

August 28, 2005
Moses the Ethiopian

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

According to the custom of counting both the first and last years of his time on the throne (793-742), Uzziah was Judah's longest reigning monarch, fifty-two years (2 Chronicles 26:3). During those final years, however, he shared the throne with his son, Jotham (26:21). In spite of this lengthy reign, Uzziah is treated in Second Kings (15:1-7) in a mere seven verses. Clearly the author did not think much of him.

The Chronicler, whose more detailed account gives a better idea of Uzziah's importance, distinguishes this king in six respects.

First, he mentions the tutelage provided for Uzziah by the priest Zechariah (26:5), whom he sees as a parallel to the ancient Jehoiada, the spiritual father of King Joash (24:2). Each king, then, receives early guidance from a priest.

Second, this feature is part of an obvious and more extensive correspondence, in the Chronicler's mind, between Joash and Uzziah. Both men began well, a fact that prompted the Bible to say that each man "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" (24:2; 26:4). In both of them the moral problem was one of growing arrogance that became manifest only later.

In each case, too, the king's fall is in some way connected to the Temple. In the instance of Joash, who at the beginning of his career "set his heart on repairing the house of the Lord" (24:4), the royal defection came in the form of admitting idols into the Temple (24:17-18) and then killing the priest who reprimanded him for it (24:19-22). In the case of Uzziah, the offense is also directed to the Temple, where the king attempted to usurp the proper role of the priests (26:16). In this instance as well he is reprimanded by the priest (26:17-18), and, like Joash before him (24:21-22), Uzziah becomes very angry (26:19). This time, however, the Lord intervenes, so the king is unable to act on his wrath.

Third, only the Chronicler spells out all the details of Uzziah's military interests and exploits (26:6-9, 11-15). Archeology has uncovered several of the military installations mentioned in these verses, and from a worldly perspective Uzziah was certainly among Judah's greatest kings. For this reason it is significant that neither biblical historian has all that much to say about him.

Fourth, only the Chronicler speaks of Uzziah's pronounced enthusiasm for agriculture and animal husbandry: "He dug many wells, for he had much livestock, both in the lowlands and in the plains; he also had farmers and vinedressers in the mountains and in Carmel, for he loved the soil (26:10). This note strengthens our assessment of the prosperous reign of Uzziah.

Fifth, only the Chronicler gives the reason for Uzziah's leprosy, which affliction is recorded in 2 Kings (15:5). The Chronicler regards the leprosy as a punishment for the king's proud usurpation of the priestly ministry (26:16-21), and his inclusion of this story expresses his sustained interest in the ministry and privileges of the authentic priesthood.

In respect to this offense and punishment Uzziah's rejection by God corresponds to two earlier instances in biblical history. First, his leprosy immediately puts the reader in mind of Miriam, also made a leper for her revolt against the leadership of Moses (Numbers 12:1-10). Second, the king's illegitimate assumption of priestly rites is a repetition of the sin of Saul, whom the Lord rejected for the same reason (1 Samuel 13:8-14).

Sixth, the Chronicler alone relates King Uzziah to the rise of literary prophecy in the eighth century: "Now the rest of the acts of Uzziah, from first to last, the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz wrote" (26:22). Because Isaiah himself, in the sixth chapter of his book, describes a mystical vision in the Temple "in the year that King Uzziah died," it is possible that this verse in Chronicles refers to the first five chapters of Isaiah. Both Amos and Hosea also prophesied during the time of Uzziah, albeit in the Northern Kingdom (Amos 1:1; Hosea 1:1).

The Bible's final word on Uzziah is not encouraging, for he is accused of arrogance and anger (26:16-19). The prophet Isaiah, who probably was not even born when Uzziah came to the throne, seems to intend a contrast between Judah's longest reigning king and the Lord, the true king of His people: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up." That is to say, Uzziah is at last in his grave, but the Lord is still on the Throne.

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