

Lesson 7

Chapter 5

The next vision deals with a problem that Israel had faced throughout its entire history. That problem was described by Paul in Romans.

Romans 9:6 — *For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.*

Romans 2:28-29 — *For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.*

In short, calling yourself a Jew did not make you a Jew anymore than calling yourself a Christian makes you a Christian. God makes that determination. He knows who his faithful, obedient, trusting children are — both today and in the day of Zechariah.

2 Timothy 2:19 — *The Lord knoweth them that are his.*

Some of the exiles who had returned were prospering in their sin. They cared more about the things of man than about the things of God. They were heaping up treasures for themselves, and they were oppressing the poor. They were robbing others, and they were robbing God. Would they be Israel's undoing, or would the work of God continue despite their efforts to corrupt the people?

The next vision addresses that question.

Before we start with the sixth vision, let's pause and ask another question - are there two visions in Chapter 5 or only one vision?

I agree with most commentaries on this point — there are two visions in Chapter 5 — one that starts in verse 1 and another that starts in verse 5.

Some commentaries, however, argue that there is only one vision in Chapter 5. Why? Because they want the total number of visions to be 7 rather than 8 because of the importance and prevalence of the figurative number 7 in the book.

I think they have missed the boat. Why? Because the number 8 also has an important figurative significance, and it is one that fits perfectly with the context of the book.

The number 8 is a symbol for renewal. The number 8 in the Bible depicts a new beginning. The eighth day denotes the start of a new week. Male children were circumcised on the eighth day to depict their new relationship with God. The year following seven sabbatical years was the year of Jubilee when all things were renewed (Leviticus 25). In Revelation we will see the number 8 used to denote the renewal of persecution directed at God's people.

What is being renewed in Zechariah? Everything! The city and the temple are being renewed. The people are being renewed. And these visions are pointing toward a renewal of the throne of David and the household of God.

In short, the number 8 is the perfect number of visions to have in this book! One might even say that this 8 is a 7!

Let's look now at the sixth vision.

*5:1 Then I turned, and lifted up mine eyes, and looked, and behold a flying roll.
2 And he said unto me, What seest thou? And I answered, I see a flying roll; the length thereof is twenty cubits, and the breadth thereof ten cubits.*

What Zechariah sees in verse 1 is a gigantic flying scroll. (The KJV calls it a flying roll.)

Typically, scrolls at this time measured 8 to 10 inches in height and up to 20 feet in length. Even the great Isaiah scroll discovered at Qumran, although produced a few centuries later, measured just 24 feet in length. At 20 cubits long and 10 cubits wide, this flying scroll is approximately 30 feet by 15 feet. It is closer in size to a modern billboard than to an actual ancient scroll.

These first two verses raises some immediate questions:

- What is written on the scroll?
- Why is the scroll flying?
- Why is the scroll so large?

We're about to see in the verses that follow that this scroll contains a divine curse. What can we discern about that curse from the facts that the scroll was flying and the scroll was large?

Perhaps the answer is simple: this curse was already in progress (the scroll was flying) and it was a prominent curse (the scroll was large). But let's look a little more closely than that.

For example, the description suggests that this scroll had been unrolled. That means that the message it contains has been laid open for all to read; it has not been concealed or disclosed to only a select few. God wanted everyone to hear and to heed the message in this scroll.

That this scroll is flying may emphasize that it is a message from God; as with other things we have seen in this book, it seems that this scroll is not the work of man. This flying scroll reminds me of Isaiah 55:11.

Isaiah 55:11 — So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

But why these dimensions? We can't say for sure. Some commentaries say that they are derived from the porch that Solomon built in 1 Kings 6:3 or from the altar of brass he built in 2 Chronicles 4:1. The numbers are the same, but there is no clear connection between those items and this scroll. Perhaps Solomon's porch is in view because it was the place where justice was administered.

