

2. Joshua was a real person and the first high priest following the Babylonian captivity. And yet his appearance in Zechariah's vision placed him in a *symbolic* role. That is, the vision wasn't ultimately about the person of Joshua; rather, he served as a symbol. The implication, then, is that both he and the role he played in the vision pointed to someone and something beyond himself. As a first consideration then, it's important to note that Joshua's symbolic cleansing in the vision – which, again, must be understood in terms of God's promise respecting Jerusalem's restoration – had two dimensions:

- a. The first was Joshua's *historical* role as God's high priest to the exiles. All priests were required to be ceremonially clean as a prerequisite to discharging their priestly duties. This was true of the high priest, whose priestly work reached its apex in Yom Kippur – the day of his annual atoning mediation for the covenant people and everything pertaining to their covenant relationship with God (Leviticus 16, 23). The high priest epitomized the priestly mediatorial role in which a divinely designated representative went before Yahweh on behalf of His covenant sons. In that sense, the high priest embodied in himself the entire nation. Thus Joshua's uncleanness indicated the uncleanness of the whole house of Israel.

“Joshua appears in his capacity as the representative equivalent of Jerusalem-Israel, more specifically, covenant-breaking Israel defiled by sin, for he appears in filthy garments, a shocking deviation from the ceremonial requirement that the high priest enter the heavenly court of the holy of holies in this vestments of holy glory.” (Meredith Kline, Glory in Our Midst)

The high priest represented his people as their mediator. He went before the Lord on their behalf, but had to obtain atonement for himself before he could offer the atoning sacrifice for them (cf. Leviticus 16:1-16; Hebrews 7:26-27). So Joshua needed to be cleansed from his defilement in order to render the people clean through his sacrificial ministrations. In this vision Yahweh declared His intention to cleanse Joshua, which implied the same intent for the Abrahamic household.

And taken within the larger visionary context, this cleansing was unto restoration: The Lord was committed to Zion and would return to her and make her fruitful so as to bear countless children for Him – children who would prove faithful. Yahweh would again dwell in the midst of His people, but this required that they also return to Him – that they be cleansed, forgiven and restored to communion with Him. And this, in turn, depended upon the effectual, sacrificial mediation of His appointed high priest. But only a spotless priest could perform this work; thus the necessity of Joshua's cleansing and the significance of Satan's accusation:

*If Yahweh's high priest was condemned as disqualified for his work, the children of Israel were left without an effectual mediator. **His** uncleanness consigned them to **theirs**, and this left them without any hope for an end to their exile and their recovery to their God. In the end, Joshua's defilement meant Zion would never see her day of restoration; if the Lord was obligated to reject His high priest, He was equally obligated to abandon His purpose and promise regarding Zion.*

- b. The second dimension of Joshua's cleansing pertained to his *typological* role in the vision. As Israel's high priest, Joshua represented the whole nation, but he also symbolized another priestly individual, here identified as Yahweh's *Branch* (3:8). The nature and significance of this symbolic correspondence will be considered in due time, but what is evident at the outset is that the relationship between the restoration of Jerusalem/Zion and Joshua's symbolic purification must be understood in terms of the correspondence between Joshua and Yahweh's servant, the Branch.
3. Immediately after calling for Joshua to be stripped of his unclean garments and reclothed, the angel of the Lord turned to address the high priest himself (3:6-7). Cleansed by the Lord of his defilement and guilt and now fit for his priestly ministration, it was proper that the angel should issue Joshua a new commissioning charge. And this charge took the form of a solemn and binding testimony composed of two parts: the high priest's obligation and the Lord's assurance in view of it.
- a. Joshua was set free from his uncleanness and guilt, but in order to henceforth serve the Lord in sincere devotion. He was to "*walk in His way*" and jealously "*keep His charge*" as high priest. The first obligation is general and overarching, emphasizing what Joshua's *manner of life* was to be – his understanding, attitude and orientation. The second is more specific and pertained to Joshua's careful faithfulness in executing his *priestly duties* (cf. Leviticus 8:35; Numbers 3:6-7).
- b. And if Joshua would prove faithful to keep these charges concerning his personal and priestly life, Yahweh promised to reward him with distinct privilege and blessing related to His sanctuary and its ministration: "*You will judge My house* (that is, mediate on behalf of it) *and watch over My courts and I will give you a presence among these standing.*" (cf. the language of Psalm 132)
- The first two statements are closely related, but there is at least one important nuance of difference between them: The first highlights the matter of authority and rule, while the second emphasizes stewardship and service. The first underscores the *regal* dimension, the second the *priestly* one. Thus the Lord's promise: If Joshua showed himself faithful as high priest, He would bestow on him all authority, rule and oversight of His sanctuary and its ministration. *The ultimate significance of this grant comes to light in the angel's subsequent declaration that Joshua and his fellows were symbols of Yahweh's servant, the Branch* (3:8; cf. 6:9-13).
 - The third promise poses interpretive challenges because of the Hebrew language and construction. Of particular difficulty is the Hebrew noun variously rendered *access, place, standing*, etc. More removed from these meanings, the Septuagint translators (who were Greek-speaking Jews) translated this term with a Greek participle that most generally refers to some sort of turning back or return. Thus Yahweh's promise becomes: "I will give you ones who will return so as to be among these standing."

