

Judah During the Divided Kingdom (2 Chronicles 10:1 – 28:7)

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The Reign of Uzziah, part 2: Uzziah's Infidelity and Curse; Closure of Uzziah's Reign; (2 Chronicles 26:16-23)

Uzziah's Infidelity and Curse (26:16-21)

At this point in his record, the Chronicler turned from the period of Uzziah's blessing to the time of divine judgment due to his infidelity.

Structure of 26:16-21

In this section the Chronicler expanded a simple report of Uzziah's leprosy (2 Kgs 15:5 // 2 Chr 26:21) into a full scale narrative which explained how and why this terrible fate befell the king. This material divides into a five step narrative (see figure 46). It begins with Uzziah at the zenith of his power entering the temple (26:16). By contrast, it ends with him having lost all his royal power and being prohibited from entering the temple for life (26:21). The turning point of this narrative is the scene in which the courageous priests confronted Uzziah within the temple and Uzziah resisted their warning to his own destruction (26:18-19). On either side of this turning point are scenes of the priests entering (26:17) and leaving (26:20) the temple. In effect, this narrative explained that Uzziah contracted a skin disease and lost his power because he defiled the sanctuary of the Lord despite priestly warnings.

Powerful Uzziah Enters the Temple (26:16)

The Chronicler began this portion of his record by recalling the preceding sentence. Uzziah was helped by God **until he became powerful** (26:15), **but after Uzziah became powerful** (26:16) trouble began. With success and power in his hand, the king became the victim of **his pride** (26:16). On a number of occasions the Chronicler recorded that blessings preceded a king's downfall. (For the Chronicler's warning against permitting blessings to lead to infidelity see comments on 1 Chr 5:24.) In this case, he focused specifically on the motive of **pride** (26:16). Uzziah's **pride led to his downfall** (26:16). Pride was a sin to which the Chronicler pointed on several occasions (see 25:19; 32:25,26). The principle that pride destroys is well established in biblical traditions (Prov 11:2; 16:18; 29:23).

The motif of pride leading to destruction suggests strongly that the Chronicler at least feared his post-exilic readers would face a similar temptation. Perhaps he was concerned that various successes (construction, organization, reforms, etc.) leading to a measure of blessing would result in self-assurance and infidelity. Whatever the specific issue may have been, it would appear that he was sensitive to this possibility for his readers. The results of Uzziah's pride would have warned his readers of the dire consequences sure to befall them, if they fell into the same trap.

The Chronicler described Uzziah as becoming **unfaithful** (26:16). This terminology also appears frequently in Chronicles as a description of serious disregard for the sanctions of Israel's covenant life with God. To be **unfaithful**, especially in the realm of worship was to insure harsh judgment from God (see *Introduction: 21) Unfaithfulness*).

Uzziah's infidelity expressed itself in a particular way that was of special interest to the Chronicler. The king **entered the temple ... to burn incense on the altar of incense** (26:16). According to the Mosaic Law, burning incense was the exclusive privilege of the priests of Israel (see Ex 30:1-10; Nu 16:40; 18:1-7). Uzziah's pride led him to feel no constraint to follow the restrictions of Mosaic Law. Having been favored by God in many ways (26:6-15), he apparently thought himself above such restrictions.

The Chronicler frequently pointed to the importance of observing the rules of worship given by Moses (see *Introduction: 14) Standards*). To violate the Mosaic regulations of worship was to disregard the manner in which Israel's divine King desired to be attended in his holy sanctuary. Violating worship order was to be unfaithful to God himself and was sure to lead to destruction. This motif was particularly important to the post-exilic readers of Chronicles as they struggled through the process of re-establishing the temple and its worship.

Priests Follow Uzziah into Temple (26:17)

The tension of this episode rises as the Chronicler reported the reactions of the priests. **Azariah and eighty other priests** did not approve of Uzziah's usurpation of their duties. So they **followed him** (26:17). It is no wonder then that the Chronicler described these men as **courageous priests** (26:17). They moved against the king at great risk. At this time, Uzziah was very powerful (see 26:8,15,16). In his powerful position, Uzziah could easily have had these priests executed for their actions. Yet, their zeal for Moses' Law gave them courage to face the powerful king. This complementary portrayal of the priests encouraged the Chronicler's readers to the same courage in resisting those who disregarded the Law of God, especially the regulations of the temple.

Confrontation Between Priests and Uzziah (26:18-19)

At this point, the narrative turns to events within the temple. The courageous priests confronted Uzziah as he was about to offer incense. This step in the story divides into three elements: 1) The priests' rebuke and threat (26:18), 2) Uzziah's angry response (26:19a), and 3) the fulfillment of the priests' threat (26:19b).

The priests (perhaps Azariah on behalf of the group) **confronted** Uzziah (26:18). The Hebrew term translated **confronted** (NIV) may also be rendered "opposed" or "withstood" (see NRS, NKJ, NAS). The priests did not humbly appeal to the king or entreat him. They boldly resisted him by directly addressing him as "**you, Uzziah**" (26:18).

