

# The Good Word

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## THE JEWISH DAY OF ATONEMENT & THE HIGH PRIEST OF ISRAEL, PART II

### SENDING THE HE-GOAT FOR *AZAZEL* INTO THE WILDERNESS (CONTINUED)

**Alfred Edersheim** (AD 1825-1889): “The distance between Jerusalem and the beginning of the *wilderness* is ... precisely ten intervals, each half a Sabbath-day’s journey from the other. At the end of each of these intervals there was a station, occupied by one or more persons, detailed for the purpose, who offered refreshment to the man leading the goat, and then accompanied him [the goat] to the next station. By this arrangement two results were secured: some trusted persons accompanied the goat all along his journey, and yet none of them walked more than a Sabbath-day’s journey -- that is, half a journey going and the other half returning. At last they reached the edge of the wilderness. Here they halted, viewing afar off, while the man led forward the goat, tore off half the *scarlet-tongue* and stuck it on a projecting cliff; then, leading the animal backwards, he pushed it over the projecting ledge of rock. There was a moment’s pause, and the man, now defiled by contact with the sin-bearer, retraced his steps to the last of the ten stations, where he spent the rest of the day and the night. But the arrival of the goat in the wilderness was immediately telegraphed, by the waving of flags, from station to station, till, a few minutes after its occurrence, it was known in the Temple and whispered from ear to ear, that *the goat had borne upon him all their iniquities into a land not inhabited.*”<sup>1</sup>

However, the Talmud also records the earlier practice:

**BABYLONIAN TALMUD, SEDER MO’ED, TRACTATE YOMA, CHAPTER VI, GAMARA (67b)** ... “Our Rabbis taught: In the beginning they would tie the thread of crimson wool on the entrance of the *Ulam* [the hall leading to the interior of the Temple] without: if it became white, they rejoiced; if it did not become white, they were sad and ashamed. Thereupon they arranged to tie it to the entrance of the *Ulam* within. But they were still peeping through and if it became white, they rejoiced, whereas, if it did not become white, they grew sad and ashamed. Thereupon they arranged to tie one half to the [projecting ledge of rock which they

called “*Azazel*”] and the other half between its horns ... Originally they used to tie the thread of crimson wool to the entrance of the *Ulam* within, and as soon as the he-goat reached the wilderness, [and if] it turned white. then they knew that the commandment concerning it had been fulfilled, as it is said: *If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white wool (Isa. 1:18).*”

But after the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ the crimson strap tied to the rock *Azazel* never turned white for one very obvious reason: the New Covenant had superseded the Old making these Levitical practices obsolete and hence, totally ineffective:

**BABYLONIAN TALMUD, SEDER MO’ED, TRACTATE YOMA, CHAPTER IV GEMARA (39b)** “Our Rabbis taught: **During the last forty years before the destruction of the Temple the lot** [‘for the Lord’] did not come up in the right hand, nor did the **crimson-colored strap** become white.”<sup>2</sup>

### ANCIENT AND MODERN COMMENTARY ON THE HE-GOATS AND ESPECIALLY THE HE-GOAT FOR *AZAZEL*


In our previous issue we noted that there were numerous theories for the meaning of the *he-goat for Azazel*, none of which were useful except the name *Azazel* אֲזַאזֵל itself, derived from אַז, *strong*; and אַז, *mighty*. And Who in *Scripture* is described as “strong and mighty” more than the *LORD* Himself as אֱלֹהֵי אֲזַאזֵל, *El Shaddai, God Almighty* and as ὁ Θεὸς ὁ Παντοκράτωρ, *the God the Almighty!* So Rashi was right in the sense that *Azazel* is a proper name, but failed to recognize it as another title the *Strong and Mighty* (One) Who carries the immensely heavy burden of all our sins away *as far as the East is from the West*.

**St. Justin the Philosopher and Martyr** (AD 100-165): “And the two goats which were ordered to be offered during the fast [Day of Atonement], of which one was sent away as the scapegoat, and the other sacrificed, were similarly declarative of the two appearances of Christ; the first, in which the elders of your people, and the priests, having laid hands on Him and put Him to death, sent Him away as the scapegoat; and His second appearance, because in the same place in Jerusalem you shall recognize Him Whom you have dishonoured, and Who was an offering for all sinners willing to repent, and keeping the fast which Isaiah speaks of, loosening the cords of the violent contracts, and keeping the other precepts, likewise enumerated by him, and which I have quoted [in Chapter XV] which those believing in Jesus do. And further, you are aware that the offering of the two goats,

1. Edersheim, Alfred, *Chapter XVI -- The Day of Atonement, The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Christ*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1985, pp. 312-319. This excerpt covers *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yoma*, (66b-67a).

