

Ecclesiastes 5:3-4 and Its Challenge for Practice of Vows Today

Emmanuel O. Nwaoru

Introduction

Making vows is a cherished age-old religious practice that is found in almost all ancient cultures. As an expression of faith in the Deity that has power to save and protect the devotee, vows have resisted any attempt by reformers and rationalists, or even cynics to suppress their place among ardent religious practices in the modern (Christian) age. Today the practice of vows is very much alive, but not without problems. Like in the biblical times (cf. Acts 5:3, 4, 9) there is a growing tendency to make vows and promises without proper consideration. Occasionally, there is inattention in the way vows made out of personal decision are fulfilled (Lev 22:23; Deut 23:19[18 E], giving rise at times to total loss of sense of commitment. Consequently, what is left of the vow is driven by external pressure or inner fear rather than passionate desire for salvation through nearness to and intimacy with God. This is very reminiscent of the practice in ancient cultures where some of those who take vows and oaths are constrained to fulfil them because of fear of retribution by the Deity. Today the situation is a little different; people can dare to take false oaths and make false promises to get what they desire even with the Holy Books (Bible, Koran, etc) in hand, i.e., without fear of the Deity. This has negatively impacted the practice of vows, promises and oaths in our time. The later biblical period experienced similar crisis. Although vows and promises were in the main irrevocable and irreversible, except where the laws stated otherwise, there was growing tendency to defraud in meeting the terms of the obligation of vows and promises. Hence the sage and "Preacher", Qoheleth unequivocally came up with the counsel in the text under consideration among his other observations on life (cf. Eccl 2:1-6:9).

This paper undertakes to examine the text in its biblical context and the challenge it holds for those who are in one way or another bound to God by their acts of consecration - initiations, vows and promises. Given the growing tendency to defaulting in keeping vows, one wonders if it is still worth the matter making vows, and what options there are for those who must live daily in the reality of the fragility of their vows. While searching for answer(s) the paper agrees with the tenet that vows are "useful supplements" rather than "substitutes" in themselves, and must be treated as such.

Vow as a Concept

The practice of vows can be said to be found in every form of religion, "Official"¹, "Popular"², Christian and non-Christian, etc. Generally, the practice of vows has been seen as "a major human strategy for coping with the future,"³ based primarily on the principle of *do ut des* (I give that you may give). It is along this sense that Roland de Vaux describes a vow as "a conditional promise to give something to God if God first granted a favour."⁴ Vows are often considered alongside other terms such as "promise" and "oath". In the Christian religion

¹ Jacques Berlinerbau defines "Official religion" as "that religion which exerts the greatest power in its relation with other religious groups within a given territory." It is often associated with "an economically dominant class". See *The Vow and the 'Popular Religious Groups' Of Ancient Israel A Philological and Sociological Inquiry*, JSOTSup 210 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 30, 167. But Judah B. Segal has earlier identified it in relation to Ancient Israel with established sanctuaries and established dates and with a formal religion. See "Popular Religion in Ancient Israel", *JJS* 27 (1976): 1-22; 1.

² This form of religion as Segal remarked has been less easy to characterise. However, James L. Crenshaw calls it the "actual religion of the 'man in the streets'" as distinct from the "officially sanctioned religion of Israel". Cf. "Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel", *ZAW* 82 (1970): 380-395; 392. Berlinerbau (*The Vow*, 167) sees this group as belonging to the non-privileged strata of society.

³ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1987), 13.

⁴ De Vaux, *Ancient Israel Its Life and Institutions*, (New York 1973), 465.

a vow belongs to the realm of consecration which is applied specially in the Catholic Church to the Eucharist, making bishops, clergy or laity professing the counsels of perfection through vows or other sacred bonds recognised by the Church, and to churches and altars.⁵ Because a vow is not a religious duty that one must necessarily fulfil the Church considers it as "an act of *devotion* in which the Christian dedicates himself [herself] to God or promises him some good work."⁶ In fact, the Church calls such act a charism (gift).

There is unanimity that making a vow is motivated by human needs and in most cases directed to God or other divine being. Those personal needs can take different forms: ill health, threat to life, needy condition and, conversely, desire to ensure one's wellbeing, to express gratitude / thanks for kindness, or even to free oneself from severe temptation.⁷ From the biblical perspective it is beautifully summarised thus:

Vows were chiefly aimed at securing Yahweh's aid, protection, or provision, e.g., for success in realizing an ambition (cf. Gen 28:20-22; 2 Sam 15:7-12; Ps 132:2-5), for the birth of a longed-for child (cf. 1 Sam 1:11; Prov 31:2), for a bountiful harvest (Ps 65:1[2]), for victory in battle (76:11[12]), for deliverance from danger (cf. Ps 61:5[6], 8[9]; Jon 1:16), or for recovery from an illness or some other crisis (cf. Job 22:27; Ps 22:25[26]; 66:13-15; 116: 14, 18).⁸

