

# Proverbs 28:20–22 and avarice among youths in the Enugu metropolis, Nigeria



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The strong desire to amass wealth and make money in every possible way is not a recent phenomenon; however, it is particularly intensified in contemporary times, especially among young people in the Enugu metropolis. Recent studies indicate that the average young person in Nigeria in general, and in the Enugu metropolis specifically, will seize any opportunity to acquire money, regardless of whether the means are licit or illicit, humane or inhumane. This study aims to address this social ill in the Enugu State by analysing Proverbs 28:20–22 for its relevance to the youth in the Enugu. The sapiential corpus in Proverbs 28:20–22 warns against such exorbitant desire, highlighting the eventual consequences of avarice. The text asserts that those guilty of avarice cannot expect lasting prosperity; rather, misery is inevitable. This study employs a rhetorical analytical method. Data were collected and analysed qualitatively. It is evident that the avarice of young people in Nigeria and in the Enugu metropolis has contributed to kidnapping, cybercrime (including yahoo and yahoo plus fraud), commercial male and female prostitution, moral laxity, human ritual sacrifice, rape, wasteful expenditure, sudden death, and related vices. These issues have rendered society vulnerable to crisis, thereby creating an urgent need for intervention. Despite numerous studies on crime in society, few have focused on theft and related crimes among youth in the Enugu metropolis. Moreover, none of the existing literature addresses cybercrime among young people in Igboland in general, and the Enugu metropolis specifically, from the perspective of Proverbs 28:20–22. The researchers posit that proper knowledge and application of this passage could provide a viable solution to the consequences of avarice in the Enugu metropolis.

**Contribution:** Proverbs 28:20–22 is one of the Old Testament texts particularly relevant to addressing the problem of avarice in any given human context. A thorough exposition of the passage and its appropriate application could curb the inordinate desire to acquire wealth, thereby reducing its negative impact on individuals and society, especially in the Enugu metropolis. It could also revitalise interest in skill acquisition among the youth.

**Keywords:** Proverbs 28:20–22; avarice; youths; Enugu metropolis; Nigeria; Exegesis.

## Introduction

Proverbs 28:20–22 forms part of the sapiential corpus regarding unethical means of acquiring money and wealth. The sages of the Old Testament emphasised the value of a moral society, where individuals are taught through both words and deeds to lead virtuous lives worthy of emulation. Whybray (1994:12) in Uroko (2022:1) posits that 'Proverbs in the Old Testament is a compendium of Israelite wisdom texts, and the audience is encouraged to accept this wisdom'. Hale (2007) similarly avers that:

[T]he book of Proverbs is designed to instruct people on how to live wisely and avoid folly, and it applies to all classes of people and all periods of history. (p. 928)

This principle is reflected in Proverbs 28:20–22.

Moreover, Habtu (2006:809) asserts that 'Proverbs 28:20, 22 alleges that undue eagerness to get rich will not go unpunished'. The Old Testament strongly condemns dishonest means of making money or acquiring wealth. Accordingly, warnings are frequently issued against such behaviour to discourage individuals from pursuing that path. Furthermore, consequences are prescribed for all who engage in such conduct, regardless of one's social status.

It is no longer a new development in Nigeria that many young people are engaging in cybercrime and related activities to become wealthy quickly. Hard work and honest means of earning a living have been forsaken, whereas dishonest practices have become commonplace.

In ancient Igboland – Enugu metropolis included – stealing and related crimes were strongly condemned and solemnly punished. Such offences were considered among the most abhorred. However, the reverse appears to be the case in contemporary Enugu. Some modern-day parents openly support their children involved in avaricious activities, especially cybercrime, if they benefit from the proceeds. Avarice has fostered societal ills such as disorder, unhealthy competition among youth for wealth, the use of dangerous charms, bloodshed to sustain criminal activity, laziness among young people, alienation from formal education and apprenticeships, moral decay, the abuse of money, lack of respect for elders who have been transformed into people with cash in their pockets, and other related vices bred by avarice. These issues are particularly prevalent in Nigeria generally and in the Enugu metropolis specifically. Consequently, this study seeks to analyse Proverbs 28:20–22 and apply its exegetical insights to address the rise and consequences of avarice in the Enugu metropolis.

