

# *Uzzah and the Ark* *of the Covenant*

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The story of Uzzah is well known among Christians from every denomination. The Churches of Christ though, as a whole, utilize this story in a very unique way to illustrate the severity of God when we violate one of the so-called five sacred acts of worship as interpreted by various Christians within the twenty-five or more divisions in this once united body of believers. This narrative is relied upon to demonstrate that if we employ the instrument in praise to God in the gathering of His people on Sunday morning, God will zap us with eternal punishment. This story is also cited to frighten Christians who use individual communion cups in the observance of the Lord's Supper. We are taught to abandon such practices; else God will condemn us to an eternal burning hell. This same Scripture is also utilized against Christians who participate in Bible studies on Sunday morning for various age groups.

It is not uncommon for many saints within the twenty-five (or more) divisions within the Churches of Christ to lay claim to this Scripture as their own unique property in order to condemn those outside their particular fellowship. Before I analyze this most abused passage in Second Samuel (6:1-15), it would be helpful to observe something of the Ark's colorful history in order to set the background for a proper interpretation and application to this much ill-treated text. This background study demonstrates that Uzzah's mistake lies in his failure to understand God's presence and holiness associated with the Ark of the Covenant. His death is not the only death associated with God's Ark.

Just a perusal of the Scriptures reveals a very colorful history of the Ark that puts fear into the hearts of so many people. This study is not designed to discuss the covering (mercy-seat) on the Ark of the Covenant. My purpose in this in-depth study is to arrive at the reason for Uzzah's death in what appears to be a trivial thing to the modern-day reader. Hopefully, this analysis will keep Christians from doing the foolish thing they often do, that is, to employ this Scripture as a means of castigating those who disagree with many of their treasured viewpoints. Robert Stein, a world-renowned scholar of the synoptic Gospels, captures the very heart of a correct intellectual sensitivity of determining the true meaning of a Scripture within its own context:

The understanding of a text involves the correct mental perception of a text's meaning. Another way of saying this is that understanding involves a correct grasp of the pattern of meaning willed by the author. Since there is a single meaning that the author willed, each individual who understands this meaning will have the same mental grasp of the author's pattern of meaning. Some understandings may be more complete than others because of a greater perception of the various implications involved, but, if an understanding is correct, it must have the same mental grasp of the author's meaning as any other understanding. Thus, although one person's understanding of meaning may be greater or more exhaustive than another's (because of a greater awareness of the various implication involved), every correct mental grasp of the author's meaning, or understanding, will be the same.<sup>1</sup>

## **GOD'S HOLINESS AND THE ARK OF GOD**

God speaks to Moses and informs him about the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:10-22). One significant thing about this Ark is that God tells Moses that He will meet and speak to him from between the two cherubim that are over the Ark of the Testimony (25:22). Thus, the Ark of the Covenant is extremely holy. We cannot help but recall Moses' encounter with God from the burning bush (3:1-6). When Moses, after hearing God speak to him from within the burning bush, approached God, He warned him, "Do not come any closer" (3:5). Why? Well, listen to God's reason: "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (3:5).

The holiness of God is involved in this narrative about Uzzah and God's Ark. But before we embark upon this particular narrative in which Uzzah discounts the holiness of God, perhaps, it would be helpful to read about another encounter in which God warned the Israelites about His holiness. The LORD said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you" (19:9). And, as a result of this coming encounter, God further instructed Moses to speak to the children of Israel:

And the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes <sup>11</sup>and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. <sup>12</sup>Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. <sup>13</sup>He shall surely be stoned or shot with arrows; not a hand is to be laid on him. Whether man or animal, he shall not be permitted to live.' Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they go up to the mountain." (Exodus 19:10-13)

When God commissioned Isaiah, he exclaims,

I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. <sup>3</sup>And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." <sup>4</sup>At the sound of their voices

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<sup>1</sup>Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 49.

the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup>“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” (Isaiah 6:1-4)

Is it any wonder that Isaiah cried: “‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty’” (6:5).

