” (v. 12)! Despite his awareness of his vulnerability, the psalmist is committed to hope and exuberant praise: “My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all day long, though their number is past my knowledge” (v.15). The psalmist’s confidence that God will “bring [him] up…from the depths of the earth” (v. 20) is a seed of the messianic hope that motivated both Simeon and Anna as they waited for the “redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38).

Verse 7 is particularly interesting in its relation to old age. The Hebrew word *mofet* usually translated “portent” can also be read as “example.”[[14]](#footnote-14) In other places it is translated as sign or wonder, even miracle.[[15]](#footnote-15) It points to the way older people serve as signposts of what is to come for those younger. They show us the path forward in many ways, warning us of the physical deterioration of age, but also demonstrating how it can be met with confidence and trust in God.

In Luke’s gospel, Elizabeth serves in this role for Mary. She is a trusted elder who is living a life of faithfulness with whom Mary can share her miraculous but scandalous pregnancy. For Mary, Elizabeth is a mentor who is able to advise and encourage her in her pregnancy and also in her faith. By the work of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth is able to speak confirmation to Mary that the child in her is truly the Son of God (Luke 1:41-44). As Mary lived with Elizabeth and Zechariah for three months, she would have been encouraged and strengthened for the trials ahead by their faith. They truly were a *mofet* to her! Their mouths were full of the praise of God (v.8) and they trusted God for strength in their old age to raise a child.

In sum, Psalm 71 seems to reflect the attitude characteristic of Anna and Simeon: ecstatic praise at the work of God, complete peace with his purposes, an intimate emotional connection and conscious daily dependence on him for rescue and provision.

## **Eternity and Mortality in Contrast: Psalm 90**

Psalm 90 contrasts the short years of human life with the eternity of God. It is attributed to Moses who lived 120 years, a long time for a man, but “a watch in the night” in God’s sight (v. 4). Human life is compared metaphorically to grass that springs up quickly in the morning dew and then withers by evening in the middle eastern climate. Not only is human life short in comparison to God’s eternity (vv. 2, 10), it is spent in “toil and trouble,” which the psalmist attributes to God’s wrath (vv. 7-11). Wisdom comes from “count[ing] our days” (v. 12), that is, knowing our mortality. Simeon particularly models an acceptance of human mortality in his willingness to die.

## **Paul’s Value in Clay Jars: 2 Corinthians 4:7-12**

In agreement with Simeon, the Apostle Paul characterizes himself as God’s *doulos,* servant or slave (v.5) and further exemplifies and commends the posture of the *Anawim*. Paul embraces weakness, humility, and servanthood for the sake of serving Jesus. Like the elderly, Paul had his own death clearly in view; like many of them he was dependent. Yet Paul sees great spiritual significance in his ministry from a stance of dependency.

Paul does not aim for greatness, but for Christ to work through him. In fact, Paul sees God work more powerfully in him in proportion to his vulnerability, as he illustrates with the metaphor of a clay lamp (vv. 6-7). Ben Witherington points out that some clay lamps were fashioned with unusually thin clay so that the light would shine through the clay in the dark. Paul likens himself to one of these especially fragile lamps made of humble materials, but holding power within. It is the very fragility of the vessel that allows the light within to shine brightly.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Paul sees himself as weak, but sustained by the power of God. He is “handed over to death for Jesus’s sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh” (v. 11). Continually experiencing physical trials, Paul nevertheless sees God rescue him and use him in ministry: “We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (vv. 8-10).

He refuses to boast, even in a situation where the Corinthians wish to know his qualifications for ministry, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (12:9-10). According to Judith Gundry Volf, although the Corinthians “took offense at the weakness which characterized Paul’s apostolic ministry, he regarded this very weakness, through which Christ’s power was mightily at work, as divine authentication of his apostleship.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

## **Synthesis of Themes, Values, and Commitments**

The attitude displayed by the aged composer of Psalm 71 is exemplified in the characters of Simeon and Anna, who are representative of the community of the *Anawim*. In Paul we see a disciple who delights in his weakness because of the way it glorifies God.