This research adopts the rhetorical analysis method – a common exegetical approach used for examining wisdom literature. According to Uroko (2022), rhetorical analysis evaluates all elements of the rhetorical situation in Proverbs 28:20 and 22 – including the audience, purpose, medium, and context – to persuade the audience to accept its truth. The Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993) describes rhetoric as the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing. Obiorah (2015:93) adds that ‘Rhetorical criticism analyzes the textual strategies by which the communicative aims were achieved in the original situation and are achieved in regard to subsequent readers’. This method is particularly appropriate for the present study, given that Proverbs 28:20–22 belongs to the poetic and wisdom corpus.

## Hebrew text of Proverbs 28:20–22

20 אִישׁ אֲמוּנוֹת רַב־בְּרָכוֹת וְאִישׁ לֹהֵעֵשִׁיר לֹא יִנָּקָה:

21 הַפֶּר־פָּנִים לֹא־טוֹב וְעַל־פֶּת־לֵקֶם: יִפְשַׁע־גֹּבֵר:

22 גֹּבֵהַ לֵהוֹן אִישׁ יֵשׁ גֵּזוֹן וְלֹא־יָדַע כִּי־תִסָּר גּוֹבֵהָ:

## Socio-cultural context of Proverbs 28:20–22

The social context of Proverbs 28:20–22 can be understood by examining the broader socio-cultural circumstances that contributed to the compilation of the book of Proverbs as a whole. Dell (2006), Fox (2009), and Martin (1995) suggest that this passage forms part of an additional collection of Solomonic proverbs gathered by royal courtiers during the reign of Hezekiah (25:1–29:27). This implies that Proverbs 28:20–22 was likely compiled during Hezekiah’s reign. Hezekiah’s rule was marked by religious reform and establishment of moral rectitude among the people. This was achieved through various means aimed at returning the wayward populace to a covenantal relationship with YHWH. This suggests that the period during which these proverbs were collected was characterised by moral decline in Israelite society.

White (1987), cited in Uroko (2022), affirms that Proverbs 28:20 and 22 emerge from a cultural context and communicate common values and beliefs in a community. In addition to this, the cultural framework includes people’s common attitude toward material wealth. The people were so deeply driven by a strong desire to acquire riches in every possible way. This widespread mindset gradually culminates into a tradition, prompting the urgent need to redirect the people’s attention to the wisdom teachings of Solomon for guidance and reflection.

Okwueze (2013) explains that:

[W]ith reference to kings and rulers in Proverbs 25:2–3; 28:15–28; 29:4 etc, it is suggested that they are of pre-exilic origin. As a result of the special religious and legal interest of chapters 28–29, some scholars regard them as originally belonging to another collection. (p. 191)

## Close reading of Proverbs 28:20–22

### Blessing of integrity and effect of being desperate (v. 20)

Verse 20 discusses the reward of integrity and the consequences of desperation in an individual’s life. The Hebrew phrase אִישׁ אֲמוּנוֹת רַב־בְּרָכוֹת, as used in the text, should not be taken lightly. אִישׁ אֲמוּנוֹת, translated as ‘a man who is faithful’, warrants further explanation for proper understanding. The Hebrew word אֲמוּנוֹת is a noun which, beyond ‘faithfulness’, can also mean ‘firmness’, ‘steadfastness’, or ‘fidelity’. In the context of the passage, it signifies that the abundance of YHWH’s blessings is reserved for the individual who remains steadfast in moral conduct, even amid societal corruption. It is this daily fidelity, particularly regarding the acquisition of wealth, which sustains one in the enduring blessings of God.

In contrast, the clause וְאִישׁ לֹהֵעֵשִׁיר לֹא יִנָּקָה, translated as ‘but one who is in a hurry to be rich will not go unpunished’, conveys the opposite of the idea rendered in the first line. This part of the text explicitly condemns avarice. The relentless pursuit of wealth in every possible way is highly abhorred, and anyone guilty of such behaviour cannot escape the consequences.

Commenting on this passage, Carson (1994) observes that the pursuit of prosperity also tends to separate people from one another. He regards this as doubly foolish, since true prosperity is determined by faith in God; those who instead place faith in themselves are equally misguided. The implication is that personal effort alone cannot guarantee wealth. It is only through complete trust in YHWH that one can be abundantly blessed at the prime time. Attempts to hasten wealth accumulation frequently lead to desperation, which in turn results in unethical practices and, ultimately, to inevitable punishment. In a similar vein, it is asserted that Spence-Jones (2004):

According to the text, ‘faithful’ means ‘one on whom one can depend’, someone who is honest and upright, and the blessings that are meant are those that come from both God and man.