## **SOME HISTORICAL ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ARK OF THE COVENANT**

### **Instructions about the Handling of the Ark of the Covenant**

Moses, in the Book of Numbers, gave instructions concerning the handling of the Ark of the Covenant. Aaron and his sons were assigned certain duties toward the Ark when the camp was to move: “Aaron and his sons are to go in and take down the shielding curtain and cover the ark of the Testimony with it. Then they are to cover this with hides of sea cows, spread a cloth of solid blue over that and put the poles in place” (Numbers 4:5-6). Following this activity in preparation for the move, Aaron and his sons were to call in the Kohathites.

God informed Moses and Aaron that the “Kohathites are to come to do the carrying. But **they must not touch the holy things or they will die**. The Kohathites are to carry those things that are in the Tent of Meeting” (4:15). Not only were the Kohathites not allowed to touch the holy things, which included the Ark of the Covenant, but they were not even allowed to look at the holy things in the Tabernacle: “the Kohathites must not go in to look at the holy things, even for a moment, or they will die” (4:20). Again, we are reminded of the holiness of God.

The furniture of the Tabernacle could not be hauled on carts, only carried on their shoulders. The disassembled parts of the Tabernacle could be placed on carts; the Tabernacle proper weighed a few tons. The tribes of Israel contributed six covered carts and twelve oxen to handle the transportation of the Tent of Meeting (7:3). Moses gave “two carts and four oxen to the Gershonites, as their work required, and he gave four carts and eight oxen to the Merarites, as their work required” (4:7-8), but “Moses did not give any to the Kohathites, because they were to carry on their shoulders the holy things, for which they were responsible” (4:9).

### **The Ark of the Covenant Played an Important Role Among the Children of Israel**

The Ark of the Covenant accompanied the children of Israel in all their wilderness wanderings (Exodus 40:33-38). Following the death of Moses (1406 BC), Joshua assumed leadership (Joshua 1:1-9), and the Ark of the Covenant accompanied them in their entrance into Canaan (Joshua 4).<sup>2</sup> For example, the Ark of the Covenant went with the Israelites into battle against Jericho: “Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams’ horns in front of the ark. On the

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<sup>2</sup>The Book of Joshua covers twenty-one years of history (1406-1385 BC).

seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets” (Joshua 6:4).

The writer of First Samuel also mentions the Ark of the Covenant in Shilo (1 Samuel 4:3). Since the Israelites had just lost a battle (4000 foot soldiers died) with the Philistines (4:2), they, as a result of this loss, sent men to Shilo to bring up the Ark of the Covenant (4:3). Once the Ark of the Covenant was in their camp, then, the Israelites once more went into battle with the Philistines (4:5-10). During the battle, the Philistines killed over thirty thousand foot soldiers (4:10) and captured the Ark of the Covenant (4:11).

### **Death and the Ark of the Covenant**

The death of Uzzah was just one death among many deaths that resulted when certain individuals came into contact with the Ark of the Covenant. The Philistines suffered countless loss of life as a result of God’s Ark being in their possession. The presence of the Ark in their territory brought nothing but terror. As a result of this panic, they, in an attempt to escape the terrible effects (1 Samuel 5),<sup>3</sup> moved the Ark from city to city. After the Philistines captured the Ark, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod (5:1). But the Scriptures reveal that “The LORD’s hand was heavy upon the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastation upon them and afflicted them with tumors. When the men of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, ‘The ark of the god of Israel must not stay here with us, because his hand is heavy upon us and upon Dagon our god’” (5:6-8).

The people of Ashdod sent the Ark to Gath (5:8), but again, the people of Gath also experienced God’s heavy-hand upon the city: “But after they had moved it, the LORD’s hand was against that city, throwing it into a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, both young and old, with an outbreak of tumors” (5:9). The Ark was then sent to Ekron (5:10). By this time, the word had gotten out about the calamities that had fallen upon Ashdod and Gath. The writer of First Samuel states: “As the ark of God was entering Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, ‘They have brought the ark of the god of Israel around to us to kill us and our people’” (5:10). They called the rulers together and requested that they send the Ark of the God of Israel away (5:11).