On the contrary, different authors have conceived and defined vows differently. For instance, the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defined vows as "solemn and voluntary promises to perform something not otherwise required but believed to be acceptable to the person to whom the vows are made."⁹ Matthew Henry in a detailed description asserts that a vow is

a bond upon the soul (Num 30:2), by which we solemnly oblige ourselves, not only, in general, to do that which we are already bound to do, but, in some particular instance, to do that which we were not under any antecedent obligation, whether it respects honouring God or serving the interests of his kingdom among men.¹⁰

Ryan captures the basic notion of a vow in ancient cultures when he defines it as "a plea for divine assistance motivated by special need with a promise of payment or deed."¹¹ The Church's Code of Canon Law gives what can be regarded as the Church's standard definition of a vow as "a deliberate and free promise made to God concerning a possible and better good which must be fulfilled by reason of the virtue of religion".¹² Looking at the alternative meaning of the Hebrew word *neder* as the "thing vowed", Keller affirms that "in most cases, the vow should be defined simply as 'a freewill offering in fulfilment of a promise.'"¹³ In that regard the psalmist is justified to call everyone to perform vows in hymns (Psa 76:12 [11

⁵ F.I. Cross, E.A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1709.

⁶ See Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 2102.

⁷ See *Abot* 3:17.

⁸ *NIDOTTE* 3, 38.

⁹ Cross & Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary*, 1709-1710.

¹⁰ See his Commentary on Ecclesiastes 5:4-8.

¹¹ Roger Ryan, *Judges* (Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007) 87.

¹² *Codex Iuris Canonici (CIC)*, Can. 1191 # 1; also CCC 2102.

¹³ C.A. Keller, "nדר to vow," in Ernst Jenni & Claus Westermann, eds., *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* Vol. 2, Trans. Mark E. Biddle (Munich: Chr. Kaiser; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1976), 918-921; (920).

Eng]) and in thanksgiving and praise (Psa 50:14) as basic disposition that should characterise all vows.

To be emphasised here is that making a vow is purely a matter of personal / private decision, whether in its conditional or unconditional form. In essence, the initiative comes from the individual and not from the Deity or another person. This is precisely why the Qumran community emphasises the freewill dimension of vows and prohibits at the same time vowing illegitimate property to the sanctuary.¹⁴ It also warns against retaining illegitimate property accruing from an unfulfilled vow (cf. CD 6:15). The offshoot of this could be seen in Jesus' own teaching (Mark 7:11-13; Matt 15:5-6; cf. 23:18; 1 Tim 5:8) and in Peter's confronting Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10). It is within the context of some of the objectionable attitudes towards making vows and fulfilling them that one can appreciate Qoheleth's message in the text under consideration.

Characteristics of Vows

The idea of a vow and of its fulfilment evokes so many other thoughts, relating to the mode of making it, its distinctive types, its purpose, the obligation and terms of fulfilling it, its irreversibility and possible exceptions, and the proper locations for making vow. Generally speaking, vows can be made anywhere and everywhere, even though they are often made in the places of worship - sanctuaries, temples, shrines, churches and other cultic sites. The Old Testament has enough evidence to show that all vows are not made in cultic places and that the devout is also not in any way constrained to make his/her vows in such places or before any cultic functionaries or third person. Here the case of Jacob at a place that would later be called Bethel comes quickly to mind (Gen 28:20-22). Jephthah's vow and that of the Israelites on their march to Canaan are made in the battlefield (cf. Judg 11:29-33; Num 21:2, respectively). From all indications, making those vows in such milieu does not envisage the presence of any cultic functionary, so also the meeting of their terms of obligation (cf. Judg 11:39). The evidence from the Legend of Keret also points to that, notwithstanding that the vow¹⁵ could have been made in a cultic place. Hannah's vow in 1 Sam 1:9-18 is unique in the biblical and extra-biblical traditions of the ancient Near East. The vow in v. 11 actually took place at the Shiloh sanctuary and before Eli the priest but it was not supervised by the priest. All this puts Parker's position in question that the initiation of a vow is an interactive and supervised process that may require the presence of cultic functionaries.¹⁶

There is no fixed pattern on how vows are made. But the biblical and other ancient traditions exhibit certain basic elements. In the earlier vow narratives, a vow, being a religious and pious act, is made in a prayerful mood, with the right frame of mind that expresses a real awareness of God's mercy in granting the devotee's petitions. Prayerful condition adds fervent force to vows. The fact that a vow is a personal and private issue does not warrant its being conceived only in the supplicant's mind. A typical vow (cf. Gen 28:20-22; Num 21:2; Judg 11:30-31; 1 Sam 1:11; 2 Sam 15:7-8; KTU 1.14 IV 36-43; Aqhat IV fragment c [KTU 1.22 15-20]; etc.) is always verbalised, articulated and distinctly pronounced.¹⁷ Wendel puts it more categorically thus: "In the Bible, to open the mouth is repeatedly found as an expression

¹⁴ Cairo (Genizah) text of the Damascus Document (CD) 16:13; also Jenni & Westermann, eds., *Theological Lexicon*, 921.

