

September 22, 2002
Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When the Persian conqueror, Cyrus, after overthrowing Babylon in 539 B.C., permitted the deported Jews to return to the Holy Land from their Babylonian Captivity, relatively few of them did so. Indeed, from an investigation of Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7, it appears that only 49,897 individuals returned to the land of Palestine over the next century. The reason for this is not hard to discern. Most Jews, settled down now and living good, profitable lives in Babylon, were reluctant to come back and assume the drudgeries of what could hardly be called, any longer, "a land flowing with milk and honey."

The priests, nonetheless, did not share that reluctance to come home, and this circumstance, too, was understandable. Since the Deuteronomic reform of 622 had limited the sacrificial worship of the Jewish religion exclusively to Jerusalem, there was certainly no reason for priests to remain in Babylon. Consequently, the number of priests who returned - 4,289 - seems disproportionately large (Ezra 2:36-39).

Chief among them was the high priest Jeshua, or Joshua, the son Jehozadak, who had been carried away to Babylon back in 586 (1 Chronicles 6:15). Jeshua's name always appears second among the returning exiles (Ezra 2:2; Nehemiah 7:7; 12:1,10,26). Invariably the first name in those lists is Zerubbabel, the governor appointed by the Cyrus to oversee Jerusalem's restoration. In the Bible, Zerubbabel and Jeshua were often paired as the spiritual and political leaders of the people. Thus, the prophet Zechariah described them as "the two anointed ones, who stand beside the Lord of the whole earth" (Zechariah 4:14).

When Jeshua first took up his duties in Jerusalem, there was no temple, of course, for the Babylonians had destroyed it in 586. Accordingly, the first sacrifices were offered on an outdoor altar (Ezra 3:2-3). The first major feast day that they observed that year was Tabernacles, celebrated in September (3:1,4). That was a feast very appropriate to the actual living conditions of the returned exiles, who were still obliged to live in tents, lean-tos, and other makeshift dwellings. Next spring they laid the new temple's foundations (3:7-13), but roughly two decades would elapse before

Zerubbabel and Jeshua were able to supervise the temple's completion, largely under the prophetic urging of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1-2; 6:15-18; Haggai 1:1-2; Zechariah 1:1).

The high priest Jeshua also appeared several times in the prophetic visions of Zechariah. In one of those the prophet beheld him standing before God with an angel and with Satan. He saw Satan doing for Jeshua what he did for Job, namely, "opposing" him, saying bad things to God about him (Zechariah 3:1; Job 1:9-11; 2:4-5). In both these cases Satan was the "accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night" (Revelation 12:10). In the case of Jeshua, Satan's accusation had to do with the "filthy garments" of the high priest (Zechariah 3:3). Could such a one, so improperly vested, properly offer sacrifices to the Almighty?

At this point the angel of the Lord rebuked Satan for his accusation against the priest: "The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you!" (Zechariah 3:2) (In case anyone inquires, "The Lord rebuke you!" is the execration regularly preferred by angels who are obliged to deal with Satan; cf. Jude 9.)

Jeshua may be taken to represent any and all of God's servants aware of their total unworthiness as they come to worship. Their hearts are full of such sentiments as, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8), "I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof" (7:6), and "God, be merciful to me a sinner! (18:13). Satan, of course, is ever at hand on such occasions, ready even further to discourage these saints who feel guilty in their filthy garments, suggesting to their minds that they may as well give the whole thing up as useless.

But what do the angels say? "Take away the filthy garments from him. . . . Let them put a clean turban on his head." We do not come before God with any righteousness of our own. "See," the Lord says, "I remove your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes" (Zechariah 3:4-5). We approach the worship of God only in the pure grace of our redemption. "Is not this," asks our good angel, "a branch plucked from the fire?" (3:2).

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