

Who were the priests of Nob?

Many priests ministered in service to the Lord in the Israelite city of Nob. Because the city contained so many priests, Nob became known as “the city of priests” (1 Samuel 22:19, ESV). Located in the territory of Benjamin (1 Samuel 22:7-8) near Jerusalem, the city is notable for the horrible massacre that took place there.

David went to Nob seeking help from the priest Ahimelek, who lived in Nob with his large family, the priests of Nob (1 Samuel 21:1). The priests of Nob were Aaron’s descendants, specifically in the line of Ithamar and Eli, and so had claim to the Levitical priesthood (1 Samuel 22:11). They wore priestly vestments, set out the consecrated bread, and kept the ephod, which held the Urim and Thummim (1 Samuel 21:4, 6, 9).

When David first fled from Saul, he stopped at Nob to ask for provisions from Ahimelek (1 Samuel 21:1-3). David did not tell Ahimelek that he was on the run from King Saul; rather, he said he was on a secret mission for the king. Ahimelek provided David with five loaves of showbread, which was consecrated and holy to God (1 Samuel 21:1-4). Also provided to David was the sword of Goliath the Philistine whom David had killed (1 Samuel 21:8-9).

Jesus later referred to David’s encounter with Ahimelek. When His disciples were criticized for picking some heads of grain and thus “breaking the Sabbath,” Jesus said, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests” (Matthew 12:3-4). The priests of Nob did not sin in giving David the showbread, and neither did Jesus’ disciples sin in eating in the grainfields. Necessity or distress overrides ceremonial law.

In Nob on the day that David visited was an evil man named Doeg, an Edomite who served as King Saul's head shepherd (1 Samuel 21:7). Doeg reported to Saul that he had seen David, and Saul was angered at Ahimelek, considering his actions treasonous. Saul summoned all the priests of Nob and accused them of conspiring against the throne (1 Samuel 22:11-13). Ahimelek, of course, had acted innocently in providing David with supplies, knowing nothing of the king's displeasure, and he proclaimed the truth: "Your servant knows nothing at all about this whole affair" (1 Samuel 22:15).

But Saul would not listen to reason, and he ordered all the priests of Nob to be killed: "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" (1 Samuel 22:17). Fearing God more than the king, none of Saul's guards would raise their swords against a priest, so Doeg the Edomite massacred all the priests. He didn't stop there, however; included in the massacre were all the priests' families and all the people in the city of Nob, including men, women, children, babies, and livestock (1 Samuel 22:18-19). Eighty-five priests were killed that day, which completely wiped out Ahimelek's family except for one son, Abiathar (1 Samuel 22:18, 20). Once David heard of the ruthless killing of the Lord's priests at Nob, he blamed himself for their deaths (1 Samuel 22:21-22).

The priests at Nob were in Eli's lineage, and Eli's descendants were prophesied to lose the priesthood and die before reaching old age (1 Samuel 2:30-33). Doeg's massacre of the priests at Nob greatly thinned out Eli's descendants, which partially fulfilled the prophecy (1 Samuel 2:33). However, the entire prophecy wasn't completed until later when Abiathar lost the priesthood due to his involvement in a conspiracy against Solomon (1 Kings 1:7; 2:26-27).

The atrocity committed against the priests of Nob and their city was triggered by nothing more than the kindness of a priest. The hatred of King Saul was on full display. The same king who had earlier refused to wipe out the Amalekites at God's command (1 Samuel 15) slaughtered an innocent and peaceful town within his own kingdom.