2. *Babylonian Talmud, Seder Mo’ed, Tractate Yoma*, Hebrew-English Edition, Socino Press, New York, NY, 1974, (39b)..





which were enjoined to be sacrificed at the fast, was not permitted to take place similarly anywhere else, but only in Jerusalem.”<sup>3</sup>

**Tertullian** (AD 155-220), “*CHAPTER VII: PROPHECY SETS FORTH TWO DIFFERENT CONDITIONS OF CHRIST, ONE LOWLY, THE OTHER MAJESTIC. THIS FACT POINTS TO TWO ADVENTS OF CHRIST:*

“May I offer, moreover an interpretation of the two goats which were presented on *the great day of atonement*? Do they not also prefigure the two natures of Christ? They were of like size and very similar in appearance, owing to the Lord’s identity of aspect; because He is not to come in any other form, having to be recognized by those by whom He was also wounded and pierced. One of these goats was bound with scarlet and driven by the people out of the camp into the wilderness, amid cursing, and spitting, and pulling, and piercing, being thus marked with all the signs of the Lord’s own passion; while the other, by being offered up for sins and given to the priests of the temple for meat, afforded proofs of His second appearance, when (after all sins have been expiated) the priests of the spiritual temple, that is, the church, are to enjoy the flesh, as it were, of the Lord’s own grace [*And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father* (Rev 1:5a).], while the residue go away from salvation without tasting it. Since, therefore, the first advent was prophetically declared both as most obscure in its types, and as deformed with every kind of indignity, but the second as glorious and altogether worthy of God, they would on this very account, while confining their regards to that which they were easily able both to understand to believe, even the second advent, be not undeservedly deceived respecting the more obscure, and at any rate, the more lowly first coming. Accordingly, to this day they [the Jews] deny that their Christ has come, because He has not appeared in majesty, while they ignore the fact that He was come also in lowliness.”<sup>4</sup>

**Theodoret of Cyr** (c.AD 393 -c. 458/466): “I will however mention the sacrifice in which two goats were offered, the one being slain and the other let go. In these two goats there is an anticipative image of the two natures of the Savior; in the one let go, of the impassible Godhead [the *he-goat for Azazel*], in the one slain, of the passible manhood.”<sup>5</sup>

**Alfred Edersheim** (AD 1825-1889): “What was the meaning of a rite on which such a momentous issue depended? Everything about it seems strange and mysterious -- the lot that designated it, and that *to Azazel*; the fact, that though the highest of all sin-offerings, it was neither sacrificed nor its blood sprinkled in the Temple; and the circumstance that it really was only *part* of a sacrifice -- the two goats together forming one sacrifice, one of them being killed, and the other *let go*, there being no other analogous case of the kind except at the purification of a leper, when one bird was killed and the other dipped in its blood, and let go free. Thus these two sacrifices -- one in the removal of what symbolically represented indwelling sin, the other contracted guilt -- agreed in requiring two animals, of whom one was


killed and the other *let go*. This is not the place to discuss the various views entertained of the import of the scapegoat. But it is destructive of one and all of the received interpretations, that the sins of the people were confessed not on the goat which was killed, but on that which was *let go in the wilderness*, and that it was this goat -- not the other -- which bore upon him all the iniquities of the people [Isaiah 53]. So far as the conscience was concerned, this goat was the real and the only sin-offering *for all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins*, for upon it the high-priest laid the sins of the people, after he had, by the blood of the bullock and of the other goat, *made an end of reconciling the Holy Place, and the tabernacle of the congregation and the altar* [Leviticus 16:20]. The blood sprinkled had effected this; but it had done no more, and it could do no more for it *could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience* [Hebrews 9:9]. The symbolical representation of this perfecting was by the live goat, which, laden with the confessed sins of the people, carried them away into *the wilderness to a land not inhabited*. The only meaning of which this seems really capable, is that though confessed guilt was removed from the people to the head of the goat, as the symbolical substitute, yet as the goat was not killed, only sent far away, into a *land not inhabited*, so under the Old Covenant, sin was not really blotted out, only put away from the people [for a time], and put aside till Christ came, not only to take upon Himself the burden of transgression, but to *blot it out and to purge it away*.