¹⁵ The vow in KTU 1.14 IV 36-43 reads thus: "As surely as Athiratu of Tyre exists, yes, the goddess of Sidon: if I take Hariya into my house, make the lass enter my residence, I will give twice her (weight) in silver, yes, three times her (weight) in gold!". See J.C. de Moor, *An Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit*, NISABA 16 (Leiden, New York: E.J. Brill, 1987), 200.

¹⁶ Cf. Simon Parker, *The Pre-Biblical Narrative Tradition: Essays on the Ugaritic Poems Keret and Aqhat* (SBLRBS, 24; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 80-86. For more detailed discussions see Berlinerbau, *The Vow*, 66-82; esp. 72-73.'

¹⁷ See Ryan, *Judges*, 87.

of vowing."¹⁸ Perhaps this is because of the cultural belief that a spoken obligation to a Deity carries with it utmost seriousness.¹⁹ It is interesting to observe that as humans open their mouth to speak their vows, the Deity listens and hears their voice.²⁰

Vows have been classified in different ways. As we have already observed many of the vows are designated as personal, private or individual because it originates from a personal decision and precludes outside administration of punishment when the obligation is not fulfilled. There could also be a collective or public vow or promise as one finds today in the sacrament of baptism, marriage, sacred orders and in religious vows. Perhaps the two main categories are the conditional and unconditional vows. A vow is conditional when it is made to a Deity or to the sanctuary on the ground that the Deity would first grant a favour. Conditional vows are regarded as positive because the devotee approaches the Deity with a specific need, expectant of a favourable answer. The conditionality hinges upon each party fulfilling the terms of the vow, namely that the divine being meet the specific need and the supplicant fulfil the promise. In other words, until the need is met, i.e., the spoken vow is heard, the promise cannot be fulfilled. Conditional vows are the most favoured in most ancient traditions, including the biblical (cf. Gen 28:20-22; Num 21:2; Judg 11:30-31; 2 Sam 15:8).

It is likely that with time in biblical history conditional promises metamorphosed into unconditional promises / vows which require self-sacrifice, i.e., offering oneself in place of another object. It is voluntarily initiated without any precondition on the Deity or on the devotee's fulfilling the vow. On the other hand, an unconditional vow is motivated by the desire to do something for God. Here one opts to make a special pledge of something to God or offer him a personal service unconditionally. Unlike a positive vow, it is negative in character because it involves self-sacrifice, without personal material gain. It entails abstaining from the most desirable things of life typified in the Nazirite vows (cf. Num 6:2-12). Apart from the personal decision characteristic of most vows, some unconditional vows in the biblical tradition are made by proxy, i.e., an individual can be vowed or initiated into it by another. For instance, Samuel is vowed into unconditional vow by the mother Hannah in a conditional vow (1 Sam 1), so also is Gideon by an angel of God / man of God (Judg 13:4-7). The action of YHWH in Amos 2:11-12 is tantamount to Nazirism or dedication. This reminds one of infant baptism in Christian religion and other forms of child initiation in other religions.

One can distinguish two forms of unconditional vows - the temporary and the irrevocable or inviolable vows. The Nazirite vow could be temporary; for a person so dedicated can be redeemed in the course of time (cf. Num 6:13-20; Acts 18:18; 21:23-24; 1 Macc 3:49-51). The irrevocable / inviolable vows on the other hand are irreversible as it were (cf. Num 30:3-5[2-4 E], 7-8[6-7 E], etc.), except in the case of annulment (Num 30:6[5 E], 9-16[8-15]). Interestingly, the OT tradition seems to suggest that only men (Num 30:3), widows and divorced women (Num 30:10) are eligible for making irrevocable vows. The privilege is only accorded to other women by permission of either their fathers or husbands (Num 30:4-5; 7-8).²¹ On the contrary, virgins made vows in the early church (cf. 1 Cor 7). Today, Catholic praxis shows that a valid and inviolable vow requires that the vow be freely made and by a

¹⁸ A. Wendel, *Das israelitisch-jüdische Gelubde* (Berlin: Philo Verlag, 1931), 95, cited in Berlinerbau, *The Vow*, 87 n. 16.

¹⁹ See Berlinerbau, *The Vow*, 86. One can also sense this in the exchange between Jephthah and his daughter in Judg 11:35-36 and in what Absalom says to David his father (2 Sam 15:8).