Some commentaries make a point of the fact that this scroll is about 40 times bigger than an actual scroll, and they argue their is symbolic significance in the number 40. But

that approach violates one of our interpretive rules — we should not introduce symbols into the vision that are not in the text.

Perhaps these dimensions just show that this scroll was unusually large; that is, the threat it represented was a large and dangerous threat.

As for what was written on the scroll, we need to keep reading.

3 Then said he unto me, This is the curse that goeth forth over the face of the whole earth: for every one that stealeth shall be cut off as on this side according to it; and every one that sweareth shall be cut off as on that side according to it. 4 I will bring it forth, saith the LORD of hosts, and it shall enter into the house of the thief, and into the house of him that sweareth falsely by my name: and it shall remain in the midst of his house, and shall consume it with the timber thereof and the stones thereof.

In verse 3 we have an answer to what is written on the large flying scroll — it contains a curse “that goeth forth over the face of the whole earth” and that curse was brought forth by God.

Why a curse? It comes from the Mosaic covenant. In fact, the people were in their present situation because of just such a curse.

Deuteronomy 28:15 — *But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee.*

Deuteronomy 28:49 — *The Lord shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand.*

Deuteronomy 28:62-63 — *And ye shall be left few in number, whereas ye were as the stars of heaven for multitude; because thou wouldest not obey the voice of the Lord thy God. And it shall come to pass, that as the Lord rejoiced over you to do you good, and to multiply you; so the Lord will rejoice over you to destroy you, and to bring you to nought; and ye shall be plucked from off the land whither thou goest to possess it.*

So, the people were very familiar with a curse from God; they were living under one because of the disobedience of their ancestors. Would that curse continue because of their own disobedience or would it be lifted. That was the question that they were now facing.

Some commentaries try to link this flying curse with what they say was a common practice at the time of cursing one’s enemies using curse-tablets made of lead or curse-slips made of parchment. If there is any relation, I think Leupold correctly describes it — God is in effect saying: “As you set loose futile curses against your enemies, so I send forth effective curses that invariably accomplish their purpose; your efforts are hollow mockery, mine terrible reality.”

Two groups of people are particularly identified in verses 3 and 4 as the object of this curse: thieves and perjurers. Why those two groups?

It may be because these sins were often connected. When someone was charged with theft when there were no witnesses, it was sometimes possible for that person to swear their innocence before God and avoid punishment. Of course, if they were guilty of the theft, they were now also guilty of perjury.

Others suggest we have these two groups because these sins were the most evident or easily identified among those who were not true to God. Yes, the thieves and the perjurers were almost certainly guilty of other sins, but perhaps their thievery and their perjury were their most evident sins.

Others suggest that these two sins are identified because each represents a whole collection of sins. The two sins Zechariah mentions represent all of the commandments in each of the two tables of the Ten Commandments. The first table focuses on commandments that involve man's relationship with God, while the second table governs man's relationships with each another. Swearing falsely in God's name would thus cover those sins that are directed at God, while theft would cover those sins that are directed at others.

A third possibility is interesting because it fits well with the context in which the temple was being rebuilt. As in building projects today, the process often calls for raising support from some key donors before construction begins. They pledge donations that provide assurances for the project to proceed.

In the ancient world, such pledges were supported by formal oaths, and such oaths transformed the pledged gifts into divine property. In this combination, anyone who pledged gifts to the temple initially but then reneged on their pledges would be guilty first of swearing falsely and then of theft, for they continued to possess that which now belonged to God.

Malachi 3:8 — Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings.

That verse would soon be directed to these very people. Perhaps we are seeing the same thing here in the book of Zechariah — people robbing God.

What is the curse in verse 3? Those who steal “shall be cut off as on this side according to it” and those that swear falsely “shall be cut off as on that side according to it.” What does that mean?

“This side” and “that side” refers to the two sides of the scroll. One side cursed those who stole, and the other side cursed those who swore falsely.