“Thus viewed, not only the text of Lev. 16, but the language of Hebrews 9 and 10, which chiefly refer to the Day of Atonement, becomes plain. The blood, both of the bullock and of the goat which the high-priest carried *once a year within the sacred veil, was offered for himself* (including the priesthood) *and for the errors* (or rather ignorances) *of the people*. In the language of Lev. 16:20, it reconciled *the Holy Place, and the tabernacle of the congregation, and the altar*, that is, as already explained, it rendered on the part of priests and people the continuance of sacrificial worship possible. But this live scapegoat *let go* in the wilderness, over which, in the exhaustive language of Lev. 16:21, the high-priest had confessed and on which he had laid *all* the iniquities of the children of Israel, and *all* their transgressions in *all* their sins, meant something quite different. It meant the inherent *weakness and unprofitableness of the command*; it meant, that *the law made nothing perfect but was the bringing in of a better hope*; that, in the covenant mercy of God, guilt and sin were indeed removed from the people, that they were *covered up*, and in that sense atoned for, or rather that they were both *covered up* and removed, but that they were not really *taken away and destroyed* till Christ came; that they were only taken into a land not inhabited, till He should blot it out by His own blood; that the provision which the Old Testament made was only preparatory and temporary, until the *time of the reformation*; and that hence real and true forgiveness of sins, and with it the spirit of adoption, could only be finally obtained after the death and resurrection of the *Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world*. Thus in the fullest sense it was true of the *fathers*, that *these all received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect*. For the law

3. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, Chap. XL, in Roberts, A., Donaldson, J (Editors), *Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF) Vol. 1*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1994, p.215.

4. Tertullian, *Against Marcion Book. 3, Chapter 7, ANF Vol 3*, p. 326-327.

5. Theodoret of Cyr, *Dialogue 3, NPNF*, 2nd Series, 3:336.



having a shadow of the good things to come, could not make the comers thereunto perfect; nor yet was it possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins. The live goat let go was every year a remover of sins which yet were never really removed in the sense of being blotted out -- only deposited, as it were, and reserved till He came whom God hath set forth as a propitiation ... because of the passing over of the former sins, in the forbearance of God.<sup>6</sup> And for this cause He is the mediator of a new covenant, in order that, death having taken place for the propitiation of the transgression under the first covenant, they which have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance (Hebrews 9:15) ...

**[REMOVAL OF THE CARCASSES OF THE BULLOCK AND HE-GOAT USED FOR THE SIN OFFERINGS]**

“While the scapegoat was being let into the wilderness, the high-priest proceeded to cut up the bullock and the goat with whose blood he had previously made atonement, put the sacrificed fats and organs in a vessel which he committed to an attendant to be salted and burned on the Outer Alter, and sent the carcasses to be burnt *outside the city*, in the place where the Temple ashes were usually deposited.

**[FINAL YOM KIPPUR PRAYERS OF THE HIGH PRIEST AND FINAL FESTAL OFFERINGS]**

“Then according to tradition, the high-priest, still wearing the linen garments, went into the *Court of the Women*, and read the passages of Scripture bearing on the Day of Atonement, viz. Lev. 16; 23:27-32; also repeating by heart Num. 29:7-11. A series of prayers accompanied this reading of the Scriptures. The most interesting of these supplications may be thus summed up: -- Confession of sin with prayer for forgiveness, closing with the words, *Praise be to Thee, O Lord, Who in Thy mercy forgivest the sins of Thy people Israel*; prayer for the permanence of the Temple, and that the Divine Majesty might shine in it, closing with --*Praise be to Thee, O Lord, Who inhabitest Zion*; prayer for the establishment and safety of Israel, and the continuance of a king among them, closing -- *Thanks be to Thee, O Lord, Who hast chosen Israel*; prayer for the priesthood, that all their doings, especially their sacred services, might be acceptable unto God, and that He be gracious unto them, closing with -- *Thanks be to Thee, O Lord, Who hast sanctified the priesthood*; and finally (in the language of Maimonides), prayers, entreaties, hymns, and petitions of the high-priests own, closing with the words: *Give help, O Lord, to Thy people Israel, for Thy people needeth help; thanks be unto Thee, O Lord, Who hearest prayer.*

“These prayers ended, the high-priest washed his hands and feet, put off his *linen*, and put on his *golden vestments*, and once more washed hands and feet before proceeding to the next ministry. He now appeared again before the people as the Lord’s anointed in the golden garments of the bride-chamber and offered the festive burnt-offerings of the day, he sacrificed *one kid of the goats for a sin-offering*, probably with special reference to these festive services, which, like everything else, required atoning blood for their acceptance. The flesh of this sin-offering was eaten at night by the priests

6. Edersheim writes in a footnote: Romans 3:25. We have generally adopted the rendering of Dean Alford, where the reader will perceive any divergence from the Authorized Version.

within the sanctuary. Next he sacrificed the burnt-offerings for the people and that for himself, and finally burned the *inwards* of the expiatory offerings, whose blood had formerly been sprinkled in the Most Holy Place. This, properly speaking, finished the services of the day ...

