

Zechariah 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Zechariah chapter 3 Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.

And 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. And the angel of the Lord was standing by. And the angel of the Lord solemnly assured Joshua, Thus says the Lord of hosts, If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here.

Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign. Behold, I will bring my servant the branch. For behold, on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day.

In that day, declares the Lord of hosts, Every one of you will invite his neighbour to come under his vine and under his fig tree. The book of Zechariah is a book written in the context of the rebuilding of the temple.

Zechariah's prophecies, along with those of Haggai, encourage the people in this project. And the night visions with which the book of Zechariah begins relate to the work that the people are undertaking.

[1 : 46] In particular, the night visions disclose what God is doing in order to re-establish the true worship of the temple. The whole temple system had to be established by the Lord. And so, it was not possible for the people merely to rebuild the temple and for it to operate as normal.

Rather, the Lord had to take the initiative. And in these chapters, we see the way that the Lord is re-founding the system, and through the message of his prophet Zechariah, giving his people assurance of this fact.

The temple is being rebuilt, but to have a functioning temple, you need to have a functioning priesthood. The problem is that the priesthood, to be properly operative, needs to continue. When there has been a break in the priesthood and in the worship of the temple, everything needs to be started off again.

In Leviticus chapter 16, we have the law for the Day of Atonement, a day in which the high priest and the tabernacle were cleansed, blood being sprinkled over the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies.

This atoned for the sins of the past year and kept the system operating. However, with the temple destroyed, the system and the ritual has broken down. There's no way to cleanse the priest, there's no way to cleanse the people, and because the ritual has been rendered inoperative as a result of the destruction of the temple, there's no clean priest to perform it now.

[3 : 01] The whole priesthood needs to be re-initiated, and it's not entirely clear how that can happen. In this night vision, the Lord addresses this concern and this problem. Joshua, the high priest, elsewhere called Jeshua, is the son of Josedach, but he has a problem. His clothes of office are defiled.

The garments of office of the high priest, garments of glory and beauty, are described in Exodus chapter 28. They represent the people before the Lord, and the defilement of Joshua's clothes display the people's sin in the presence of God.

Ideally, the high priest was supposed to come into the presence of God and be accepted on account of his garments, garments that declared that he was holy to the Lord. But Joshua's garments seemed to be performing the opposite function.

They declared the defilement of the people. In the vision, Zachariah sees the divine council. We have visions of the divine council in places like 1 Kings chapter 22. The Lord enthroned in the heavens, surrounded by his servants.

Here Joshua is in the presence of the council. We might think of this in connection with the Day of Atonement, where the high priest would enter into the very throne room of the temple, the Holy of Holies, which represented God being enthroned above the cherubim.

[4 : 14] Ideally, the high priest would enter into the divine throne room, and he would have the angel of the covenant at his right hand, pleading and interceding for him. The right hand is the place where the person would look to for support.

Psalms 109 verse 31 For he stands at the right hand of the needy one, to save him from those who condemn his soul to death. Or in Psalm 109 verse 6 Appoint a wicked man against him.

Let an accuser stand at his right hand. Here in Zachariah chapter 3, it is an accuser that is at the right hand of the high priest, Satan himself. The power of Satan the accuser comes from the defilement and sin of the people.

While Christ intercedes for his people on account of his atonement, Satan accuses people on the grounds of their guilt. Overcoming the resistance of Satan requires atonement for the defilement of the people and the priesthood.

He is opposing the work of re-establishing the temple. As long as he can point to the defiled garments of Joshua that represent the defilement of the people, the rebuilding of the temple can be frustrated.

[5 : 17] Somehow the high priest needs to be set apart once more, set apart from the impurity of the people. As we have seen, the crucial ritual of the day of atonement could not be performed, where there was neither an intact temple, nor a pure and continuing priesthood.

There was no assurance that the people would be accepted before God. However, the accusations of Satan are not allowed to stand. The Lord is going to act on behalf of Jerusalem and on behalf of the priesthood.

It is going to be re-established once more. The original installation of the priests was performed by the prophet Moses, and Zechariah the prophet is going to participate in something similar here.

Joshua is described as like a brand plucked from the fire. He is one who has survived the judgment of exile that has fallen upon the people. However, to be re-established, the Lord has to deal with the problem of the clothing.

The high priest, particularly when clothed with his garments of office, represented the people and their spiritual state before the Lord. We see this in Numbers chapter 18 verse 1. So the Lord said to Aaron, You and your sons and your father's house with you shall bear iniquity connected with the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear iniquity connected with your priesthood.

[6 : 29] As James Jordan has pointed out, the ability of the high priest to enter into the presence of the Lord, particularly on the Day of Atonement, without being destroyed, was most especially connected with the golden plate that he had upon his forehead.

Exodus chapter 28 verses 36 to 38. You shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it like the engraving of a signet, holy to the Lord. And you shall fasten it on the turban by a cord of blue.

