

OpenTheo

September 25th: Zechariah 5 & Matthew 18:15-35

September 24, 2021



Alastair Roberts

The visions of the flying scroll and the woman in the ephah. The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here:

<https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

If you are interested in supporting this project, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

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 stork, 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 on to each other in a chiastic 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 the basket. We will 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. It's twenty cubits by ten cubits. The specificity of the dimensions and the strangeness of the dimensions suggests that they are symbolic.

There are a few possible connections that we could think of here. In 1 Kings 6, verse 3, we read of Solomon's temple. The vestibule in front of the nave of the house was twenty cubits long, equal to the width of the house, and ten cubits deep in front of the house.

In 1 Kings 6, verses 23 to 26, we see a further item with dimensions of ten cubits by twenty cubits. The cherubim inside the Holy of Holies with their wings stretched out. The altar of bronze in 2 Chronicles 4, verse 1, also is twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and ten 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 have 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 ascent 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.

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 argue 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 of 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. Zachariah 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, 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.

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 a base, presumably within its own shrine. Once we've recognized 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 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 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. 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 ether, trapped beneath the lead talon 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 ether, talon and stone of lead are words associated with trade and bring to mind issues of injustice. The ether is also associated with worship and offerings in the temple. In Hebrew, wickedness, *harusha*, 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 ether is a parody of the Ark of the Covenant with anti-cherub attendants who raise up the ether 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 talon 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? Matthew chapter 18 verses 15 to 35.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. Then Peter came up and said to Him, Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times? Jesus said to him, I do not say to you seven times, but seventy seven times.

Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children, and all that he had and payment to be made.

So the servant fell on his knees imploring him, have patience with me and I will pay you everything. And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii.

And seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, pay what you owe. So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, have patience with me and I will pay you. He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you? And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt.

So also my heavenly father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart. The second half of Matthew chapter 18 is a passage dealing with the importance of reconciliation and forgiveness. Sins against us within the body of Christ need to be considered in the light of brotherhood.

And we have to deal with our brothers. When your brother wrongs you, you can't just let it fester. You have to interact with your brother day by day and you have little choice but

to relate to your brother.

And our relationships in the body of Christ should be the same. There is an imperative to uphold and establish peace between us and to heal any wounds that might exist. We confront each other in order to sort things out swiftly.

And Jesus gives here a procedure that is designed to avoid any sort of premature escalation of situations to conflict. Many people seem to approach this as if the earlier stages are unfortunate prerequisites for really dealing with the finally being done with people that have wronged us and bringing them to the point of being cast out. Yet Jesus' teaching here is very clearly designed with the end that we might win over our brother.

That's the optimal outcome. We care about our brothers and sisters so we very much wish to win them back if at all possible. The point of this is that we are not the ones that want to see things escalate.

Every form of escalation is a result of the resistance of the other party, of their opposition, not something that we seek to bring about ourselves. This begins in private and it's an important thing to give people a chance to climb down. It's very hard to climb down from something that we've said that is wrong or hurtful in public.

We very often feel that desire to stick to our guns, to stick to what we have said, to save face and dealing with things in private gives people an optimal context in which to repent for what they've done, to set right wrongs, to take back perhaps some of the words that they have said. And it is also a way of avoiding gossip and rumours and seeds of bitterness. We are going to deal with this directly and we are going to deal with it quickly.

We take the step of approaching people rather than letting anything fester and we approach them in a personal way. This is us going to them, we're not sending someone else on our behalf. We're dealing with this personally and in a way that gives them the ideal situation in which they could repent and set things right.

A healthy society needs a minimum of law but litigiousness is a sign of people who cannot adequately resolve their own disputes. And so we do have to take these things to other people at certain points but we draw out that process, we don't go straight to the most extreme authority. This may be a particular problem for us where we can always appeal to the crowd, we can always appeal to some other parties to intervene and to come into our situation and cast their judgment upon it, particularly as we have access to the internet.

Resisting the power that that gives us and dealing with things closer to home, dealing with things in a way that gives people the opportunity to stand down, to repent and to set things right without putting them to a public shame or putting their feet to the fire so

that they have no choice but to back down. That's not what we're trying to do, rather we seek to establish peace where at all possible. We bring witnesses along on that second occasion to test the words of all.

Now no testimony is being given yet but the witnesses introduce that implicit warning of it that this may come to something more and at this point we want people to establish the words. We don't want false rumours, we don't want a sort of he said she said situation, we want the words to be established and true. We want to know exactly what was said, who stands where and how things can be resolved if they are possible to be resolved.

Finally we bring things to the church and if they refuse to listen to the church we don't associate with them as brothers anymore. The point of all of this is that we are peacemakers, we are people who seek reconciliation, we are people who deal with things quickly and always in a way that seeks to avoid unnecessary escalation and here we should note the importance of being in a situation where we are relating to each other deeply and in a sustained fashion. It's very easy to be a person that never needs to forgive if you're not relating to people as brothers and sisters.

It's very easy to avoid forgiveness if whenever you fall out with someone you just go to the next church in town. We need to relate to people in a sustained way and it will form in us the virtue of forgiveness. This is something that doesn't come easily, it's very easy to cut off connections with people, it's very easy to avoid the sort of connections that might really impinge upon our will, that really might make us vulnerable to being wronged by others but yet we're called to put ourselves in that position and that's in part how we will learn what it means to forgive.

