

Ecclesiastes Chapter Five

Protocols for Worship (vv. 1-7)

VERSE 1 Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen

rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools וְקָרַב לְשִׁמּוֹעַ מִתַּת הַכְּסִילִים זָבַח

שָׁמַר (רַגְלֶיךָ) [רַגְלֶיךָ] כַּאֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵךְ אֶל-בַּיִת הָאֱלֹהִים [Qal imper.m.s. shamar guard +

noun f. dual constr.w/2m.s.suff. regel foot; step + prep kaph w/rel.pro. asher + Qal impf.2m.s.

halak walk, go + prep el to + noun m.s.constr. bayith house + d.a.w/noun m.p.abs. Elohim +

waw w/Qal infin.constr. qarab come near, draw near + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. shama

listen + prep min w/Qal infin.constr. nathan give; “offer” + d.a.w/noun m.p.abs. kesil fool +

noun m.s.abs. zebach sacrifice]; **for they do not know they are doing evil** לַעֲשׂוֹת רָעָה

כִּי־אֵינָם יוֹדְעִים [part ki for + adv. ayin not + Qal part.m.p.abs. yada know + prep lamed

w/Qal infin.constr. ashah do + adj.m.s.abs. ra evil]).

VERSE 2 Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in

the presence of God תִּבְהַל עַל-פִּיךָ וּלְבָבְךָ אֶל-יְמִינְהוּרָה לְהוֹצִיא דָבָר לְפָנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים

אֵל [adv al not, neither + Piel impf.2m.s. bahal be disturbed; to hurry; “be hasty” + prep al

above with + noun m.s.constr.w/2m.s.suff. pah mouth; in word” + waw w/noun

m.s.constr.w/2m.s.suff. leb heart; “in thought”+ adv al neither + Piel impf.3m.s. mahar hasten

“or impulsive” +prep lamed w/Hiphil infin.constr. yatsa go out; “to bring up”+ noun m.s.abs.

dabar word: “matter” + prep lamed w/noun both pl.abs. paneh face; “the presence” +

d.a.w/noun m.p.abs. Elohim]).

For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few

כִּי הָאֱלֹהִים בַּשָּׁמַיִם וְאַתָּה עַל־הָאָרֶץ עַל־כֵּן יִהְיוּ דְבָרֶיךָ מְעַטִּים) [conj ki for + d.a.w/noun m.p.abs. Elohim + prep beth w/waw w/noun m.p.abs. shamayim heaven + waw w/pro.2m.s. attah you + prep al on + d.a.w/noun both s.abs. eretz earth + prep al w/adv ken “therefore” + Qal impf.3m.p. hayah be + noun m.p.constr.w/2m.s.suff. dabar word + adj.m.p.abs. me-at little; “few”)].

VERSE 3 For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool

כִּי בָּא הַחֵלֹם בְּרַב עֲנָן וְקוֹל כְּסִיל בְּרַב דְּבָרִים) [part ki for + Qal perf.3m.s. bo come + d.a.w/non m.s.abs. chalam dream + prep beth w/noun m.s.abs. rob abundance; “much” + noun m.s.abs. inyan task; “effort” + waw w/noun m.s.abs. qol voice + noun m.s.abs. kesil fool + prep beth w/noun m.s.ab.s rob “many” + noun m.p.abs. dabar word)].

VERSE 4 When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes

תִּדְרֹךְ נֶדֶר לְאֱלֹהִים אַל־תֵּאַחַר לְשַׁלְּמוֹ כִּי אֵין חֶפְזִין בְּכִסְיִלִים) כַּאֲשֶׁר [prep kaph w/rel.pro. asher “When” + Qal impf.2m.s. nadar make a vow + noun m.s.abs. neder vow + prep lamed w/noun m.p.abs. Elohim + adv al not + Piel impf.2m.s. achar tarry; be late + prep lamed w/Piel infin.constr.w/3m.s.suff. shalem be complete; “in paying it” + part ki for + adv. ayin no + prep beth w/d.a.w/noun m.p.abs. kesil fool)].

Pay what you vow (אֵת אֲשֶׁר־תִּדְרֹךְ שַׁלֵּם) [d.o. + rel.pro. asher what + Qal impf.2m.s. nadar make a vow + Piel imper.m.s. shalem be complete; “Pay”)]!

VERSE 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not

pay (טוֹב אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִדָּוַר מִשְׁתַּדּוֹר וְלֹא תִשְׁלַם) [adj.m.s.abs. tob “better” + rel.pro. asher “that” + neg lo + Qal impf.2m.s. nadar make a vow + prep min w/rel.pro. asher w/Qal impf.2m.s. nadar make a vow + waw w/neg lo + Piel impf.2m.s. shalem “pay”)].