The phrase “cut off” is better translated as “purged out” or “cleansed by purging.”

Does this mean that the thieves and the liars were literally transported away? No. Remember that we are reading apocalyptic language. I think what we are seeing here is a figurative description of the verse we read earlier from 2 Timothy 2:19 — The Lord knoweth them that are his.

The thieves likely thought they were being very clever and would never be caught. The perjurers likely thought that they would never be found out. If so, they were wrong. There was a huge flying scroll headed their way with a curse from God written on it just for them! God knew exactly who was on his side and who was not on his side.

What does the end of verse 4 mean? “It shall remain in the midst of his house, and shall consume it with the timber thereof and the stones thereof.”

Simple. Those who stole and lied would not keep their loot for long. God’s curse would find them, it would enter their stronghold, and it would bring both it and them down.

***Obadiah 4** — Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and though thou set thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down, saith the Lord.*

***Galatians 6:7** — Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.*

That is the message of the sixth vision.

The exiles needed to understand that they were still under the Mosaic covenant. They needed to understand that the conditional curses for those who disobeyed the covenant were still operative. If they violated the covenant, they could once again find themselves in exile.

Questions about the sixth vision?

5 Then the angel that talked with me went forth, and said unto me, Lift up now thine eyes, and see what is this that goeth forth. 6 And I said, What is it? And he said, This is an ephah that goeth forth. He said moreover, This is their resemblance through all the earth.

An ephah is a unit of measurement that is close to a bushel in size, likely somewhere between 5 and 10 gallons. In addition to denoting a measurement, the word ephah was also used (as it is here) to describe a measuring basket used for dry measure. It was not the largest measure known at the time, but it was the largest in actual use.

As with the flying scroll, this ephah may have also been much larger than an actual ephah. Why? Because we will soon see that a woman is crouching within it.

The final phrase in verse 6 is difficult: “This is their resemblance through all the earth.” The ESV translates it as: “This is their iniquity in all the land.” Another has: “This is their ‘eye’ throughout all the earth.” (NET)

The best Hebrew text uses the word “eye” in verse 6, but that word is difficult to place in the context of the verse, which is why most English translations have variant readings (resemblance or iniquity).

So which is correct? “This is their eye,” “this is their iniquity,” or “this is their resemblance”?

We can’t say for sure, but there is a rule of textual analysis called “lectio difficilior” or “the difficult reading” that may be helpful. That rule says that when we have a situation such as this, we should select the most difficult reading (which, in this case, would be “eye”). Why? Because the easier readings likely came from scribes trying to solve the problem they saw with the difficult reading. But that “rule” is really just a guideline and should not be applied automatically without any thought for the context in which the difficult word appears.

If “eye” is the correct reading, what does the statement in verse 6 mean? “This is their ‘eye’ throughout all the earth.”

Some suggest it is the eye of God on the evildoers. Others suggest it is the eyes of the evildoers who are always looking for opportunities to do evil. Of those two, I think the latter fits best with the context. Also, the phrase is “their eye” rather than “his eye,” so I don’t think this is the eye of God.

If “eye” is not correct, then I think the best option is “this is their iniquity.” That choice fits well with the context because in verse 8 we will see that this ephah contains wickedness.

No matter whether we choose “eye” or “iniquity,” another problem remains. To whom does the pronoun “their” refer?

Most likely it is referring back to the one who stole and the one who swore falsely — is their eye looking to do evil, or it is their iniquity.

What about the third option that we saw in the KJV? “This is their resemblance through all the earth.” If that is the correct translation, what does it mean?

We are about to see that this vision involves the removal of wickedness from the land, so most likely “their resemblance” or “their appearance” in verse 6 refers to the appearance of the wicked. That is, as the ephah looks, so do the wicked look.

So what does the ephah look like? Keep reading.

