

THE BOOK OF ZECHARIAH
Lesson 6, Chapter 3

I think the best way to frame what Zechariah chapter 3 is all about is first to provide the context of how Yehoveh saw Judah at the time He exiled them, and the resulting condition of the returned exiles in general. That is, the people that journeyed back to what was now the Persian province of Yehud came home in anything but a healed spirit or renewed heart. They lived in a pagan place for 70 years and of course had been infected with a heathen cultural perspective, even if it was sub-consciously so. Much rehabilitation and a rebuilding of trust in their sacred institutions had to be accomplished.

The Book of Ezekiel gives us a very good synopsis of this condition that we'll use as a prelude to what Zechariah has to say.

CJB Ezekiel 22:23-31 ***²³ The word of ADONAI came to me: ²⁴ "Human being, tell her this: 'You are a land that is neither cleansed nor rained on in the day of fury. ²⁵ There is a conspiracy of prophets in it like a roaring lion tearing up the prey; they have devoured people, seized wealth and valuables, and widowed many in it. ²⁶ Her cohanim have done violence to my Torah, profaned my holy things, made no difference between the holy and the common, not distinguished between unclean and clean, hidden their eyes from my shabbats, and profaned me among themselves. ²⁷ Her leaders in it are like wolves tearing up the prey to shed blood and destroy people, in order to benefit unjustly. ²⁸ Her prophets have "plastered" for them with whitewash, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, "Thus says Adonai ELOHIM," when ADONAI has not spoken. ²⁹ The people of the land have extorted, robbed, wronged the poor and needy and unjustly oppressed foreigners. ³⁰ "I sought for a man among them who could build a barricade or stand in the break to oppose me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one. ³¹ Therefore I am pouring out my fury on them, consuming them with the fire of my rage, bringing their own ways on their own heads," says Adonai ELOHIM.***

God promised to bring Judah back after 70 years of His anger against them, but that didn't mean that the Judeans had undergone a major spiritual transformation up in Babylon. The place He decided to begin this transformation was with the Temple and its priesthood, which is one of the reasons He was demanding that the Temple be reconstructed and put back into service urgently! The people felt abandoned by the priesthood even before they had left for Babylon. In exile, apparently the priesthood did little good for those who had been forcefully moved out of their homeland by the invaders. What was needed, then, was a restoration of the people's trust and confidence in the fidelity and authority of the priesthood. As we just read in Ezekiel, the priesthood had been equally as sullied and corrupted as every other Judean institution, and they needed an opportunity to show that they had learned their lesson.

Turn your Bibles to Zechariah chapter 3.

READ ZECHARIAH CHAPTER 3 all

This is the 4th vision of the series of visions given to Zechariah. The first words of the first verse present us with a conundrum: who is the "he" who "showed me"? And, the answer is, your guess is as good as mine. I don't think it is the Interpreting Angel because that angel tends to explain what is shown, not the one who presents the vision. Might it be, then, the Angel of Yehoveh? Could be, and it is my choice as to the most likely candidate. Most Bible scholars say it is Yehoveh Himself that is the "he". I am suspicious of that because it moves far away from all that we have seen so far in the Book of Zechariah. But, what speaks against my view is that almost immediately the Angel of Yehoveh is added to the vision as a participating character.

A new character comes onto the scene: the Accuser. We might even list the character of Joshua as a second new character except that this isn't actually about the person of Joshua so much as it is about the office he holds (as High Priest) and even more that it he representative of the character of the High Priest office and probably the character of the priesthood in general. On the other hand, we don't want to degrade this into purest symbolism because

Joshua was indeed a real person, who was the High Priest at this time. There are no imaginary symbolic objects or people involved in this vision.

The way the Hebrew grammar and syntax work together, is to connect this new vision with the previous one. At the same time, this 4th vision stands as somewhat unique compared to visions 1 – 3 and 5 – 7. For instance, it doesn't begin with the more standard opening protocols used by Prophets to announce visions and oracles. This is the middle vision. It is the fulcrum that operates at the center of the 7 visions, and without doubt this is why it is somewhat different in its nature compared to the other 6. If this seems a little odd or confusing, keep in mind the most unique and challenging nature of the entire Book of Zechariah as we discussed in the Introduction.

