

Perspectives on Ageing and Old Age in the Old Testament

Abstract

In recent years, an increasing interest in anthropological topics can be observed in Old Testament scholarship. In this context, the topic of “age and ageing” has also gained considerable importance in the field of Old Testament anthropology. This article provides an overview of the subject and the images of ageing and old age on the basis of selected passages from the various text genres of the Old Testament including narrative texts, wisdom literature, legal texts, or poetic literature. Three aspects of old age and ageing are considered: (1) chronological aspects: the division of life into stages and human life expectancy, (2) biological aspects: the physical ageing process with physical and mental changes, and (3) social aspects: the social position of aged and wise people and the care for the elderly.

1 Introduction

“He or she has reached a biblical age”, is what is proverbially said to this day when someone grows very old or dies at an advanced age. This phrase is mainly rooted in the biblical narratives about the extreme old age of the primeval figures, among them the most famous old man, Methuselah. According to biblical tradition, he reached an age of 969 years and thus became a kind of prototype of longevity, so that his name is still used in a figurative sense today to describe someone who is very old.¹ However, the topic of old age in the Old Testament literature is not exhausted in these high, symbolic ages that are reported in the narratives and genealogies of the book of Genesis. Rather, the topic of ageing and old age occurs in various textual genres of the Old Testament, such as the wisdom writings, poetic literature, legal or narrative texts. In contrast to Greek

1 Cf., e.g. “Das Methusalem-Komplott” which is a book that deals with the ageing of society (Frank Schirrmacher, *Das Methusalem-Komplott*, München ^s2004), or, in the “Asterix” comic series, the name “Methusalix” for the oldest inhabitant in the small Gaelic village.

and Roman antiquity, there are no comprehensive treatises or philosophical reflections on ageing and old age in the Bible. Only some texts explicitly focus on the aged or the human ageing process.² More often, it is only a few verses within a text from which conclusions can be drawn about the perception of old age in biblical times. In terms of everyday life in ancient Israel, the sources can only be evaluated to a limited extent, as these texts in many cases reflect the view of a certain social class, namely the scribal elites.³

When looking at the texts of the Old Testament, we find a great variety of images of old age and different attitudes towards ageing and old people. In order to classify and examine this diversity, Old Testament scholarship can benefit from the categorisations and different perspectives on old age and ageing in the field of gerontological research.⁴ In my paper on old age in Old Testament literature, I would like to focus on three selected aspects:⁵ Firstly, chronological aspects such as the human life expectancy, or the division of life into stages; then, biological aspects such as the biological ageing process, which comprise both physical and mental changes, and finally, social aspects including the position of aged and wise people in the society of ancient Israel as well as how the elderly were cared for. In the Old Testament, all these issues are permeated by the theological aspect, to which I will return separately at the conclusion.

2 Cf. e. g. 2 Sam. 19:32–41.

3 Beate Wagner-Hasel, *Alter in der Antike. Eine Kulturgeschichte*, Wien-Köln-Weimar 2012, p. 14.

4 For an overview, cf. e. g. Paul M. Balthes/Jürgen Mittelstraß/Ursula M. Staudinger (Eds.), *Alter und Altern. Ein interdisziplinärer Studententext zur Gerontologie*, Berlin-New York 2018; Andreas Kruse/Hans-Werner Wahl, *Zukunft Altern. Individuelle und gesellschaftliche Weichenstellungen*, Heidelberg 2010; Hans-Werner Wahl/Vera Heyl, *Gerontologie – Einführung und Geschichte*, Stuttgart 2015 (*Grundrisse Gerontologie* 1).

5 Stephanie Ernst, *Segen – Aufgabe – Einsicht. Aspekte und Bilder des Alterns in den Texten des Alten Israel*, St. Ottilien 2011 (ATS.AT 93), pp. 15–17; Rolf Knierim, *Age and Aging in the Old Testament*, in: William M. Clements (Ed.), *Ministry with the Aging*, San Francisco-London 1981, pp. 21–36.

2 Chronological Aspects

2.1 Phases of Life

The division of life into different stages is widespread in the ancient Near East and is also known in Old Testament literature.⁶ In most cases, human life is divided into three (childhood, adulthood, old age), four (childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age), or, less frequently, five stages (childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, and extreme old age), without these being delimited by certain age limits.⁷ Compared to Greco-Roman antiquity, however, there is only limited evidence in the ancient Near East literature of a stage model of life phases. The texts known so far presuppose a decimal system, and, in some cases, indicate the beginning of the phase of “old age”.⁸ As far as the Old Testament is concerned, only a kind of a stage model is preserved in Leviticus 27:1–8, a post-exilic appendix to the law of holiness (Leviticus 17–26):⁹

1 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 2 Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When a person makes an explicit vow to the Lord concerning the equivalent for a human being, 3 the equivalent for a male shall be: from twenty to sixty years of age the equivalent shall be fifty shekels of silver by the sanctuary shekel. 4 If the person

6 Moshe Weinfeld, *The Phases of Human Life in Mesopotamian and Jewish Sources*, in: Eugene Ulrich / John W. Wright / Robert P. Carroll / Philip R. Davies (Eds.), *Priests, Prophets and Scribes. Essays on the Formation and Heritage of Second Temple Judaism in Honour of Joseph Blenkinsopp*, Sheffield 1992 (JSOT.S 149), pp. 182–189; Milton Eng, *The Days of Our Years. A Lexical Semantic Study of the Life Cycle in Biblical Israel*, New York 2011 (LHBOTS 464), pp. 44–57.

