

Background Characters in the Old Testament

Abiathar: The Priest

Lesson #7 for November 13, 2010

Scriptures: Exodus 28:6; 39:2-7; 1 Samuel 21:1-9; 22:6-23; 2 Samuel 15:13-29.

1. We have already studied several background characters from the times of David. Abiathar is another. Can you remember anything about Abiathar? He was a descendent of Eli. Eli had died with his two sons following the capture of the ark by the Philistines. Abiathar was a priest, survivor, escapist, fugitive, personal advisor, spy, and possibly traitor! Near the end of his life, he was banished to Anathoth about 3 miles from Jerusalem the ancestral home of Eli and his family. It was from this area, Anathoth, that Jeremiah the priest and prophet came years later. Is it possible that Jeremiah was a descendent of Abiathar?
2. Let us review in outline form what we know about the life of Abiathar:
 - a. David escaped Saul's vengeance in Jerusalem with the help of his wife, the younger daughter of Saul, who after helping David escape out a window placed a "household idol" in his bed claiming he was sick. When the soldiers returned to Saul, he said, "I don't care if he is sick or not, I want him killed!" David fled to Nob the home of the priestly family at that time. He lied to the high priest Ahimelech, Abiathar's father. Unfortunately, Doeg, Saul's chief herdsman, an Edomite, was there and saw David and may even have heard the conversation. David fled to King Achish in the Philistine city of Gath. (1 Samuel 21:1-15; Mark 2:26) When Saul found out about it, his wrath was aroused and he ordered the destruction of Ahimelech and all of his descendants—everyone who lived in the village of Nob. (1 Samuel 22) Doeg, the Edomite, agreed to kill all of Ahimelech's family. He killed 85 priests and apparently all of their families. How could he kill all those people. Didn't they defend themselves? How did Elijah manage to kill 850 of the prophets of Baal and Ashtoreth? (1 Kings 18:40) Would it have made any difference if David had not lied? Why did David even go to Nob?
 - b. But Abiathar managed to escape and joined David in the city of Keilah, taking the ephod with him. (1 Samuel 23:6) On several occasions while they were still refugees, David asked Abiathar to consult the Lord through the use of the ephod. (1 Samuel 23:9; 1 Samuel 3:7) This is one of only a very few times when the Bible specifically mentions the use of the ephod and the "Urim and Thummim." (Compare 1 Samuel 14:41; 28:6; Ezra 2:63; Nehemiah 7:65)
 - c. Abiathar stayed with David through his fugitive days until David became king. Eventually, he and his son Abimelech served David as priests along with Zadok, son of Ahitub. (2 Samuel 8:17)
 - d. Read the story of Amnon, Tamar, and Absalom. (2 Samuel 13) When Absalom's rebellion became known (2 Samuel 15) and David was escaping from Jerusalem, Abiathar and Zadok took the ark—the sacred covenant box—and prepared to leave Jerusalem with David. David, however, insisted that they return to Jerusalem and serve as spies, conveying information to a servant woman who would pass the information to their two sons who would run to David and report to him. (2 Samuel 15:13-37)
 - e. Hushai advised against the plans recommended by Ahithophel and then reported

all the details to Zadok and Abiathar who relayed them through their secret information channel to David. (2 Samuel 17:15-22)