Men will praise and benedict his name, and God will show his approval by sending material prosperity. However, someone who is only interested in getting rich quickly and is dishonest about their means cannot be 'a faithful man', and as a result, they cannot be blessed. (p. 55)

Walvoord and Zuck (1983) argue that being faithful (or 'trustworthy'), rather than employing to get rich quick, is the true path to abundant blessings. Those who chase quick riches often resort to deceit and dishonest behaviour, which may result in punishment by the legal system, poverty, or both. Henry and Scott (1997) similarly maintain that holiness and honesty are the genuine pathways to happiness; acquiring wealth overnight, regardless of the means, is not. Being holy and honest, as instructed by the wisdom teacher in the text, is the real path to happiness. The faithful person will abound in blessings from both heaven and earth. People will pray for him, praise him, and eagerly offer their support. He will be rich in good works and become a blessing to his community. The reward of fidelity is usefulness – a reward worth pursuing.

The wise teacher went one step further and issues a warning against dishonest and deceptive paths to happiness, especially attempts to rapidly accumulate wealth by any means. It is erroneous to assume that this path is a shortcut to success. A person who hastens to become wealthy will not go unpunished. If he is guilty, he invites a curse on his possessions rather than God's blessings. If not innocent, he will neither be able to enjoy contentment for very long, nor will he be considered innocent by others. He will instead be the object to their hostility and reproach. There is a high likelihood that such a person is not innocent, even if he does not openly confess it: 'He who rushes with his feet sinneth, stumbles, and falls'. An avaricious individual, eager to become wealthy, shows no regard for law, conscience, or shame (Henry 1996).

### Consequence of partiality and wrongdoing (v. 21)

The Hebrew *gerund* הִכָּרְפָנִים, translated in various English versions as 'to have respect of a person' (KJV), 'he that reverences' (LXE), or 'to show partiality' (NAS and NRSV), warrants further clarification in this text. A close reading of the Hebrew text suggests that the most literal translation is 'to regard faces' or 'to recognise faces'. In the present text, הִכָּרְפָנִים signifies *partiality*. It is used to emphasise the violations of people of the low social class in favour of those of the high social class. This unjust and persistent societal division is described with the phrase לֹא־טוֹב, emphasising that it is categorically not good at all. Such preferential treatment, particularly at the expense of another, is bad in any given society and condemned by the wisdom teacher.

The first line of verse 21 introduces the concept expanded upon in the second line, which in Hebrew reads יִשְׁעֵי וְעַל־פִּתְיָהֶם גָּבַר. The English translation 'yet for a morsel of food a man will offend or sin' explains why regarding or recognising faces becomes a practice. The Hebrew vocabulary

used in the text suggest that the partiality of regarding people at the detriment of others was done by individuals of a specific social or professional standing. The Hebrew word רֶבֶךָ enhances the understanding of the text. Although רֶבֶךָ is often translated to 'man' in the English version of the Old Testament, it has neither the same meaning as אָדָם which refers broadly to humanity, nor the same meaning as אִישׁ which means 'man', typically used for a single adult male or husband. In this text, רֶבֶךָ refers to a 'warrior' or 'soldier'. Its use here implies that such individuals show partiality in the execution of their duties in exchange for personal gain. They commit acts of injustice to enrich themselves, showing deference to the wealthy or powerful in hopes of receiving food or other favours – not due to any lack of official remuneration, as the text does not indicate this – but because of their own greed. This behaviour is precisely what the wise teacher denounces as unjust.

In interpreting this verse, Nelson (1997) suggests that the 'piece of bread' represents a bribe given to a judge who, despite his status and influence, is willing to abuse his power for personal benefit. Walvoord and Zuck (1983) argue that partiality is unequivocally condemned in Proverbs, noting that this verse is the sixth 'not good' saying in the book (cf. 17:26; 18:5; 19:2; 24:23; 25:27; 28:21). Even a small bribe, such as a slice of bread, can cause a judge to act with bias in court. This irony underscores how easily justice can be compromised despite clear biblical prohibitions against bribery.