7 Deut. 32:25; Jer. 6:11, 51:22; Ezek. 9:6; Thomas Pola, *Vom Kleinkind bis zu den “Ältesten”. Zu den Lebensaltern im Alten Testament*, in: *ThBeitr* 42 (2011), pp. 127–142; Eng, *Days* (see note 6), pp. 52–57.

8 For Mesopotamia cf. the short list on the Sultantepe tablet from the 7th century CE (STT 400; Rivkah Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia. The Gilgamesh Epic and Other Literature*, Oklahoma 2000, pp. 28–30); for Egypt cf. the instruction of “Papyrus Insinger” from the Ptolemaic period (Rosalind M. Janssen / Jac. J. Janssen, *Growing Up and Getting Old in Ancient Egypt*, London 2007, p. 197; Abraham Malamat, *Longevity. Biblical Concepts and Some Ancient Near Eastern Parallels*, in: *AfO.B* 19 [1982], pp. 215–224, at p. 216). Cf. also Eng, *Days* (see note 6), pp. 44–50.

9 For Lev. 27 cf. Thomas Pola, *Eine priesterschriftliche Auffassung der Lebensalter*, in: Michaela Bauks / Kathrin Liess / Peter Riede (Eds.), *“Was ist der Mensch, dass du seiner gedenkst”* (Psalm 8,5). *Aspekte einer theologischen Anthropologie. Festschrift für Bernd Janowski zum 65. Geburtstag*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2008, pp. 389–408, at pp. 390–392, 405–408; Thomas Hieke, *Leviticus*, 2 vols., Freiburg-Basel-Wien 2014 (HThKAT 6,1–2), vol. 2: 16–27, pp. 1108–1111.

is a female, the equivalent is thirty shekels. 5 If the age is from five to twenty years of age, the equivalent is twenty shekels for a male and ten shekels for a female. 6 If the age is from one month to five years, the equivalent for a male is five shekels of silver, and for a female the equivalent is three shekels of silver. 7 And if the person is sixty years old or over, then the equivalent for a male is fifteen shekels, and for a female ten shekels' (Lev. 27:1–8).¹⁰

This text presents a classification of life phases from a priestly perspective and lists the amounts of money required for the release of people who have dedicated their lives to the sanctuary in a vow, distinguishing four phases of human life: children between the ages of one month and five years, young people from the ages of five to 20 years, adults from the ages of 20 to 60 years and, finally, men and women over the age of 60. The criterion for the money to be given to the sanctuary is human labour. Men and women aged between 20 and 60 have the highest value (50 and 30 shekels respectively), because this phase of life is considered to be the time of greatest productivity; for those aged over 60, on the other hand, less money has to be given due to their reduced ability to work (15 and 10 shekels respectively). According to this list, the age of 60 marks a significant caesura in human life and can, in a sense, be regarded as the beginning of old age. However, this age caesura does not apply without exception, as is shown by another priestly text that sets a lower age limit of 50 years as marking the end of the priests' service in the sanctuary (Num. 4:3.23.47; cf. 8,25).

2.2 Life Expectancy

The life expectancy in ancient Israel is difficult to determine based on the available sources. In general, drawing on archaeological evidence, e. g. in the necropolises of Jericho or Megiddo, one can assume a maximum average age of approximately 30 to 40 years, which means that only a small percentage of the population may have reached the age of 60 years or even more.¹¹ Considering the literary sources such as the Deuteronomistic

10 All translations of biblical texts are based on the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

11 Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Life Expectancy in Ancient Palestine*, in: *SJOT* 11 (1997), pp. 44–55; Douglas A. Knight, *Perspectives on Aging and the Elderly in the Hebrew Bible*, in: *Interpretation* 68 (2014), pp. 136–149, at pp. 139–141; Kathrin Liess, *Zwischen Ideal und Wirklichkeit. Lebensalter und Lebenserwartung im Alten Testament*, in: Malte Cramer / Peter Wick (Eds.), *Alter und Altern in der Bibel. Exegetische Perspektiven auf Altersdiskurse im Alten und Neuen Testament*, Stuttgart 2021, pp. 31–57.

History (i. e. the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings), the average age for kings is about 46.¹² However, it must be taken into account that kings had, due to their social status and life circumstances, a much higher life expectancy than the average population, who lived and worked under worse economic conditions.

From the average life expectancy in Old Testament times the very long lifespans of primeval figures – such as the already mentioned ancestor Methuselah or the protagonist of the flood narrative, Noah – deviate to a large extent, for their age by far exceeds the human life limit. In the genealogies of the book of Genesis, Genesis 5 and 11, the mythical ages of the ancestral figures before the flood range from 365 (Enoch) to 969 years (Methuselah). The postdiluvian period, by contrast, is characterised by decreasing ages of the characters in the narratives in Genesis 12–50 (the patriarchal narratives and the story of Joseph), which are nevertheless still higher than the average lifespan (Abraham: 175, Sara: 127, Isaac: 180, Jacob: 147, and Joseph: 110 years).¹³

The idea of extreme old ages of the ancestors is shared by the Old Testament with its ancient Near Eastern environment. An important parallel is represented, for example, by the Sumerian King List, which offers a comparable distinction between a time before and after the flood with the same concept of a decreasing life span in postdiluvian times. As in the Sumerian List, the high ages reported in the biblical narratives are not to be taken literally but rather have a symbolic meaning. In the genealogy Genesis 5, they connect the first humans to the mythical primeval times of the world and indicate a close connection of the ancestors of mankind with the divine sphere.¹⁴ In the case of the progenitors of Israel (Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob), their mythical ages are an expression of divine blessing as well as of an exceptional closeness to God. Some numbers also have symbolic value: 365 years (Enoch) correspond to the days of the solar year, 110 years (Joseph) represent the Egyptian ideal age,¹⁵ and 120 years (Moses) symbolise perfection according to the sexagesimal system common in Mesopotamia.¹⁶

12 Pola, *Auffassung* (see note 9), p. 404; Wolfgang Zwickel, *Alt werden in Israel. Das durchschnittliche Lebensalter in der antiken Welt*, in: *WUB* 61 (2011) pp. 76–77.