What we are witnessing in this 4th vision is something that is happening in the Heavenly court and it is essentially an investiture ceremony for the High Priest who... again... is representative of both his own office as well as the institution of the priesthood in general. At a yet higher level, God's reinvestment of Joshua and the priesthood as His chosen institution to lead Israel in spirituality and morality, is also indicative of His assurance that Israel remains His chosen vessel on earth to bring the knowledge and truth of Yehoveh to the world.

When it comes to attempting to understand the role of Joshua in this vision, I think we can do no better than to hear the words of the eminent Bible scholar of the early 19th century, Theodore Kliefoth. He says this concerning Joshua's presence on the Heavenly court:

"The character of Israel as the holy and priestly nation of God was violated... violated by the general sin and guilt of the nation, which God had been obliged to punish with exile. This guilt of the nation, which neutralized the priestliness and holiness of Israel, is pleaded by Satan in the accusation which he brings before Malach of Jehovah against the high priest, who was its representative. A nation so guilty and so punished could no longer be the holy and priestly nation; its priests could no longer be priests, nor could its high priests be high priests any more. But the Malach of Jehovah sweeps away the accusation with the assurance that Jehovah, from His grace, and for

the sake of election, will still give validity to Israel's priesthood, and has already practically manifested this purpose of His by bringing it out of its penal condition of exile".

In contrast to this, we find a wholly different mindset of the preeminent European Bible scholars of the later 19th century, Kiel and Delitzsch, that well expresses the consensus view of traditional Christianity at that time, and as it still exists and holds sway over most of the modern Church in the 21st century.

I realize that it might seem that too often I pile onto the traditional institution of the gentile-Church at every opportunity, and for this I am likely guilty. I have no desire to demonize because the Church has done so much good. Yet, there are some things that are so off track in their fundamental doctrines that they must not go unchallenged. So, I want to present you with a quote from those respected Bible scholars that is really the antithesis of what Kliefoth had to say.

To open their study about this 4th vision of Zechariah they say this:

"In this and the following visions the prophet is shown the future glorification of the church of the Lord".

How amazingly different that is from Kliefoth and how grateful I am for those Christian scholars like him that can accept and write about the truth as it is found in Holy writ, and not attempt to twist it into something not recognizable. I cringe every time I read statements like this by highly acclaimed Christian Bible scholars. One has to ask how in the world one can read prophecies that are specifically and emphatically ONLY about Judah and Israel, and somehow conclude that this is actually code for a brand-new gentiles-only faith created in the 4th century. The answer is that perhaps the underlying foundational principle of the Constantinian Church is that gentile Christians and the Church have replaced the Hebrew people and Israel. Even though the Church acknowledges a Jewish savior, and rightfully and successfully has brought this basic knowledge of Christ to the world, according to Christianity everything God promises to our Savior's people, Israel, has been cancelled, taken away, and re-directed to the gentile Church. Therefore, Israel is to expect nothing

but God's anger, wrath and curses because they are the Christ-killers. To that terribly bigoted and wrong doctrine I say this: if those who truly love Yeshua, and want to know who the real historical Yeshua was and is, and want to know the truth about why He came and what He taught, then it necessarily involves reading the Bible and taking it for what it says; facing up to this 1600- year-old false doctrine and others like it that form so many of the founding and ongoing principles of Christianity. Such thoughts are so thoroughly embedded in Church history, philosophy and theology that nothing but a direct frontal assault against it is going to eradicate it, or (probably more realistic) get at least some Believers to sit up and take notice... and then for those Believers to take action. Enough said.

Getting back to the scene Zechariah is being presented, Joshua has been brought into a Heavenly courtroom or sorts, in order to be prosecuted by a new character called The Accuser. Clearly, it is The Father sitting on His throne who is the great judge. The words "standing before" lend weight to the scene as a defendant standing before the trial judge. Just as I regularly bring up certain challenges to confront the teachings of our traditional Christian institutions because often they do not reflect biblical truth, so I have recently begun to bring up this issue of the existent reality of Yehoveh's Divine Council and of His Heavenly Court. Several sayings of the Psalms, of Job, and of the Prophets are not really understandable until we recognize that what they are mentally envisioning are the many administrative and judicial functions going on in Heaven, and even to a degree who it is that mans the associated offices and positions. I have explained that it is particular divinely created beings called the Elohim that sit on God's Divine Council. And now we get a view of God's Heavenly Court system, and for this Yehoveh sits as the sole judge. No one else is permitted to rule when the issue is judicial in nature, as it is in Zechariah's 4th vision.

