

'Young people think with their eyes': Proverbs 1:8–19 and cultism in Warri, Delta State

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A theological response to the crisis of cult-related activities in Warri is imminent, considering the increasing number of young people joining the group on a daily basis. Proverbs 1:8–19 presents important aphorisms from a wise father to his son, emphasising the importance of avoiding evil company and rejecting the enticement of those who engage in evil behaviour. A literary analysis of the study text reveals three structures: the call to listen (vv. 8–9), peer pressure (vv. 10–16), and consequences for evil-doers and partakers of evil (vv. 17–19). The findings of this study reveal that this thematic analysis forms the basis for young people to join cults and even dropping out of school to practise cultism. The father in the pericope spoke wisely, urging his son not to follow the wrong path and join a bad gang, but to follow the right path that would lead to a happy life, both now and in the future. This study adopted literary criticism. As a recommendation, it is important to conduct mass sensitisation in schools and churches, where young people can be informed about the long and short-term consequences of joining cult groups.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Notwithstanding the father's counsel, it depends on the son to be wise or foolish. Parents in Warri would be considered wise if they are able to warn their children against cultism and not use their cultists' children to harass others. Old Testament and Practical Theology were implicated in the study.

Keywords: Proverbs 1:8–19; wisdom corpus; peer pressure; cultism, Warri; young people.

Introduction

Proverbs 1:8–19 is part of the wisdom literature found in the Old Testament. Wisdom literature includes the books of Proverbs, Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. The common thread that runs through the book of wisdom includes wisdom that should guide our relationship with God and fellow human beings. The advice in Proverbs 1:8–19 is useful in the real world of youth in Warri. Proverbs 1:8–19 warns teenagers and youths that some friends may not add any value to your life. According to Feenstra (1996), the first lesson in the school of wisdom is summarised in Proverbs 1:8–9, and it is a crucial lesson. This was contextualised in cult membership and clashes in the Warri local government area of Delta State, Nigeria. Warri youth seem to have abandoned rational reasoning but are using their eyes to think. This is the reason for the high level of cultism in the local government area. Proverbs 1:8–19 provides a platform to argue that the wisdom corpus strongly opposes joining bad gangs such as cult groups or any other secret societies. Proverbs 1:8–19 warns against bad people who would lure the innocent, and especially the naïve, into behaviours they would regret (Northern Seminary 2015). It also warns against people who allow themselves to be coerced into a wrong association with things that look attractive. Also, Proverbs 1:8–19 avers that the pericope was written to highlight that there are two ways a person can live, two paths on which a person can travel: the path of wisdom, which leads to life, and the path of folly, which leads to death (Doug 2018). The characteristics of the path of wisdom and that of folly were mentioned in the pericope, and it really speaks anew to the resurging cult conflict in Warri. Literature on cultism in Warri in the light of wisdom literature is difficult to find. Warri is a town in Delta State, which is recognised by the inhabitants of the state as the second state capital after Asaba. There are enormous mineral and petroleum resources, which makes it a major market for petroleum exploration, exportation and exploitation. Unfortunately, this is supposed to provide gainful employment to the youths and keep them in check but the reverse is the case as the youth has resolved to vices, particularly cultism. Some of the cult groups in Warri include Black Axe and Pirates, and they engage in rape, kidnapping, arm robbery, blood rituals, sorcery and the shedding of human blood. Hardly any week passes without the news of cult clashes, which most times lead to loss of lives and destruction of

Note: Special Collection: African Hermeneutics.

properties. It also hampers the smooth running of the school calendar. Many youths are still joining these cult groups based on the phenomenon of peer pressure. Proverbs 1:8–19 mentions how to spot peer pressure and how to deal with it (Broadway 2015). If the aphorism in the pericope is taken into practical recognition, the menace of cultism, which has given Warri a bad name and also made it unsafe for law-abiding residents (Adurokiya 2022), will be ameliorated.