13 Gen. 25:7 (Abraham), 35:18 (Isaac), 47:28 (Jacob); Gen. 50:26 (Joseph).

14 Ute Neumann-Gorsolke, “Aber Abraham und Sarah waren alt, hochbetagt...” (Gen. 18:11). *Altersdarstellungen und Funktionen von Altersaussagen im Alten Testament*, in: Angelika Berlejung/Jan Dietrich/Friedrich Wilhelm Quack (Eds.), *Menschenbilder und Körperkonzepte im Alten Israel, in Ägypten und um Alten Orient*, Tübingen 2012 (ORA 9), pp. 255–285, at p. 261.

15 Janssen/Janssen, *Growing* (see note 8), pp. 194–203.

16 Harris, *Gender and Aging* (see note 8), pp. 30–31; Jacob Klein, *The “Bane” of Humanity. A Lifespan of One Hundred Twenty Years*, in: *ASJ* 12 (1990), pp. 57–70.

In contrast to the extreme old ages of the prehistoric figures, Psalm 90, a psalm influenced by wisdom theology, mentions a realistic life expectancy from today's perspective: "The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away ... So teach us to count our days, that we may gain a wise heart" (Ps. 90:10–12). Compared to the average life expectancy in ancient Israel, 70 to 80 years represent a very long lifespan that only very few were granted. Nevertheless, the psalm is dominated by a negative view of life and the psalmist laments transience and death. Faced with life's fleeting nature, he turns to God as a teacher with an urgent plea, asking for a wise way of dealing with life's brevity.¹⁷ His insistent request to learn "to count the days" is aimed at developing awareness of each day of life. The psalmist strives to gain a "wise heart" that enables a realistic worldview that affirms reality, even that of death. Consequently, the petition of Ps. 90:12 reflects a wisdom-oriented attitude to life that focuses on the preciousness of each day in the face of human transience and mortality.¹⁸

The number 70, mentioned in Psalm 90 as the limit of a life in years, has a symbolic meaning as it denotes completeness and perfection. A lifetime of 80 years goes even beyond that and is therefore a sign of strength. However, apart from the figures of Israel's prehistory such as Methuselah, Noah, or Abraham and Sarah, people who reached or even exceeded the age of 70 or 80 remain the exception in Old Testament narratives. Examples include, among others, early leaders of the people (Moses: 120 years [Deut. 34,7]; Aaron: 123 years [Num. 33:39]; Joshua: 110 years [Josh 24:29]) or figures central to the early Israelite kingdom such as the ideal king David, who reached the perfect age of 70 but nevertheless suffered from old age (1 Kgs. 1:1–4), or Barzillai the Gileadite, his servant, who retires from active life at the age of 80 and prepares for death (2 Sam. 19:32–41).

17 Walter Brueggemann / William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms*, Cambridge 2014 (NCBC), pp. 392–393.

18 Frank-Lothar Hossfeld / Erich Zenger, *Psalmen 51–100*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 2000 (HThKAT 26), p. 612; Christine Forster, *Begrenztes Leben als Herausforderung. Das Vergänglichkeitsmotiv in weisheitlichen Psalmen*, Zürich-Freiburg 2000, p. 191; Hubert Irsigler, *Psalm 90. Der vergängliche Mensch vor dem ewigen Gott*, in: id., *Vom Adamssohn zum Immanuel. Gastvorträge Pretoria 1996, St. Ottilien 1997 (ATS.AT 58)*, pp. 49–67, at p. 65. For the interpretation of Psalm 90, cf. also Theodor Seidl, *Allgemeine Klage über die Vergänglichkeit oder Bittgebet in individueller Not. Zur kontroversen Auslegung von Psalm 90*, in: Andreas Michel / Nicole Katrin Rüttgers (Eds.), *Jeremia, Deuteronomismus und die Priesterschrift. Beiträge zur Literatur- und Theologiegeschichte des Alten Testaments. Festschrift für Hermann-Josef Stipp zum 65. Geburtstag*, St. Ottilien 2019 (ATS.AT 105), pp. 233–262.

Two other very old characters are priests, Eli reached the age of 98 (1 Sam. 4:15), and Jehoiada reached the age of 130 years (2 Chr. 24:15).

While Psalm 90 limits life to 70 or 80 years, two other Old Testament texts presuppose an even longer lifespan. According to Sir. 18:9, a human being can only live to be a hundred years old, and in Gen. 6:3, the human lifetime is limited to the symbolic 120 years: “Then the Lord said: ‘My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years’” (Gen. 6:3). According to the Old Testament only Moses, who is *the* central figure in Israel’s history as the leader of the Exodus from Egypt and the mediator between God and his people, reached this ideal age of 120 years. Remarkably, he did this without showing any physical signs of old age (Deut. 34:7). For the eschatological times, prophetic literature hopes for a transgression of the limitation of lifetime. As promised in Isaiah 65, the usual division of life phases will be shifted, for those who die at 100 are still considered “young men”: “No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed” (Isa. 65:20).

