**Zechariah 3:1-5**

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Zechariah sees an adversary (Satan) desiring to accuse Joshua before the LORD. However, the angel of the LORD rebukes the adversary and cleanses Joshua, allowing him to continue to perform his priestly duties.

This passage records Zechariah’s fourth vision. Previously, the prophet focused on Jerusalem and its new state. In the first vision, he saw a man mounted on a red horse leading a patrol of heavenly horse riders. Through this vision, the LORD revealed that He would comfort His covenant people and choose Jerusalem again as the site of His presence.

In the second vision, Zechariah saw four horns that scattered Judah and four blacksmiths that terrified the horns. Through this vision, the LORD explained that the vision indicated that successive world powers would defeat the nations that had oppressed Judah. In the third vision, Zechariah saw a renewed Jerusalem in the future; the city was large and secure.

In this section, the prophet focuses on the temple and its courts. Zechariah began by saying, Then he showed me Joshua the high priest (vs 1). The pronoun “he” likely refers to Zechariah’s interpreting angel (1:9, 13, 14, 19; 2:3). In Zechariah’s day, Joshua was the religious leader of Judah, who returned to Jerusalem with the exiles (Ezra 3:2). As a high priest, he represented the people of Judah before the LORD. In the book of Haggai, we learn that Zerubbabel and Joshua were the force behind the rebuilding of the “house of God” in Jerusalem (Haggai 1:1; cf. Ezra 5:2). They encouraged the Judean exiles who returned to their homeland to rebuild the temple that the Babylonians destroyed in 586 BC.

Zechariah saw Joshua standing before the angel of the LORD (vs 1). The title angel of the LORD refers to a special divine messenger. That messenger speaks as God, identifies Himself with God, and performs the duties of God (Genesis 16:7–12; Judges 2:1–4). Unlike the other angels of God, whose primary function is to communicate God’s message to humankind, the angel of the LORD is associated with the LORD in name, authority, and message (Exodus 3:2, 4, 7; Judges 13:20). Accordingly, it seems to fit that the angel of the LORD is the preincarnate Christ.

The angel of the LORD represents the LORD in the human realm and performs mighty divine acts (Exodus 23:20–22). In our text, the angel of the LORD served as a judge in the heavenly courtroom, whereas Joshua—the high priest who represented the people of Judah in Zechariah’s day—stood as guilty in the dock. It is likely prophetic that here the priest standing before God is named Joshua, which is the Hebrew name of “Jesus.” In fact, we are told in vs 8 that Joshua and his pupils are a symbol.

The adversary of Joshua was Satan (literally, “the Satan”). The Hebrew term translated as Satan means “opponent” or “adversary.” It occurs over twenty times in the Old Testament (Numbers 22:22; 1 Samuel 29:4; 1 Chronicles 21:1; Job 1:6, 7; Psalm 109:6, etc.). The term can describe a human adversary or a supernatural being. Here in Zechariah, it has the definite article to designate a function rather than a proper name. In other words, Satan here does not refer to a proper name of an accuser as in the New Testament. Instead, it is a title for a being fulfilling the role of a prosecuting attorney in the heavenly tribunal (Job 1:1–6). It seems likely here though that the being filling the role of accuser is the angelic being we know as Satan.

The text states that Satan was standing at Joshua’s right hand to accuse him before the angel of the LORD (vs 1). In the ancient world, the right hand of the defendant was the traditional position for an accuser to stand in a court of law. In Psalm 109, the psalmist David illustrated this ancient custom when he cried to God for relief from his enemy: “Appoint a wicked man over him and let an accuser stand at his right hand” (Psalm 109:6). Here in Zechariah also, Satan took that position to accuse Joshua, the high priest (vs 1).

But before Satan could say or do something to condemn Joshua, the LORD spoke to silence him. The term LORD is the personal name of God, which He revealed to His servant Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14–15). It means the Existent One, and emphasizes God’s sovereignty over all things. In our text, the context suggests that the speaker was the angel of the LORD. He was the one who said to Satan, The LORD rebuke you, Satan! (vs 2). This respect shown for authority further infers that the accuser here is the being Satan, as he was apparently reinstalled the prince of this world when Adam fell (John 12:31).

The New Testament book of Jude notes that we should respect the power of spiritual beings as superior to us; we are lower than the angels (Psalm 8:5) and should rebuke angelic beings in God’s name, not in our own authority (Jude 1:8-9). Here we likely have the pre-incarnate Jesus, who is God (the LORD) rebuking Satan in the name of the LORD.

Since the angel of the LORD addressed Satan in the name of the LORD, the angel distinguished himself from the LORD. It is inferred that this special envoy is Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, prior to His first advent on earth. Christ is the only one who could associate Himself with the Father God in name and authority (Exodus 3:2; John 8:58).

The verb rebuke means “to reprimand” or “to reproach.” The LORD was not pleased with Satan, the accuser, so He sent His special messenger to rebuke him in His name. The angel intensified the rebuke when he stated, Indeed, the LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you (vs 2).

This repetition of rebuke of Satan not only shows the level of God’s anger at Satan but also demonstrates His gracious love for Joshua and the people of Judah (Israel). The term Jerusalem probably refers to the population of people who lived in that city, the capital city of the southern kingdom of Judah. Since the LORD had elected the inhabitants of Jerusalem as His covenant people, He dismissed Satan and drove him away.

The angel of the LORD then asked a rhetorical question—a question meant to make a point rather than to seek an answer: Is this not a brand plucked from the fire? (vs 2). This expression recalls a statement in the book of Amos, where the prophet Amos stated that the Suzerain God saved Israel from complete ruin at the last moment (Amos 4:11). The picture is of a stick used to stir the fire, a brand, that you would expect to catch on fire and burn, but it has been plucked from the fire so it is not consumed.