**[THE EVENING TAMID Service]**

“But the high-priest had yet to offer the ordinary evening sacrifice [the Tamid], after which he washed his hands and his feet, burnt the evening incense on the golden altar, lit the lamps on the candlestick for the night, washed his hands and feet, put on his ordinary layman’s dress and was escorted by the people in procession to his own house in Jerusalem. The evening closed with a feast.”<sup>7</sup>



**WAS ST. ZACHARIAH, THE FATHER OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST, A HIGH PRIEST OR JUST A PRIEST?**



by Dr. Seraphim Steger

Now that we have discussed the role of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement in detail, and appreciate how St. Paul has given us the apostolic understanding of it in his *Letter to the Hebrews*, we are ready to answer the question as to whether St. Zechariah, the father of St. John the Baptist, was truly a High Priest of Israel, or just a simple priest as the heterodox maintain based on their heretical dogma of *Sola Scriptura*:


**TESTIMONY OF THE SCRIPTURES**

**Luke 1:5 (KJV)** *There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zachariah, of the course of Abia [LXX 1 Paralipoimenon 24:10 τῶν Ἀβιά = MASORETIC TEXT I Chronicles הַכֹּהֲנִים אֲבִיָּה] to Abiyah], and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. 7 And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.*

8 *And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course. 9 According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.*

11 *And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And when Zachariah saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zachariah: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. 14 And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. 15 For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. 16 And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. 17 And he shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the*

7. Edersheim, pp. 319-326.



children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

18 And Zachariah said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. 19 And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings. 20 And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season. 21 And the people waited for Zachariah, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple. 22 And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless.

23 And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house. 24 And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, 25 Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men (Luke 1:5-25).

We should note from reading this passage that St. Luke does not identify St. Zachariah as a High Priest., but only as a priest. Priests were chosen by lot to burn the incense for the daily *Tamid* services as we have seen in the *Mishnah*. This is an argument that the Heterodox commonly use in support of St. Zechariah being only a priest. However, as we have also seen during the *Tamid* services, prayer was not given in the Holy Place by the incense offerer, but rather he blessed the people only after exiting the Holy Place and standing on the steps which led down to the Court of the Priests. Moreover, this blessing was done in unison with all the other officiating priests of his course.

#### PATRISTIC COMMENTARY ON ST. ZACHARIAH AS HIGH PRIEST OF ISRAEL

We are instructed by our Holy Tradition as Orthodox Christians not to interpret the *Scriptures* by our own understanding, as do the Heterodox, but trust in the interpretations of our Holy Fathers of the Church, who, illumined with the grace of the Holy Spirit, safely guide us to a correct understanding. Let us avail ourselves of their understanding now.

**St. Ambrose of Milan** (c. AD 338-c.397):

“22. ... Here, he [Zachariah] is the High Priest who is still sought by lot [cf. 1 Paralipomenon 24:5], because the True One is still unknown; for he who is chosen by lot is not comprehended by human judgment. Therefore, one was sought and Another was prefigured. The True Eternal Priest was sought, to whom it is said, *Thou art a Priest for ever* [Psalm 109:4; Hebrews 7:22], Who reconciled God the Father to the human race, not by the blood of sacrifices, but by His Own [cf. Hebrews 9:12]. But then the blood was shed in show; in show

the priest was ordained; but now that the Truth has come, let us leave the show, let us follow the Truth [cf. Hebrews 10:1-2]. And, indeed, then there were courses, but now there is perpetuity. For so there were courses, and surely there was One Whose courses were also in progress.

“23. So the Priest was chosen by lot to enter the Temple. If, then, none could be used figuratively as a witness, what was signified, save that there would come a Priest Whose Sacrifice would not be shared with the rest, Who would not sacrifice for us in temples made with hands [cf. Acts 17:24], but would annul our sins in the Temple of His Body [cf. II Corinthians 6:16]. So the Priest was sought by lot. Perhaps on this account, the soldiers drew lots for the Lord’s garments [cf. Luke 23:34]. Since the Lord prepared to make Sacrifice for us in His Temple, the shaking of the lots around Him would also fulfill the precept of the Law. For He said, *I have not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it* [St. Matthew 5:17], surely because He Himself was He Who was seen to be both expected by the Old Testament and chosen by the command of God. So the lot fell on the Apostle Matthias [cf. Acts 1:26], lest the choice of an Apostle should seem to diverge from the command of the Old Law.”<sup>8</sup>