3 Biological aspects

3.1 Physical Signs of Old Age

Ageing is a biological process that affects both the human body and mind. As in many cultures, in Old Testament literature the physiognomy of old age is determined by bent posture and grey or white hair. Even in the time of eschatological salvation, old people will need a stick to walk (Zech. 8:4). Since the second characteristic, grey hair, is such an important topos of old age, the term used in ancient Israel for old people is derived from it: the Hebrew *šēbāh* has two meanings, “grey hair” and “old age”. However, grey hair can also be regarded positively as a sign of honour and the righteous living of old and wise people, as two passages from the book of Proverbs illustrate:¹⁹ “Grey hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life” (Prov. 16:31) and “The glory of youths is their

19 Arndt Meinhold, *Beginn und Bewertung des Greisenalters*, in: id., *Zur weisheitlichen Sicht des Menschen. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Leipzig 2002 (ABIG 6), pp. 79–116, at pp. 105–107; Kathrin Liess, “Der Glanz der Alten ist ihr graues Haar” (Spr 20,29). *Alter und Weisheit in der alttestamentlichen und apokryphen Weisheitsliteratur*, in: Bernd Janowski / Kathrin Liess (Eds.), *Der Mensch im Alten Israel. Neue Forschungen zur alttestamentlichen Anthropologie*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 2009 (HBS 59), pp. 453–484, pp. 456–467.

strength, but the beauty of the aged is their grey hair” (Prov. 20:29). In addition to the physiognomy of old age such as grey hair and a stooped posture, age-related symptoms and discomforts are described, particularly in narratives. Among the most important texts are the stories of the 80-year-old Barzillai the Gileadite (2 Sam. 19:32–41), the narratives of the ancient progenitors of Israel, Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 18:9–15), or the story of the 70-year-old king David (1 Kgs. 1:1–4).

At an advanced age Barzillai, who once served at the royal court, sees himself as a burden to king David, afflicted as he is from physical and mental limitations, such as the loss of hearing and taste as well as the lack of discernment between good and evil (2 Sam. 19:36).²⁰

32 Barzillai was a very aged man, eighty years old. He had provided the king with food while he stayed at Mahanaim, for he was a very wealthy man. 33 The king said to Barzillai: ‘Come over with me, and I will provide for you in Jerusalem at my side.’ 34 But Barzillai said to the king: ‘How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? 35 Today I am eighty years old; can I discern what is good and what is evil? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king? 36 Your servant will go a little way over the Jordan with the king. Why should the king recompense me with such a reward? 37 Please let your servant return, so that I may die in my own town, near the graves of my father and my mother’ (2 Sam. 19:32–37).

Not only the servant, but also king David himself suffers from symptoms of old age, since his frail body does not get warm (1 Kgs. 1:1–4). About the ancestors Abraham and Sarah it is reported that they are infertile due to their advanced age until God ends their childlessness (Gen. 18:11–12, cf. 17:17). Beyond these narratives, the Old Testament literature mentions other physical characteristics of ageing such as, for instance, the loss of eyesight (Gen. 27:1; 48:10; 1 Sam. 3:2, etc.), a disease of the feet (1 Kgs. 15:23), limited physical mobility (Sir. 25:20), or decreasing strength (Ps. 71:9, 18). In addition to the physical changes, there are cognitive impairments such as the lack of knowledge and cognition (2 Sam. 19:36), decline in memory, and loss of insight and understanding (Eccl. 4:13; Sir. 3:13; 25:2).

20 For this text cf. Ute Neumann-Gorsolke, Barsillai, der Gileaditer. Überlegungen zu Bedeutung und Funktion der Altersaussagen in 2 Samuel 19, 32–41, in: Bauks/Liess/Riede (Eds.), “Was ist der Mensch” (see note 9), pp. 375–388; Ernst, Segen (see note 5), pp. 45–56.

3.2 Counter-Images to the Physical Ageing Process

The above examples show that in Old Testament literature the description of the ageing process is characterised by loss, both of physical and mental abilities. But, on the other hand, there are numerous texts in the wisdom literature that consider ageing as a mental maturation process and emphasise the wisdom of the aged.²¹ In addition, the biblical literature occasionally presents ideal counter-images to the physical ageing process. Thus, the main characters of the early biblical history described in the books of Genesis and Exodus to Deuteronomy are exempted from the typical signs of ageing. Through God's promise, Abraham and Sarah's age-related infertility is reversed, and Sarah gives birth to a child despite her old age (Gen. 18:9–15; 21:1–7). Moses, the central figure of the Exodus, is not subject to age-related diseases; rather, "his eyes had not grown dim, and his vigour had not waned" (Deut. 34:7), when he died at the ideal age of 120. Remarkably, these extraordinary characters each stand at the beginning of a decisive stage in Israel's history: with the old couple Abraham and Sarah, after the primeval history (Gen. 1–11), the history of Israel's ancestors begins (Gen. 12–50), and with Moses the history of Israel as a nation commences (Exodus-Deuteronomy). At the same time, the old Moses is at the end of an era, for he retires and dies at the border of the promised land as a very old but still vital man. While these early characters were spared the typical physical complaints of old age (Moses), or their physical limitations of old age were overcome by divine promises (Abraham and Sarah), other figures, such as the patriarch Isaac, the ideal king David or Eli the priest, reached a ripe old age but nevertheless suffered from the symptoms of ageing (Gen. 27:1; 1 Sam. 4:15; 1 Kgs. 1:1–4).