Old age is a time when strength fails and dependency increases. As various capacities are lost, the aged are uniquely placed to exercise the childlike trust of the *Anawim*. If like Anna and Simeon they have practiced praise, thanksgiving, intimacy, and dependency, they may also, like them, find delight and purpose in blessing the work of God in their midst.

Old age as seen in Psalm 71 and in Simeon and Anna is also a time of looking both back and ahead. Like the composer of Psalm 71, Anna and Simeon see the work of God now as connected to his faithfulness in the past. It is their daily intimacy with God in worship and study, their long habits of thankfulness and practiced posture of humility that position them to be harbingers of the new work of God. Like the psalmist they close their days with exuberant praise.

If older Christians have been formed by a habit of praise and dependency they could more easily develop the acceptance of mortality seen in Simeon, and the conviction that their fragility allows God to be seen like a light shining through a thin and cracked clay lamp. They would be better able to serve as *moftim* for younger people as Elizabeth and Paul did. Then older believers might find that God is nearer than their breath, indeed that the Holy Spirit grows stronger in them even as they endure the distinctive challenges of old age.

1. In ancient Israel, as in many traditional cultures, elders were treated with more respect than is generally true in the contemporary west. Take for example the young Elihu’s explanation of waiting to speak until his elders had finished in Job 32:7: “I said, ’Let days speak, and many years teach wisdom.’” It is not clear, however, if such respect extended to elder women. Widows faced a quite daunting lack of respect in the culture. The emphasis of the prophets on caring for widows as a mark of righteousness seems to indicate that they were of little value in the culture despite the proverbs about honoring those with gray hair (Prov. 16:31, 20:29). Proverbs 23:22 specifically says: “do not despise your mother when she is old”! Jesus called out the scribes for “devouring widows’ houses” (Mark 12:40) and told a parable about a widow having to badger a judge for justice (Luke 18:1-5). The discrepancy between the societal attitudes toward older men and widows leaves open the question of how married older women were viewed. On that topic there is very little evidence.

   Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations will reference the New Revised Standard Updated Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mary is told the Holy Spirit will “come upon” her to engender the child Jesus (Luke 1:35); Elizabeth is “filled with the Holy Spirit” when Mary visits her (1:41); Zechariah is also “filled” with the Spirit (1:67). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Raymond Edward Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, New updated ed., [Nachdr.] (New Haven, Conn. London: Yale University Press, 2007), 274, 452. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Luke gives the canticles of Zechariah, Mary, Simeon (which he may have gotten from a community of Anawim who followed Jesus) to “the characters to whom he attributed …the piety of the Anawim.” Brown, 353. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 350–51. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Leon Morris, *Luke*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 3 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1988), 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 99–100. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Morris, *Luke*, 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sarah Harris, “Letting (H)Anna Speak: An Intertextual Reading of the New Testament Prophetess (Luke 2.36–38),” *Feminist Theology* 27, no. 1 (September 2018): 60–74, https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735018794483. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Nancy L. DeClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 566–72. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., *Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 2. print, vol. 5, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: With the New International Version (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1991), 463. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gaebelein, *Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 467. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 245. Alter notes: “*Mofet”* generally has a positive connotation, and the positive meaning is confirmed by the second verset.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ex. 7:3 “…I may multiply… My *wonders* in the land of Egypt” (NASB), Ex. 7:9 “Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, ‘Work a *miracle*,’” Deut. 29:3 “those great signs and *wonders*.” Referring to the plagues against Egypt. 1 Kings 13:3 “’This is the *sign* which the Lord has spoken.’” These references illustrate the complexity of the word. It indicates a wonder in the sense of something rare and unusual, even supernatural, but also connected often with both God’s judgment against evil and his liberation of his people. All these references are to the NASB. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI : W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 386–87. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Judith Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990) 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)