**Blessed Theophylact** (c. AD 1050-1107):

“What was the prayer of Zachariah which caused the angel to say, *thy prayer is heard, and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son?* Surely Zachariah was not praying for a son. Was he not praying for the sins of the people? Some say, therefore, that on account of his prayer for the sins of the people, he would beget a son who would cry out, *Behold the Lamb of God, Which taketh away the sin of the world* (Jn. 1:29). Thus it is altogether fitting that the angel says to him, *thy prayer is heard*, meaning ‘thy prayer for the forgiveness of the sins of the people. Thou shalt beget a son through whom there will be forgiveness of sins.’ But others understand it this way, ‘*Thy prayer is heard*, O Zechariah, and God has forgiven the sins of the people.’ Then, as if Zachariah had asked, ‘How can we know this is so? The angel says to him, ‘I give thee this sign, that Elizabeth shall bear thee a son. By Elizabeth’s childbearing thou shalt believe that the sins of the people have been forgiven.’”<sup>9</sup>

**St. Demetrius of Rostov** (1651-1709):

8. St. Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, Etna, CA, 1998, pp. 18-19.

9. Blessed Theophylact, *The Explanation by Blessed Theophylact of the Holy Gospel According to St. Luke*, Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO, 1997, p. 11.



“Zachariah replied [to the Archangel Gabriel], ‘At this moment my prayer to God was that He [would] send the Messiah, Whom we await and Whom He has promised us by the mouth of his holy prophets. I pray that God send him quickly to the earth to deliver the seed of Abraham from bondage to the heathen. I also pray for the forgiveness of my many sins and the sins committed in ignorance by the people. But I do not pray now for a son, for I have already reached deep old age as has my wife.’”<sup>10</sup>

**St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite (1749-1809):**

“That Zachariah was a High Priest is confirmed for us by Chrysostom, Augustine, Ambrose, Theophylact and Theodoret. Holy Scripture also testifies to this, where it says that no one else was to be in the Tabernacle when the High Priest was making atonement: *No one is to be in the Tabernacle from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Holy of Holies until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel* (Lev. 16:17). This is in agreement with what the Evangelist Luke writes about Zachariah: *And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the time of incense* (Lk. 1:10). The divine Chrysostom uses this verse from Scripture to show that Zachariah was a High Priest, and that when he entered into the Holy of Holies, it was the Day of Atonement which took place in the seventh month, namely September. Theodoret also testifies to this: “The altar of incense was located outside the curtain [in the Holy Place of the Second Temple]. If it had been inside, he would not have been ordered to take the coals in a censer and toss the incense once inside the curtain” (*Quest. 22 on Leviticus*). This was taught to us also by the blessed Luke, in his narration on Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist. At that time (namely the Day of Atonement which was in the seventh month, or September), he entered the Holy of Holies, and [when he returned to the Golden Altar of Incense in the Holy Place, he] had a vision of an angel.”<sup>11</sup>

Note: we also observe the interpretation of St Zechariah being a High Priest in our Liturgical texts:

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10. St. Demetrius of Rostov, *The Twenty-third Day of the Month of September, A Homily on the Conception of the Honorable and Glorious Prophet, Forerunner, and Baptist of the Lord, John, The Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints*, Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO, 1994, p. 364.

11. St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *The High Priesthood of Zechariah is Vital to the Liturgical Calendar of the Church*, <https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2019/09/the-high-priesthood-of-zechariah-is.html>, Thursday Sep 5, 2019, Mystagogy Resource Center. The specific work of St. Nikodemos is unreferenced in the article.

**TESTIMONY OF THE MENAION:**

**SEPTEMBER 5: THE HOLY PROPHET ZACHARIAS, FATHER OF THE FORERUNNER.**

**Apostica:** *Plagal of the Fourth Tone:*

Glory, *Second Tone:* **As an undefiled priest, thou didst enter into the Holy of Holies; and clothed with the sacred vestments, thou didst blamelessly minister unto God with the clear sound of the High Priest’s bells**<sup>12</sup>, Like Aaron setting forth the Law, and like Moses leading the tribes of Israel ...

**MATINS:**

Ode 3: *Plagal of the Fourth Tone:*

**When thou didst offer the incense of oblation, O high priest**, then didst thou receive the birth of the Forerunner.

Ode 5: The **mitre was set upon thy head, O glorious Prophet**, having in its seal a figure of Grace.

Oikos: **The high priest** received the silencing of the Law by an Angel’s voice ...

