

THE ANGEL OF THE LORD IN THE VISION IN ZECHARIAH 3

The prophet Zechariah had eight visions in the same night (Zch 1:7-6:8). A central theme was God's gracious promise to restore Jerusalem, and the rebuilding of the temple was one aspect of this. The sin of the Jews would not disqualify them from their work. The passage in Zch 3 is not fully appreciated without the messianic references.

One angel is identified by the clause, "who was speaking to me" (1: 9 1:13-14, 1:19, 2:3). He explains to the prophet Zechariah what the eight visions mean. However, another "angel" needs special attention. In Zechariah's first vision, about the myrtle trees in the ravine, he wrote, "During the night I saw a Man riding on a red horse." This "Man" is then called the Angel of the LORD (1:11-12). The "horses" whom Zechariah sees are probably to be understood as angels. The Lord sends them to go throughout the earth.

In various places in the Old Testament "the Angel of the LORD" is the same person as the LORD Himself. He often says things that apply strictly only to God. When the Angel of the Lord spoke to Hagar, He used the first person, "I shall indeed give you so many descendants that they are too many to be counted" (Gn 16:7,10). Hagar then gave the name "El-Roi" to the place where the Angel of the LORD had been talking to her. "El-Roi" means "God sees me." Other similar passages of the Old Testament are Ex 3:2,4; Jdg 2:1-5; Jdg 6:11-24; Jdg 13:22; Zch 1:11-12; Zch 12:8. The Angel of the Lord is also identified with Lord Himself in Zechariah 3:1, 5, and 6.

The question, which Person of the Trinity, then, was this Angel of the Lord, who is also the Lord, is answered by John 1:18: "No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is God, who is in the lap of the Father, has made Him known." Compare also 1 John 4:12. It is important to affirm that the person of the Godhead who appeared and spoke to Abraham, Moses, and the rest is the Second Person, the Son, who later became incarnate for us and for our salvation. This also reminds us of the briefest and fullest Christian confession, "Jesus Christ is Lord."

The passages in Zechariah 1 and 3 say things that are interesting about this Angel of the Lord. The other angels reported to Him, and told Him that the earth was still and quiet. Although the Angel of the Lord was Himself the LORD, He addressed another Person as LORD: "LORD of hosts, how much longer will You withhold Your compassion from Jerusalem and the other cities of Judah? You have been angry with them for the past seventy years" (1:12). Although the Persian empire, which also controlled Jerusalem at this time, was still and quiet, many Jews remained in captivity and under oppression. The Angel of the LORD appeared as One who wanted to show them compassion. We recall that the Angel of the Lord was also the one who announced to another priest, Zacharias, that he would be the father of Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist, over five hundred years later (Lk 1:11).

In chapter two the angel who explained to Zechariah what he was seeing in the visions was again distinguished from another Angel, and this second Angel spoke in the kind of way that was appropriate only to God. "Then I saw the angel who had been talking to me going out. Then another Angel came out to meet him. He told him, "Run! Tell that young man, 'People will live in Jerusalem as people do in open country places, because it will have so many human beings and animals in it. I Myself shall be a wall of fire all around it', declares the LORD, 'and I shall be the Glory inside it.'" (2:3-5). He promised restoration and a bright future for Jerusalem. He Himself would protect it like a wall of fire. He Himself would be the Glory inside Jerusalem. We are reminded of other scriptural passages that refer to the Messiah as the Glory of His people Israel (Lk 1:32; Isa 46:13).

In Zechariah's fourth vision the prophet witnessed the cleansing of the high priest Joshua. He also heard a promise that God will send His Servant, who was called "The Branch." Satan wanted to accuse Joshua. The suggestion was that he was too wicked. Although Joshua was guilty of sin and appeared wearing filthy garments, the LORD, "who chooses Jerusalem" (3:2) rebuked Satan. The Angel, before whom Joshua was standing, told those who were standing in front of Him, "Remove the filthy clothes from him!" The next words again are appropriate for God Himself. He has the power to remove sin and guilt. The Angel of the LORD told Joshua, "Look! I have taken your guilt away from you." The festal robes in which He ordered Joshua to be clothed also represented the freedom from guilt that He bestowed.

The Angel of the LORD then spoke in the name of God Himself. He solemnly assured Joshua, "This is what the LORD of hosts has said: 'If you walk in My ways and observe My requirements, then you yourself will also rule my temple and have charge of My courts. Then I shall give you free access among these who are standing here'" (3:7).

The high priest Joshua, who represented Jerusalem, was like a burning stick snatched from a fire. We are expressly told that Joshua and his companions are "men who symbolise something wonderful." What wonderful thing do they symbolise? The answer lies in the following promise of the Messiah, for whom the Old Testament uses two Hebrew words that mean "the Branch" (*nezer* and *zemach*, Isa 4:2; Isa 11:1; Isa 53:2; Jr 23:5; Jr 33:15; Zch 6:12). This is the promised messianic Descendant from David, who brings remarkable salvation for us all. He Himself is the Angel of the Lord in this passage.

The expression "My Servant" was one that Ps 89:20 and Isaiah had used in four songs about the Servant of the Lord (42:1; 49:3,6; 52:13; cf Ezk 34:23-25). The first Jewish Christians also used the expression "God's Servant" to refer to Jesus (Ac 3:13; 3:26; 4:25, 27, 30). The term referred particularly to Jesus' human nature during His humiliation. Perhaps this expression passed out of regular use in the NT because it could be wrongly understood, as though Jesus' divine nature were inferior to the Father's.

In the New Testament Jesus often said that the Father had sent Him. Here the LORD says, "For look! I shall bring My servant, the Branch."

The reference to the stone that God places before Joshua is probably also to be understood as a messianic promise:

“For look at the stone that I have set before Joshua! See! On a single stone with seven eyes I shall engrave its inscription’, declares the LORD of hosts, ‘and I shall remove the guilt of this land in a single day. On 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’” (3:9-10). Seven is God’s number, and the seven eyes suggest God’s own infinite knowledge.

The cleansing from sin, therefore, in this passage, refers to the costly redemption that the Son, the Angel of the Lord, would Himself make. His blood and death would remove sin and guilt “in a single day.”

From the standpoint of the New Testament we see several other similarities or contrasts. The name “Jesus” comes from Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name “Joshua” and its later Hebrew form “Jeshua.” Jesus is our High Priest, who, unlike the Joshua in this vision, does not come from the tribe of Levi. Jesus, our high priest, would remove guilt in a single day. The Angel of the LORD was pointing to Himself in this passage.

Because of what He has done, He has removed the possibility for Satan to accuse those who trust in Him. The solemn declaration that the high priest Joshua is clean is a beautiful picture of justification through faith. The Angel of the Lord, as the Judge, rose from His sitting position to order Joshua’s restoration, a clean headband for him, and free access for him among those in God’s presence. We rightly read in this passage our own declaration that we are righteous before God through faith, for Christ’s sake.