

Who was Doeg the Edomite?

Doeg the Edomite is first mentioned in 1 Samuel 21:7 and described as a servant of King Saul. Doeg is called Saul's chief shepherd, which probably means he was in charge of all the servants tending Saul's animals. Doeg was an Edomite, not a Hebrew. Israel had been at war with Edom, so Doeg may have entered Saul's service as either a captive or a traitor to his people (1 Samuel 14:47).

Doeg was an evil man. Although he pretended to serve Israel, he served only himself. One day while David was running from Saul, he stopped to seek assistance at the tabernacle in Nob, and it so happened that Doeg was also at the tabernacle that day, "detained before the Lord" (1 Samuel 21:7). It could be that Doeg was at the tabernacle because it was the sabbath day, and he could travel no farther without breaking the law; or it could be that he was there to offer a sacrifice to complete a vow or to be ceremonially cleansed. Regardless of why Doeg was there, this was a fateful encounter with David.

At the tabernacle, the priest Ahimilech gave David and his men some consecrated bread from the table of showbread (1 Samuel 21:6) and Goliath's sword (verses 8-9). Doeg witnessed all this and later told Saul of David's whereabouts: "I saw the son of Jesse come to Ahimelek son of Ahitub at Nob. Ahimelek inquired of the Lord for him; he also gave him provisions and the sword of Goliath the Philistine" (1 Samuel 22:9-10). By sharing this information while Saul was in a petulant mood, Doeg placed all the Lord's priests in peril. King Saul summoned Ahimilech and his family and, when they stood before the king, charged them with treason. "Then the king ordered the guards at his side: 'Turn and kill the priests of the Lord, because they too have sided with David. They knew he was fleeing, yet they did not tell me'" (verse 17).

Saul's Israelite guards refused to murder God's anointed priests, so the king turned to Doeg the Edomite and told him to kill them. The wicked Doeg may have seen this as an opportunity to ingratiate himself with the king, so he murdered eighty-five priests, but he did not stop there. Doeg continued the slaughter by wiping out the entire population of Nob, the city where David had sought help: "He also put to the sword Nob, the town of the priests, with its men and women, its children and infants, and its cattle, donkeys and sheep" (1 Samuel 22:19).

One priest, a son of Ahimilech, escaped and ran to join David's band of men. He told David what had happened. Sorrowful, David replied, "That day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, I knew he would be sure to tell Saul. I am responsible for the death of your whole family. Stay with me; don't be afraid. The man who wants to kill you is trying to kill me too. You will be safe with me" (1 Samuel 22:22-23).

Doeg the Edomite was a self-seeking, bloodthirsty man and an enemy of God. After the incident at Nob, David wrote Psalm 52: "Why do you boast of evil, you mighty hero? Why do you boast all day long, you who are a disgrace in the eyes of God? . . . You love evil rather than good, falsehood rather than speaking the truth" (Psalm 52:1, 3). Destruction is promised for the Doegs of the world: "Surely God will bring you down to everlasting ruin; . . . he will uproot you from the land of the living" (verse 5). In contrast, the man who follows the Lord has hope for the future: "But I am like an olive tree flourishing in the house of God; I trust in God's unfailing love for ever and ever" (verse 8).