

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* (שׁוֹכֵחַ הַנָּחָשׁ 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 יִתְרוֹן לְבַעַל הַלָּשׁוֹן), 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—charmners 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

אִם H518	יִשְׁךָ H5391	הַנָּחָשׁ H5175	בְּלֹא H3808	לְחֵשׁ H3908	וְאֵין H369
will bite	Surely the serpent		without enchantment		
יֵתֵר H3504	לִבִּי H1167	הַלָּשׁוֹן H3956			
is no better		and a babbler			

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.