7 And, behold, there was lifted up a talent of lead: and this is a woman that sitteth in the midst of the ephah. 8 And he said, This is wickedness. And he cast it into the midst of the ephah; and he cast the weight of lead upon the mouth thereof.

In verse 7, the lid of the ephah is lifted off so that we can see inside.

A better translation than “talent of lead” is “a round lid of lead.” The Hebrew word means “round” but is usually translated “talent” when referring to gold or silver. Because the metal here is lead, the word “round” should be used instead of “talent,” and it fits better with the context as we see this lead being used as a cover. But this heavy metal lid is not a natural cover for a measuring basket — there must be something unusual inside.

Having such a heavy lid suggests that the contents of this basket must be kept from escaping. Whatever is inside must be kept separate from the people of God.

When the lid is lifted, Zechariah sees a woman sitting (literally, crouching) within the ephah. She is immediately identified in verse 8 — “This is wickedness.”

Was this an actual woman? Perhaps, and if so, then this flying ephah must have been much larger than an actual ephah, just as the flying scroll was much larger than an actual scroll.

But it is possible that the woman within the ephah is smaller than an actual person. Some commentaries suggest this wicked woman is shown in the form of a female idol of the type that were often used to depict Canaanite goddesses. Or perhaps more likely it depicts the Babylonian goddess Inannam, who was called the “Queen of Heaven.”

This vision of the wicked woman reminds us of the great vision of Revelation 17.

Revelation 17:3-5 — *So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.*

Why is wickedness depicted here as a woman?

If the idol represents a specific false goddess, then that answers the question. But another possibility is that this vision is showing us a very common figure in the Old Testament — idolatry was often depicted as the people of God playing the harlot. Hosea does this, as does Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 16 — *(verse 15) But thou didst trust in thine own beauty, and playedst the harlot because of thy renown, and pouredst out thy fornications on every one that passed by; his it was. ... (verse 28) Thou hast played the whore also with the Assyrians, because thou wast unsatiable; yea, thou hast played the harlot with them, and yet couldest not be satisfied. Thou hast moreover multiplied thy fornication in the land of Canaan unto Chaldea; and yet thou wast not satisfied herewith. How weak is thine heart, saith the Lord God, seeing thou doest all these things, the work of an imperious whorish woman ... (verse 32) But as a wife that committeth adultery, which taketh strangers instead of her husband!*

There may also be a lesson here about the problem of taking foreign wives, which we know was a problem from our study of Ezra.

One last theory on why wickedness is shown here as a woman may be the simplest theory: the Hebrew word for “wickedness” is feminine, and so that alone may explain why the vision personifies wickedness as a woman. We see something similar in Proverbs 8 where wisdom (also a feminine noun in Hebrew) is personified as a woman.

It seems that the woman must have tried to escape her confinement because she is cast back into the ephah and the lid of lead is placed back upon it. The Hebrew verb used here suggests that the woman struggled with the angel, even though he prevailed. One translation (NJB) has: “And he rammed her back into the barrel and jammed its mouth shut with the mass of lead.”

Seeing such wickedness in this basket reminds us of the curse in Deuteronomy 28:17 against those who would disobey the covenant: “Cursed shall be thy basket and thy store.”

We should pause for just a moment and note that idolatry was never the problem for Israel after the exile as it was prior to the exile. They seemed to have learned their lesson in Babylon, but perhaps this vision tells us that the problem had not been eliminated completely. Perhaps some of those false gods had come back to Jerusalem with the exiles.

What happens next?

9 Then lifted I up mine eyes, and looked, and, behold, there came out two women, and the wind was in their wings; for they had wings like the wings of a stork: and they lifted up the ephah between the earth and the heaven.

In verse 9 we see two more women. They have the wind in their wings, and their wings were like the wings of a stork. They lift up the ephah that has wickedness trapped inside.

Storks were frequently seen in Palestine, and during the migratory season they would appear in great numbers. They had very powerful wings, which may be why the bird is mentioned here. When storks are migrating to distant lands they take a very high course of flight.