Here, the expression brand plucked from the fire refers to Joshua, who had been spared judgment, as a righteous person, like how Noah was delivered from judgment when the earth had filled with violence (Genesis 6:11). Joshua may also represent the exiles who had survived to this point, and their privileged deliverance from God’s judgment. Many Judeans died when the Babylonians “burned all the houses of Jerusalem” (2 Kings 25:9). But God rescued Joshua and a small remnant just as someone snatches a stick from the fire before it is consumed. God has spared Joshua; he is now further being protected from the attack of Satan.

In Zechariah’s vision, he also noticed that Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and standing before the angel (vs 3). The filthy garments symbolize the sins and guilt of Joshua, and by implication, the sins of the returning exiles, whom he represented. Joshua was ministering to the LORD in a filthy and ceremonially unclean condition, which epitomized the impurity of Judah in Zechariah’s day. It seems likely that Satan the accuser is accusing these people because of their sin, even as Satan accused Peter because of his sin (Luke 22:31).

According to the Mosaic Law, a high priest was to wear “holy garments” as he exercised his ministerial function before the LORD (Exodus 28:2, 41). He was not to defile himself under any circumstances (Leviticus 21:10–15). As a high priest, Joshua was to wear holy garments to lead worship in a way that pleased the LORD. However, he stood with filthy garments before the angel (vs 3), meaning that he and the people of Judah were guilty.

The term angel here refers to the angel of the LORD, a special divine messenger bearing the LORD’s name and authority (v. 1). Thus, Joshua stood guilty before the LORD. And as the angel looked at Joshua’s condition, he spoke to those who were standing before him (vs 4). Although not mentioned in the previous text, those standing before the angel were probably other angelic beings. They were heavenly attendants. The angel commanded them, saying, Remove the filthy garments from him (vs 4).

The verb translated remove indicates that Joshua and the people of Judah were unclean. They deserved divine condemnation, but the LORD had mercy on them. Instead of condemning them, as Satan (the accuser) apparently had hoped, God cleansed His covenant people and restored their lives. It is worth noting that it was God that provided the clean garments.

After the angel instructed the heavenly council to remove the filthy garments from Joshua, he addressed him directly and said, See I have taken your iniquity away from you (vs 4). The verb take away is “ʿāḇar” in the Hebrew text. The Bible often uses it for the removal of guilt or sins (2 Samuel 24:10). The term translated as iniquity is “ʿāwōn” in Hebrew. It describes a deliberate sin against God.

In Zechariah, the angel inferred to Joshua that his filthy clothes symbolized his sins, which God had forgiven. But since the cleansing of Joshua was not complete with the removal of his dirty garments, the angel further said to him, I will clothe you with festal robes (vs 4). The festal robes refer to rich or fine garments.

The festal robes symbolized the gift of God’s righteousness, which He imputed to Joshua and the people of Judah. In doing so, He restored their lives, allowing them to minister effectively to Him again as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:4–6). This is consistent with the biblical pattern that humans cannot be justified in the presence of God through their deeds, but rather are granted the gift of being justified in God’s sight through faith in Him (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3).

As the prophet Zechariah observed the scene, he was apparently stimulated to speak. He chimed in with his suggestions and said, Let them put a clean turban on his head (vs 5). The word for turban is “ṣānɩ̂p̱” in Hebrew. It means “headband.” It can be used for a man (Job 29:14), a woman (Isaiah 3:23), a royal crown (Isaiah 62:3), and (4) a high priest, as in this passage. This might infer that Zechariah knew his scripture, as what he is suggesting is prescribed in the Mosaic Law.

The heavenly servants followed Zechariah’s suggestions regarding putting a headdress on Joshua to complete his clothing. So, they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments (vs 5). According to Exodus, the high priest was to wear a turban made of “pure gold” inscribed with the words, “HOLY TO THE LORD” (Exodus 28:36).

This provision of the inscription upon the turban was prescribed in Exodus. It was supposed to “always be on his forehead, that they (the people) may be accepted before the LORD” (Exodus 28:38). Thus, this clean turban placed on Joshua’s head was to rededicate his life to the priestly office as he served as mediator between the LORD and His people. And this ceremony occurred while the angel of the LORD was standing by (vs 5).

Among the postures depicted in the Bible, standing is a major image. It denotes presence or location. For example, in the book of Joshua, we read about “cities that stood on mounds” (Joshua 11:13) or the “LORD’s tabernacle that stands” in Israel (Joshua 22:19). However, the imagery of standing also connotes specific qualities or attitudes (Psalm 122:2; Nehemiah 8:5).

That the angel of the LORD was standing by indicates the importance of the occasion, as when King David’s servants stood by while he grieved (2 Samuel 13:31). Thus, the fact that Joshua received his cleansing while the angel of the LORD was standing by means that Joshua received the LORD’s approval to continue to perform his priestly duties.

This section can be seen as prophetic, in that Joshua (Hebrew for “Jesus”) stands as high priest for the people, as Jesus is our high priest (Hebrews 8:1-2). Joshua is cleansed of sin, and Jesus took on the sins of the world (Colossians 2:14; John 3:16; Romans 5:8). Then, through Jesus our high priest, God also justifies all who believe. Every believer is made righteous in His sight (John 3:14-15; Romans 4:3). Verse 8 will tell us that Joshua is a symbol.

**Biblical Text**

**1Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. 2The LORD said to Satan, “The LORD rebuke you, Satan! Indeed, the LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?” 3Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and standing before the angel. 4He spoke and said to those who were standing before him, saying, “Remove the filthy garments from him.” Again he said to him, “See, I have taken your iniquity away from you and will clothe you with festal robes.” 5Then I said, “Let them put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments, while the angel of the LORD was standing by.**