Why such an urgent meeting and demand by the citizens of Ekron? Listen again to the people as they call attention to their condition: “So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and said, ‘Send the ark of the god of Israel away; let it go back to its own place, or it will kill us and our people’” (5:11). Had any died as a result of the Ark in their city? The writer of First Samuel confirms what the people were saying: “For death had filled the city with panic; God’s hand was very heavy upon it. Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven” (5:11-12). Because of God’s heavy hand of punishment, the Ark was returned to Israel (6:1-12). The Ekronites placed the Ark on a “new cart ready, with two cows that have calved and have never been yoked. Hitch the cows to the cart, but take their calves away and pen them up” (6:7).

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<sup>3</sup>The Book of First Samuel covers a period of ninety years—from the birth of Samuel to the death of Saul in 1010 BC.

The two cows went toward the territory of Israel—Beth Shemesh (6:9). Upon its arrival in Beth Shemesh, the people chopped up the wood of the cart and sacrificed the two cows as a burnt offering to the Lord (6:14). Then, the Levites took down the Ark of the Lord, as well as the gold objects sent with the Ark, and placed the Ark and gold object on the large rock (6:15) where the cows stopped (6:14). But the people of Beth Shemesh also experienced death: “But God struck down some of the men of Beth Shemesh, putting seventy of them to death because they had looked into the ark of the LORD” (6:19).

### **Uzzah and the Ark of the Covenant**

Second Samuel records the episode of Uzzah and the Ark of the Covenant (2 Samuel 6:6-7).<sup>4</sup> In this book we find information related to David’s bringing the Ark of God to Jerusalem (6:1-19). Uzzah may well have belonged to the clan of the Kohathites.<sup>5</sup> As stated earlier, God informed Moses: “After Aaron and his sons have finished covering the holy furnishings and all the holy articles, and when the camp is ready to move, the Kohathites are to come to do the carrying. But **they must not touch the holy things or they will die**. The Kohathites are to carry those things that are in the Tent of Meeting” (Numbers 4:15). The Kohathites were not to be cut off from the Levites “So that they may live and not die when they come near the most holy things, do this for them: Aaron and his sons are to go into the sanctuary and assign to each man his work and what he is to carry, but **the Kohathites must not go in to look at the holy things, even for a moment, or they will die**” (4:19-20).

When Uzzah touched the Ark of the Covenant, God’s anger burned against him for “his irreverent act” (2 Samuel 6:7). This Ark was so sacred that even the high priest was prohibited from entering the Most Holy Place of the Tabernacle that housed the Ark of the Covenant except on the Day of Atonement: “The LORD said to Moses: ‘Tell your brother Aaron not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die, because I appear in the cloud over the atonement cover’” (Leviticus 16:2). Whenever we encounter the Ark of the Covenant, we encounter the presence of God. Uzzah could not plead ignorance. He committed an act of treason against God. His touching the Ark of God was an act of clear rebellion and disregard for God’s holiness and presence.

### **Holiness and the Believer**

Many Christians are horrified by this story of Uzzah. The story of Uzzah is not just about the holiness of God—even though it is that—but it also about His presence. In spite of the death of Uzzah, this story should teach us that the holiness and presence of God is **not** something to trample upon. The episode of Uzzah should imprint upon our minds that God is

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<sup>4</sup>Second Samuel begins in 1010 BC and ends in approximately 970 BC.

<sup>5</sup>Kohath was one of the three sons of Levi (Numbers 3:17).

holy. When we reflect upon the holiness of God today, does this holiness make us stand in awe? Is God just someone “up in the sky”? Is He just “big daddy”? Or is God simply the “old man” above? Do we have the sense of “hallowed be your name” (Matthew 6:9) when we pray? In our encounter with God, do we reflect upon the Old Testament’s concept of God’s holiness and presence? What does “take off your sandals” convey to you? The worshipers of the Old Testament knew that “take off your sandals” (Exodus 3:5) spoke of the presence and holiness of God. Abraham’s meeting with God called forth this cry: “I am nothing but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27). Do we ever feel this way? The story of Uzzah and the Ark of the Covenant is about his disrespect for God’s presence and God’s holiness.

Isaiah also understood something of God’s holiness and presence when he saw the Lord seated on a throne: “‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty’” (Isaiah 6:5). Even Peter begged Jesus, following his witness to a miracle, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8). Even the four living creatures, described in the Book of Revelation by John, exclaims, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come” (Revelation 4:8). Do we have this awe for the holiness of God? If so, then we too will seek to be holy even as He is holy. Peter writes: “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:15).