- f. When Absalom's revolt was crushed, Zadok and Abiathar were used as ambassadors to the leaders of the tribe of Judah asking them to restore David to his kingdom. (2 Samuel 19:9-12)
 - g. Sometime after the rebellion of Absalom and Ahithophel's suicide, (2 Samuel 17:23) Abiathar and Jehoiada son of Benaiah became the king's advisors. (1 Chronicles 27:34)
 - h. When David was about to die, his eldest living son, Adonijah, approached Joab, leader of the army, and Abiathar, the priest, to support him in his plans to become the next king. (1 Kings 1:7) Why didn't those leading men in Israel know that God had instructed David to make Solomon the next king? Or, did they? (1 Kings 1:13)
 - i. When Bathsheba the mother of Solomon to whom the kingdom had been promised heard of Adonijah's plans, she and her friends approached the king convincing him that Solomon should be made co-regent in preparation to be the next king. (1 Kings 1:42)
 - j. After Solomon had become king, Adonijah requested Bathsheba to speak with Solomon allowing him to marry Abishag the beautiful young woman who had been chosen to keep David "warm" in his old age. (1 Kings 1:1-4) Solomon perceived that as a threat to his kingdom. (1 Kings 2:22) If he had married one of the members of David's "harem," would that have given him some claim to the throne?
 - k. After killing Adonijah because he wanted to marry Abishag, Solomon banished Abiathar to his home town in Anathoth about 3 miles from Jerusalem. This was in fulfillment of a prophecy made 100 years earlier regarding Eli that his family line would end violently and none of his descendants would continue to serve as priests. (1 Samuel 2:27-36; 3:13,14)
 - l. Peter named Abiathar as the high priest in the days when David lied to Ahimelech at Nob. This was, in fact, an error on the part of Jesus, or maybe by Peter and Mark. (Mark 2:26) Is this proof that the whole story is confusing? We are studying this story carefully, and we have a hard time keeping all of the names straight! How should we relate to minor errors in Scripture? Were the words of the Bible dictated by the Holy Spirit? If you believe that is true, then you have a problem!
3. This story could make a great daytime TV drama! Why is this story in the Bible? Throughout the Old Testament, we see stories of three prominent groups leading out in various activities among the Israelites. First of all there were priests, then prophets, and finally kings. What was the relationship between those three groups? The kings received their positions through heredity as did the priests. The prophets were chosen independently by God and assigned to their tasks. At different times in history, each of these groups had differing levels of authority. What was the main work of the priests?
4. The Israelites were told in Exodus 19:6 that they were to function as priests, carrying the gospel to all nations around them. That commission was expanded and extended to include Christian Gentiles in the New Testament. (1 Peter 2:9) In what sense are we to serve as priests? Are we to serve in an intercessory role at times?
5. Review again the tragic story of Ahimelech and Abiathar that resulted in the murder of their

families. (1 Samuel 21:1-9; 1 Samuel 22:6-23) Why do you think David lied to Ahimelech? Was he afraid to tell the truth? Why did Jesus use this story as an example? (Mark 2:26) Why did Saul become so upset by the fact that the high priest had assisted David even in a small way? Who was Doeg? He was a descendant of Esau—an Edomite. Where did he come from? Did he feel comfortable in killing the priests of the Lord because he was a foreigner? When David heard the story of what happened, he believed he was responsible because of his lie to Ahimelech. Do you think David's lie really made any difference? Certainly, Ahimelech and all his family were not murdered because David lied!

