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CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

THE MOBILE SHRINE
IN ZECHARIAH 5: 5 -11

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THE MOBILE SHRINE IN ZECHARIAH 5:5–11

INTRODUCTION

At first glance Zechariah's sixth vision in 5:5–11 appears to depict a woman sitting in a basket, requiring a very big basket or a very small woman. The אֶפְהָה, according to various estimates (Meyers 1987: 296), was about a bushel, more or less, and was much too small a basket in which to seat a woman. Consequently, the *woman* has at times been exegetically miniaturized to a female *figurine* to accommodate the container. However, a closer examination of the text led some commentators to shy away from 'a woman in a basket.' Carol and Eric Meyers (1987: 293) opted for a simple transliteration of the key word as follows:

זֹאת הָאֶפְהָה הַיּוֹצֵאתָ וְזֹאת
אִשָּׁה שֹׁמֵרֶת יוֹשֵׁבֶת בְּתוֹךְ הָאֶפְהָה

"This is the Ephah which goes forth
and this is one woman seated in the Ephah."

In this study I present the evidence for interpreting Zech 5:7 as follows, with the key words in italics: "This is the *mobile shrine* and this is the '*first lady*' sitting in the middle of the *shrine*." The shrine would have been the counterpart to the אָרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת "ark of the covenant of Yahweh of hosts" (I Sam 4:4). The אֶפְהָה יוֹצֵאתָ "*mobile shrine*" may have resembled and function somewhat like the sacred palanquins (*o-mikoshi*) used to transport a deity in Shinto festivals.

shrine could have had mobility and have been large enough for a woman or a life-size statue of a goddess.

The **בכר לעפרת**, usually translated “lead weight” which served as the roof of the shrine was probably just a simple “circular cover.” The **לעפרת** is the equivalent of the Arabic **غفيرة** (*gufirat*) “cover”; and **לעפר** can be the cognate of **عفر** (*afar*) “dust” or **غفر** (*gafara*) “he covered/concealed,” as in the phrase **غفر المتاع في الوعاء** (*gafara ʾalmataʿa fi ʾalwi ʿā ʾi*) “he concealed the things in a vessel” (Lane 1877: 2273).

The MT **לעפרת** would be the normal feminine participle in agreement with the feminine **בכר**. The extended discussions in some commentaries about **לעפרת** “lead” and **בכר** “talents” seem gratuitous, and the failure to mention **غفر** (*gafara*) has to be an oversight. The fact that a *circular covering* was placed over the “mouth” of the **אִיפָה** does not require the **אִיפָה** to be a vessel. The semantic range of **פָּה** “mouth” includes “end” and “top” (as in Pro 8:3, **לְפִי־קִרְת**, “from the top of rafters,” or the MT **לְפִי־קִרְת** “to the end of town”).

עונם / עינם THE MEANING OF

Delitzsch (1920: 105) listed Zech 5:6 among the numerous texts in which there was a confusion of ם and ן, like Hos 10:10 where the *Kethib* is **עינתם** but the *Qere* is **עונתם** “their sins.” Although there is no *Qere/Kethib* for Zech 5:6, the *Vorlage* of the Septuagint and the Syriac must have read **עונם**, “their iniquity,” whereas the *oculus eorum* “their eye” of the Vulgate indicates a *Vorlage* with **עינם**. The English translations vary with the KJV, NKJ, NAS, and YLT all

following the Hebrew עֵיִן, and translating עֵיִנִים as “resemblance,” or “appearance” or “aspect.” The RSV, NRSV, and NAS followed the Greek and Syriac and rendered עֵיִנִים as “iniquity” or “guilt.” The NIV emended the text to עוֹן הָעָם “the iniquity of the people.” Carol and Eric Meyers (1987: 297) stated, “the MT need not be altered,” but they nevertheless emended עֵיִנִים to עֵיִנָּה “its appearance,” the feminine antecedent of *its* being the Ephah since there was no explicit antecedent for the masculine plural suffix ם.

The proposal here is that עֵיִנִים of the Greek and Syriac *Vorlagen* should be followed, but the stem עוֹן should *not* be restricted to עוֹן “iniquity.” Knowing how the vision ends helps in understanding how it developed. The mobile shrine was to be relocated by winged women to Shinar where a temple would be built for it—suggestive of the shrine atop a ziggurat. Knowing this, it seems obvious that the figure in the shrine was a goddess to be worship in Shinar—but not in Judah! The female figure hidden in the shrine had her rightful place of worship and her legitimate devotees for whom she was עוֹנָם “their help,”² with עוֹן being the cognate of Arabic عون (*awn*) “aid, assistance,” used in reference to God’s aiding a person—as in the prayer “O my Lord, *aid* me, and *aid* not against me” (Lane 1874: 2203; Wehr 1979: 771–772). The ambiguity of the plural suffix ם seems intentional. If the shrine was a cult center in Shinar, it would be עוֹנָם “their [Shinar’s] help,” but, when the shrine became a cult center in Judah, it then became עוֹנָם “their [Judah’s] iniquity.” The ambiguity of the ם is a clue to the *double entendre* of עוֹן.