Their speech is similar to the pattern of an oracle of judgment which accuses and then sentences. In no uncertain terms, the priests told Uzziah, "**It is not right for [you] to offer incense**" (26:18). They insisted that this duty was **for the priests the descendants of Aaron** (26:18). Their reason was plain; the priests **have been consecrated** (26:18) for that role. Rituals of consecration appear frequently in Chronicles as examples of proper worship which the post-exilic readers were to imitate in their day (see *Introduction: 6) Royal Observance of Worship*). Having rightly accused the king, the priests sentenced him to **leave the sanctuary** because he had **been unfaithful** (26:18; see *Introduction: 21) Unfaithfulness*). Moreover, they predicted that Uzziah would **not be honored by the Lord God** (26:18).

In a number of earlier passages, the Chronicler had already demonstrated what a faithful king should do in such circumstances. He should repent and humble himself before God in hopes of receiving mercy (see *Introduction: 15) Prophets*). To do otherwise was to insure that the threat of dishonor from God would be realized.

Uzziah's pride kept him from repentance (see 26:16). Instead, as he stood **with a censer in his hand**, he **became angry** (26:19a). The king even began **raging at the priests** (26:19b). Uzziah refused to listen to the Word of God and turned in anger toward those who spoke on God's behalf. In earlier accounts, the Chronicler made it evident that this kind of response to a messenger from God led inevitably to divine judgment (see *Introduction: 15) Prophets*). The same would prove true for Uzziah.

Once the king responded inappropriately to the warning of the priests, their prediction was fulfilled. **Leprosy broke out on his forehead** (29:19). Like Asa and Jehoram, and perhaps Hezekiah (see 16:12-13; 21:12-19; 32:24), the Chronicler viewed disease as the judgment of God against Uzziah. It is difficult to know precisely what disease Uzziah contracted; the Hebrew term translated **leprosy** here referred to a broad range of skin diseases. In fact, there is some evidence against identifying this disease with modern leprosy. It may be better simply to translate the term "skin disease." In all events, Uzziah's dermatological illness visibly demonstrated that he was under the judgment of God.

Priests Escort Uzziah Out of Temple (26:20)

When Azariah and the priests noticed what happened to Uzziah, **they hurried him out** (26:20). The disease rendered the king ceremonially unclean according to the Law of Moses and made it impossible for him to stay in the temple complex and to perform his normal royal duties (see Lev 13:46; Nu 5:1-4; 12:15; 2 Kgs 7:3). Moreover, the Chronicler noted that Uzziah himself did not resist the efforts of the priests. **He himself was eager to leave**, perhaps for fear of an even worse judgment (26:20). In a striking contrast to earlier scenes where the king and priests enter the temple, they now leave as fast as possible. The priests had been vindicated by God; Uzziah had been judged. The

Chronicler dramatically displayed to his post-exilic readers the consequences of allowing power and pride to lead to infidelity.

Powerless Uzziah Barred from Temple (26:21)

In this verse the Chronicler followed closely 2 Kgs 14:5, the passage that gave rise to his expansion on Uzziah's infidelity. This last step of the narrative contrasts sharply with the opening verses (see figure 46). At the beginning of the story (26:16), Uzziah was politically powerful and fully intending to exert himself in the sanctuary of the temple. As the story closes, the king was **excluded from the temple of the Lord** (26:21). His skin disease had made it impossible for him even to attend to his ordinary role in worship. Moreover, Uzziah lived **in a separate house** (26:21). Upon contracting his disease, **Jotham his son** ruled as co-regent with Uzziah (26:21). Uzziah was utterly powerless both in the affairs **of the palace** and in matters concerning **people of the land**. (For the Chronicler's use of this terminology see 1 Chr 5:25; 2 Chr 23:13,20,21; 33:25; 36:1.) This was the state of Uzziah's kingship **until the day he died** (26:21).

In a striking manner the Chronicler distinguished these years of Uzziah's reign from the earlier years of blessing. Uzziah's devotion to God led to great political successes and prosperity. His pride led to the judgment of God. The lesson for post-exilic Israel could not have been more obvious.

Closure of Uzziah's Reign (26:22-23)

The Chronicler continued to rely on information in Kings (// 2 Kgs 15:6-7) to close out the reign of Uzziah. He mentioned his prophetic source for the king's activities (26:22; see *Introduction: 15) Prophets*). He also reported the king's death, burial (26:23a), and successor (26:23b).

The most significant variation in this passage is the Chronicler's description of Uzziah's burial. 2 Kgs 15:7 merely states that Uzziah was "buried near" his fathers. The Chronicler, however, pointed to the king's dishonorable burial. He added that Uzziah was buried **in a field for burial that belonged to the kings** (26:23). Uzziah rested in royal land, but not in the tombs of his fathers. The reason for this dishonor is also explicitly stated. **People said, "He had leprosy"** (26:23). Even in death, Uzziah did not lose the shame of the skin disease which he received as a result of his infidelity (see *Introduction: 28) Healing and Long Life/ Sickness and Death*).