



"He who marries the spirit of the age will be a widower in the next."
—Fulton Sheen

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The High Places (Part Four)

Uzziah (also called Azariah) is the third successive king of Judah who failed to remove the high places from the land. The high places, torn down by Jehoshaphat and rebuilt sometime during the reign of his son, Jehoram (or Joram), had been a feature of the kingdom of Judah for over 76 years when Uzziah assumed the throne, and he allowed them to continue for another half-century. Like his father, Amaziah, and his grandfather, Jehoash, Uzziah "did what was right in the sight of the LORD," but also like them, his ending was worse than his beginning.

The overview of Uzziah in II Kings is concise and provides few details:

He was sixteen years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-two years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jecholiah of Jerusalem. And he did what was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah had done, except that the high places were not removed; the people still sacrificed and burned incense on the high places. Then the LORD struck the king, so that he was a leper until the day of his death; so he dwelt in an isolated house. . . . ([II Kings 15:2-5](#))

From this, one receives the impression that the leprosy directly resulted from Uzziah's failure to rid the realm of idolatry. However, the record in II Chronicles reveals more of the story. Uzziah "sought [God](#) in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the visions of God; and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper" ([II Chronicles 26:5](#)). This is reminiscent of his grandfather Jehoshaphat, who did right as long as Jehoiada the priest was alive to guide him. But without a strong moral figure to keep him pointed in the right direction, he began to lose his way.

His downfall, like his father's, had its roots in worldly greatness and success. He vanquished the Philistines, Arabians, and Meunites in battle, and due to his reputation, the Ammonites paid tribute to avoid a similar fate ([II Chronicles 26:6-8](#)). He fortified Jerusalem and the surrounding areas (verses 9-10) and constructed war machines capable of "shoot[ing] arrows and large stones" (verse 15). Out of his small kingdom, he mustered and equipped an army of over 300,000 men that "made war with mighty power" (verse 13). As [II Chronicles 26:15](#) summarizes, "So his fame spread far and wide, for he was marvelously helped till he became strong."

Yet, like most men, Uzziah was unable to handle such strength: "But when he was strong his heart was lifted up, to his destruction, for he transgressed against the LORD his God by entering the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense" ([II Chronicles 26:16](#)).

During his reign, God began sending the recorded prophets. Prophets had been part of God's interaction with His people since Abraham, yet few left writings that God preserved for our use. While Uzziah was king, God raised up Jonah (to warn Nineveh), Amos (to warn the [northern tribes of Israel](#)), Isaiah (to warn Judah), and Hosea (to warn both houses). Uzziah's death is noted in [Isaiah 6:1](#), and thus the first five chapters specifically deal with Judah during his reign. In Isaiah and Hosea appear a strong indication of the state of the people and the leadership.

Isaiah writes that "from the sole of the foot [of the sinful nation] even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; they have not been closed or bound up, or soothed with ointment" ([Isaiah 1:6](#)). Hosea similarly writes about the nation burning incense to the Baals ([Hosea 2:13](#)), offering sacrifices and burning incense on high places (

[Hosea 4:13](#)), sacrificing to the Baals ([Hosea 11:2](#)), and "the high places of Aven, the [sin](#) of Israel" ([Hosea 10:8](#)). Fittingly, *Aven* means "to pant," and is used in the sense of "exerting oneself in vain." Truly, idolatry is a vain—fruitless—exercise, yet the people and leaders were nonetheless panting after false gods.

Uzziah did not serve wooden images and idols (like Jehoash), nor bow down or burn incense to Edomite gods (like Amaziah). However, by "entering the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense," we can perhaps see pagan influences creeping into a previously righteous reign. In God's law, only the priests—the descendants of Aaron—were authorized to offer incense to God, a critical point dramatically underscored in the incident with Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, when "a fire came out from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering incense" ([Numbers 16:35](#)). Afterward, God made it plain that "no outsider, who is not a descendant of Aaron, should come near to offer incense before the LORD, that he might not become like Korah and his companions" ([Numbers 16:40](#)).

However, in the pagan religions, despite having a priesthood, essentially *anyone*—and especially the king—could burn incense to his god (see [Jeremiah 32:29](#); [44:15-25](#)). Thus, in his pride, Uzziah borrowed a page from the pagans' playbook, even while ostensibly worshipping God. Yet, God had already explicitly defined how He is to be worshipped, even warning Israel "not [to] inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way" ([Deuteronomy 12:30-31](#)).

Uzziah was raised in an environment that included his father burning incense to the gods of [Edom](#). The high-place paganism that he allowed to continue—with *the people* burning incense on them—would likewise have shaped the way he approached the worship of the true God. Thus, when his heart was lifted up by worldly greatness, he apparently felt free to overlook God's clear instructions regarding sacrifice and incense. That way of worship was the norm all around him—what harm could it do? Not only did he try to [worship God](#) on his own terms, but he became enraged when the priests—God's representatives—challenged him. His string of successes seems to have given him delusions of infallibility:

Then Uzziah became furious; and he had a censer in his hand to burn incense. And while he was angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead, before the priests in the house of the LORD, beside the incense altar. And Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and there, on his forehead, he was leprous; so they thrust him out of that place. Indeed he also hurried to get out, because the LORD had struck him. King Uzziah was a leper until the day of his death. He dwelt in an isolated house, because he was a leper; for he was cut off from the house of the LORD. ([II Chronicles 26:19-21](#))

Even in this, though, God was [merciful](#); Uzziah survived, while Korah and his companions (and their families) had been completely wiped out.

Uzziah's upbringing in a multicultural environment, combined with a strong taste of untempered power and a lack of defeat, likely contributed to his ambivalence toward the high places in the land and his presumptuous imitation of their practices. Though he did not participate in it, the paganism he tolerated later influenced his worship of God, who would in no way accept this mixture of the holy and the profane.

- David C. Grabbe

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[Presumptuousness](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Individuals arrogating to themselves the authority to change doctrine are on extremely dangerous ground, presumptuously or boldly setting up idols in place of God. We dare not put words into God's mouth. The work of God in the latter days is to turn the people from their sin and back to God. Any other work is either window dressing or directly contrary to God. The consequences of presumptuous (intentional) sins are far more deadly and permanent than for sins committed in ignorance (unintentional). Presumptuousness equates to competition with God, following in the

footsteps of Satan. The antidote to presumption is to 1) submit to God, 2) remain humble, and 3) wait for Him to exalt us.

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by Staff

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