The Accuser (the prosecutor, if you would) bringing a judicial complaint before God is, in Hebrew, called **ha-satan**. The Angel of Yehoveh (in this scene we could call Him the advocate for the defendant), then stands in opposition to The Accuser. Interestingly, we don't hear The Accuser speak, nor do we get a narrative from him about what his accusation amounts to; it is only implied by what God's response to it is.

The Hebrew term **ha-satan** is where the Christian world gets its term Satan from. Like many terms, this one has morphed in meaning over the centuries. If we were to literally translate the Hebrew it would say "the satan", which in the way Christianity thinks of it is odd. That is, in this era the term satan was not used as a formal name the way Christians do. So, we have to search to determine what the term satan best translates to in English. Here, since very clearly he is depicted as the prosecutor in a trial, then the title of The Accuser is probably the best choice. So, is **ha-satan** necessarily doing evil, or is he merely a prosecutor doing his job? A good parallel to what we find here in Zechariah is Psalm 109. In verse 6 we read:

CJB Psalm 109:6 *[They say,] "Appoint a wicked man over him, may an accuser stand at his right*

So, in this Psalm we find a judicial setting, and the term "wicked man" is made synonymous with "accuser" (which, by the way, is in this Psalm also the Hebrew **satan**). However, it is only later Christianity that takes this term and turns it into a formal name for the Devil. In the KJV of this same verse we read:

KJV Psalm 109:6 *Set thou a wicked man over him: and let Satan stand at his right hand*

Whether or not we ought to call this accusing figure Satan or just leave it at The Accuser notwithstanding, this is some kind of spiritual being that opposes God in a number of ways, and therefore opposes those whom God uses, elects, or anoints. For us to get a better sense of this accusing figure, let's turn to the Book of Job.

CJB Job 1:6-12 *⁶ It happened one day that the sons of God came to serve Yehoveh, and among them came the Adversary <N1>. ⁷ Yehoveh asked the Adversary, "Where are you coming from?" The Adversary answered Yehoveh, "From roaming through the earth, wandering here and there." ⁸ Yehoveh asked the Adversary, "Did you notice my servant Iyov, that there's no one like him on earth, a blameless and*

upright man who fears God and shuns evil?"⁹ The Adversary answered Yehoveh, "Is it for nothing that Iyov fears God?¹⁰ You've put a protective hedge around him, his house and everything he has. You've prospered his work, and his livestock are spread out all over the land.¹¹ But if you reach out your hand and touch whatever he has, without doubt he'll curse you to your face!"¹² Yehoveh said to the Adversary, "Here! Everything he has is in your hands, except that you are not to lay a finger on his person." Then the Adversary went out from the presence of Yehoveh.

Everywhere we see the word "adversary" in this Job excerpt, the Hebrew is ***ha-satan***, just as we find it in Zechariah chapter 3. And, in this Job story it might not be entirely out of place to use the term The Accuser instead of Adversary. Apparently, this divine being has been assigned the job of wandering around on Earth, and then bringing back reports on what he sees to Yehoveh. On the other hand, this is less a judicial setting and more simply a regular meeting of God's Divine Council. We can know this because of how this story begins with the words: "it happened one day that the sons of God came to serve Yehoveh..." In Hebrew the "sons of God" is ***ben Elohim***. While I can't spend the time today to fully flesh this out, you can go to previous lessons in others of the books of the Minor Prophets that I've taught where I explain it more thoroughly. The bottom line is that ***ben Elohim*** is a term that speaks of a special class of divine beings who are the administrators of Heaven. These are the creatures that form God's Divine Council. God (Yehoveh) delegates duties and tasks to them and they carry them out. Here we learn that ***ha-satan*** is one of those creatures. Yet, just as those several Elohim are not given names, neither is ***ha-satan***. Rather, ***ha-satan*** is a description of his purpose or function, and that purpose is to wander the Earth and to bring back reports of things he finds suspicious or wrong, and present those things to Yehoveh to decide on what to do about them.