This article examines aphorisms in Proverbs 1:8–19 that speak directly to the increasing activities of cult groups in Warri. The pericope was chosen because it contains aphorisms on peer pressure and the consequences of living a wasteful life. This study is a qualitative study that uses literary analysis. The goal of a literary analysis is to show the reader why the author chose certain concepts, words or writing styles to make their point (Germana Academic Center for Excellence 2019). Data were obtained from the Bible and relevant academic literature. This study firstly dives into explaining what Proverbs 1 stands for better understanding. Secondly, the thematic analysis of the aphorist's aphorisms was explored. Thirdly, there was the conceptualisation of the concept of cultism in Warri. The themes from the analysis were brought to bear in the Warri context. Thus, the text and context were woven within an African hermeneutic.

Scholarship on the fundamentals contained in Proverbs 1

The book of Proverbs, the book of Job, the book of Psalms, the book of Ecclesiastes and the book of the Song of Songs belong to the genre called wisdom literature or wisdom corpus. Udall (2020) reveals that young people are the target audience for the book of Proverbs, which offers guidance on how to live properly in a fallen world. Udall (2020) further attests that the majority of Proverbs was written by Solomon, who also included writings from individuals simply referred to as 'the wise' (22:17–24:22; 24:23–34), Hezekiah's men (25:1), Agur (30:1–33) and Lemuel (31:1–9) as well as his own writings.

In Owen's (2018) view, the book of Proverbs was composed sometime in the 10th century and Nigerians and other Africans can still benefit from following its advice today. This is because most of the activities of that period are still prevalent in contemporary Nigerian society. All ranks and classes have their word in season because Solomon's book of Proverbs has a wide spectrum of guidance for a vast cross-section of the population (Sperling 2017). There are so many comparisons in the book of Proverbs, between good and evil. According to Jamieson, Fausset and Brown (1863), the true word for *proverb* is *maschal*, which is derived from the Hebrew word for 'comparison'. Mast asserts that the intelligent person notices these patterns and then positions himself within the broader context of reality (Mast 2018). Providing further insight, Kinder (2013) reveals that understanding awareness manifests in two ways or via two channels, namely, body and language.

An analysis of the literature demonstrates that there are essentially two methods for children to learn about life: either they listen to and follow their parents' instructions or they venture out on their own and gain knowledge through experience (Zaspel 2020). Proverbs 1:8–19 introduces the father and mother, the young man and the violent men (Clifford 2018). In the words of Shelton (2020:1), the book's central theme is ignorance and folly and instructs people on how to recognise and shun foolish behaviour and the benefits of obtaining knowledge. Conclusively, Proverbs 1 contains aphorisms that emphasise the importance of choosing the right path and avoiding the wrong one.

A pragmatic review of Proverbs 1:8–19

The study text is divided into verses 8–9 (call to listen), verses 10–16 (peer pressure) and verses 17–19 (consequences of evil-doers and partakers of evil). This structure was adopted because it contains the various themes needed for analysing the contemporary developments among youth.

Call to listen (verses 8–9)

In verse 8, the sage appeals to his son to listen [שמע] to his instructions. This instruction is a form of direction or order about how the good life could be lived. Hebrew שמע means to discern, proclaim, announce and obey, among others. It shows that wisdom will not force its way into the sons' lives (Susquehanna 2015). The sage calls on his son to obey and heed his instructions. The sage further advises his son not to forsake [שח] the mother warning on the good path to follow. Hebrew שח can also mean to abandon, cast away or neglect. Beginning with verse 8, the father begins with 'my son'. It reveals both the teacher's fatherly relationship with the young and inexperienced students he has agreed to educate as well as the real source and authority of the lessons he will impart to them (Kirkpatrick & Parry 1895). In verse 9, the basis for this call to obey the instruction of the father and the mother was mentioned. Firstly, it will be an ornament of grace on the son's head and chains [תבליט] around his neck. According to Terri (2019), verse 9 shows how blessed are those who have parents who raised them in wisdom and faith, and how blessed are parents who have children who walk in God's grace and knowledge. The chains in verse 9 signify that it will restrain the son from exceeding his bounds, by checkmating his sons so as not to fall into evil. Hebrew תבליט which means a chain or neck pendant and it makes the son distinct or distinguishes him exceptionally from other children (Holladay 1988). This structure is a clarion call from the rhetor to the audience, specifically the youth on the need to listen to words of wisdom.