Spence-Jones (2004) similarly notes that even the slightest incentive can sway a judge who is prone to favouritism. However it appears improbable to bribe a judge with a piece of bread, the phrase is metaphorical and broadly applicable in many situations. In daily life, even trivial factors can lead individuals to act unjustly or abandon moral integrity. Those in positions of authority are particularly susceptible to being influenced by petty and undeserved incentives. The 'piece of bread' symbolises extreme poverty or worthlessness. Thus, 'he that regards not the persons of the just is not good; such a person will sell a man for a morsel of bread'.

### The end of a desperate man (v. 22)

Verse 22 portrays the tragic fate of a desperate man who is eager to become wealthy. The Hebrew phrase לְהוֹן אִישׁ יָרַע עֵינָיו, translated as 'an evil man's eye is in a hurry to be wealthy', implies that it is the greedy individual who hastens after riches. The Hebrew word לְהוֹן from where נִבְהָל is derived, has the root להב, which carries meanings such as 'to disturb', 'to terrify', 'to alarm', and 'to be anxious'. Its use of this word conveys how terrifying or dangerous and unsettling the eagerness of a wicked man is to acquire wealth. The implication is that such a person will stop at nothing, employing any means, no matter how harmful to others, to amass riches.

However, this man of wicked intent, in his reckless pursuit of wealth, is unwittingly plotting his own downfall. The Hebrew phrase in the second line, וְלֹא־יָדַע כִּי־תִסָּר יִבְאֶנּוּ,

translated as 'and does not know that poverty (loss) is (sure) to come', affirms this outcome.

According to Henry (1996), the wise teacher highlights the immorality and foolishness of those individuals determined to accumulate wealth rapidly, irrespective of right or wrong. Such individuals are not at peace. They are said to possess 'an evil eye' – a metaphor suggesting that they constantly envy those who are wealthier than they are and resent their required expenses, believing these things prevent their appearance of affluence. This internal conflict leaves them in a state of constant dissatisfaction. These individuals also fail to secure their wealth for the future. They do not consider its possible loss, nor do they take steps to protect it. As a result, they will experience poverty. Ironically, the wealth they acquired in hopes of gaining wings will, in the end, fly away. Their false sense of security leaves them unprepared. They fail to realise that their haste to become rich is the very cause of their impoverishment – otherwise, they would not place their trust in uncertain riches.

Henry and Scott (1997) add that those who are eager to become rich rarely reflect on the possibility that God could strip them of their fortune and leave them destitute.

## Findings of the Exegesis

The findings of the exegesis reveal the following:

- The abundant blessings of the LORD are reserved for individuals who uphold strong moral integrity despite widespread moral decay in society.
- The Hebrew phrase *הַכֹּרֶת־פָּנִים לֹא-טוֹב* in verse 21 indicates that all forms of partiality are unjust. According to the exegesis, such partiality is often driven by bribery and corruption.
- The exegesis reveals that a desperate person, in pursuit of wealth, can become dangerous and morally corrupt.

## Overview of avarice

Avarice is a vice characterised by an excessive love for wealth and material possessions. It is a moral failing marked by an excessive desire for riches and a lack of generosity toward others (Kant 1785). According to Bourdieu (1986), avarice is a cultural phenomenon shaped by societal values and norms that exalt wealth and material success. Eysenck (1965) describes avarice as a personality trait typified by extreme materialism and an absence of altruism. Hume (1751) views avarice as a moral deficiency – a failure to prioritise the welfare of others and to act with kindness and generosity. Similarly, Rawls (1971) interprets avarice as a moral flaw rooted in a lack of empathy and an inability to recognise the intrinsic worth of human life.

## Reading Proverbs 28:20–22 in the Enugu metropolis

The only sure path to experiencing the blessings of the LORD is through moral rectitude. The opposite of moral rectitude

makes one vulnerable to divine wrath. Youths in Enugu, who are guilty of avarice, are urged to reflect on these truths and apply them in their lives to avoid incurring divine wrath. Those who are considering illegal means of acquiring wealth are warned to abandon such intentions if they wish to be eligible for divine blessings in due time.

In Enugu, it has been observed that some young people engage in various crimes due to an unrestrained desire for wealth. These include cyber theft (Ugwuewo 2024), and it is precisely these individuals to whom this exegetical study applies to save themselves from imminent danger.

