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### “I AM NOT UZZAH”: DANTE SPEAKS TRUTH TO POWER

**Abstract:** In the Old Testament, Uzzah the Israelite is killed angrily and violently by God for touching the Ark of the Covenant. During the Middle Ages, various theologians and canon lawyers interpreted this event as a warning to lay persons against criticizing the clergy. Dante refers to the Uzzah story briefly in *Purgatorio* 10 and more extensively in *Epistola* 11, his letter to the Italian cardinals. In the letter, Following the tradition of the *sermo humilis*, Dante positions himself as a humble person who must speak truth to power. He clearly distinguishes himself from Uzzah’s transgression by saying that he is not concerned with the Ark (the substance of the church), but with the oxen (the cardinals) who are leading the church on the wrong path.

**Keywords:** Uzzah, Ark of the Covenant, David, Gregory the Great, Gratian, *sermo humilis*, *Purgatorio*, Dante’s letter to the Italian cardinals (*Epistola*. 11), criticism of the church.

#### The Old Testament Story of Uzzah

The story of Uzzah the Israelite is no longer common knowledge, but in Dante’s time the figure of Uzzah was well-known, and it served as a cautionary tale for lay persons who might have the temerity to criticize the clergy while expressing what they saw as the truth. Dante mentions Uzzah in two places: on the *cornice* of the proud in *Purgatorio* (10.55-69) and in his letter to the Italian cardinals (*Epist.* 11.5).<sup>1</sup> Both treatments are best understood in light of the full Biblical story of Uzzah, which is told in 2 Samuel 6 and partly repeated in 1 Paralipomenon 13.<sup>2</sup> King David was working to establish himself as king over all the Hebrew tribes. He has defeated the Philistines, retrieved the Ark of the Covenant, and received anointment as king over all of Israel. He stored the Ark in the house of Abinadab on the hill of Cariathiarim in Shiloh for at least twenty

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<sup>1</sup> In his edition of Dante’s *Epistolae*, Paget Toynbee lists this letter as No. 8 (121), but almost all subsequent editions list it as No. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Following the Book of Ruth, the names of the next six books in the Latin Vulgate (*Biblia Sacra*), the English Douay-Rheims (*The Holy Bible*), and the Revised Standard Version (henceforth, “RSV”) (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*), vary as follows: the Vulgate pattern is Samuel (or Regum) 1 and 2, Malachi (or Regum) 3 and 4, and Paralipomenon 1 and 2; the Douay-Rheims pattern is Kings 1 and 2, Kings 3 and 4, and Paralipomenon 1 and 2; the RSV pattern is Samuel 1 and 2, Kings 1 and 2, and Chronicles 1 and 2. Unless otherwise noted, references here follow the Vulgate. Bible quotations in Latin are from the *Biblia Sacra*; quotations in English are from Douay-Rheims.