Peer pressure (verses 10–16)

Verse 10 begins with the possessive pronoun 'my son' [בני] showing that the father loves the son dearly, hence the appeal in verse 9. He instructs the son that if bad people entice you [תפתה], do not consent [תבא]. Aiken (2015:1) advises the wise to stay away from evil or negative behaviour because people

who refuse to stay with wisdom will eventually perish because they never weigh the costs. To entice [פְּהָה] means to be deceived, seduced or persuaded. One could be enticed by money, women or fame. The sage warns his son not to allow himself to be deceived, and also not to אָבָה [consent]. 'Not to consent' means not to obey, not to be willing and not to yield. The son was asked to develop moral discipline against his peers who may try to deceive him into bad behaviour. In verse 11, the sage warns his son that the bad people will surely call on him to join them in partaking in evil, that is, shedding blood (דָּם [bloodshed, homicide]) against innocent people (נָקִי [clean, exempt]). It is clearly seen that the wicked shed blood by the use of the phrases 'lie in wait' and 'lurk secretly' for the innocent (Darren 2017).

According to Barnes (1949), the temptation that the teacher tries to protect his student from is joining a gang of thieves. He also told his son in verse 12, that bad friends are always willing to do evil, swallowing people (גְּבַלְעִים [ending, destroying and ruining]) rights and life. The sage observed that the evil doings, bent on destroying others' lives are all going down (פְּיֹרְדִי – descending, lowered and sank down) a deep pit (בּוֹר – pit of grave and dungeon) with or without their knowledge. In the words of Henry (2008), the way of sin is downhill because of the fact that humans cannot stop themselves. The wise man exhorts young people to avoid both temporary and permanent destruction and to make sure they do not go even one step down these harmful roads (Henry 2008). The sage emphasised that they are reaping the consequences of their actions. In verse 13, the sage informs his son that all those evil friends want is to take people's possessions (הוֹן [wealth and substance]) unjustly. He further informs his son that the wicked people destroy [שָׂלַל] the houses of others, which may include the future and dignity (of others for their personal benefits). Hebrew שָׂלַל could also mean plunder, spoil or prey, an indication that joining bad gangs makes one seek to prey on people's lives and wealth.

The extent of peer pressure that the son may face was sketched by the sage. In verse 14, he told his son that they will tell him to cast in (תְּפִיל [to attack, bring down, waste away]) anyone and anything. This also indicates that the son will be given evil duties to accomplish by his peers. In verse 15, the father, that is the sage pleaded 'my son' not to walk (תִּלְאָלִי [do not go, do not accompany, do not act, do not follow]) with his evil peers. In verse 15b, the father instructs his son not to keep (מְנַע [to withhold, to restrain]) his path (נְהִיב [course of life]) with the evildoers. Their pathway, according to the father, is crooked. According to Gill (1810), the verse warns that when there is an inclination or a temptation to it, withstand it; stop in time, do not proceed, but drawback, and go on in the way thou hast been trained up in, and remember the instructions of thy parents. In verse 16, the father mentions what evil peers are interested in doing, that is to shed blood (דָּם לְשֶׁפֶךָ [gush blood, waste blood like water]). This shows that their heart's desire is to pour human blood as water. They engage in this evil action with haste (מְהֵרָה [anxious, do quickly, hurriedly, swiftly]), without critical thoughts about

the consequences of their actions. This structure calls on the youth to avoid peer influence on a negative basis.

