

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 reinstated 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 "ābar" 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 "āwōn" 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 “šānîp” 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." ⁵ Then 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.