We should remember that Jesus' teachings don't operate in isolation from each other. His earlier teaching about not wanting to be a stumbling block and about the importance of humility is still in play here. What is our concern when someone sins against us? Is it primarily the assertion of our rights? Or are we concerned for the spiritual health of our brother and the church of which we are both members? Are we trying to restore peace and establish harmony between people? Or are we more concerned about ourselves and our own rights and entitlement from our brother? Are we concerned about restoring the lost sheep? Or in this case restoring the lost brother? And this is the concern that should be animating our practice at this point.

Jesus talks again about binding and loosing here, once again in reference to the church and the authority that's given to it. He declared a similar statement with Peter a few chapters earlier. God uses the words and actions of his people to affect his work in the world.

This isn't an absolute power, a sort of blank check that allows the church to act in whatever way it wants with the assurance of complete divine backing. No, the point is

that Christ works authoritatively through his church and that where his church is faithfully active, its words and actions can have the force of the proclamation of the words of Christ by his spirit. Peter's question to Christ that follows is perhaps one that reveals the hearts of many of us.

How many times should I forgive my brother if he sins against me? This is something that many of us have dealt with. People who have again and again they've sinned against us. And should it be up to seven times, seven strikes and you're out? Is there some sort of limit to this? And yet Jesus says up to 70 times seven.

That's a strange number to give. Why that particular number? If we look back in the very early parts of the Bible, in Genesis chapter 4, there is a reference to 70 times seven. Lamech said to his wives, Ada and Zillah, hear my voice, you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say.

I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is 77 fold. So if Cain was seven times, then Lamech is 77 fold.

This is the line of Cain. This is the line of the brother killer. And what Christ is calling Peter to be is the exact inverse of the line of the brother killer.

Rather, he is the one that seeks to win over his brother. If Cain is going to be avenged seven times and Lamech 77 times, then Peter is one who's going to be forgiving his brother, not just seven times, but 77 times. He's going to express the inverse of vengeance in extreme forgiveness.

But there's more going on here because in Daniel chapter 9, verse 24 following, God establishes his own pattern of forgiveness. 70 weeks or 77s are decreed about your people and your holy city to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. God is going to forgive the sins of his people.

He's going to restore them. And he's going to do it after 77s. This is the time of restoration.

It's the restoration from exile. It's the year of the Lord's favour. 70 times 7, 490, it's connected.

It's a mega jubilee. 10 times that jubilee number, 7 7s. God is restoring and forgiving and establishing his people after all that they have done, after all the ways that they have rejected and despised and mistreated him, in all the ways that they have turned their backs and gone to serve other gods, in all the ways that they have committed spiritual adultery, in the ways that they have mistreated their neighbours and despised the image of God in their brothers.

In all these ways that they have wronged him, God is going to restore them in 70 times 7 and bring them to life in his presence. Now what Christ is teaching Peter, among other things, is that that must provide the paradigm for his exercise of forgiveness. Not the behaviour of Lamech, the descendant of the brother killer, who replaced the 7 times of Cain's vengeance with 77 times of his own.

It's the inverse of that and indeed it's the pattern that God himself has given. 70 times 7. Peter then must extend the pattern of God's own forgiveness of his people to others. And once we've appreciated this, Jesus' parable that he proceeds to give makes so much sense.

Because God is the great king that has forgiven the incalculable debt that his people owe to him. He has given them that relief 70 times 7. And yet, there are so many of them who want to hold their rights against their neighbour, to insist upon getting their pound of flesh. And God says that they're not to do that.

Rather, they're to extend the forgiveness that he has given them to their neighbour. We are a people who are called to have a life founded upon and driven by forgiveness. We don't seek our own rights but seek to set things right.

We seek to restore broken relationships, to win back the lost brother, rather than to assert our rights over him. God makes us active participants in his giving and his forgiving. God, for instance, has given us the Holy Spirit.

He gives the Church the gift of the Holy Spirit. But he gives each one of us as members of the Church gifts of the Holy Spirit. The point is that as we exercise our gifts, we're representing that one gift of the Holy Spirit.

And as I exercise my gifts and you exercise yours, we are giving to each other that one gift that Christ has given to his Church. We are representing that thing that belongs to all of us. God makes us active participants then in his giving and likewise in his forgiving.

And those who resist this cut themselves off from the grace that he's given us. As he gives us his Spirit, as he gives us his forgiveness, what he is doing is giving us the capacity to extend the same to others. To take the grace that has been given to us and show that grace to people who need it every bit as much as we do.

We are in a cycle of grace that has been opened up by the bountiful, liberal gift of God. A gift beyond all measure. A gift beyond all value or compare.

And we are called and privileged with the possibility of extending this, of being people who give to others what has been given to us. We have been given freely and bountifully. And this blessing is so that we can give it to others.

That we can share in that. That's the gift that we have been given. God does not just

leave us as paupers who have been given some bounty that we can enjoy.

Rather, he has entrusted us with his gifts. That we might be those who extend gifts of forgiveness to others. We can proclaim God's forgiveness to others.

It's one of the things that the reformers recognized. Along with the church. Beyond the reformers.

The recognition that we can declare Christ's forgiveness to our neighbour. Christ has forgiven us and he calls us to be those who declare with the authority of Christ. The forgiveness of all who truly repent.

That we might be sources of security and assurance for those people who have troubled consciences. That they come to God's throne and we can declare as people who act in Christ's name. That they too are forgiven.

That he holds none of their sins against them. And this teaching concerning the unforgiving servant is the absolute inverse of what should characterize the church. A question to consider.

How does this teaching develop the earlier teaching concerning forgiveness in the Sermon on the Mount?