

## **Cleansing for the high priest (3:1–7)**

### **Context**

The fourth night vision depicts a heavenly courtroom, with the 'prosecuting attorney' (or Satan) accusing the defendant (Joshua, the high priest) of being unfit for his priestly duties. The Lord is both 'defense attorney' and 'judge', and he censures the arguments of the prosecution, dismisses the case, and declares Joshua innocent by virtue of his divine election and cleansing. The angel of the LORD (v. 1) and the LORD (v. 2) seem to be one and the same divine being (see commentary on 1:11, here). The vision unfolds in three movements: the removal of the high priest's filthy clothes (vv. 1–4); the dressing of the high priest in clean clothes (vv. 5–7); and the interpretation of the symbolic actions (vv. 8–10).

### **Verse 1**

Joshua the high priest was a descendant of Levi and the son of Jehozadak, who was taken captive and deported to Babylonia when King Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem in 587 BC (cf. 1 Chr. 6:15). Joshua is also mentioned in Zechariah (3:1; 6:11), and later records indicate that some of his descendants were listed among those who married foreign women in the time of Ezra (Ezra 10:18). It is unclear whether Zerubbabel and Joshua were in the first wave of Hebrew emigrants who returned to Jerusalem soon after the decree of King Cyrus under the leadership of Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:5–11; cf. 1:1–4), or if they led another caravan of Hebrew returnees to Jerusalem sometime around 522 BC (Ezra 2:2, 64–65; 3:1–13). It seems likely that Ezra 2 presents a composite emigration record spanning the years from the edict of Cyrus to the completion of the Second Temple. If so, then Zerubbabel and Joshua probably led a mass emigration of Hebrews back to Judah, prompted by the ascension of Darius I to the Persian throne in 522 BC. This may explain the enthusiasm and vigour of the restoration community for the temple construction project (Hag. 1:12–15), since

those more recent emigrants would not have been jaded by the previous two decades of failure to rebuild the temple.

The construction of the word Satan (lit. 'the satan') designates a functionary of the heavenly court whose role it is to accuse human beings of wrongdoing. The title Satan and the verb 'to accuse' are based on the same Hebrew verbal root. The 'right hand' is a position of authority in the biblical world, marking 'The Accuser, Satan' (NLT) as first officer in the heavenly court.

The identity of this unnamed figure, presumably a powerful angelic being who has access to God's heavenly courts, has generated much discussion. At this time in the historical development of Hebrew theology, the term Satan should probably be understood as a title or description of function, rather than a personal name. 'The Accuser' has a role similar to that of the *rabiṣu* official of Mesopotamia in the Old Babylonian court. This officer was the most important court personage after the judge, and was responsible for the preliminary examination of the accused at trials. The word Satan simply means 'Adversary' (so NEB), and the function of the adversary may be performed either by human or divine beings (cf. 1 Sam. 29:4; 1 Chr. 21:1). The role of the adversary (or satan) is not always an evil one, as evidenced by Balaam's encounter with the angel of the Lord (Num. 22:22).

The context of Zechariah indicates that the function of the adversary is evil in its intent in that it seeks to discredit Joshua the high priest. The strong rebuke of Satan by the Lord supports this understanding. Satan or The Accuser appears to be a divine being or angel and a member of the Divine Council of YHWH, with the formal function of prosecuting attorney (cf. Job 1:6). By the time of the NT, Satan is a personal name belonging to an evil angel who is prince of the demons (Mark 3:22). Satan is equated with the serpent (Rev. 12:9; 20:2; cf. Gen. 3:1), and the devil (Matt. 4:1), and he is identified as both the deceiver of

humanity and the adversary of God and all that is good (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 6:11; Rev. 20:2).

## **Verse 2**

The repetition of Satan's rebuke is emphatic, underscoring the divine election of Joshua and the people of Israel represented in the holy city of Jerusalem (cf. Zech. 1:17; 2:12). In prophecy, the word rebuke 'denotes divine invective against those who stand in the way of Yahweh's plan'. The archangel Michael quotes this admonition in his dispute with the devil over the body of Moses (Jude 9). The vivid word-picture, 'Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?', is a reference to the return of Joshua and the Hebrew people from the Babylonian exile 'by an act of divine grace'.

## **Verses 3-4**

Joshua's filthy clothes (v. 3) are symbols of the guilt and pollution of sin (v. 4) that prompted the divine judgment of exile. The word for filthy is found only here in the OT, but is closely related to two Hebrew nouns used for human excrement (cf. Deut. 23:13; Ezek. 4:12) and vomit (cf. 2 Kgs 18:27; Isa. 28:8). Such defilement of the high priest makes his presence in the heavenly court an odious affront to God.

The angel (v. 3) in charge of the scene in the heavenly court is probably the angel of the LORD introduced in verse 1. The direct address to remove the filthy clothes to those who were standing before Joshua in the prophet's vision (v. 4a) is a reference to other angelic beings present in the heavenly court serving as attendants (v. 4b; cf. NEB, 'in attendance on him' [i.e. Joshua]).

The rich garments (NIV) or 'festal garments' (NAB) are the 'fine vestments' (NEB) or 'priestly robes' (JPSV) appropriate to the office of the high priest. The verb

used to report that Joshua's sin had been taken away (NIV, NRSV) 'indicates divine forgiveness or the removal of guilt' (so NJPS).

### **Verse 5**

The word for turban (NIV, NRSV) or 'miter' (NAB) is rare in the OT (only Job 29:14; Isa. 62:3; Zech. 3:5) and connotes an elaborate headdress associated with royalty (cf. NJPS, 'diadem'). The use of such an unusual term here may anticipate the later 'crowning' of Joshua (Zech. 6:9–15). The turban of the high priest was to be made of fine linen and set with a medallion of pure gold inscribed with the words HOLY TO THE LORD (Exod. 28:36, 39). Although Zechariah uses a different term for turban, he may allude to the turban which the high priest was to wear at all times so that the Lord will accept the people of Israel (cf. Exod. 28:38). The placement of the turban on Joshua's head is an act of ordination or dedication, and reinstates him in the priestly office and his role as mediator for the people. This placing of the priestly turban on Joshua's head, along with the new vestments, was emblematic of the restoration to a former position accomplished in the divine cleansing (i.e. Joshua to his service as high priest, and Israel as the people of God).

### **Verses 6–7**

The restoration to priestly service and access to the divine presence was conditional: If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, after the pattern of the Mosaic covenant (cf. Deut. 30:19–20). Joshua's privilege and position were contingent upon obedience to God. God will again sanction the priestly oversight of 'his temple and the courtyard surrounding it' (CEV). This priestly governance of the temple precincts would have included judicial duties and the collection and administration of revenues and offerings.

Joshua is granted conditional access to the Divine Council of God's heavenly court (and I will give you a place among these standing here), an invitation to stand with the other angelic beings in YHWH's presence. This 'priestly access to

the Divine Council is innovative', since usually God's prophets were granted this privilege (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; Isa. 6:1–5). Although the advantages to this access to the Divine Council for the high priest are unclear, given the absence of a monarch in Judah, the appointment may signify the expanding role and authority of the office of high priest in the leadership of post-exilic Judah.

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