²⁰ Cf. The Canaanite and Aramaic inscriptions ([KAI] nos. 47, 68, 88, 98, 103-108, 110-111, 113) testify to this.

²¹ The Mishnah elaborates on the law See Moshe Drori, "In Israeli Law", Fred Skolnik, et al. eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica* Vol 1. 2nd edition (New York, London: Thomson Gale, 2007), 242-243; 243.

person who has a sufficient use of reason. It must be within the bounds of possibility of performance and tends to some future good.²²

It is generally agreed that fulfilment of vows and solemn and voluntary promises is very essential. In other words, it is not enough that one makes a vow voluntarily; once spoken, the vow becomes binding, and its fulfilment a sacred obligation. Consequently, the one who makes a vow has no option but to meet the terms of the vow. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* puts it this way: "The vow, which must be made voluntarily, and in full consideration of its implications, becomes effective upon utterance, and its violation constitutes a transgression of the prohibition 'he shall not profane his word' (Num 30:33)."²³ The contentious issue is the modality of meeting the obligations. There are divergent biblical voices on how this will be done. The one holds that fulfilment of a vow binds absolutely (Deut 23:22-23[21-22 E]; Prov 20:25; Eccl 5:3-4; Sir 18:22), including the purity / integrity of what is vowed (Deut 23:19[18]). One possible reason behind absolutism in the fulfilment of vows, as Ryan suggests, is the notion that the one who vows is in debt to YHWH when the request is granted and YHWH becomes a creditor who requires settlement.²⁴ Another factor that motivates absolute demand for fulfilment of vows is the fear of retribution of the irascible deity. This is evident among the Israelite neighbours²⁵ and, indeed, in African tradition.²⁶

Another perspective holds that fulfilling vows may not after all require a literal payment of the vowed object. In fact, people are allowed to commute, by act of redemption, the vowed person or thing into payment of its value (cf. Lev 27:1-8). In this way the one who vows evades a direct fulfilment of the vow. Whatever the case, the promise made in a vow bears with it a religious and cultic character. That makes it imperative that one should fulfil one's promises once the needs are met (Num 30:3[2]), although there seems to be no rigid enforcement of this demand.

Just as there is no rigid enforcement of how the payment of a vow should be made, so also there is no visible time frame for meeting the obligation. Evidently, there is no known law prescribing the time of payment. Each supplicant decides when to fulfil the obligation, without fear of being punished by anyone. Consequently, the payment of a vow obligation can be delayed in some instances, or met immediately the request is granted. For instance, Hannah delayed (three years?) until the child waned (1 Sam 1:22); Jephthah delayed the fulfilment of his vows (Judg 11:36-39), so also did Absalom (2 Sam 15:7-8). Definitely,

²² See CIC cann. 1191-1198.

²³ R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 716.

²⁴ Cf. Ryan, *Judges*, 87.

²⁵ Here also one thinks of the Ugaritic text, KTU 1.15 III where the goddess Asherah raises her voice in anger against King Keret who must have refused to meet the terms of the vow after it has been granted. See de Moore, *An Anthology*, 207-208. In Akkadian literature the story is told of two young employees whose sickness unto death is interpreted as divine punishment for keeping vowed goods (*ikribu*). Cf. P. Garelli, "La religion de l'Assyrie ancienne d'après un ouvrage récent" *RA* 56 (1962) 191-210; 192. A. L. Oppenheim also relates the story of the 'bad conscience' of a Hittite king who has failed to make a proper payment. Cf. "The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East With a Translation of an Assyrian Dream-Book," in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* XLVI (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1956), 193. For more details on Hittite evidence see also T. Cartledge, *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, JSOTSup 147 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 103. P. Garelli has substantially discussed the disastrous consequences of withholding payment in *Les Assyriens en Cappadoce* (Bibliothèque archéologique et historique de l'institut Français d'archéologie d'Istanbul, 19; Paris: Librairie Adrien Maisonneuve, 1963) 255-256; See also Berlinerbau, *The Vow*, 87, 159-160.

²⁶ This explains why oaths are taken in the shrines and sanctuaries of the gods to settle conflicts or to ascertain the truth.

cultural attitudes as Schlesinger rightly points out can influence the way individuals cope with their vows, oaths and promises and their fulfilment.²⁷ It must be stressed that it is in relation to fulfilling the obligation of the vow by the supplicant that a vow is said to be "holy" or "profane". A vow is "holy" when the terms of a vow are absolutely met, while it becomes "profane" by virtue of its annulment or being rendered void *pr* by a competent authority (cf. Num 30:9[8 E], 13-14[12-13 E], cf. 16 [15]). Whatever the case, it is strongly recommended that fulfilment of vows should be without delay; for procrastination could lead to forgetfulness and, thus, hinder the obligation being fulfilled.

