

Zechariah 5:5-11

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/zech/zech-5/zechariah-55-11/>

Zechariah sees a woman in a basket who personifies the wickedness of the land of Judah. He also sees two other women grabbing the basket and flying into the sky like winged storks to transport it to Shinar (Babylon). The action means that the LORD will remove the sin of Judah and take it to Babylonia.

This passage records Zechariah's seventh vision. Previously, the prophet saw a flying scroll with curses written on each side. He learned from the interpreting angel that the scroll was the instrument through which the LORD would judge thieves and those swearing falsely by His name (Zechariah 5:1-4). And while Zechariah was meditating on his last vision, *the angel who was speaking with him went out* and directed his attention to a new scene. Thus, the *angel said to him, Lift up now your eyes and see what this is going forth* (vs 5).

To *lift up the eyes* is an idiom, which means to look around (Genesis 13:10; 18:2; 22:4). Sometimes, the action involves elevating the eyes from a lower to a higher position. The verb suggests that Zechariah looked steadily and intently at the flying scroll until the angel interrupted his thoughts and asked him to observe a new scene. The prophet had to abandon his contemplation of the scroll to focus on this new revelation.

Having obeyed the *angel* and looking up, the prophet saw an object but did not quite understand its nature. He asked the *angel* a question: *What is it?* Without hesitation, the *angel* replied, *This is the ephah going forth*. The Hebrew term *ephah* means "basket." It was the standard for measuring all sorts of agricultural products. It was the unit heavily used in trading and selling (Amos 8:5). It ranged from about five to ten gallons (3/5 bushel).

The *angel* identified the object as an *ephah* and said, *This is their appearance in all the land* (vs 6). The term translated as *appearance* is "eye" in Hebrew. The pronoun *their* preceding the word *appearance* likely refers to the wicked Judeans since the term *land* speaks of the territory of Judah.

Moreover, the previous passage had already identified the disobedient Judeans as thieves and as those swearing falsely by God's name (Zechariah 5:1-4). Thus, the covenant people needed cleansing from God. Purification was necessary for the returning exiles to continue to fellowship with their holy and righteous God. God promised to cleanse the land of the offenders, household by household (Zechariah 5:4).

As the prophet continued to look at the *ephah*, *behold*, he observed that *a lead cover was lifted up* (vs 7). Lead was a well-known heavy metal generally found in the veins of rocks (Exodus 15:10). Its use as a *cover* in Zechariah was likely to secure the basket to prevent someone or something from escaping.

When the prophet came near *the ephah*, he saw *a woman sitting inside it* (vs 7). Before he asked the interpreting *angel* what the *woman* was doing in the basket, he received the answer. The *angel* said to him, *This is Wickedness!* (vs 8). The term for *wickedness* is “rāša” in the Hebrew language. It pertains to what is morally evil or wrong. It is the opposite of righteousness, which is living according to God’s perfect design (Proverbs 11:5; 13:6). Since the word is feminine, the writer personified *wickedness* as a woman (2 Chronicles 24:7). This is in contrast to Lady Wisdom (Proverbs 1:20).

Since *the lead cover* was not on the *ephah*, the *woman* embodying *wickedness* tried to escape. But the interpreting *angel* did not allow that to happen. While she tried to climb to the top, the *angel* *threw her down into the middle of the ephah and cast the lead weight on its opening* (vs 8). The verb *throw down* suggests a struggle between the *angel* and the *woman*. But the *angel* had superior strength, so he confined Lady Wickedness to *the ephah* and closed the basket again, sealing it with *the lead weight* as a lid.

As Zechariah continued his description of the vision, he stated, *Then I lifted up my eyes and looked* (vs 9). This idiomatic expression indicates that Zechariah focused on all the images of the woman in the basket until something else caught his attention. This expression thus marks the beginning of a new unit in the vision.

When Zechariah *looked up*, he noticed *two women coming out with the wind in their wings* (vs 9). Zechariah saw a vision of *two women* that had wings. They were flying through the air, having *wings like the wings of a stork* (vs 9).

To say that the *women* had *the wind in their wings* is like saying they were flying effortlessly. The stork is highly proficient at gliding, catching the currents of the winds. The prophet compared the flight of *the women* with that of *the stork* because of the similarity of the way they used their wings. This comparison suggests that the women flew with strength and ease.

They (the two winged women) *lifted up the ephah between the earth and the heavens* (vs 9). That means they flew like “the stork in the sky” (Jeremiah 8:7). The action of the *two women* who picked up the basket and flew away with it aroused Zechariah’s curiosity. So, he asked *the angel speaking with him*, *Where are they taking the ephah?* (vs 10). The interpreting *angel* replied, *To build a temple for her in the land of Shinar* (vs 11).

Shinar was the ancient name for Babylon (Genesis 10:10). According to Genesis 11, the early human race settled in a valley in the “land of Shinar” and began to build the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:2–9). The angel probably used the term *Shinar* instead of Babylonia in this passage to remind the audience of the place where the early human race opposed God.

The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah tell us that Babylon was a place of wickedness and idolatry (Isaiah 46–47; Jeremiah 50–51). Thus, *Shinar* would be a fitting place to take the *ephah* since the *woman* in it symbolized *wickedness* (v. 8). When the *temple is prepared*, *she will be set there on her own pedestal* (vs 11). People would erect the *ephah* in a *temple* as an idol for pagans to worship.

Transporting the *woman in the ephah* (Lady Wickedness) to Babylon means that God would remove the sin of His covenant people and cleanse their land. It also means that God would return the wickedness of idolatry to Babylon, the nation that defeated Judah, burned its capital city (Jerusalem), and carried its citizens away into exile for many years (2 Kings 25:8–12). God would purify the land of Judah to bless His children and allow them to fellowship with Him.

The Bible carries from Genesis to Revelation the image of Babylon as the world system opposing God, and attempting to replace it with a human kingdom run by tyrants. In Genesis, the tyrant ruler was Nimrod. His plan to unite humans under his reign was thwarted by God confusing their languages (Genesis 11:1-9). Although God used Babylon as His agent to purify Judah (Habakkuk 1:5-7), He still opposes their wickedness. Here God returns the wickedness of Babylon, which was apparently exported to Judah, taking it back to Babylon and confining it to a temple there.

In Revelation, Babylon represents the world system that has profited from human exploitation (Revelation 18:10-19). Babylon is co-represented with Lady Wickedness, who is said to have corrupted the entire earth with wickedness:

“and on her forehead a name was written, a mystery, “BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.”
(Revelation 17:5)

This world system of human wickedness is responsible for the death of God’s people (Revelation 17:6) just as Babylon was responsible for the death of many of God’s people (2 Kings 25:8-11; Jeremiah 19:6-8).

Biblical Text

⁵ Then the angel who was speaking with me went out and said to me, “Lift up now your eyes and see what this is going forth.” ⁶ I said, “What is it?” And he said, “This is the ephah going forth.” Again he said, “This is their appearance in all the land ⁷ (and behold, a lead cover was lifted up); and this is a woman sitting inside the ephah.” ⁸ Then he said, “This is Wickedness!” And he threw her down into the middle of the ephah and cast the lead weight on its opening. ⁹ Then I lifted up my eyes and looked, and there two women were coming out with the wind in their wings; and they had wings like the wings of a stork, and they lifted up the ephah between the earth and the heavens. ¹⁰ I said to the angel who was speaking with me, “Where are they taking the ephah?” ¹¹ Then he said to me, “To build a temple for her in the land of Shinar; and when it is prepared, she will be set there on her own pedestal.”