As for the individual, in the book of Psalms the righteous and pious are promised a good old age without weakness and disease. This is described particularly impressively in Psalm 92, a thanksgiving psalm, which uses plant motifs to sketch a picture of the fullness of life and vitality of the righteous unto old age, living in faithful relationship with God:²² "The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap" (Ps. 92:12–14). But

21 See the following section on social aspects.

22 For Ps. 92 cf. W. Dennis Tucker, "The Ordered World of Psalm 92", in: OTE 32 (2019), pp. 358–377, at pp. 368–372; Kathrin Liess, "Jung bin ich gewesen und alt geworden." Lebenszeit und Alter in den Psalmen, in: Thorsten Fitzon/Sandra Linden/ead./Dorothee Elm (Eds.), *Alterszäsuren. Zeit und Lebensalter in Literatur, Theologie und Geschichte*, Berlin-Boston 2012, pp. 131–170, at pp. 138–144.

these ideal counter-images described in Ps. 92 or Deut. 34:7 remain the exception; much more often the Old Testament presupposes typical, cross-cultural characteristics of old age such as declining physical abilities.

4 Social Aspects

The social status of the elderly, their role in society and the care for the elderly are closely related to the biological aspects of ageing. On the one hand, the increase in life experience and knowledge can have a positive impact on social status: old people, because of their wisdom, deserve a special dignity. On the other hand, old age is, as described above, characterised by increasing physical and mental limitations. This also affects the position of the elderly in society: weakened by age, old people may be exposed to a lack of appreciation by younger generations. Moreover, due to their declining capacity for labour, they need support and material care from other members of society. Both sides of the social perception of old people – respect and dignity on the one hand, contempt and dependence on the other – have found their expression in Old Testament literature. Whereas the topic of wisdom of old persons plays a central role in biblical wisdom writings, the lack of respect for the older generations and the care for the elderly are mainly the subject of the legal texts, and also of the wisdom writings.

4.1 Wisdom and Dignity

According to the Old Testament writings, wisdom and old age are closely related and lead to a privileged position of wise, old people in society. In many cases, the worldly wisdom of parents and the elderly is emphasised:²³ “How attractive is sound judgment in the grey-haired, and for the aged to possess good counsel! How attractive is wisdom in the aged, and understanding and counsel in the venerable! Rich experience is the crown of the aged, and their boast is the fear of the Lord” (Sir. 25:4–6). The older generation is responsible for teaching and sharing their knowledge with the next generation (Sir. 8:9). Therefore,

23 Meinhold, *Beginn* (see note 19), at pp. 105–107; Rüdiger Lux, *Alter und Weisheit. Reflexionen über die Lebenskunst des Alterns in den biblischen Weisheitsschriften*, in: Kristian Kühl/Gerhard Seher (Eds.), *Rom, Recht und Religion. Symposion für Udo Ebert zum 70. Geburtstag*, Tübingen 2011 (Politika 5), pp. 629–644.

the younger generation is advised to stay in the company of old people (Sir. 6:34) and to consult them in order to learn from them (Job 8:8–9).

The instructions and the wealth of experience of the older generation are preserved in the wisdom collections of the biblical literature, including the late Greek writings such as the book of Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. Both the book of Proverbs as well as the later book of Sirach accumulate wisdom sayings to be transmitted from the wise, older generation to the younger generation. This process of transmission is reflected in the prologue of the Greek translation of the book of Sirach. Added by Sirach's grandson, the prologue explicitly introduces and thereby authorises the collection as the words of his wise grandfather. The grandson, in turn, is tasked with translating his grandfather's wisdom and thus passing it on to the contemporary Greek readership:²⁴

Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them, and for these we should praise Israel for instruction and wisdom. Now, those who read the scriptures must not only themselves understand them, but must also as lovers of learning be able through the spoken and written word to help the outsiders. So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom, so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the law (Prologue, lines 1–14).

In narrative literature, 1 Kings 12 provides an exemplary situation in which the elderly are characterised as being wise and circumspect advisers.²⁵ When king Rehoboam succeeds Solomon, he disregards the advice of the elderly who had advised his father before, and chooses to follow the false recommendations of his contemporaries instead. The advice of the two generations could not be more contrary to one another. The life-experienced generation of the elders recommends the king to be a “servant of the people”, for then his people will also serve him (1 Kgs. 12:6–8, 13). The young, on the contrary, recommend subjecting the people to harsher servitude (1 Kgs. 12:8–11, 14), which finally leads to

24 For the prologue cf. Georg Sauer, *Jesus Sirach / Ben Sira*, Göttingen 2000 (ATD.A 1), pp. 36–41; Johannes Marböck, *Jesus Sirach 1–23*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 2010 (HThKAT 32), pp. 36–45.

25 For 1 Kgs. 12:1–19 cf. Moshe Weinfeld, *The Counsel of the “Elders” to Rehoboam and its Implications*, in: *Maraav 3* (1982), pp. 27–53; Ernst Axel Knauf, *1 Könige 1–14*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 2016 (HThKAT 14), pp. 375–379; Ernst, *Segen* (see note 5), pp. 66–86.

separation and division of the united monarchy into the northern and the southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah. By describing the negative result, the narrative highlights the wisdom of the older generation in contrast to the young. At the same time, it reveals the problematic relationship between the two generations, for in youthful arrogance the inexperienced king ignores the sage advice of the elders, and thereby questions also their social position and authority.