Ecclesiastes 5:3-4[4-5]: Its Text, Context and Message

A literal translation of the text reads thus:

3a	<i>ka^ašer-tiddōr neder lē'lōhîm</i>	When you vow a vow to God,
3b	<i>'al-t^e'ahēr l^ešall^emō</i>	do not delay to fulfil it;
3c	<i>kî 'ên hēpes bakk^esîlîm</i>	for there is [he has ²⁸] no delight in fools
3d	<i>'ēt ^ašer-tiddōr šallēm</i>	What you vow, fulfil.
4	<i>tōb ^ašer lō'-tiddōr miššettiddōr w^elō' t^ešallēm</i>	It is better that you should not vow than that you should and not fulfil.

Eccl 5:3-4 is an easy text to comprehend both in its Hebrew and Greek forms. It carries one of those dissenting voices in the later biblical period that warn the devout against making vows hastily, without due consideration. It is an integral portion of a book which greater part is attributed to an unknown Jewish "sage" (cf. 12:9). The superscription identifies this sage as "*qhlt*²⁹ [Qoheleth], the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1), a name that occurred about seven times in all (cf. 1:2, 12; 7:27; 12:8 [with a definite article]; 12:9, 10). This has led some scholars to attribute the work to Solomon which is highly improbable because of the similarity its language has with Mishnaic Hebrew.³⁰

The text of Eccl 5:3-4 falls within the literary unit of 4:17-6:9 (5:1-6:9 E) and can be located in the sub-unit of 4:17-5:6 (5:1-7 E) on religious practices.³¹ The text is framed by the two singular imperatives *šmr* (guard) and *yr'* (fear) in relation to *hā^elōhîm* ([the] God[s]) in the commands "guard your steps when you go to the house of God" (4:17) and "fear God" (5:6) respectively. To be noted too is that verse 4:16 naturally concludes the preceding sub-unit with the marker "chasing the wind", while 5:7[8 E] begins a new sub-unit (5:7-6:9[5:8-6:9

²⁷ See Herbert J. Schlesinger, *Promises, Oaths, and Vows. On the Psychology of Promising* (New York, London: The Analytic Press, 2008), 25-26.

²⁸ The LXX reads, *hoti ouk estin thelēma en aphrosin* rendered as "for he has no pleasure in fools". This has influenced many translators, although some others retain the MT literally.

²⁹ The form is that of a fem. Sg. ptc. Although it is strange in this context, it is not impossible for a feminine word to have a masculine meaning and vice versa. The meaning of this word that appears to derive from the root *qhl* is up to now conjectural. Judging from the root one may say that the sage in question must have something to do with the assembly or congregation (cf. Deut 33:4), and in that regard can be said to be a teacher or "one who assembles wisdom teaching" (*NJBC* 31:2). Perhaps it is based on that that the LXX calls the book '*ekklēsiastēs*'. Interestingly, the Reformers, precisely Luther translated it with the German word "*Prediger*" - preacher, just as Jerome rendered it as "*concionator*" - convener of an assembly.

³⁰ *NJBC* 31:2. In fact, James L. Crenshaw believes that "the book is written in Aramaizing Hebrew", showing again its late provenance between the 3rd and 2nd century BC. Cf. "Ecclesiastes, Book of," *ABD* 2, 271-280, esp. 274.

³¹ However, there are divergent opinions on the structuring of the entire book, including this sub-unit. For details see J.L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes A Commentary*, OTL (London: SCM Press, 1988), 34-49 and "Ecclesiastes, Book of," 273-274.

E]) that is both syntactically and thematically different. It begins with an "if" clause and has social justice and oppression of the poor as theme. A close look at the sub-unit of our text shows that it is knit together and rhetorically punctuated by three imperatives / injunctions (4:17a, 5:3c, 6), four explanations (4:17b; 5:1a; 2, 3b), four prohibitions / negative commands (5:1b, 3a, 5a,b), a "better-than" saying (5:4) and a rhetorical question, "Why should God be angry?" (5:5c).

From this observation it is clear that our text, 5:3-4 is an important micro-unit. Out of the thirteen functional phrases contained in the seven verses of the sub-unit, the two verses under consideration have four of them. Verse 3 alone has three: a negative command *'al-t'e'aḥēr* "do not delay" (3a), an injunction *šallēm* "pay, fulfil" (5:3c) and an explanation, introduced by the particle *kī* "for" (3b), while v. 4 stands out as a unique wise saying. The five times occurrence of the root *ndr*³² and three of the root *šlm* indicate where the emphasis of the text lies, namely on vows and their fulfilment. This is succinctly and vehemently brought out in the last phrase of v. 3, *'ēt 'ašer-tiddōr šallēm* literally means "What you vow, fulfil", or more classically put: "Fulfil what you vow". As if this injunction / admonition were not enough the author, perhaps out of frustration, comes to the verdict: *tōb 'ašer lō'-tiddōr mišsettiddōr w'elō' t'ešallēm*, "It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfil".