It shall be on the front of the turban. It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead that they may be accepted before the Lord.

Jordan observes the significance of the absence of this in the story of Uzziah in 2 Chronicles chapter 26 verses 19 and 20. Then Uzziah was angry.

Now he had a censer in his hand to burn incense. And when he became angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead in the presence of the priests in the house of the Lord by the altar of incense.

[7 : 33] And Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him. And behold, he was leprous in his forehead. And they rushed him out quickly. And he himself hurried to go out because the Lord had struck him.

Where a person going into the presence of the Lord did not have holy to the Lord upon his forehead, he was in danger of being struck by the Lord. In this vision then, the Lord is dealing with the problem of the garments of the high priest that represent the spiritual state of the people that the high priest brings before him.

While the day of atonement was the continuing celebration, this is a sort of foundational day of atonement, a day in which the high priest is prepared for his ministry at the very outset.

This is one of those passages in scripture where the angel of the Lord seems to be identified with the Lord himself. We see this particularly in verse 2. And the Lord said to Satan, The Lord rebuke you, O Satan.

The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you. The angel of the Lord here speaks to the Lord and as the Lord. The angel of the Lord instructs the filthy garments to be removed from Joshua.

[8 : 36] These garments, representing the sin of the people, are taken away. And in their place are given pure garments. Perhaps surprisingly, Zechariah then speaks up, calling for a clean turban to be put upon the head of the high priest.

As we have seen in Exodus chapter 28, this was an important aspect of the high priest's vestments. The angel of the Lord then delivers a word of encouragement and assurance to Joshua and to his companions, presumably the chief priests.

They are being installed in their office and there is an assurance here that their office will be effectual in bringing atonement for the people. As they are accepted, the people can be accepted.

A priest is, as Peter Lighthouse has argued, a palace servant of the Lord, one who acts as a steward in the Lord's house where the Lord's throne is symbolically situated.

Joshua in particular as the high priest will be able to come into the very presence of the Lord in the Holy of Holies. This is followed by a surprising promise in verse 8. Joshua the high priest and his companions, the chief priests, are signs that the Lord will bring his servant the branch.

[9 : 40] We read of the figure of the branch elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah chapter 23 verse 5. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch and he shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

And then again in Jeremiah chapter 33 verse 15. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

The restoration of the priesthood then and the temple service is a sign and a guarantee of the coming of the messianic branch and of the re-establishment of the Davidic kingdom.

The cleansing and re-establishment of the priesthood is a sign that the Lord has not given up on his people, that there is still a future awaiting for them and in such a manner a promise that one day the Messiah would come.

If we've been paying attention to the symbolism so far, the meaning of the stone in verse 9 should not be surprising to us. The single stone with seven eyes that corresponds with the promise to remove the iniquity of the land relates to the golden plate that was upon the forehead of the high priest, which was also engraved with holy to the Lord.

[10 : 52] That were seven Hebrew characters and here the stone has seven eyes. What more can we make of the symbolism here? Why not just describe it as a golden plate that was inscribed by the Lord?

Why has the golden plate become a stone that is inscribed and that has seven eyes? When we think of the Lord inscribing a stone, we might think of the tablets of stone of the law.

In Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 5 to 9, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.

You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. The engraved stone that's placed upon the forehead of the high priest here represents the law that's placed as the frontlets between his eyes, symbolically placing the commandments of the Lord upon his mind and also as a mark of divine ownership upon him.

[11 : 58] What about the seven eyes? In the next chapter of Zechariah, in chapter 4 verse 2, we read, And he said to me, What do you see? I said, I see and behold a lampstand all of gold with a bowl on the top of it and seven lamps on it with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it.

And then again in verse 10, For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel. These seven are the eyes of the Lord which range through the whole earth.

The lampstand in the temple is connected with the almond tree or the watcher tree. In Exodus chapter 25 verse 37, we are given instructions for it. You shall make seven lamps for it and the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it.

The high priest, of course, could be symbolically associated with the lampstand. When Aaron's rod budded, in Numbers chapter 17, it produced almond blossoms. The high priest was also a watcher within the house of the Lord and also within the house of Israel more generally.

In the stone with seven eyes that is placed upon the forehead of the high priest, perhaps we are seeing a deeper correspondence between the high priest and the temple in which he serves.

[13 : 11] The engraved tablets of stone, though no longer in the Ark of the Covenant, are associated with the Holy of Holies, the golden lampstand with the holy place. In his garments, the high priest is being represented as a sort of living temple.

The Lord is going to cleanse the high priest and re-establish the worship of the temple, but perhaps verse 9 is looking forward to something even greater. The removal of the iniquity of the land in a single day seems to have an eschatological referent.

We see this language used in 1 Kings 4, 25, of the reign of Solomon, for instance. And Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon.

[14 : 23] Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more, but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

A question to consider. In Jude verse 9, we read, But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, The Lord rebuke you.