

Ecclesiastes 10:11

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Surely the serpent will bite without enchantment; and a babbler is no better.

Analysis

Surely the serpent will bite without enchantment—the Hebrew im-yishokh ha-nachash be-lo lachash (אִם־יִשְׁקַח הַנַּחַשׁ בְּלֹא לָחָשׁ) describes a snake biting before the charmer can use his lachash (לָחָשׁ, incantation/whisper). Ancient snake charmers claimed to control serpents through spells and whispered formulas (Psalm 58:4-5; Jeremiah 8:17). If the snake strikes first, the charmer's skill becomes worthless—timing is everything.

And a babbler is no better—ve-eyn yitron le-vaal ha-lashon (וְאֵין יִתְרֹן לְבָעֵל הַלְשׁוֹן) there is no advantage/profit to the master of the tongue). The phrase baal ha-lashon means literally "lord of the tongue," referring to someone skilled in speech—whether a snake charmer, slanderer, or smooth talker. Just as untimely snake charming proves useless, so does eloquent speech deployed too late or in wrong circumstances. This continues chapter 10's theme of wisdom's timing and appropriateness.

Historical Context

Snake charming was practiced throughout the ancient Near East—charmers claimed ability to control serpents through magical incantations (Exodus 7:11). Israelites were forbidden to consult such practitioners (Deuteronomy 18:10-11), yet the practice was widely known. The point here isn't validating snake charming but using it as illustration: even supposed expertise fails if timing is wrong. Similarly, eloquent speakers prove useless if their words come too late. James

3:1-12 warns extensively about the tongue's power and danger. Jesus emphasized that words matter eternally—every idle word faces judgment (Matthew 12:36-37). The Reformers warned against eloquent heresy that led souls astray despite persuasive delivery.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. When have your words—however true or eloquent—proven ineffective because of poor timing, and what does this teach about wisdom?
2. How does this verse warn against trusting in eloquence or persuasive skill rather than timely, appropriate, truthful speech?

Interlinear Text

אָמַרְתִּי כִּי שְׁנָאָתָה בְּלֹא לְמַשְׁחָה אֵין
H518 will bite H5391 Surely the serpent H5175 without enchantment H3808 H3908 H369

בְּלֹשֶׁן: לְבָבֶל יִתְרֵא וְ
is no better H3504 and a babbler H1167 H3956

Additional Cross-References

Jeremiah 8:17 (Parallel theme): For, behold, I will send serpents, cockatrices, among you, which will not be charmed, and they shall bite you, saith the LORD.