The question is what must have led Qoheleth who recognises the individual decision to make vows, as indicated by the phrase "When you make a vow to God" at the beginning of this micro-unit (cf. v. 3) to sound so reserved and cautious about making vows at the end of it (cf. v. 4). The cold and reserved attitude towards vows is typical of the later biblical period and, particularly the Wisdom era (Prov 20:25; Sir 18:22-23; cf. Deut 23:22-23[21-22]; Num 30:3[2]; Lev 27:9-10; Matt 5:33), even though popular religion seems to have encouraged practice of vows for the delight of it. Motivated by all kinds of needs, vows are made rashly and without serious consideration of the obligations. Moreover, some devotees delay fulfilment of their vows, or totally forget to meet the obligations, even after their needs have been granted. The saying in Eccl 5:3-4 therefore is one of those outstanding reactions against this questionable tendency emerging from the popular religion of the time. It arises from Qoheleth's practical observation; rational analysis and reflection upon the way people make their vows and fulfil them. If then religious leaders invented the means of getting around fulfilling one's votive offering or religious obligations, as Crenshaw suggests,³³ Qoheleth's critique of the *status quo* must be of considerable importance, even in our time.

The idea in Eccl 5:3-4[4-5 E] is not totally new. There is a strong probability that verse 3 is to some extent inspired by the Deuteronomic ritual precepts in Deut 23:22-23[21-22 E]. The first verse of the two texts read thus:

Deut 23:22[21 E]	Eccl 5:3[4 E]
a <i>kī-tiddōr neder layhwh 'elōheykā</i>	<i>ka'ašer-tiddōr neder lē'lōhîm</i>
b <i>lō'-t'e'aḥēr l'ešallēmō</i>	<i>'al-t'e'aḥēr l'ešallēmō</i>
c <i>kī-dārōš yidr'ešennû yhwh 'elōhêkā mē'immāk</i>	<i>kī 'ên ḥēpes bakk'ešlîm</i>
d <i>w'eḥyāh b'ekā ḥēt'</i>	<i>'ēt 'ašer-tiddōr šallēm</i>
a When (if) you vow a vow to YHWH your God,	When you vow a vow to God,

³² The root occurs 4x in the verbal form (2x in v. 3 and 2x in v. 4) and 1x as a noun in v. 3. Interestingly the root *šlm* occurs 2x in v. 3 and 1x in v. 4 all in verbal form.

³³ Cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 117.

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| b | you shall not delay to fulfil it; | do not delay to fulfil it; |
| c | for YHWH your God will certainly require it of you, | for there is [he has] no delight in fools |
| d | and it would be sin in you. | What you vow, fulfil. |

A simple analysis indicates that Eccl 5:3 shares a number of features in common with Deut 23:22, but not without Qoheleth's redaction. For instance, both recognise the freedom of the individual to make a vow to a deity. In other words, the practice of vows is not forbidden, although the temporal particle *kî* in Deut 23:22a seems to communicate a conditional sense³⁴ that is totally absent in the *ka^ašer* of Eccl 5:3a. The two texts also indicate with the use of the preposition *l^e* "to" that vows should be made to the divine being. Qoheleth, however, shortens the long and personalised form of the divine name "YHWH your God" in Deut 23:22a by omitting "YHWH" and the second-person singular pronominal suffix "your" to simply read "God" in v. 3a. Here the word "God" appears with a definite article. The identity of this divine being is not self-evident. Scholars have maintained two lines of thought, the one holds that it should be "viewed collectively as any indeterminate sum of indistinguishable beings".³⁵ This view follows Hölscher's earlier position that the name should not be conceived as YHWH but rather be understood in terms of the gods of other nations or even the demon.³⁶ Hallevy on the other hand depicts *^elōhîm* as a specific deity, which name is not only compatible with that of the Israelite God, YHWH but also synonymous with it.³⁷ Qoheleth, therefore must have preferred to use the name *^elōhîm* to avoid the Tetragrammaton YHWH, like other later biblical narrators / authors.³⁸