While 1 Kings 12 emphasises the wisdom of the elders as advisers, an increasingly critical evaluation of the connection between wisdom and old age can be observed in the later wisdom literature, which also affects the position of the elderly in society.²⁶ According to classical wisdom tradition a righteous way of life leads to a long life. For those who follow wisdom and righteousness throughout their lives can enjoy a fulfilling life and social dignity (cf. e. g. Prov. 3:1–26; 4:10–27, etc.). But this connection between act and consequence, the so-called *Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang*, is no longer self-evident in the late post-exilic wisdom writings such as the book of Job or the Wisdom of Solomon illustrate. In fact, these books deal with the suffering and the premature death of the righteous. In the book of Job (5th–3rd century BC) the wisdom of the elderly fails to explain the suffering of the innocent and righteous Job. Whereas Job's three friends refer to the wisdom of the old people (Job 15:10), Job himself emphasises the elusiveness of wisdom. Wisdom can only be found in God, who can also withdraw it from the elderly: "Is wisdom with the aged, and understanding in length of days? With God are wisdom and strength; he has counsel and understanding ... He deprives of speech those who are trusted, and takes away the discernment of the old people" (Job 12:12–13, 20).

In the "Elihu speeches" (Job 32–37), a part of the book of Job added in later times, Job's fourth friend, Elihu, as a representative of the younger generation, denies the privilege of the elders to speak first. According to Elihu, wisdom is a gift from God the creator, and can be given to anyone, even to a younger person. Therefore, as a young man, he no longer wants to modestly withhold his view, but to declare his own wise opinion:

6 Elihu son of Barachel the Buzite answered:

'I am young in years, and you are aged;

therefore I was timid and afraid to declare my opinion to you.'

7 I said, 'Let days speak, and many years teach wisdom.'

8 But truly it is the spirit in a mortal,

26 Meinhold, *Beginn* (see note 19), pp. 107–108, Liess, *Glanz* (see note 19), pp. 467–480, Lux, *Alter* (see note 23), pp. 636–643.

the breath of the Almighty, that makes for understanding.

9 It is not the old that are wise,
nor the aged that understand what is right.

10 Therefore I say, 'Listen to me;
let me also declare my opinion' (Job 32:6–10).

The Wisdom of Solomon (1st century BC) relativises the relationship of wisdom and old age in view of the early death of the righteous one. The dignity and wisdom of old age can already be attributed to a wise and righteous man who dies young:²⁷ “But the righteous, though they die early, will be at rest. For old age is not honoured for length of time, or measured by number of years; but understanding is grey hair for anyone, and a blameless life is ripe old age” (Wis. 4:7–9). The reasons why the connection between advanced age and wisdom was relativised in late Old Testament literature are probably to be found in the mental and social changes in late post-exilic times. The hope for an afterlife that emerged during this period shed new light on earthly life, and thus also on ageing and old age. In particular, the hope for eternal life and immortality significantly contributed to a re-evaluation of “old age” or the dignity of old age, as for example described in Wisdom 4. In addition, new challenges and questions arose from the encounter with Greek philosophy and education, to which particularly the younger generation turned.²⁸ These new challenges of the Hellenistic era could no longer be mastered solely with the wisdom of the elderly.²⁹ Certainly, this changed context also may have contributed to a critical questioning of the wisdom of the elderly and thus of their social status as well.

Beyond the challenging of their wisdom, the threatening loss of honour and social prestige of the elderly is a well-known problem described in Old Testament literature, both in the legal texts and in the wisdom writings. Weakness, decreasing vitality and mental limitations carry the risk of provoking social disregard. On the one hand, the Old Testament contains exhortations to treat old people with honour and respect and thus the commandment to honour one's father and mother applies especially to the aged parents and probably includes caring for the elderly in general (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16; cf. Lev. 19:3; see below). Remarkably, the promise for those who keep this commandment is that they themselves will enjoy a long and fulfilling life. On the other hand, to ameliorate the loss of dignity and authority in old age, there are numerous admonitions addressed to the younger generation not to mock, insult, or despise frail, old people. Even if the

27 Liess, Glanz (see note 19), pp. 471–480; Lux, Alter (see note 23), pp. 640–641.

28 Lux, Alter (see note 23), pp. 640–641.

29 Ibid., p. 638 (note 34).

father's mind diminishes with advancing age, one should not have contempt for him, but be patient with him (Sir. 3:12–13). And the mother should not be despised when she is grown old (Prov. 23:22). These admonitions can be further reinforced by referring to one's own impending ageing: "Do not disdain one who is old, for some of us are also growing old" (Sir. 8:6). In addition, the fear of God is also cited as a motivation to respect and care for the old: "Thou shall rise before the grey hair / the aged, and you shall honour the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God" (Lev. 19:32). Finally, exhortations to honour the elderly may include specific rules for respectful behaviour, such as standing up as a gesture of deference to an old person (Lev. 19:32) or respecting the privilege of elders to speak first at the banquet (Sir. 32:3).