Ode 8: *Theotokion:* **Being both high priest and divine herald, Zacharias**, joyfully worshipped the Mother and Virgin.<sup>13</sup>

**SEPTEMBER 23: THE CONCEPTION OF THE VENERABLE AND GLORIOUS PROPHET, FORERUNNER, AND BAPTIST JOHN**

**Apostica:** *Plagal of the Second Tone:*

**Entering in holiness into the Holy of Holies as the sacred Scripture saith**, the most sacred Prophet and holy priest of God was addressed with these words by a holy Angel.<sup>14</sup>

**JUNE 24: THE NATIVITY OF THE HOLY, VENERABLE, AND GLORIOUS PROPHET, FORERUNNER, AND BAPTIST JOHN.**

**VESPERS:** *For Lord, I have cried, Fourth Tone*

Thou who wast born in accordance with God’s promise: when the most majestic and divine Archangel came unto thy father, **who stood at prayer within the Temple**, and he proclaimed the good tidings of thy birth, then, as it is written, Gabriel brought on the priest silence and speechlessness till thy birth; for he believed not, and contradicted ...<sup>15</sup>

So we can see that according to Church tradition, Zechariah was a High Priest officiating before the Lord God of Israel in his burning of incense in the Holy of Holies and praying for the atonement of himself, the priesthood, and the entire nation of Israel. He was then visited in the Holy Place, next to the Golden Altar of

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12. Note: The High Priest only wore the white linen garments without the bells while performing the specific rites of sanctifying the Temple with the blood of the bullock and the he-goat, as well as in the offering of incense in the Holy of Holies. At other times during the day he wore his usual regal garments, especially during the *Tamid* services. Altogether, the High Priest changed his clothes and washed his whole body 5 times on this day.

13. *The Menaion • Volume One: The Month of September*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, MA, 2005, pp. 71-75

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 187-192.

15. *The Menaion • Volume Ten: The Month of June*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, MA, 2005, pp. 113-124

Incense, by the Archangel Gabriel, who informed him that his prayer for all Israel had been granted, and furthermore, that he and Elisabeth would bear a son by God's grace and were to name him John.

**ST. ZECHARIAH IN OUR ORTHODOX ICONOGRAPHIC TRADITION**

St. Zechariah is often portrayed in Orthodox iconography as a High Priest of Israel by showing him in the garments of the High Priest which may include the mitre, the breastplate, and the ephod with the bells and pomegranates suspended from its lower border:



FIGURE 1: ICON OF ST. ZECHARIAS CLOTHED AS HIGH PRIEST WITH MITRE AND HIS ROBE OF THE EPHOD SHOWING BELLS ON THE FRINGES AS HE IS LISTENING TO THE ARCHANGEL GABRIEL



FIGURE 2: ICON OF ST. ZECHARIAS CLOTHED AS HIGH PRIEST WITH MITRE AND BREAST-PLATE (WITH ST. ELISABETH AND ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST AS A CHILD AT HIS SIDE)

**THE HIGH PRIESTHOOD OF ZECHARIAH AND THE**


**LITURGICAL CALENDAR OF THE CHURCH**

The Holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church recognizes and proclaims that Zechariah was the High Priest that officiated on the day of Atonement on the 10th day of the month of Tishri. As such, he would have been present in Jerusalem at the Temple for the entire preceding week, and most likely from the 1st of Tishri, the Feast of Trumpets, when he would have started his 2-week period of service of the 8th division of the priests -- that of Abia. If so, he would have finished his obligated service for his division at sunset following the 14th of Tishri. However the next day was the Lord's appointed Feast of Tabernacles:

*Leviticus 23: 34 "Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the feast of tabernacles for seven days unto the LORD. 35 On the first day shall be an holy convocation: ye shall do no servile work therein. 36 Seven days ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD: on the eighth day shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD: it is a solemn assembly; and ye shall do no servile work therein. 37 These are the feasts of the LORD, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations ...*

As a adult male of Israel, St. Zechariah would have been obligated to attend this 3rd mandatory pilgrim festival<sup>16</sup> -- the 8-day feast of Tabernacles wherein all Israel remembered their 40 years in the wilderness under Moses by living in booths in and around Jerusalem. This feast lasted from 15-22 Tishri. St. Zechariah would also have been required to present a whole burnt offering to the Lord on the first and eighth day of the feast. Thus, the 23rd of Tishri would have been Zechariah's 1st day without significant religious responsibilities wherein he could return to normal family life. And it is on that day, the 23 of September under the Julian Calendar that the Church celebrates the conception of his son St. John the Forerunner and Baptist of Christ Jesus. This is the first step in how St. Zechariah's prayer for the salvation of all Israel, granted by the Angel Gabriel, becomes manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. Nine months later, we celebrate the Feast of the Forerunner's Birth on the 24th of June, that is, at the completion of St. Elisabeth's nine months of pregnancy. The Feast of the Annunciation to the Theotokos by the Archangel Gabriel and the conception of Christ is celebrated on March 25th, six months after the conception of St. John the Baptist. And of course the Nativity of Christ follows 9 months after His

16. *Deut. 16:16, Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the LORD thy God in the place which He shall choose; in the feast of unleavened bread, and in the feast of weeks, and in the feast of tabernacles; and they shall not appear before the LORD empty.*



conception on the 25th of December. Eight days later we celebrate the Circumcision of the Lord (January 1) and 40 days after His Nativity we celebrate His Meeting in the Temple (February 2) where He and the Theotokos, on the day of their purification according to the Law of Moses, are met by the Holy and Righteous Symeon the God-Receiver and the Prophetess Anna. Consequently, we can easily see that the entire sequence of the fixed feasts of our Lord Jesus Christ on the Liturgical Calendar of the Church is entirely dependent on St. Zechariah's service as High Priest in the Temple on Yom Kippur.