Consequences of evildoers and partakers of evil (verses 17–19)

As is conventional with the sage in the wisdom corpus, especially in the wisdom aphorisms in the book of Proverbs, whenever there is a warning, the consequences of the warning will be enumerated. In verse 17, the father tells his son about the foolishness of the activities of evildoers. They think that they can escape disaster, and those who join them also think the same. They are no wiser than a bird that is sensible enough not to go into the trap of a hunter that it observed when the trap was set up. According to Gleason (2012:1), the wise father continues that evil people already told their victims how terribly they treated other victims. In verse 18, the father informs his son that evildoers lie in wait (יִצְרְבוּ) for their own blood (לְדַמָּם). Hebrew אָרַב derived from the phrase יִצְרְבוּ used in verse 18b also means to ambush, lie in ambush. Thus, evildoers are only doing harm to themselves without knowing it. The father mentioned that the evil actions of the evildoers will consume their blood (דָּם) and their lives (נַפְשׁ [soul, person, desire, appetite, emotion]). This is also an indication that the desires, which of evil, will surely consume the perpetrator. It also indicates that evildoers who carry their actions secretly (סָפַץ [to hide, conceal]) will face their consequences publicly.

In verse 19, the father tells his son the reason why the evildoer will face destruction at the end of his evil actions. The father noticed that the greed (בְּצַעַת [gain from violence, robbery, covetousness]) makes evildoers to engage in evil actions, which are indirect ways of destroying their own lives. The father also lamented that because they took the lives of those persons, they took their property, which is why their own lives must be taken. This is one of the reasons for the iron law of Moses that an eye for an eye in Leviticus 24:19–21. In the words of Ellicott (1896), the person whose life is taken away by covetousness has this evil in his heart. Verse 19 lucidly quips that those who get richer by dispossessing others and killing them will surely end in the loss of their life and blood, and their eternal soul, which shows that the evildoers lose everything including their life. This structure mentions the consequences of following bad path or joining bad gangs.

The close analysis of the study text insisted on serious warning of the father to the son on the need to shun evil and everyone who partakes in evil. Looking at the so many aphorisms that warn the youths, it fits into the contemporary activities of cultists and the recruitment pattern. This will also be a basis for warning teenagers about the dangers of joining cult groups in their activities in Warri.

Teenagers, youths and cultism in Warri

One cannot talk about cultism in Nigeria without referring to Warri. Apart from being acknowledged as an oil-producing

community, Warri is also acknowledged as a crime-producing community. Warri, located in Delta State, Nigeria, was established in 1480 and it grew in significance as a port city in the late 19th century when it emerged as a hub for the trading of palm oil and other important goods such as rubber, palm products, cocoa, groundnuts, hides and skins (NigeriaGalleria 2021). It was former President Ibrahim Babangida who moved the state capital from Warri to Asaba in 1991 (Amaize 2011). However, the nitty-gritty of this article is not to give a historical purview of Warri but to give a phenomenological analysis of cultism in Warri that has claimed lives and properties and is still waxing stronger in primary and secondary schools. There are indications that there are cult groups in primary, secondary and advanced levels of education in Warri. They get their membership by harassing and intimidating their victims and assuring their safety. Some of the known cult groups in Warri include Aiye (Ake) and Eiye confraternities (Akenzua 2017), Downtown Boys, Buccaneer and Shaggy Boys (Adingupu, Omonisa & Ige 2015).

The activities of cultists have negatively impacted the life of the society. Cultists engage in the rape of women and girls. For instance, a cultist was killed when he tried to rape a 13-year-old girl in an uncompleted building (Akenzua 2017). They are known to waylay young girls who refuse their proposal and rape them. Also, cultists are known to enter houses and hotels with guns, knives, cutlasses and other dangerous weapons with which they threaten the inhabitants and dispossess them of their phones, laptops, money and other important valuables. Sometimes these cultists set up illegal roadblocks and collect levies from pedestrians and motorists without any resistance from security forces. According to Adingupu et al. (2015), cultists generate a lot of money by illegally collecting security fees from businesses, levies from motorcycles and other commercial vehicles, and other dubious methods. When these levies are collected by the cultists, they usually have disagreements about the sharing formula amongst themselves. This results in clashes among them, and the people living around the area of the clash are affected.