The nature of ***ha-satan*** always seems to be to present to Yehoveh the suspected dark side to those whom God declares as righteous or at least His elect. Thus, it is not that ***ha-satan*** is necessarily always doing an evil thing in the way we might think about it, but rather that he likes being a tattle-tale on those whom God especially favors. In fact, in Job, just as in Zechariah, God

doesn't tell The Accuser that he is wrong or wicked for bringing these charges, only that God is not going to rule against these people and instead is going to respond by showing them special grace. Therefore, it is likely that the **ben Elohim** who is given the task of roaming the Earth to report back to God what he sees is not lying about it. So, the reason we are even given these glimpses into the workings of the Divine Council seems to be to see how Heaven functions, to learn about some of the divine beings involved, to understand that God does know what goes on down here, and that there is a specific, authorized **ben Elohim** who seems to enjoy bringing bad news to God about those on Earth that God favors. No doubt, whom God favors is no secret among the members of the Divine Council.

What I've just explained to you is more or less how the Israelites and Judeans of Zechariah's era understood how things operated in the spiritual realm. This was their mental image of it all, and therefore this is why we find these Scriptures written as they were. It sounds pretty strange to us. Be that as it may, until we can grasp how it is they saw it, then we cannot grasp what this was meant to convey.

Of course, **ha-satan** went on to represent a demonic figure, especially after he was cast down out of Heaven. But, still, in Zechariah 3 we're left to wonder what, exactly, precipitated The Accuser bringing this charge against Joshua to Yehoveh. My take is that I think it is self-evident what the cause was, and that is why I presented an excerpt from Ezekiel 22 to open today's study. The priesthood had become a clearly sullied institution, Yehoveh obviously knew it, and The Accuser was questioning why God would want to have the High Priest and the priesthood reinstated, and why He would still favor the badly corrupted Israel.

God responds to The Accuser starting in verse 2.

CJB Zechariah 3:2 ² Yehoveh said to the Accuser, "May Yehoveh rebuke you, Accuser! Indeed, may Yehoveh, who has made Yerushalayim his choice, rebuke you! Isn't this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?"

Yehoveh puts The Accuser in his place. He says "rebuke you!". God finds the charges irrelevant and so is rejecting the prosecuting attorney's reasoning for bringing these charges. Further, we see Yehoveh respond to part of **ha-satan's** accusation that was not recorded for us, but now is implied. It is that in addition to bringing a case against Joshua the representative of the High Priest office, it is also against Jerusalem as God's favored city. Why would **ha-satan** think that God might agree with him that Jerusalem should no longer be God's chosen city? Because once before God's choice of a favored city was revoked: Shiloh. That revocation was permanent. So, it's not that Joshua was somehow perfectly suited or not to be High Priest, nor that Jerusalem was perfectly suited or not to be God's Holy City. It is that this is purely God's prerogative to make these choices, He *has* decided, and that's that. Remembering what we discussed earlier that Joshua is representative both of the entire priesthood, and at a higher level also as all Israel, then we get another proof that God has not and never will permanently reject Israel, Jerusalem, or the Hebrew people... and He certainly is not going to replace that which He has not rejected.

Verse 2 concludes with these words (that are the more literal translation of the Hebrew): "Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?". I wanted to present it this way because hidden just beneath the surface is a play on words. We get this nearly exact same statement from the Book of Amos.

CJB Amos 4:11 ¹¹ ***"I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew S'dom and 'Amora; you were like a burning stick snatched from the fire; still you haven't returned to me," says Yehoveh.***

A brand is a stick, or even better a thorny weed or vine (that is, it is something useless or troublesome). But the key word is "fire". In Amos the Hebrew word used for fire is **serepha**. This statement, then, is something of a proverb or an expression that was in use in that time. It has special significance for Joshua because His grandfather, Seraiah, which is taken from the word **serepha**, was the High Priest who was executed when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah. So, whereas some Judeans (and obviously **ha-satan**) may have looked at what could only be viewed by most of them as a failed and corrupted High Priesthood that ought to be done away with

permanently (burned up like a brand), God rescued it, and used this statement He had made some years earlier to Amos to make His point. The point is that whatever consequence may have been well-deserved, God will at His own determination instead offer rescue and mercy.