The Hebrew noun is a cognate of the verb, *to walk*, and often refers to the process or event of walking (as in “taking a *walk*”) or to a passage or journey. But that particular sense doesn’t seem to fit well here. What does fit is the idea of movement that brings one into an assembly of persons – thus the ideas of entrance, access, and a place within such an assembly. Treated in the context of the vision, the statement is perhaps best understood as Yahweh’s pledge to Joshua that his faithfulness will secure for him entrance and a place among those standing before him.

This, of course, raises the question of who this group of men was. Scholars hold different views, but the context suggests that they were the same individuals directed to strip and reclothe Joshua (3:4). (The Lord’s angel didn’t identify these men, but both groups are described in the same way.) But assuming this to be the case, what was the nature of this assembly? Previously it was suggested that these figures were angelic attendants, which would then seem to indicate that Joshua was being promised the sort of access to Yahweh’s presence enjoyed by His angels. This view is plausible given Joshua’s status and role as high priest. But other scholars conclude that these figures represented a visionary embodiment of Yahweh’s faithful *priesthood*, so that Joshua was being promised a place in that fraternity. Somewhat similar to this view, others maintain that this assembly was a symbolic personification of the *divine agency* by which God removes guilt and impurity. Thus the promise spoke of Joshua’s role as the Lord’s agent in His work of atoning for sin.

Whatever the interpretive difficulties of the third promise, it’s clear that it must be understood in the light of the other two as well as the charge to Joshua and the vision’s larger meaning and purpose. When all of those considerations are taken into account, the general sense seems to be that Yahweh was pledging to Joshua that he would be His high priest *indeed*: one who is authentically “holy to the Lord” in his person and ministration; one who stands in Yahweh’s presence as faithful and effectual mediator free of all uncleanness and accusation.

4. Having issued his charge to Joshua, the angel widened his address to include those with the high priest (3:8-10). Once again the angel (and Zechariah) didn’t identify these particular individuals. They’re simply described as Joshua’s companions who were sitting in front of him. It’s also unclear whether they appeared with Joshua throughout the vision or only at this point. Zechariah didn’t mention them at the outset of the vision (3:1), but this could have been because he was focused on Joshua as the central figure. The fact that the angel mentioned these individuals casually and without commentary suggests they were present throughout the vision, but either way, what matters is the role they played in it. They are introduced as Joshua’s *associates sitting before him* and this, along with their serving as *signs* (apparently together with Joshua himself) points to them being fellow priests. If so, they possibly appeared to Zechariah as men he knew – priests serving alongside Joshua. But the fact that they’re not identified (cf. v. 1) seems to indicate that they were merely priestly figures presented as under Joshua’s authority.

- a. The angel's word to Joshua consisted of an exhortation to faithfulness and the pledge of blessing following upon it (vv. 6-7). Here, he revealed to the high priest and his associates that they were signs of the *Branch* whom Yahweh was going to bring. This title may appear obscure to contemporary Christians, but it wouldn't have to Zechariah and the Jews with him. For this was a well-known designation used by the prophets in identifying the coming messianic figure as the son of David – the son Yahweh promised in His covenant with David. Thus the Branch is the *Branch of David*: the son appointed by the Lord to build His house and in whom David's house, throne and kingdom were to realize their everlasting perpetuity (2 Samuel 7:1-17; cf. Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1ff; Jeremiah 23:5-6, 33:14-16).

Not surprisingly given the diptych structure of Zechariah's prophecy, this same "Branch" is the focal point of the central hinge in 6:9-15. In that passage this person's Davidic identity is highlighted, not by direct association with David himself, but by his relation to the Davidic Covenant; he is the son of David appointed to build Yahweh's house. Moreover, he was going to do so as an enthroned priest-king, thereby drawing on Melchizedek imagery which itself is associated with David (cf. Genesis 14:18; Psalm 110; cf. also 2 Samuel 6:12-18).

- b. It's also noteworthy that the Lord referred to this Branch as His *servant*. In itself this designation isn't particularly illuminating, for God applied it to numerous individuals (and even the nation of Israel) who served Him and His purposes – whether knowingly and willingly or otherwise. But when connected with the concept of the Branch, the servant designation becomes profoundly important. For then it points to a singular servant: the messianic figure identified by the title, the *Servant of Yahweh*. This theme has its focal point in Isaiah's "Servant Songs," but it occurs widely in the third section of Isaiah's prophecy (chaps. 40-66). Most importantly, Isaiah is the prophet who most closely associates this coming Servant with the covenant son of David known as "Branch" (often referred to as "David") (cf. Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1-12 with 42:1-7, 49:1-13, 52:13-55:3; also Jeremiah 23:1-6, 33:14-16; Hosea 3; Ezekiel 34:11-24, 37:15-28; cf. also Psalm 89:1-4, 19-29).

This Branch of David was coming into the world to accomplish Yahweh's will as His Servant. And Yahweh's will is that this Branch should build His house by bringing back to Him the sons of the Israel and the nations of the earth.

- c. Yahweh's angel declared His determination to bring in the Branch and he proceeded to substantiate this oath by pointing to a strange *set of images* (3:9-10). This is arguably the most challenging part of the vision, and that for at least three reasons. First, the images themselves are not easy to interpret. But the difficulty is heightened by the fact that this imagery must be interpreted in terms of the two accompanying divine pledges: the pledge to bring in the Branch and to remove the land's iniquity. And beyond that, the angel indicated that Branch and his coming have a sign in Joshua and his associates. All of this – together with the entire visionary episode and the broader biblical witness to the messianic Servant/Branch – must be considered in the process of interpreting these images.