4.2 Working Life and Care for the Elderly

In contrast to modern society, where retirement from working life is regulated by specific age limits, such caesuras are hardly documented in the ancient Near East. In the Old Testament literature, one exception is recorded: the already mentioned caesura of 50 years for leaving the priesthood (Num. 4:3). "Old age" in the sense of a phase of life beyond working life is almost unknown from the ancient Near East. As far as ancient Israel is concerned, there is little information about work in old age. Of course, old people also still play a social role in the Old Testament narratives. Moses remains the leader of the people of Israel until the age of 120, only stepping down shortly before his death (Deut. 31:1–8). Eli, despite his old age, still works as a priest until he finally dies at the age of 98 (1 Sam. 4:15–18), and Samuel is a famous "judge" and prophet in Israel until his old age (1 Sam. 8–12). Old people can still work in the fields (Judg. 19:16) or act as advisers of the king, as elders (1 Kgs. 12). However, the social role of the elders, who were responsible for political or legal tasks such as the jurisdiction in the gate (Num. 5:14), can hardly be limited to old people. Unlike in peasant life, for which one can expect a gradual withdrawal from daily working life due to physical constraints,³⁰ priestly texts from the exilic and post-exilic period mention specific age limits for the end of professional life by stating that at the age of 50 priests should retire from their active service in the sanctuary (Num. 4:3, 23, 30, 47; 8:25). However, even after their retirement they could still assist

30 Christian Frevel, "Du wirst jemanden haben, der dein Herz erfreut und dich im Alter versorgt" (Rut 4,15). Alter und Altersversorgung im Alten / Ersten Testament, in: Rainer Kampling / Anja Middelbeck-Varwick (Eds.), *Alter – Blicke auf das Bevorstehende*, Frankfurt a. M. 2009 (Apeliotes. Studien zur Kulturgeschichte und Theologie 4), pp. 11–43, at p. 22.

the younger priests (Num. 8:26). The desire for relief may well have been the reason why the old prophet and judge, Samuel, appointed his sons as judges (1 Sam. 8:1). When his political task of establishing the kingship in Israel was finished, he finally withdrew from the judgeship (1 Sam. 12:2), but still retained his prophetic role.

The above-mentioned story of Barzillai the Gileadite (2 Sam. 19:32–41) tells of retirement from active life at the royal court. Aware that he has only a little time left, the 80-year-old Barzillai, who served king David, withdraws from the royal circle and goes back to his homeland (2 Sam. 19:38). Due to his old age, he would, in his own words, only be a ‘burden’ to the king, since he would depend on support. Therefore, he separates himself spatially from the king and refuses any kind of support or care from him (2 Sam. 19:36). In ancient Israel, as in the entire ancient Near East, the care for the elderly was primarily the responsibility of the family, unlike is the case in modern societies.³¹ The eldest son was obliged to support his aged parents until their death and to organise their burial (Tob. 4:3–5). Childlessness was therefore a severe problem. In the book of Ruth, there is great joy about the birth of a son, for he ensures that Ruth will be cared for when she grows old: “He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age” (Ruth 4:15).

Besides these two narratives in the books of Tobit and Ruth, the central legal text for the care for the elderly in ancient Israel is the commandment to honour one’s father and mother (in the Decalogue: Exod. 20:12, Deut. 5:16, cf. Lev. 19:3), which is not addressed to adolescents but rather to adult children. Honouring one’s parents includes above all caring for them when they are old. The Hebrew terms “honour” (*kābad* pi., Exod. 20:12, Deut. 5:16) and “fear” (*jare*, Lev. 19:3) are comparable in meaning to the corresponding terminology in Mesopotamian legal documents, thus supporting the thesis that the parental commandment can be related to care for the elderly.³² An inner-biblical interpretation of the commandment of the Decalogue is offered by Sir. 3:1–16, which combines the honouring of parents with the care of the elderly:

31 On the topic of “care of the elderly” cf. Frevel, *Alter* (see note 30), pp. 11–43; Heinz-Josef Fabry, *Der Generationenvertrag und das biblische Gebot der Elternehrung*, in: Thomas Klosterkamp/Norbert Lohfink, *Wohin du auch gehst. Festschrift für Franz Josef Stendebach OMI*, Stuttgart 2005, pp. 14–29; Eckart Otto, *Biblische Altersversorgung im altorientalischen Rechtsvergleich*, in: *ZAR 1* (1995), pp. 83–110. For the ancient Near East cf. Marten Stol/Sven P. Vleeming (Eds.), *The Care of the Elderly in the Ancient Near East*, Leiden-Boston-Köln 1998 (Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East 14).

32 Rainer Albertz, *Hintergrund und Bedeutung des Elternggebots im Dekalog*, in: *ZAW 90* (1978), pp. 348–374, at pp. 356–364 (= id., *Geschichte und Theologie. Studien zur Exegese des Alten Testaments und zur Religionsgeschichte*, Berlin-New York 2003 [BZAW 326], pp. 157–185).

1 Listen, you sons, to the law of the father, and do so that you may be well.

2 For the Lord has commanded the children to honour their father
and the sons to respect the rights of their mother

...

12 My child, help your father in his old age,
and do not grieve him as long as he lives;

13 even if his mind fails, be patient with him;
because you have all your faculties do not despise him (Sir. 3:1–16).