It's when we see this statement in this light that we get further validation of one of Yehoveh's most wonderful attributes: He will forgive what seems like the unforgivable if He so chooses. This is a choice and decision that only He, as God, has the right to make and is on a case-by-case basis. In the Law of Moses, Yehoveh hands down many laws and their accompanying punishments for breaking them. For many of these infractions God offers no provision for human judges to forgive or to lessen the punishment He has ordained. For instance, the Law makes it clear that unjustifiable killing of a person must bring with it the death penalty. No other resolution is possible. But... God in His mercy, has the option for His own good reasons, to offer such special mercy as and when He sees fit. Depending on one's viewpoint, this is an attribute of God that you may like or not like; that is, seeing it as serendipitous, unfair, perhaps expressing partiality, or even as hypocritical. I caution: don't let your mind go there. Our sitting in judgment over God is never a good idea. What *is* a good idea is to read the Holy Scriptures to better understand God, accepting Him as He is and not attempting to either create a doctrine to change it or to think we are in a position to anoint ourselves with the same choices He reserves only for Himself. If He won't even allow His highest spiritual creatures, the **ben Elohim**, to make judicial decisions in the Heavenly court, then it follows that we mere humans certainly have no such right.

Verse 3 explains that Joshua was standing in filthy garments before God and The Accuser. The Hebrew word used here to describe his garments is **tsow**, and it is much more than meaning dirty or soiled. It represents the foulest of the foul. It is a word used to describe what I will (as delicately as possible) compare to used toilet paper. That is, it can't get any worse than this. So, the condition in which those who are part of the Heavenly court are viewing Joshua as High Priest and as all Israel, is the lowest of the low and it is painfully obvious to all who are present (no wonder **ha-satan** thought he was bringing a pretty solid case before God).

When we are told that Joshua was standing next to (or before) the "angel" this seems to mean the Angel of Yehoveh... at least I can't find a better candidate to explain him... *and* we find Joshua more or less described as standing in that position back in verse 1. Beginning in verse 4, the Angel of Yehoveh speaks out to everyone present and orders (rather surprisingly, I think) to take those filthy garments off of Joshua. Whom, exactly, is tasked with doing that isn't specified. But, what we are witnessing is a divine act of cleansing. Joshua is helpless to do this for himself. His impurity was so great that no ritual he could perform, no task he could commit to, no apology or repentance he could offer, would ever solve the problem. Only the sovereignty of The Father had the authority to do it.

That it is the Angel of Yehoveh that issues the order makes clear His authority to speak for Yehoveh. And, yet, it is equally as clear that the person of Yehoveh is right there, so why didn't He order it? While I don't have any answer to this, it does bring up the issue of these various manifestations of God that we encounter throughout the Bible that do have a unity, but at the same time have a quality of separateness. Here in this scene, we find The Father and The Angel of Yehoveh appearing together **but** as separate entities for separate purposes in the proceedings of the Heavenly court. The Father is the judge, The Angel is the defender. What this removal of the filthy garments means is explicitly stated:

CJB Zechariah 3:4 *...Then to him he said, "See, I am taking your guilt away. I will clothe you in fine robes."*

More literally, it says: "...I have taken away your iniquity and will clothe you in festal robes". Joshua is being purified, and whatever impurity and guilt there was is now gone. Forgiveness, restoration, and acceptance have happened. It is immediate. The mention of festal clothing means a reinstatement of all Joshua's High Priestly roles and lofty position. This scenario is also envisioned in Isaiah, and is something we all need to be thankful for.

CJB Isaiah 61:10 *I am so joyful in Yehoveh! My soul rejoices in my God, for he has clothed me in salvation, dressed me with a robe of*

triumph, like a bridegroom wearing a festive turban, like a bride adorned with her jewels.

As a reminder, because the role Joshua plays in this scene is as representative less of himself and more of the priesthood and Israel in general, then we can easily agree with Kliefoth that this is clearly a picture of all Israel still having validity in God's eyes for their existence and purpose as God had originally ordained for them. Israel has been reinstated as a holy and priestly nation. In other words, it completes the reversal of their guilt and exile.