The two texts enjoin the devotee not to delay to fulfil the vow. In Deut 23:22b it is a general and enduring prohibition as indicated by the particle *lō'*; in Eccl 5:3b, however, the particle *'al* shows that it is a specific and immediate negative command.³⁹ The *kî* phrase in v. 22c and v. 3c gives different explanations why one should promptly fulfil one's vows. In as much as the option to make a vow is personal, winning God's delight / favour should be the determining factor (Eccl 5:3c; contrast 5:5) and not divine punishment (Deut 23:22c). Furthermore, the motivation for fulfilling one's vow should not be to avoid incurring sin (Deut 23:22d) but to act with integrity before God and with oneself (Eccl 5:3d). This entails bringing one's experience to bear on the decision to make vows. Indeed, any form of piety that ignores experience tends to become false. This explains why Qoheleth designates those who delay fulfilling their vows as *hakk^esîlîm*, the foolish (ones) / fools (cf. v. 3c; also 4:13; 5:2). For they have lost the pleasure of both God and humans and, therefore, have lost proper orientation (cf. 10:15b). For Qoheleth the fools are the direct opposite of the "wise ones" (cf.. 2:14-16; 4:13; 6:8; 7:4-5; 9:17; 10:2, 12). Hence Eccl 5:3d positively enjoins the devout to freely fulfil their vows.

The next verses highlight the distinctive characteristics of the two traditions. Deut 23:23 continues to consider refraining from vowing in terms of avoiding sin, ("But if you refrain from vowing it shall be no sin in you"), while Eccl 5:4 emphasises honesty in the practice of vows. For Qoheleth one does not only refrain from vowing because of fear of guilt but also because of conscious awareness of one's inability to fulfil the vow. Qoheleth employs the

³⁴ See TWOT, 976; Holladay Lexicon, 3747.

³⁵ W.R. Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (New York: 1956) 445; cited in R. Hallevy, "Man of God," 237 n.3.

³⁶ G. Hölscher, *Die Profeten* (1914), 127, esp. n. 2.

³⁷ See Raphael Hallevy, "Man of God," *JNES* 17 (1958) 237-244; 237.

³⁸ For more details, see Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, *The Man of God in Biblical and Extra-biblical Traditions* (Nsukka: Afro-Orbis Publications, 2007), 4-6.

³⁹ See Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), §102.

"better than" saying here in v. 4 just as in other instances (cf. 4:3, 6, 9, 13; 6:3, 9; 7:1, 2, 3, 5, 8; 9:4, 16, 18) to challenge the veracity of a viewpoint already endorsed by conventional wisdom and to provoke a fresh consideration of the status quo⁴⁰ as represented in the Deuteronomic tradition.⁴¹ The overall analysis leaves no one in doubt that in spite of its dependence on Deuteronomic ritual precept our text has its own specific features that distinguish it from its supposed source. The omissions and additions point to the fact that Qoheleth intends to give a new perspective to the understanding of the practice of vows and their fulfilment.

The practice of vow is described in the verbal root *ndr* with its cognate accusative, meaning "to vow a vow" (cf. v. 3a). The noun *neder*, which is presumed omitted twice in v. 4),⁴² occurs once in v. 3a and could stand for vow as vow and for the votive offering, "thing offered".⁴³ The verb *šlm* is a choice verb employed among others used together with *neder*.⁴⁴ It is generally translated as "to pay". Such a translation can be misleading since it insinuates a monetary deal in relation to vows. To avoid any ambiguity about the use of the verb *šlm* we agree with Berlinerbau that "it would seem better to translate the term as 'fulfil a vow' rather than 'pay a vow'".⁴⁵

Ecclesiastes 5:3-4 vis-à-vis Broken Vows

A keen observation today shows that it is becoming increasingly difficult for many people to fulfil their vows, oaths and promises. Ordinarily, at the religious level, one would expect that the practice of vows would lead to full "conversion" in the sense of full intimacy with God (cf. John 17:14, 16). The reality is that the expected "conversion" does not necessarily translate into "withdrawal" from the world and worldly interests. This is to the discontent of not only the devout but also many whose vision of life is modelled on their own life-style. This is partly what constitutes Qoheleth's apprehension; that people, no matter their stand in religion, can and, indeed, do disappoint their admirers. Hence his admonition: Fulfil what you vow, otherwise refrain from making a vow.

Daily experience shows how difficult it is to fulfil promises made either to God or to neighbours and friends in good and stressful moments of life. The reason for breaking vows may be attributable to the high cost of fulfilling it, often unknown to the one vowing. An Igbo adage says, *Onu e jiri biri aku a bughi onu e ji akwu ya*, "The rhetoric at borrowing is not always the same at payment." Vows, conditional or unconditional, are highly costly. The price of Jephthah's vow (Judg 11:29-39) comes readily to mind. The challenge is even more if the vows are vocalic and, so, public. In that case their fulfilment is binding and irreversible. The fear of breaking vows is in itself a hindering and inhibiting factor. This often puts the fulfilment of vows on trial, especially when the chips are down. Furthermore there are people who for whatever reasons may make vows they cannot and will not fulfil. In that case such vows are doomed to be broken ever before they are made. One can therefore understand why Qoheleth counsels caution and insists on conscious and conscientious practice of vows. The

⁴⁰ Cf. Crenshaw, *ABD* 2, 275.