VERSE 6 Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence

of the messenger of God that it was a mistake (אֵל־תִּתֵּן אֶת־פִּיךָ לַחַטִּיא אֶת־בְּשָׂרְךָ וְאַל־תֹּאמַר לְפָנַי הַמַּלְאָךְ כִּי שָׁגָגָה הִיא) [adv al not + Qal impf.2m.s. nathan give; “let” + d.o. + noun m.s.constr.w/2m.s.suff. peh mouth; “speech” + prep lamed w/Hiphil infin.constr. chatta sin + d.o. + noun m.s.constr.w/2m.s.suff. bashar flesh; not translated; translation: “do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin” + waw w/dv al not + Qal impf.2m.s. amar say + prep lamed w/noun both p.constr. face; “in the presence” + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. mal-ak messenger + part ki that + noun f.s.abs. shegagah from vb. shagag err; “a mistake” + pro.3f.s. it)].

Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your

hands (לָמָּה יִקְצַף הָאֱלֹהִים עַל־קוֹלְךָ וְחָבַל אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֶיךָ) [prep lamed w/interrog. mah why? + Qal impf.3m.s. qatsaph be angry + d.a.w/noun m.p.abs. Elohim + prep. al + noun m.s.constr.w/2m.s.suff. qol voice + waw w/Piel perf.3m.s. chabal destroy + d.o. + noun m.s.constr. ma-asheh work + noun f. dual constr.w/2m.s.suff. yad hand)])?

VERSE 7 For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness (הַרְבֵּה)

כִּי בְרַב חֲלֻמוֹת וְהַבָּלִים וּדְבָרִים [part ki for + prep beth w/noun m.s.abs. rob multitude + noun m.p.abs. chalom dream + waw w/noun m.p.abs. chebel “emptiness” + waw w/noun m.p.abs. dabar word + Hiphil infin.abs. rabah become many].

Rather, fear God (כִּי אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים יִרָא) [part ki “Rather” + d.o. + d.a.w/noun m.p.abs.Elohim + Qal impf.m.s. yare fear].

ANALYSIS: VERSES 1-7

1. In these verses the subject is the manner in which one should approach God in worship.
2. The change in subject here also has a change in the way the subject is handled.
3. The author shifts from reflections about life, based on his personal observations, to admonitions based on imperatives.
4. These imperatives are directed at the individual (2m.s.).
5. The author seems very conventional framing his admonitions in a series of imperatives.
6. This form of admonition is characteristic of Proverbs.
7. Caution before God is expressed in the 1st imperative/admonition (v. 1).
8. “Guard your steps whenever you go to the house of God” (i.e., temple) refers to worship.
9. “Steps” is used in Proverbs as a figure of speech for human conduct (Prov. 1:15-16; 4:12; 5:5; 14:15; 16:19; 20:24).
10. Here it refers to one’s mental attitude/motivation.
11. The contrast here is between listening and offering sacrifice.
12. The attitude of caution (“Guard your steps”) is characterized by listening to a teacher of the Law.
13. The absence of caution is characterized by the “sacrifice of fools.”
14. In this case the worshipper does not check his motivation, and enters “the house of God” to make an impression.
15. The motive here is corrupt, because it is based on approbation (cf. Hosea 6:6 “I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”; Amos 5:22 “Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not *even* look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.”).
16. Here we have yet another example of the “fool.”
17. What is especially onerous in this type of fake worship is that “they do not even know that they are doing evil” (v. 1c).
18. The total lack of caution before God in the designated place of worship demonstrates that their lives are hypocritical (cf. Mk. 12:41-44; Matt. 6:2).

Caution in Prayer (vv. 2-3)

19. In v. 2 the author adds to the concept of caution by emphasizing restraint in speech before God.
20. This goes along with the admonition to listen.
21. This verse is composed of three parts: a command, a motive clause, and then a second command that is implied by the motive clause.
22. The command is to be reticent before God.
23. The motive: the great distance between God followed by the second command reemphasizing the need to be quiet before God.
24. The subject of this verse and the next is clearly prayer.
25. The verse means to avoid badgering God with superfluous talk.
26. After all God is in heaven, that is, He is in control.
27. This approach considers the author's warning as an anticipation of Matt. 6:7-8 "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words."
28. However, the author has been anything but pious up to this point.
29. His damper on prayer stands over against the torrent of the psalmists' passionate pleadings, laments, and questions.
30. His approach to prayer here warns readers to be cautious, as if taking up God's precious time!
31. "God is in heaven" is not here taken as an assertion of divine majesty (as in Ps. 115), but of divine distance, perhaps even indifference.
32. The concluding command "let your words be few" reinforces the opening command.
33. But where elsewhere in the word of God is this cautioned in regards to prayer?
34. Vain repetitions and showing off in public are condemned.
35. In v. 3 the author bolsters the commands of verse 2 with an analogy.
36. The exact nature of the comparison between "a dream" and "the voice of the fool" is uncertain.
37. The first part refers to a dream (while sleeping) that is the result of busyness ("through much activity").
38. It is not here to be regarded as a divine revelation while asleep.
39. Such a dream is meaningless.
40. The second half of this verse is the punch line that reinforces the dream analogy.
41. A fool is characterized by "many words."
42. This goes back to verse 2 where the admonition is to exercise restraint in speech.