Since we are servants of righteousness, we are to present ourselves holy to the Lord. It is in this regard that Paul admonishes the believers at Rome:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual<sup>a</sup> act of worship. <sup>2</sup>Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2)

Peter, as mentioned above, also calls for holiness in the life of the believers: “Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:13-16).

The author of the Book of Hebrews also calls attention to Jesus’ action that resulted in a holy people: “The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp, and so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate **to make the people holy** through his own blood” (Hebrews 13:11-12). Since we are “the holy people” of God, this fact of holiness necessitates certain changes in our lives in order to coincide with our new nature: “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (13:15-16). Because we are redeemed through the blood of Christ, the author of Hebrews says,

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<sup>a</sup> Or *reasonable*

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens,<sup>a</sup> Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (4:14-16)

## CONCLUSION

When we reject the traditional slant (interpretation) attached to Uzzah's condemnation, we are not rejecting the importance of obedience in the life of the believer. To cite this incident to maintain our justification for separation from other Christians because of disagreements over doctrinal matters is manipulation of this text. To apply this story to a so-called worship service on Sunday morning with its five rituals performed in a prescribed way is to tear this story out of its context. This biblical data is distorted through the "spectacles" of our historical traditions. One reason for such distortion is that many Christians approach this text with their strong subjective biases. Many sincere believers see what they want to see through their "colored glasses" of long-cherished traditions. "Proof-texting" is a poor way to discover the meaning of a text. Cedric B. Johnson is on target when he writes with sharpness:

There is a danger in viewing the Bible as an encyclopedia. An encyclopedia has many facts but most of them are unrelated. Some people seem to view the Bible as a series of unrelated verses. Such a totally atomistic approach to biblical interpretation would be rare, but a faulty or incomplete understanding of context is a common problem of interpreters.<sup>6</sup>

If God had authorized a traditional worship service with its five acts of worship as practiced among many Christians today, this Scripture is still the wrong Scripture to cite to condemn others over their so-called misunderstanding of certain traditions advanced by certain fellowships. If God had specified only vocal music and excluded instrumental accompaniment, then we would still need to cite another story other than the Uzzah story to illustrate the wrath of God against instrumental music, individual communion cups, Sunday school, and so on. Uzzah's story is about honoring God's presence or holiness. It is wrong to employ this Scripture in a way that the Holy Spirit did not intend. Since God has not designated one way or the other concerning praise to Him in the public gathering of God's people, then no Scripture is violated if we choose to sing and play an instrument in the assembly.

Again, if God had specified grape juice only in the communion, then the use of wine in the observance of the Lord's Supper would dishonor the command of God. Whether we use grape juice or wine, we violate no so-called principle of worship for the corporate worship of God's people. The same is true with the distribution of the bread in the Lord's Supper. Some fellowships among the one cup and non-Sunday school movement have divided over the breaking of the bread. Once more, if God had demanded that the bread in the communion be *pinched* and not *broken* into pieces, it would still be wrong to cite the Uzzah story to condemn

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<sup>a</sup> Or *gone into heaven*

<sup>6</sup>Cedric B. Johnson, *The Psychology of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 27.

those whose practices in the corporate worship do not coincide with their particular brand of orthodoxy.

Unfortunately the traditions of the church have made it difficult, if not almost impossible, to read the Bible without spectacles. In my preaching and teaching (fifty-eight years), I have discovered that the “faith of the fathers” has made it difficult for many Christians to approach the Scriptures with fresh eyes. The story of Uzzah and the Ark of God is about indifference for God’s presence and His holiness. Hopefully, as a result of reading this story, Christians will grasp something of the holiness of God in their own relationship to the Creator of the universe and Savior of humanity. If the angels of God stood in awe, then should not we also stand in awe? Are we conscious of God’s holiness? Is “holy, holy, holy” in our vocabulary? Do we honor God in our daily walk? Do we take the name of God in vain through our day-to-day conduct? Is God pleased with our reaction to His holiness? What does the story of Uzzah and the Ark of God convey to you? Again, we need to approach old texts through new eyes.