

Abiathar the High Priest

A•bi'a•thar [the Father is preeminent]. A priest, the son of Ahimelech, of the line of Ithamar and Eli. On the slaughter by Doeg at the insistence of King Saul of the priests at Nob, Abiathar escaped, carrying the ephod with him; and, as was natural, he cast in his lot with David (1 Sam. 22:20-23). When at length David ascended the throne, Zadok and Abiathar apparently shared the high priesthood (1 Chron. 15:11-12; 2 Sam. 15:24 ff., 35, etc.).

The mention of Ahimelech, son of Abiathar, as priest with Zadok in 2 Sam. 8:17 is taken by some as a copyist's error, whereby the names of father and son were transposed. But the number of allusions to Ahimelech, the son of Abiathar, as priest, is so great that an error is improbable (1 Chron. 18:16, LXX; 24:3, 6 & 31).

A simpler explanation is that, since Abiathar was becoming quite old (he was about 70 years of age at the time of Absalom's revolt), his son and legal successor assumed the burdensome priestly functions and was called priest (much as Hophni and Phinehas served during the lifetime of Eli and were called priests – 1 Sam. 1:3, 2:11).

The aged Abiathar remained faithful to King David during Absalom's rebellion and rendered the fugitive monarch great service (2 Sam. 15:24, 29 & 35-36, 17:15, 19:11); but when Adonijah later sought to wrest the succession to the throne from Solomon, Abiathar cast his priestly influence with the military influence of Joab, another old man, in favor of the attractive aspirant (1 Kings 1:7).

Though this attempt failed, he again favored Adonijah after David's death (1 Kings 2:12-22). For this he was deposed from the high priesthood, and Zadok, a priest of approved loyalty, but of the other branch of the Aaronic family, was put into his place (1 Kings 2:26, 35). His deposition involved that of his sons, Ahimelech and Jonathan; and thus the rule of the house of Eli came to an end, according to prophecy (1 Sam. 2:31-35). The passage in 1 Kings 4:4 probably refers to the time immediately prior to his deposition.

Abiathar is alluded to by our Lord in the New Testament (Mark 2:26).