Vows (vv. 4-7)

43. Like worship and prayer, a vow was a voluntary sacrifice to God.
44. Vows were often made by a worshipper if God would answer a specific request (Gen. 28:20-22; Judg. 11:30-31, 39; 1Sam. 23:22a).
45. Prov. 20:23 is noteworthy: "It is a trap for a man to dedicate something and only later to consider his vows" [alternate translation].
46. The author's views on vows are virtually the same as that of the rest of the Bible.
47. No one, divine or human, likes to see a person default on a spiritual promise/vow.
48. He does more than warn his hearers to fulfill their vows they have already made.

49. He also encourages them not to make vows in the first place (v. 5; cf. Deut. 23:22 “However, if you refrain from vowing, it would not be a sin in you.”).
50. He expresses himself with a “better-than” proverb.
51. Quite simply those who never make vows in the first place are better off than those who do not keep their vows.
52. He warns his listeners not to play religious games—to make vows, and then to try to get out of them (cf. Matt. 23:16-22).
53. The setting in verse 6 is still that of vow taking in a setting of worship.
54. People’s mouths drag them into sin (“Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin.”; literal).
55. Here the sin of the mouth is to make a vow, and not fulfill the words of the person’s mouth.
56. The vow here is a public pronouncement before the religious authority.
57. The situation is that when the temple “messenger” (*mal-ak*) makes his rounds to the home of the vow-taker, then they will give a lame excuse (“that was a mistake”).
58. The author asserts that the reluctant vow taker will anger God, and God will inflict some form of divine punishment (“destroy the work of your hands”).
59. Apparently there were individuals whose duty it was to check up on those who had fulfilled their public vows, a kind of religious bill collector.
60. The noun translated “mistake” (*shegagah*) is used in Lev. 4:2-36 and Num. 22-31, which contrast sins committed in ignorance with intentional sinning.
61. An intentional sin such as breach of verbal commitment will bring down the wrath of God in a disastrous fashion (something related to the vow breakers livelihood).
62. Verse 7 is difficult to translate and to interpret.
63. Once again (see v. 3) we have the association of dreams and words.
64. Verse 7 and verse 3 supports the idea dreams are a reference to what is unreal or illusory.
65. There is a parallel between a succession of dreams and a multiplication of words.
66. The fool bases his vows on dreams he has had, which he relates in elaborate detail, in the house of God, before the authorities (“many empty words”).
67. Again, this all done before God in His temple.
68. The idea is that the dreams of the fool are the background to his worthless vows.
69. As at the outset of this section the motivation is approbation.
70. A translation: “So when dreams multiply so do many senseless words. Instead, fear God.”
71. This section concludes with an admonition in the form of an imperative introduced by an adversative *ki*: *Instead, fear God.*
72. Is the author’s concept of the fear of God in line with the reverential fear of the book of Proverbs; or is it on the negative side of being afraid of God?
73. The latter seems to be the case because His actions are inscrutable and He is distant from humans, according to the author.
74. Thus far, the thrust has been unfulfilled expectations in reference to labor (4:17-12), social oppression (4:1-3, 13-16; 5:8-9), and wealth (5:10-6:9).
75. Even the matter of prayer (speech) and vow taking (speech) in the house of God is devoid of the sentiments expressed by the psalmist (cf. Ps. 73:23-28).
76. Note the contrast between Prov. 2:3, where the fear of Yahweh is associated with finding knowledge of God, and Eccl. 3:11; 8:1, 17, where God’s actions are inscrutable.
77. Prov. 10:27 associates the fear of God with longevity, whereas in this book the author questions whether the life of the righteous is prolonged (8:11-14; 9:1-6).

78. In Prov. 14:26 the fear of Yahweh is associated with strong confidence, but instead, here the author stresses caution before God.
79. Caution before Elohim may explain why the author never uses Yahweh for God in Ecclesiastes (prominent in Proverbs).
80. Ambiguity is the order of the day thus far in Ecclesiastes!