

Zechariah 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 25 September 2021

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[0 : 00] Zechariah chapter 5. Again I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, a flying scroll. And he said to me, What do you see? I answered, I see a flying scroll. Its length is twenty cubits, and its width ten cubits. Then he said to me, This is the curse that goes out over the face of the whole land.

For everyone who steals shall be cleaned out according to what is on one side, and everyone who swears falsely shall be cleaned out according to what is on the other side. I will send it out, declares the Lord of hosts, and it shall enter the house of the thief, and the house of him who swears falsely by my name, and it shall remain in his house, and consume it, both timber and stones.

Then the angel who talked with me came forward and said to me, Lift your eyes, and see what this is that is going out. And I said, What is it? He said, This is the basket that is going out.

And he said, This is their iniquity in all the land. And behold, the leaden cover was lifted, and there was a woman sitting in the basket. And he said, This is wickedness. And he thrust her back into the basket, and thrust down the leaden weight on its opening. Then I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, two women coming forward. The wind was in their wings. They had wings like the wings of a stalk, and they lifted up the basket between earth and heaven. Then I said to the angel, who talked with me, Where are they taking the basket? He said to me, To the land of Shinar, to build a house for it. And when this is prepared, they will set the basket down there on its base.

Zechariah chapter 5 continues Zechariah's night visions, containing the sixth and the seventh. In total, there are eight night visions, and James Jordan suggests that they can be mapped onto each other in a chiasmic structure. The first concerns horsemen in the deep. The last concerns horsemen and chariots going out. The second is of four horns and four craftsmen, and the seventh, which he argues corresponds to it, is the woman in a basket. We'll reflect upon possible connections as we look through it. The third and the sixth are the man with the measuring line, and then the flying scroll. And then the middle two are the cleansing of the high priest, and then the vision of the lampstand and the olive trees that relate to Zerubbabel. The sixth vision is of a flying scroll. It's unusual in a number of respects. Its dimensions are strange. It is quite out of proportion for a scroll. A scroll would be very long compared to its width, but this is only twice as long as its width. And the scroll itself is huge.

[2 : 37] It's 20 cubits by 10 cubits. The specificity of the dimensions and the strangeness of the dimensions suggest that they are symbolic. There are a few possible connections that we could think of here.

In 1 Kings chapter 6 verse 3, we read of Solomon's temple. The vestibule in front of the nave of the house was 20 cubits long, equal to the width of the house, and 10 cubits deep in front of the house. In 1 Kings chapter 6 verses 23 to 26, we see a further item with dimensions of 10 cubits by 20 cubits. The cherubim inside the Holy of Holies with their wings stretched out. The altar of bronze in 2 Chronicles chapter 4 verse 1 also is 20 cubits long, 20 cubits wide, and 10 cubits high. So any of the sides of the altar would have the same dimensions as this scroll. Beyond these items, there is also the holy place in the tabernacle in the wilderness. I am most inclined to relate these dimensions to the doorway of the temple, and perhaps secondarily to the dimensions of the cherubim. Considering that the verses that follow speak about a curse going out from the house of the Lord presumably, cleaning people out who are sinful, and entering into particular houses of the wicked. Perhaps it makes sense to relate these to the dimensions of a doorway. The scroll then might symbolise who has and does not have access into God's presence. Once we've appreciated this, its connection with the third vision, the man with the measuring line, and the establishment of Jerusalem as a place where God would dwell in the midst, will make a lot more sense. As the temple and the holy place are restored, the boundaries of holiness start to be applied throughout the land. Judgment moves out from the temple. The fact that the scroll is a flying scroll underlines

its effectiveness. It has been sent on a mission by the Lord, and it will achieve its purpose. The purpose of the scroll is to bring secret sins to light. In Deuteronomy chapter 27, the people had to assent to a curse declared upon those who were secret sinners, calling for God to act in judgment against them. The effectiveness of the law could not depend entirely upon the judges and the rulers of the people. As we see in the book of Deuteronomy, but also in the Psalms, it required the Lord to act against the wicked. Where the Lord did not act against the wicked, and secret sins were unpunished, wickedness could fester and gain strength in the land, frustrating the work of the righteous.