Furthermore, partiality, often accompanied by bribery and corruption as captured in the Hebrew phrase *הַכֹּרֶת־פָּנִים לֹא-טוֹב*, must be consciously avoided by the youth of Enugu. It is not a misnomer to say that cyber theft is a well-known form of corruption to make money and constitutes a clear injustice. To devise cunning means of deceitfully obtaining another person's money through online manipulation is deeply unethical. Young people must realise that a partial person is not in favour with either the divine or humanity. Such a person becomes alienated from the moral order. The expression 'for a morsel of food' illustrates the degrading lengths to which individuals will go to satisfy selfish desires. In the biblical text, warriors are rebuked for exploiting the lower class of the society to gain favour from elites through bribery. Similarly, this admonition extends to the youth who pursue wealth through dishonest and immoral means. Ultimately, such pursuits do not lead to lasting satisfaction but rather prepare the individual for ruin – for the laws of nature cannot be violated without consequence.

Moreover, divine blessings from the LORD are available to all who uphold moral integrity, regardless of their circumstances. The Hebrew phrase *אִישׁ אֲמוּנָה רַב־בְּרָכוֹת* in the study text affirms this truth. The LORD's blessings are intentionally reserved for those who value and uphold moral rectitude. It is important to note that, in the context of the passage, divine blessings are not exclusively equated with material wealth and money. The nature of the blessings is determined by the Giver, and the recipient will recognise them upon their arrival. The youth of Enugu metropolis are strongly encouraged to remain steadfast in righteousness until the manifestation of the divine blessings. Significantly, this implies that cyber theft and other illicit means of acquiring wealth are not, and cannot be, channels of divine blessing. For the youth to be truly blessed and enriched by the LORD, they must completely refrain from any theft and related offences.

Finally, the Hebrew phrase *עֵיַן רָע לְהוֹן אִישׁ רָע עֵיַן*, translated as 'an evil man's eye is in a hurry to be wealthy', suggests that the methods employed by desperate individuals to gain wealth are terrifying and often harmful to society. It is evident that some young people in the Enugu metropolis fall into this category – becoming cybercriminals, kidnappers, and perpetrators of money



rituals (Ugwuewo 2024). It is crucial to raise awareness among Enugu's youth that an evil person is at odds with goodness and, by extension, with the divine Supreme Being. God alone has the sovereign power to bless and enrich anyone with goodness. The youth are therefore urged to abandon all forms of desperation for wealth, as such desperation only leads to wrongdoing. They are earnestly encouraged to adopt preventive measures to guard themselves against this destructive impulse.

## Conclusion

This study reveals that vices, such as cyber theft, kidnapping, involvement in 'baby-making business', and other related crimes fuelled by avarice, were alien to the values of traditional Enugu society. Moreover, these practices are clearly condemned by the Old Testament. It is evident, however, that in contemporary times, many young people – particularly in Nigeria and specifically in the Enugu metropolis – have become involved in these illicit activities.

An analysis of Proverbs 28:20–22 affirms that the only reliable path to receiving the LORD's abundant blessings is through moral integrity. Desperation brings no genuine benefit; instead, it exposes the individual to potentially devastating consequences. Apparently, corrupt efforts to gain wealth are offensive to God and contradict the natural principle of diligent, honest work. Every youth in the Enugu metropolis is urged to carefully renounce such practices and, through upright living, contribute meaningfully to the betterment of society – both individually and collectively.

## Recommendations

Based on this rhetorical narrative, we highlight the following recommendations:

- Young people in the Enugu metropolis should reflect deeply on Proverbs 28:20–22. Internalising this passage will enhance their understanding of life and increase their awareness of the negative consequences of desperation.
- Parents of young people in Enugu should not, under any circumstance, endorse or condone cybercrime.
- Parents in contemporary Enugu must take greater responsibility for their children's upbringing. Effective parenting will help produce morally upright youths who develop a proper attitude towards work (see the wisdom corpus in Proverbs, which highlights the value of diligent labour in contrast to 'worthless pursuits' that lead to poverty).
- The government – especially the Enugu State government – should intensify efforts to create more job opportunities for young people.
- The youth of Enugu should embrace hard work as a virtue. They are encouraged to acquire at least one skill with which to contribute meaningfully to society and to avoid the dangers associated with idleness.
- Youths must accept the truth that only the LORD grants material blessings, and he does so in his appointed time.

- They must strictly avoid all illegal means of making money or amassing wealth. Such methods are harmful, and their consequences can be severely damaging.

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## Authors' contributions

C.S.U. wrote the exegesis and application, while S.N.N. wrote the section on overview of Avarice.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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## Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study, and its findings are available within the article.

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