I have mentioned earlier that this 4th vision, this fulcrum at the center of the 7 visions, is rather unique as compared to the other 6. So, here in verse 5 we see Zechariah suddenly being interjected *into* the vision as a character operating within it, as opposed to what he has been up to now... a reporting observer. It is Zechariah that says to no one in particular: "They should put a clean turban on his head". And, in the response the unnamed "they" who are present do put a clean turban as well as clean garments on Joshua.

In reality, the word to describe the turban and the fresh garments is not "clean" but rather "pure". The Hebrew word is ***tahor***, and it is used in a ritual sense. So, while it is indeed the opposite of unclean, when it comes to the priests then ritual purity is the issue and it is not about something that is merely dirty and has now been washed. The turban, or mitre, is the headpiece worn by the High Priest. A special metal plate is attached to this kind of turban that says "holy to Yehoveh", and only the High Priest may wear it.

While this investment... or maybe better, re-investment... ceremony might usually conclude with the High Priest donning his turban, instead the scene continues on with what we read in verses 6 and 7.

CJB Zechariah 3:6-7 ⁶ Then the angel of Yehoveh gave Y'hoshua this warning: ⁷ "Yehoveh-Tzva'ot says this: 'If you will walk in my ways, obey my commission, judge my house and guard my courtyards; then I will give you free access among these who are standing here.

A warning is given to Joshua not *by* the Angel of Yehoveh, but *through* the Angel. The message itself comes from the mind and authority of Yehoveh and are His words. The warning essentially says that this entire reinstatement is prefaced upon obedience. The word "if" means what has been done for Joshua (and essentially for all Israel) is conditional. The conditions are spelled out: if you will walk in my ways, obey my commission and judge my house and guard my courtyards. IF Israel and IF the priesthood does that, then the reinstatement will continue. Please note that this sounds so similar to when the Law was first given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. All covenants of God, despite what you may have heard and believed, are conditional. Both sides have responsibilities. While it would be a stretch to call this reinstatement scene a covenant renewal ceremony, in effect it acts like one. Thus, the expectations of God upon Israel have been reconfirmed, with some words added that apply mostly to the Levite priesthood. Judging God's house means to rule over the Temple. Guarding His courtyards refers to the courtyards that are contiguous with the Temple, and it means to protect them from being defiled.

Now, to parse these instructions a little further, we need to recall some material from earlier lessons in Zechariah. Up to now in Israelite history, the existence of a Hebrew King as head of the Israelite monarchy that ruled over Israel and Judah was presupposed. The Temple with its priesthood were at least partly a visual validation of that king to rule and reign. But, conditions at the moment were very different than in the past. Not only was the former Judah now a Persian province called Yehud, but also there was no Hebrew king. Instead, a Persian civil servant was hired to act as governor of Yehud. That it was a Jewish man as that governor didn't change that fact. The High Priest, Joshua, was given an expanded role into governing the province. While the Persian-appointed Jewish governor dealt with purely civil matters, the High Priest now dealt not only with religious matters but also some civil issues including the justice system. Therefore, we get these strange instructions from Yehoveh to Joshua about "judging My house". In prior times the king had always been the chief judicial authority. God was now confirming Joshua as that judicial authority. So, it is almost incorrect to speak of Joshua as "High Priest" because he was now so much more than that in Judah's current situation. Perhaps we should think of Joshua as the "Chief Officer" of the Temple, who was responsible to execute justice in most facets of Jewish life.

As head scratching as this entire verse is, none of it causes such uncertainty of its meaning than its final words: ***then I will give you free access among these who are standing here.*** “Those who are standing here” can only be referring to the members of God’s Heavenly court, and those various divine beings who are present in this scene. So, in what way is Joshua to have access to that Heavenly court? Perhaps the point is that Joshua is now the head of the supreme court of the earthly realm of Israel, in a similar way that the court in Heaven is the supreme court for justice in Heaven. Or, maybe it is that since Israelite kings were to have access to Heavenly direction through their Prophets, now Joshua as High Priest will have that same access to Heavenly direction. It is my opinion that it is the latter because of this strange new governance over Israel that they are faced with, and that God seems to be giving His official stamp of approval. That is, whereas God’s highest representative on earth had, up to now, been Israelite kings, now it is Israelite High Priests, beginning with Joshua.

We’ll stop here for today and finish up chapter 3 next time.