אִשָּׁה אֶחָת “FIRST LADY”

The feminine אִשָּׁה אֶחָת “the first lady” functions like the masculine יוֹם אֶחָד “the first day” of Gen 1:5. The singularity of the person rests in the singular demonstrative זֶה, as well as the singular form of the noun. In terms of number the אֶחָת is superfluous since אִשָּׁה is morphologically singular. Thus, it seems best to interpret אִשָּׁה אֶחָת as title of priority and/or status. If priority was the focus, it suggests a title for a goddess (with אִשָּׁה אֶחָת being a circumlocution for אֱלֹהֵי אֶחָת or אֱלֹהֵי אֶחָת “first goddess.”) A reference to such a goddess may survive in the מִמַּלְאָכֵי הַקִּנְיָאָה of Eze 8:3, which can be translated “the image of jealousy” or as “the image of the creatress,” since קָנָה/קָנָה can also mean “to create”—as well as “to acquire” and “to be zealous” (Gordon 1965: 479). Jeremiah’s reference to the “Queen of heaven” (44:17–19, 25) would be another likely candidate for the title of אִשָּׁה אֶחָת “first lady.” Whether it was priority or status, אִשָּׁה אֶחָת reflects a sarcastic modification by the angel of Yahweh of what must have been a title of reverence for the goddess and/or her image.³

For the devotees in Shinar the goddess figure in the mobile shrine would be הַרְשָׁעָה “the one making [the means of subsistence] abundant,” but for the people of Judah in covenant with Yahweh she was הַרְשָׁעָה “the wicked one.” There is surely another *double entendre* here. Hebrew רָשָׁעָה means not only “wickedness,” it can also be the cognate of Arabic رَسَعَ (*rasaḡa*) “he made ample, he made abundant” and the adjective رَسِيعٌ (*rasīḡ*) “ample, abundant” (Lane 1867: 1081).

CONCLUSIONS

The sixth vision of Zechariah suggests several subtle word associations with dry or liquid measures: אִיֶּפֶה “the *ephah*” and “shrine”; בַּת “the *bath*” and בַּיִת “temple”; כֹּר “the *kor*” and כֶּכָר “circular.” It also has two cases of *double entendre*: רָשָׁעָה “wickedness” and רַשְׁעָה “abundant,” as well as עוֹנָם “their iniquity” and עוֹנָם “their help.” It has one circumlocution with אִשְׁתֵּי אֶחָת “the first lady” meaning אֱלֹהֵי אֶחָת “the premier goddess.” Because the אִשְׁתֵּי אֶחָת was to be enshrined in Babylon there is no basis to interpret the removal of her image to Shinar as the symbolic legitimation for deporting Babylonian women from Judah.

Thematically this vision resonates with the henotheism assumed in Deut 4:19, 29:26 and 32:9 (MT). Other gods had their designated lands, but חֵלֶק יְהוָה עַמּוֹ יַעֲקֹב חֶבְלֵי נַחֲלָתוֹ “Yahweh’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.”

NOTES

1. Petersen (1984: 254) limits his discussion of Marenof to a footnote, stating: “Ingenious though this suggestion was, it has not found general acceptance.”

2. Note KBS II: 799, which cites the Arabic cognate *عون* [I, II, and IV] “to help,” without citing any occurrences in Hebrew. The MT *מֵעוֹן* or *מֵעוֹנֶךָ* in Ps 71:3; 90:1; and 91:9 has been recognized by Ben Yehuda (1908: 3155), Zorell (1956: 455), Kopf (1958: 187–188), and Dahood (1968: 172, 322, 333) as being derived from *עוֹן*, the cognate of *عون* “to help, give succor,” and has been equated with the nouns *معاون* (*mi‘wân*) and *معونة* (*ma‘ûnat*) “help, aid.” The

עני of Zech 9:9, coupled with נושע “savior,” is probably from this root also.

3. Note Lane’s (1863: 27) comment: “أحد (*ahad*), without the article, is used as an epithet specially in relation to God.” The feminine אלהת would appear to be an epithet in Hebrew for a goddess figure, even though אשה appears in lieu of the anticipated אלה or אלת.