"Therefore if we concede that Zechariah was not a High Priest, and he did not receive the annunciation in the seventh month, we derail the above order of the Despotical Feasts, and the entire cycle is muddled. For all of the above feasts have a basis and foundation on the fact that the conception of the Forerunner took place in the seventh month."<sup>17</sup>

Research into the origins of the celebration of the date of the Nativity of Christ such as those by F.C. Conybeare,<sup>18</sup> Carl Phillip Emanuel Nothaft,<sup>19</sup> among others, despite much good research and analysis of both early and more modern chronological theories, have debunked many historical myths, but nevertheless, they have not come to a satisfactory conclusion. None that I have read to date have followed the logical path I have outlined above. It is beyond my expertise to prove that the 23 of Tishri on the Jewish Lunar Calendar and the 23 of September on the Julian Calendar in the year prior to Christ's birth corresponded to the same day. In that era Jewish leap years, with the addition of the 13th month of Adar II, was based on the agricultural cycle. If the barley sheaves would not be ready for harvest on the 15th of the month for the Feast of Firstfruits, Adar II would be declared for this month and spliced into the calendar. Thus, the month of Nisan and the moveable feasts of unleavened bread, Pascha, Firstfruits, and Pentecost would all be delayed by 30 days.

Another major objection by the Heterodox to St. Zachariah's High Priesthood is that the official records of both the Jews and the Romans do not contain the name Zechariah as being one of the High Priests near the time of the nativity of Christ. Therefore they claim there are no records to support Zechariah serving as the High Priest of Israel. The records that are extant in the

*Babylonian Talmud* show that during the 410 years of the Temple of Solomon there were only 18 High Priests, but in the 420 years that the sanctuary in the Second Temple existed, over 300 High Priests served, many of whom were not descendants of Aaron. Many of these reportedly died when they unworthily entered the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur because of their illegality, immorality and contempt for the office.<sup>20</sup> According to Jewish tradition, the practice of buying the High Priesthood began in 175 BC when Menaulus, a non-Kohen from the tribe of Benjamin, promised the Seleucid Ruler Antiochus Epiphanes IV a larger sum of money for the position of Kohen Gadol than did the High Priest Onias III's Hellenized brother, Jason. This corrupt practice continued throughout the years of Hasmonean and Roman sovereignty. Since many of these latter priests also proved unworthy, they often died during the Yom Kippur services.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, when we examine the list of High Priests under the Roman Empire, when they were chosen according to Roman law, and perhaps by lot according to Jewish tradition, we note from Josephus' list, that there are 4 High Priests from 3 B.C. to 6 A.D, whose ruling dates are uncertain, so we cannot say for sure who served as High Priest during that time and for how long. And St. Zachariah may very well have been the backup High Priest that year, substituting at the last moment for an indisposed known High Priest. Furthermore, St. Nikodemus the Hagiorite notes:

"As for those who say that no High Priest named Zechariah appears in the Jewish lists of High Priests<sup>22</sup>, there is no strength to this argument. For the Jews were very much oppressed, and during the reign of Titus [AD 79-81], the lists of their High Priests and the genealogies of their race were destroyed."<sup>23</sup>

So it is very probable that no records of his service as High Priest are extant except those of St. Luke, where his service is implied by his offering of incense and his prayer inside the Temple while everyone else awaited outside, and were alarmed that he was taking too long to exit the Holy Place. Why was this the case? Were the High Priest to die inside the Holy Place, one of the other priests on duty could retrieve his body. Consequently, the prayer of the High Priest needed to

17. St. Nikodemus the Hagiorite, *ibid*.

18. Conybeare, F. C., *The History of Christmas, The American Journal of Theology*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Jan), 1899, pp. 1-21. [https://http://www.jstor.org/stable/3152491?](https://http://www.jstor.org/stable/3152491?searchText=&searchUri=&ab_segments=&searchKey=&refreqid=fas)

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19. Nothaft, C.P.E., *The Origins of the Christmas Date: Recent Trends in Historical Research, Church History*, Vol 81, No. 4 (Dec), 2012, pp. 903-911. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23358685>

20. *Babylonian Talmud, Seder Mo'ed, Tractate Yoma, (9a)*.