According to Georg Sauer, the concretisation, or focussing of the parental commandment on the care of the elderly as it is done in the book of Sirach (Sir. 3:12–13; cf 7:27–28) could be viewed against the background of the social and cultural changes in the urban Jewish diaspora in Hellenistic times, from which the Greek translation of Sirach originates.³³

Many of the texts mentioned in this passage reflect how the young and old generations depend on each other; certainly in the world of ancient Israel even more than is the case today. Because of their weakness, the old depend on their children to provide for them; while on the other hand, the advice of wise, life-experienced old people can assist the young to better cope with their own lives. This interdependence, however, also harbours considerable potential for intergenerational conflicts. This involves, on the one hand, the first point, namely that of wisdom and dignity. Young people, as 1 Kings 12 has shown, reject the advice of wise old people, question their wisdom (Job 32:6–10) or disregard their dignity. On the other hand, this also involves the second point, namely the care for the elderly, as the following admonition from the book of Sirach shows: The old man should preserve his financial independence as far as possible into old age by not distributing his inheritance before his death, for then he runs the risk of being dependent on the (unpredictable) favour of his children (Sir. 32:20–24).

5 Conclusion

The Old Testament is characterised by a variety of images and concepts concerning ageing and old age. These can be grouped into different views:

(1) One main characteristic is an *ambivalent* view of old age that affects the three aspects mentioned above. Firstly, the symbolic old age of primeval and ancestral figures in the book of Genesis contrasts the maximum lifespan of 120 years (Gen. 6:3), 100 years

33 Sauer, *Jesus Sirach* (see note 24), p. 64.

(Sir. 18:9), or 70 to 80 years (Ps. 90:10). The average life expectancy in biblical times, however, was considerably lower than these ideal ages suggest. Secondly, the loss of physical strength and other physical and mental constraints in old age stand alongside the increase of wisdom. At the same time, however, the connection between old age and wisdom can be questioned as is the case in the later wisdom writings. Finally, a threatening disregard and contempt is juxtaposed with the honouring of old people. Through this ambivalent and multifaceted view, old age is characterised in the Old Testament as a time of loss, but also of gain; for example, the loss of physical and mental abilities, but also the gain of wisdom and life experience, to name just two important aspects.

(2) If one disregards the extraordinarily high ages of the ancestors, a *realistic view* of old age dominates in many cases in the Old Testament literature. On the one hand, this concerns the position of the old in society and the relationships between the generations (social aspects of ageing). On the other, the realistic view is further reflected in the description of physical and mental constraints and the awareness of the limited nature of the human lifespan (biological aspects of ageing).

(3) The people in the Old Testament deal with the ageing process and the experience of the finiteness of life in different ways. Both a *negative and a positive view* can be found in the texts. In this context, two further important aspects of ageing and old age should be considered, namely the psychological and the theological aspects, which are interwoven with the three aspects mentioned above in a number of ways in Old Testament literature.³⁴ A more positive view of old age predominates when death ends a long life. Some texts speak in a formulaic way of “dying at a good old age”,³⁵ and “old and full of days” (lit. “satiated with days”),³⁶ describing an old person who is not disgusted with life, but rather is at the end of a fulfilled life blessed by God. Other texts reflect a pessimistic view, struggling with ageing and imminent death (Eccl. 11:9–12:8),³⁷ or lamenting to God about the brevity and transience of life (Ps. 90). For individuals in the Old Testament, an important way to cope with the negative aspects of old age and to

34 Cf. e. g. Psalm 90.

35 Gen. 15:15 (Abraham); Judg. 8:32 (Gideon); 1 Chr. 29:28 (David).

36 Gen. 25:8 (Abraham), 35:29 (Isaac); 1 Chr. 23:1, 29:28 (David); 2 Chr. 24:15 (Jojada the priest), and Job 47:17 (Job).

37 For the interpretation of Eccl. 11:9–12:8 cf. Thomas Hieke, *Das Gedicht über Freude, Alter und Tod am Ende des Koheletbuches*, in: Fitton/Linden/Liess/Elm (Eds.), *Alterszäsuren* (see note 22), pp. 171–191; Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 2004 (HTHKAT 29), pp. 526–541; Thomas Krüger, *Kohelet*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2000 (BK 19. Sonderband), pp. 346–359.

overcome their pessimistic attitude towards ageing and death is their relationship with God. The theological aspect, which repeatedly permeates the different aspects of ageing and old age mentioned so far, plays an important role especially in the psalms. Psalm 71, for example, speaks of hope and trust in the God's salvation and presence from youth to old age:

17 O God, from my youth you have taught me,
and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.
18 So even to old age and grey hairs,
O God do not forsake me,
until I proclaim your might
to all the generations to come.
19 Your power and your righteousness, O God,
reach the high heavens.
You who have done great things,
O God, who is like you?
20 You who have made me see many troubles and calamities
will revive me again;
from the depth of the earth
you will bring me up again.
21 You will increase my honour,
and comfort me once again (Ps. 71:17–21).

Although the psalmist is afraid of being forsaken in his old age, he trusts in God, who has accompanied and saved him throughout his life. Therefore, his lifelong relationship with God can comfort the faithful one until old age. At the same time, the experience of God's presence and benevolence into old age gives the old person an important task: to praise him and proclaim his saving deeds to the next generation.

A kind of inner-biblical answer to the plea for God's lifelong presence into old age, for which the petitioner of Psalm 71 asks, is offered by God's promise in Isa. 46:3–4. The confidence to be carried by him into old age results from the promise of his steadfastness:³⁸

3 Listen to me, O house of Jacob,
all the remnant of the house of Israel,

38 Ulrich Berges, *Jesaja 40–48*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 2008 (HThKAT 37), pp. 454–460.


who have been borne by me from your birth,
carried from the womb.

4 Even to your old age I am he,
even when you turn grey I will carry you.

I have made, and I will bear;

I will carry and will save (Isa. 46:3–4).

ORCID®

Kathrin Liess  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1424-4327>