Jordan draws attention to the fact that there is a curse written on both sides of this scroll. Ezekiel's scroll, which he ate in Ezekiel chapter 2 verse 10, was written on both sides. More importantly, perhaps, the tablets of the law were written on both sides, in Exodus chapter 32 verse 15. Jordan remarks that the curses here come upon the person who steals, and the person who swears falsely. Swearing falsely, he argues, is connected to the third commandment, bearing the name of the Lord in vain, whereas stealing is connected with the eighth commandment. The third commandment is the middle of the first five commandments, and the eighth commandment, the middle of the second five commandments.

[5 : 42] Perhaps then we should see these two commandments as standing for the whole. Once true worship has been established then, the Lord is going to actively enforce his law, ensuring that his people aren't overwhelmed by sin. This flying scroll represents the holiness of the house of the Lord, which also relates to the holiness of Israel, as those in whose midst God dwells. As it goes out into the land, it will tear down all rival houses. In this context, we might recall the decree of Darius concerning the house of the Lord and its rebuilding, in Ezra chapter 6, in verse 11 of that chapter.

Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill.

The seventh vision is perhaps the toughest vision of all to understand. It is very difficult to determine what the imagery within it relates to. A great many of the commentators are baffled by it, and fail to give much of an account of many of its details. By far the most compelling treatment of this vision that I've encountered is that offered by James Jordan, and in a more recent treatment by Anthony Petterson, both of them argued that we need to pay attention to all the elements of the vision taken together. It will only be as we see the full picture that the particular elements will start to make sense. If we look at each of the elements by themselves and try and relate them to other parts in scripture, we'll be drawing a blank. The basket, or more properly the ether, does not have strong connections elsewhere. Likewise the women with stalk wings. A further point that Jordan stresses is the importance of understanding this in the light of the temple. All of these visions relate to the rebuilding of the temple, and the significance of what the Lord is doing through that.

Recognising this key fact, we can use it as a key to understanding what is taking place in this vision, and this will be easier to do if we think visually about what is being presented to us.

Zechariah is instructed by the interpreting angel to look at what is going out, and what he sees going out is described as an ether. Many translations refer to this as a basket, but ether is the better translation. The ether was a measurement that was used in the worship of the temple. We also have a number of references in scripture to the ether being adulterated as a measure. For instance, in Micah chapter 6 verse 10, can I forget any longer the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked, and the scant measure, or literally ether, that is accused? The interpretation of the second half of verse 6 is also complicated. Many commentators consider the original reading of this text to be, this is their iniquity in all the land. However, the text that we have has eye. In the broader context, the meaning of the eye might be related to the eyes of the Lord that go throughout the whole earth, and the eyes on the stone given to Joshua back in chapter 3. There the eyes were connected with sight and with judgment. The eye is also a spring. From this eye would flow false judgment and false authority, and it's going to be removed. However, it seems more likely to me that the reference is to the iniquity of the people. In verse 7, we discover that there is a leaden cover upon the basket, literally a leaden talent. We've already seen an ether, and now we see a talent. Maybe there's some reference to the wicked commerce of the people being made here. Inside the basket, a woman is sitting, as with the scroll earlier in the preceding vision. The proportions of the elements of the vision seem to be badly off. The woman is represented to us as wickedness. She is thrust back into the basket, trapped beneath the leaden weight, or the talent, and then in the second stage of the vision, two women come with wings like a stork. Between them, they lift up the basket

and fly away with it.

[9 : 29] Zechariah is told that they are bringing it to the land of Shinar, the place where Babel and Babylon was, to build a house for it. There, the basket would be placed down on the base, presumably within its own shrine. Once we've recognised this, it gives a clue to the meaning of the entire vision.