6. It seems fairly clear why Abiathar and David felt a great kinship during their fugitive days. Abiathar was not only a fugitive but he was also homeless with no family. David was a fugitive whose family had fled with him!
7. While the Urim and Thummim are not mentioned specifically, it is interesting to note that on more than one occasion, David asked Abiathar to bring the ephod to get God's guidance. Considering what we know about the ephod, (Exodus 28:6; 39:2-7) it would appear that this was one of the few documented times when the Urim and Thummim were actually used. (See #2-b above)
8. What would we do if we had a Urim and Thummim today? How would it be used? Wouldn't there be a line from here to New York City of people waiting to ask the Lord a question? Or, do we have all the guidance we need through God's Word, the Holy Spirit, fellow Christians, and even the circumstantial guidance provided by God? (John 14:26; Proverbs 20:18; Romans 8:28)
9. Read John 16:25-27. Was Jesus asking his disciples to function as priests when He sent them forth to bear much fruit as they were praying to God in Jesus' name?
10. What kind of individuals or groups today might be fulfilling Peter's commission to be a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, even a holy nation? (1 Peter 2:9) If we are to serve God in the role of a chosen generation even a royal priesthood, what does that imply? As a practicing Christian, do you feel like you are part of a royal priesthood?
11. Think how many groups God has tried to work with down through the millennia to get his message out to the world. There were the descendants of Adam. Then the descendants of Noah. Then the descendants of Abraham. Following the coming of Jesus, there was the Christian Church; and when it failed, the Protestant Reformation. Has God now laid that burden on the Seventh-day Adventist church? Are we supposed to be serving as "priests" to the world today?
12. Following David's affair with Bathsheba, things in his family began to fall apart. One part of that story is the sad story of Absalom, his sister Tamar, and his brother Amnon. (2 Samuel 15-18) When Absalom had developed the full revolt and was approaching Jerusalem with an army, David and a select group of friends were escaping. Abiathar and Zadok were among them, carrying the ark of God. While David was constantly seeking God's guidance in almost everything he did, he wanted the ark to remain at Jerusalem. He advised Abiathar and Zadok to return the ark to its place in Jerusalem.
13. David refused to use the ark of God as some kind of good luck charm. That had been tried before with disastrous results. (1 Samuel 4-5)
14. But Zadok and Abiathar did not cease to assist David. With the help of Hushai one of David's chief advisers who pretended to be loyal to Absalom, they were given information which they passed through their secret channels to their sons who carried it to David. It is

quite possible that this saved David's life. One of the more colorful parts of the story was the time when these two young men were suspected of carrying information to David. Those two fled to a friend's house where a woman hid them in a well, covered over it with a cloth, and spread it with drying grain. (2 Samuel 17:50-29) That should remind us of Rahab's treatment of the spies in her day. (Joshua 2:6)

15. Does God ever authorize the use of deception to promote His work? In the early days of the Cold War, a young man from the Netherlands discovered how desperately Bibles were needed in communist countries. He then set about through various devious methods to import Bibles to lands behind the Iron Curtain. He did that so successfully over a long period of time that he came to be known as "God's Smuggler." Was his success just accidental, or did God help him?
16. We have already mentioned that near the end of Abiathar's life when David's reign was coming to an end and his strength was waning, Adonijah his oldest living son convinced Joab the general of the army and Abiathar the priest to support him in a bid to be the next king. It was quite natural for Adonijah to think that he should be the next king. He was the oldest living son. Whatever happened to Chileab (Daniel) Abigail's son who was older than Adonijah? (2 Samuel 2:2-5)
17. Did Abiathar choose to support Adonijah because of David's sin with Bathsheba and the fact that Solomon was their son? Did he support Adonijah because that was the normal tradition for succession? Did Abiathar and Adonijah know that God had chosen Solomon to be the next king? These are questions to which we really do not know the clear answers.
18. After Adonijah had requested to have Abishag as his wife, he was perceived as a continuing threat to king Solomon, and he was killed. Abiathar was not killed, but he was banished to his traditional home at Anathoth. If he was the only surviving priest of that family after Saul's slaughter of them, does that mean that he was an ancestor of Jeremiah the prophet-priest who came from that same town?
19. One of the questions raised by the details of this lesson is the question about God's foreknowledge. It had been prophesied that the descendants of Eli would cease to be priests in the kingdom of Israel. (1 Samuel 2:30-36) How is it that God's predictions came so precisely true? Did God cause it to happen—thus eliminating our human freedom—or does God have some way of "seeing" the future without eliminating our free moral choices?
20. What about the case of Judas? (Matthew 26:14-16, 20-25.) Didn't Jesus know from the beginning that Judas was a traitor? As one of the disciples, hadn't Judas gone out to preach the gospel, to perform miracles, perhaps even to raise people from the dead? But Judas like Abiathar had ideas about the future kingship of Israel and Judah that did not match God's ideas. Do your ideas ever conflict with God's ideas? Do we ever work at cross purposes with God? What questions do you have about God's foreknowledge?

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