⁴¹ The Talmud also severally suggests that fulfilling what one vows, or not vowing at all is to be preferred to vowing and not fulfilling it. See *b. Nedarim* 9a; *b. Menahoth* 81a; *b. Chullin* 2a; also *b. Ketuboth* 72a; *b. Shabbath* 32b. Cf. Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries* (Malden, MA, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell, 2007), 29.

⁴² The phrase occurs about nine times in Wisdom literature, Job 22:27; Prov 7:14; 20:25; 31:2 and the five times in Eccl 5:3-4. For its distribution in the pre-exilic narratives, late pre-exilic, exilic and post-exilic prophets, the Psalms and Jonah and in the book of Numbers, see Keller, "*ndr* to vow," 919.

⁴³ See Benjamin Davidson, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1850), 537.

⁴⁴ See *BDB*, 623-624.

⁴⁵ See Berlinerbau, *The Vow*, 179.

one who makes vows needs to know the full implications of the vows and, so, take seriously Qoheleth's warning that irresponsible making of vows will lead to loss of divine pleasure (v. 3c) as well as provoke divine wrath (5:5[6 E])⁴⁶

Any Remedy?

In the face of frequent falls and broken vows should people go on making vows, or do they stop the practice entirely? Is there any remedy? Firstly, those who make vows and promises should see them positively, and not as a burden. The one who makes a vow has to cherish it, bearing in mind that the church and society still recognise and extol its value.⁴⁷ Following the admonition of Qoheleth, vows must be made with utmost caution and after deep and honest reflection. Therefore, one has to make vows from some degree of self-consciousness, sense of serious responsibility, and a sufficient level of emotional maturity.⁴⁸ On the contrary, one has to avoid making vows out of fear or from a disadvantageous position. In other words, one has to learn not only how to react to social, cultural and religious pressures but also to deal with them.

Fulfilling one's votive obligations requires the help of others. The encouragement of Jephthah's daughter to his father helped him to resolve the dilemma in fulfilling what he vowed. Lapse of time did not change the role of her support (Judg 11:35-39; esp. v. 36). In a similar way, those under vows need the encouragement of their neighbours to meet the obligations of their vows. Without doubt, the greatest supporter in this regard is God himself. He alone has the prerogative of punishment and of mercy, if someone incurs guilt. That explains why those in vows must constantly approach God in prayer and in trust, for he is the merciful One (cf. Jer 3:12) in contrast with the gods of the nations. That is one important thing Qoheleth fails to comprehend, otherwise he would not have been so rigid in his conclusions, and in envisaging the one who fails as an unredeemable creature (cf. Eccl 5:5).

The truth is that what saves one from guilt after failing to fulfil a vow is YHWH's forgiveness (cf. Ps 65:2-5[1-4]). Peter, the chief Apostle, experienced similar forgiveness after he had failed to keep his oaths and vows (cf. Matt 26:74-75; Luke 22:61). The supreme remedy, therefore, is to recognise the nature of YHWH to whom vows are directed and constantly keep it in view. For he says, "I am God not human" (Hos 11:9), an important insight Qoheleth never had.

Conclusion

In conclusion one can say that Qoheleth's ambition is to keep religion honest and in touch with reality; it is not to oppose the practice of vows or popular religion. From the wealth of his keen observation, personal experience and deep reflection, he opts to deal with the lassitude between making vows and fulfilling them. This is evidenced in his employing the roots *ndr* (vow) and *šlm* (to fulfil, pay), severally in Eccl 5:3-4. The text has taught the present reader that there has always been a problem with the keeping of vows from the ancient times up till the present, notwithstanding that almost every religion considers a vow as a sacred obligation that has to be fulfilled. This is probably because of the socio-cultural and religious belief that a spoken obligation to a Deity carries with it utmost seriousness. This eventually becomes a source of pressure to the devout. One can therefore understand why Qoheleth counsels caution and insists on conscious and conscientious practice of vows. His emphasis on honesty in the practice of vows can only be matched by the necessity for those who vow to know the full implications of their action before they undertake it. As a human

⁴⁶ It is remarkable how Qoheleth returns to the Deuteronomic theme of sin and punishment in this verse, emphasising that what one says can lead one to sin, and ruling out any form of excuse or inadvertency.

⁴⁷ See CCC, 2103; CIC, can. 654, also *Vita Consecrata*, 1.

⁴⁸ Cf. Schlesinger, *Promises, Oaths, and Vows*, 25-30.

undertaking the possibility of one's failing to meet the obligation of vows is real. But it cannot be enough reason to despise making vows; for vows still have their values today, and making them can be an expression of faith. The remedy, therefore, is not in despair, but in those who make vows to constantly approach God in prayers, trusting in his mercy, compassion and love (cf. Hos 11:8-9; Jer 3:12).