The vision primarily works by means of inversion. Lead is heavy, but inglorious. Gold is heavy and glorious. The lead is an inversion of the gold. Women with the wings of unclean birds are the inversion of winged cherubim, who are holy and are also represented as males. What we're seeing here is a correspondence with the Ark of the Covenant, but a parody and an inversion of it. The leaden talent, or cover, is the mercy seat. The women with the wings of unclean birds, who carry the basket with the leaden weight, or cover, upon it, are parodies of the two cherubim above the Ark of the Covenant.

And the movement is also a parody. Shinar is the site of Babel and Babylon. Rather than being delivered from Babylon, brought to Jerusalem, and established with a new temple there, this is being removed from Jerusalem, brought to the land of Shinar, and placed within a shrine there. The woman is identified as wickedness. She is like the harlot or the adulterous woman, and she is locked up, bound beneath the lead talent. The central power of sin is going to be restrained and bound and removed from the land. As it's removed, however, it will be established elsewhere. There will be a more effective division between the righteous and the wicked, but wickedness will still continue to operate. This vision in the chiasmic structure that Jordan has identified can be paralleled with the second vision concerning the four horns and the four craftsmen. The four horns represented the powers that had scattered Judah, and together they represented a sort of parody of the true altar.

As the altar of the Lord was rebuilt, however, these four horns would be cast down. We might also hear behind this a reference to Ezekiel chapters 8 to 11. There, in a remarkable vision, Ezekiel saw the Lord departing from the temple in Jerusalem. The Spirit of God, after judging Jerusalem, lifted Ezekiel up and brought him to the land of Chaldea. The Lord's departure from the house left it empty to be possessed by evil powers, wicked powers that had already been within it prior to the exile.

Now, however, instead of the Lord leaving the temple because of the wickedness within it, the Lord is back in the temple in the midst of his people, and wickedness is going to be expelled into the far country. We should recognize themes associated with the Day of Atonement here.

[12 : 05] The Lord is cleansing and re-establishing his worship. Joshua the high priest was re-clothed back in chapter 3, and now wickedness is going to be cast out. This draws upon Leviticus chapter 16 verses 20 to 22.

And when he has made an end of atoning for the holy place, and the tent of meeting, and the altar, he shall present the live goat. And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat, and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness. The woman in the ephah, trapped beneath the lead talent, and carried by the women with the wings of unclean storks to the land of Shinar, is enacting the meaning of the scapegoat. Anthony Pettison sums up the vision very well, and brings out a number of further details that we have not previously commented upon.

The vision itself evokes many associations that remain elusive until the whole picture is developed. The ephah, talent, and stone of lead are words associated with trade, and bring to mind issues of injustice. The ephah is also associated with worship and offerings in the temple.

In Hebrew, wickedness, *harushah*, sounds like *asherah*, and brings to mind idolatry. However, it is the second half of the vision, with its clear allusions to Ezekiel chapter 8, which makes it clear that the ephah is a parody of the Ark of the Covenant, with anti-cherub attendants who raise up the ephah between the earth and heaven to carry it to Shinar, where an anti-temple will be established for it. In doing this, wickedness will be sent back to where it belongs. This then clarifies some of the earlier ambiguous associations such as the talent of lead, which sounds like mercy seat, and the posture of the woman who is enthroned in the basket under the lid. It is an ingenious presentation. There is also an echo of the Day of Atonement ritual in Leviticus chapter 16, which has two distinct phases. After the temple is cleansed, the scapegoat is sent far away. These two phases are

mirrored in the wider visionary sequence, with Joshua being cleansed and the temple being built, visions 4 and 5, and now wickedness itself is being sent far away. An important function of this vision and the previous one is to reassure God's people that he himself will deal with the sin that in the past has incurred his wrath and precluded his blessing. A question to consider, where in the book of Revelation do we see elements of this vision being drawn upon?