In addition to being powerful, these women with wings like that of a stork are being propelled by a special wind, and so what we see here is a swift and powerful transportation of the wickedness inside the ephah.

Who are these two women? For starters, I don't think we should like for anything particularly symbolic here for the number two. It would have been natural to see two people carrying an ephah with a lead cover, one person on each side.

But why women? Some commentaries suggest that all of the women here are wicked, and that what we see here is God punishing sin with sin. They point evidence to the fact that the stork was an unclean animal (Leviticus 11:19), and they say that their submission here shows God's power over false gods. But no one here is eating a stork, and no one could doubt God's power over these false gods! Plus, as we have seen there are some good characteristics of storks that may explain why we see them mentioned here.

One last point about the stork — storks have a reputation for caring tenderly for their own young. That is likely what caused the Hebrew word for "stork" to be almost the same as the Hebrew word for "faithful" or "loyal." (They differ by one letter.) That may explain why we see the stork mentioned here in a vision that is teaching a lesson about faithfulness and loyalty to God.

This wicked basket is lifted up between heaven and earth. It is evil, so it cannot come into God's presence — but neither should it be on earth in man's presence. So we see it between heaven and earth.

10 Then said I to the angel that talked with me, Whither do these bear the ephah? 11 And he said unto me, To build it an house in the land of Shinar: and it shall be established, and set there upon her own base.

Zechariah has the same question that we likely have at this point: where are these two women taking the ephah? The answer is in verse 11: "To build it an house in the land of Shinar: and it shall be established, and set there upon her own base." What does that mean?

Shinar is an old name for the land where Babylon was located. Other prophets have used it to refer to Babylon. (Isaiah 11:1, Daniel 1:2)

But Shinar is also a reminder of what it stood for when it was first used in the Bible in Genesis 10:10 and Genesis 11:2.

There, Shinar was part of the founding of earthly kingdoms that would stand against God and of the project of the men who built the tower of Babel. In short, Shinar had long

been a center for activity that was opposed to the plan of God. Shinar, or Babylon, was the epitome of a high-handed, rebellious people.

To the Jew, the land of Shinar was firmly associated with wickedness, and that had been true for many centuries. Shinar was the perfect place to send this wickedness, and the picture in verse 11 is that it will permanently reside there in a house where it will be established.

The word “house” here can also refer to a temple, so we may be seeing the false idol returned to the very false temple in Babylon where it came from — even to the point of being placed on the same pedestal.

“What could be more appropriate than to banish all idolatry to Babylon, infamous for her own idolatries, as well as the site of Judah’s punishment for her own idolatry?”

What does the vision mean? When would it be fulfilled?

The premillennialist thinks this is all yet future — and if it were to be taken literally, then it would have to be future. It is certainly not the case today, nor has it ever been the case, that wickedness has all been banished to one particular land. But, of course, we know that this vision was not meant to be interpreted literally.

So what does it mean? Jeremiah answers that question.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 — *Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.*

Did you hear that last part? “for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them”

Is there a kingdom in which everyone in the kingdom knows God? In which everyone in the kingdom loves and obeys God? In which nothing wicked is allowed to enter? Yes — and you are part of that kingdom if you have obeyed the gospel. That kingdom is the church.

God adds people to the church when they are saved, and there is no other way to gain entry. And those who are lost — even if they were once saved but fell away — are not in the church. The church is the body of Christ; it is the body of the saved.

Colossians 1:13-14— *Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.*

No one under the power of darkness is a part of the kingdom of his dear Son. Those who have left the church have left the kingdom, and vice versa — by definition.

The people were worried about the wickedness in the land, and God is telling them here about the eternal unshakable kingdom that was to come in Acts 2, and in that kingdom there would be no wickedness. It would be carried far away, just as the wickedness in this ephah is shown being carried off to the land of Shinar.

Questions about the seventh vision?