21. Ref. *The High Priest in Jewish Tradition*, from the Chabad Organization website: [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/4195084/jewish/The-High-Priest-in-Jewish-Tradition.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4195084/jewish/The-High-Priest-in-Jewish-Tradition.htm)

22. For Josephus' list of Jewish High Priests and Rabbinical lists of High Priests of Israel see: <https://owly.wiki/en/Traditional-Jewish-chronology/>

[#Josephus' enumeration of High Priests during the Second Temple period/](https://owly.wiki/en/enumeration-of-High-Priests-during-the-Second-Temple-period/) and [https://owly.wiki/en/List of High Priests of Israel/](https://owly.wiki/en/List-of-High-Priests-of-Israel/)

23. St. Nikodemus the Hagiorite, *ibid*.



**Dr. Seraphim Steger, Editor, THE GOOD WORD**

c/o St. Seraphim of Sarov & St. John of Kronstadt Orthodox Church  
6063 Lake Murray Blvd.  
La Mesa, CA 91942-2506,  
U.S.A.

be brief. Were the High Priest to die within the Holy of Holies, he could only be removed from the Holy of Holies to the Holy Place if a rope were attached to him, or by the back up High Priest if he were immediately authorized to assume the role of High Priest. In the latter case the backup High Priest could potentially be defiled by direct contact with the dead body of the High Priest and would consequently be unclean for 7 days (*cf.* Num. 19:13-15) and not be able to complete the services for Yom Kippur.

Two texts, probably referring to the same event, reinforce the Jews' fear of the death or incapacitation of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement:

*Jerusalem Talmud, Yoma, GEMARA (42c)* Once a certain high priest made a long prayer and [his fellow priests] decided to go in after him - they say this high priest was Shim'on the Righteous. They said to him: Why did you pray so long? -- He said to them: I was praying that the temple of your God would not be destroyed. -- They said to him: Even so, you should not have prayed so long.

*Babylonian Talmud, Seder Mo'ed, Tractate Yoma, GEMARA (53b)* "Our Rabbis taught: It happened with one high priest that he prolonged his prayer. His fellow priests undertook to enter after him. As they began to enter he came forth. They said to him: Why did you prolong your prayer? -- He said, Is it disagreeable to you that I prayed for you, for the Sanctuary, that it be not destroyed? -- They said to him: Do not make a habit of doing so, for thus we have learnt: He would not pray long lest he terrify Israel."<sup>24</sup>

It is also known that King Herod the Great both killed High Priests and appointed his own, even for a single day -- the Day of Atonement:

"But the people, on account of Herod's barbarous temper, and for fear he should be so cruel as to inflict punishment on

24. Footnote in *B. Talmud*: "By his delay, attributable either to his failure to obtain forgiveness or to personal mishap."

them, said what was done, was done without approbation, and that it seemed to them that the actors might well be punished for what they had done. But as for Herod, he dealt more mildly with others [of the assembly]; but he deprived Matthias of the high-priesthood, as in part an occasion of this action, and made Joazar, who was Matthias' wife's brother, high-priest in his stead. Now it happened, that during the time of the high-priesthood of this Matthias, there was another person made high-priest for a single day, that very day which the Jews observed as a fast<sup>25</sup>. The occasion was this: -- This Matthias the high-priest, on the night before that day when the fast was to be celebrated, seemed in a dream, to have *conversation* [*Obs. intimate acquaintance*] with his wife; and because he could not officiate himself on that account, Joseph, the son of Ellemus, his kinsman, assisted him in that sacred office. But Herod deprived this Matthias of the high-priesthood.<sup>26</sup>

Consequently, when St. Zechariah delayed his exiting the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place, it was natural for the people waiting outside to have become fearful. When the Angel of God appeared to St Zechariah after he had offered the incense, *And when Zachariah saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.* ([Luke] 1:12). But the fear of the assembled priests and populace would have been a natural reaction to any extraordinary happening in the Holy of Holies or the Holy Place, because, it may have indicated the death of the High Priest. But the Angel assured St. Zechariah not to be afraid, and that his prayer for Israel had been answered (1:13). Moreover, St. Zechariah's son would become the Forerunner of the Messiah and help fulfill that prayer for Israel! ❖ ❖ ❖

25. Footnote in *Antiquities*: "the great day of expiation," i.e., Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

26. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Bk. XVII, Chap. vi, 4, in William Whiston, *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, Vol. III, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1974, p. 494. This event is attested to in the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud* by a footnote in the text.