Contextualising the literary analysis of Proverbs 1:8–19

The need to listen to advice

The father's and mother's instructions must be heeded so says the sage in Proverbs 1:8–9. This is because parents want the best for their children and they would do anything possible to bring their children through the right path. The sage calls on his child to be prudent because it is the exercise of sound judgement in avoiding evils and troubles (Davis 2001). According to Uroko and Enobong (2021), the use of 'hear' as an opening remark of the advice shows that the sage is presenting the youth with a choice. Bringing this to bear in the context of Warri, Nigeria, it is observable that some parents do not warn their children to flee from cultism. In fact, some parents used their children who are cultists to intimidate their landlord and electricity

company. There is no good advice that this set of parents give their children to bring them to the right path. According to Bb (2022), parents leave their responsibilities for the pursuit of economic gain and some even support their children in these unwholesome activities. Thus, the advice that parents give their children to heed is that they must make more money to bring the family out of poverty. They see it as an achievement, but the father in Proverbs 1 cautions his child to heed his advice of avoiding evil or befriending evildoers.

Inevitability of peer pressure

In verses 10–16, the father warns the son to avoid joining bad gangs such as cult groups or secret societies. Ritsman (2023:1) mentions that the father cautions his son that he may run with sinners who will try to persuade him to commit evil alongside them. The father noticed that they will use different things to try to lure the child, but the child should not give in to their demands. Teenagers and youths who join cult groups are coerced psychologically into joining. Sometimes they are deceived into thinking that when they join cult groups, no one can intimidate them or their families, without knowing that they are only being enticed. Also, in verses 11 and 13, the father warns his son that evildoers are always stealing from people, secretly and publicly. This is the situation in Warri, where cultists are stealing from people's houses and shops during the day and in the light. Cultists have been known to run banks in broad daylight in Warri. For instance, on 17 February 2021, some daredevil gunmen in broad daylight invaded a bank in Udu, Warri, Delta State, and it was not clear how much the robbers, who came in two vehicles carted away (Folade 2021). In verse 11, evildoers such as cultists shed the blood of people. In Warri, cultists kill their members, rival cult groups, their family, their enemies, and innocent people. Sometimes they kill their targets on the road or in the victim's house with a cutlass or gun. Onyekachukwu (2022) reveals that at least two people were reportedly killed by rival groups on 16 April 2020 at two different locations in the heart of Warri. In verse 14, the sage tells his son that evildoers will always try to make you take an oath with them not to abandon the group and their activities. In the words of Usman (2018):

People are lured into cults without being told of the consequences. By the time one is initiated, it will be too late to back off, as that would amount to the person's death. That is why, during initiation, one takes an oath of secrecy. We are told to promote the interests of our members, whether they are legitimate or not. Members meet at ungodly hours, during which they are given directives on what to do. At times, instructions on what to do are given through telephone calls by our leaders. Once one is initiated, he loses his freedom, and he is not allowed to make friends with rival cultists as that could amount to his death. (p. 1)

This is an evident characteristic of cult groups in Warri. Members are required to take an oath of allegiance and secrecy of any information or operation they are involved in or about to be involved in.

The repercussions for engaging in evil

In verse 17, the father projects a bird as being wiser than an evil person. According to the verse, when a bird sees a hunter arranging a trap to catch it, it runs away from that area, but evildoers see dangers and still put their heads which are later consumed by the danger they saw but refuse to heed to. According to Gleason (2012), people who tempt you to ruin others will also destroy you, and they speak in contradictions. This verse tells how foolish the activities of cultists in Warri are. They know that what they are doing has no gain and may consume their lives and that of their family members, yet they insist on joining cult groups and contributing to their evil doings. It was on this basis that Adebayo (2021:1) laments that the situation has become so terrible that it has reportedly started affecting elementary school children. Shedding further historical light on the issue of cultism in Warri, Deji-Folulile (2021) laments that:

From all indications, the violence in Nigerian schools today is a reflection of what is happening in the larger society. We have enthroned violence, bloodletting, bullying, lying, deception – all kinds of evils – to the extent that many children have lost their innocence. These students no longer see anything wrong in violence. How can they when they see pictures and videos of politicians snatching ballot boxes; approaching elections as if they are going for a major warfare all the time. Yet, they see these violent people emerging as governors, lawmakers, etc. They have wrongfully believed that intimidation and violence are required to be in charge in a lawless society like ours. (p. 1)

In verse 18, the father tells his son that the partakers of evil are destroying themselves. They are selfishly seeking gain and will selfishly destroy themselves. Wellman (2015) reveals that the sage is saying that individuals who lay traps for others will eventually fall victim to them, whether it be now or tomorrow. Bringing this to the Warri text, cultists are indirectly destroying themselves. Some of them dropped out of school to effectively practise their cultism, which has already affected their future and prospects. Some of them have been killed during cult clashes in their school and in their homes. Some of them have been caught and killed. Thus, cultism they think is a way of making themselves indelible, which ultimately consumes them. A youth was killed on 16 January 2022 in Essi Layout, in the Warri South Local Government Area of Delta State, when several gunshots fired in the air in the vicinity as the suspected cultists engaged in a supremacy battle (Ogunyemi 2022). Additionally, on 27 January 2021, three people were killed by suspected cultists with machetes at Egbokodo-Itsekiri, Warri South Local Government Area, Delta State, following a violent altercation between several cult members (Adurokiya 2021).

In verse 19, the father concludes that it is greed for money, women and fame that pushes young people to join cult groups and motivates them to take the lives and properties of others. According to Kabel (2019):

Solomon finished his counsel by shining a bright light on the root problem of these violent souls – greed. Greedy people are violent people. Greedy people are hurtful people. Greedy people are destructive people. Greedy people are insensitive people. Greedy

people are cold people. Eventually, greedy people take away the life of the owners of coveted substance. They do harm because they place a higher value on possessions than they do on the owners of those possessions. (p. 1)

These aphorisms are evident in cult-related activities in Warri. Most young people join the group because of greed. There are also situations where unskilled workers such as road mechanics, vulcanisers, carpenters and bricklayers join cult groups only to find themselves running helter-skelter when they are being chased by rival cult groups. They join cult groups thinking they will be able to intimidate others, only to end up intimidating and destroying themselves.

Recommendations and conclusion

The hermeneutical lessons have shown that a wise father counsels his son to desist from joining hands in doing evil. It depends on the son to be wise or foolish. A wise son will learn from these lessons, but surely one who is foolish will be destroyed by him. Cultists and their sponsors should remember that the end result is always regretful and may lead to the loss of lives. Politicians who use cultists for rigging during elections, silencing their political enemies and bailing the cultists whenever they are arrested by the police (Adingupu et al. 2015) will also mean a sad end. The following recommendations will help to reduce or ameliorate the increasing cult activities in Nigeria. Firstly, there is the need for parents to talk reasonably to their children about the dangers of joining bad gangs. Parents should desist from using the cultists in the family to harass people. Secondly, church priests should always warn teenagers and youth about the dangers of joining cults. They should be sensitised to the enticements of cultists. Thirdly, faith-based organisations can also go to schools to teach young people about the need for them to shun cultism. They can also assist those who are willing to come out of cultism by carrying out rehabilitation and reformation on them. Fourthly, the government should also prosecute any security personnel who are caught shielding cultists. This will serve as a deterrent to other people. The appropriation of Proverbs 1:8–19 will help the youth understand the dangers of involving themselves in cultism and the need to listen to the advice of their parents. Also, the youth in other countries can also learn from the aphorisms in Proverbs 1:8–19. The youth should understand that the consequences that befall youth in Warri who go into cultism will also befall them. Also, the path to success outlined in Proverbs 1:8–19 is just as important to youth in other countries as it is to youth in Nigeria.

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