

# Alcoholism in Proverbs 23:19–21, 29–32 and the Tiv and Idoma people of Benue State

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This article used Proverbs 23:19–21, 29–32 as a lens for analysing alcohol addiction in Benue State. The pericope warns that alcoholism leads to poverty, regrets, and life-threatening consequences. These given aphorisms listed are important in studying the growing alcohol dependency among the Tiv and Idoma people of Benue State. Alcoholism is plentiful among the Tiv and Idoma tribes, because alcoholics are found in their numbers in drinking joints and bars. Early in the morning, alcoholics leave their houses to drink with friends. Sometimes, they do not have the finance or time to take care of their families. The government seems to be overwhelmed with this challenge. Most families are unstable and children become delinquent because the father has no time to stay at home or uses money for family feeding and school fees to pay for his alcohol and those of his friends in bars and drinking joints. Unfortunately, literature on the alcoholism among the Tiv and Idoma people are scanty. Findings revealed that most Tiv and Idoma people who engage in alcoholism do so on the basis of peer pressure, depression, and the feeling that their life lacks meaning. However, Proverbs 23:19–21, 29–32 admonish men to avoid alcoholism because the dangers of alcoholism outweigh any life challenges one is going through. This is a qualitative study with data gathered from relevant academic literature. Data analysis was performed using literary analysis method and recommendations were discussed.

**Contribution:** The study used Proverbs 23:19–21 to analyse the situation of alcoholism in Benue State. It envisaged that alcohol addicts usually end up with more financial, health, marital, and mental challenges.

**Keywords:** Proverbs 23:19–21; Proverbs 23:29–32; wisdom corpus; alcoholism; Benue State.

## Introduction

The *Book of Proverbs* gives wisdom to the prudent on what and how to eat and drink. Tyndale (2019) observed that wisdom is observed, studied, and learned. Providing a more succinct thesis, Swindoll (2021) noticed that the *Book of Proverbs* brings divine truth into proper focus, enabling the listeners to look at their earthly sojourn through the God's lens and also ensure to live according to aphorisms there. This is the essence of Proverbs 23:19–21, 29–32 in the context of the growing level of alcoholism in Benue State. The pericopes captured the fact that alcohol addiction, otherwise known as alcohol dependence, has disadvantages in the long and short run, with its life-threatening consequences. The rhetor in the pericope noted that the urge and temptation to become drunk with alcohol begins with a glimpse, and the most effective strategy in dealing with it involves not allowing it to happen in the first place (Ulrich 2018). The aphorisms in study texts are vital in addressing the pandemic of alcoholism among the people of Benue, particularly the Tiv and Idoma people.

Tiv and Idoma comprise the dominant tribes in Benue State, although there exist other minor ethnic groups such as Etilo and Igede. The level of commitment to alcoholism by the Tiv and Idoma people has had consequences for the drunkard, their family, close relatives, and their friends. Early in the morning, the young and the old alike gather in drinking joints where alcohol is specifically made, known as *Burukutu* in Benue State. It is used to kick-start the day's activities. Charles (2021) noticed that in Benue for a long time now, people have sold alcohol beyond 22:00 and some until the next day. Also, in the evening, they gather again to drink themselves into a stupor. Sometimes, some of them stagger to their homes. Some are killed by running vehicles. Others fall into gutters and sustain severe injuries, losing their eyes, among others. In Benue State, alcohol addicts had been involved in alcohol-related dangers such as accidents, physical combat, among others. It is also sad to note that alcohol addicts value their drinking motives more than the experiences of negative impacts of alcohol on their social life (Gire & Shaahu 2015).

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Others rape their biological daughters, beat their wives, and break televisions in the homes. In fact, the level of alcoholism in Benue State has received little attention from the government, governmental organisations, civil-based organisations, and even the scholarly community. Most research has focused on alcoholism in other parts of Nigeria, but existing literature has carefully avoided providing a missiological response to this crisis, especially from the Old Testament and specifically from the Wisdom Corpus.

This is a qualitative study with data gathered from relevant academic literature. Data analysis was carried out using literary analysis method. A literary analysis is a careful examination of the mechanism of a literary work and a discussion of how that mechanism functions to reveal meaning (Skrabanek 2014). The aim of this study is to use Proverbs 23:19–21, 29–32 to address the problem of alcohol addiction in Benue State. Firstly, this study gives a succinct narrative on Proverbs 23. Secondly, thematic analysis was carried out on the pericope. Thirdly, the challenge of alcoholism was sketched, and thereafter the hermeneutical framework was established.

## Understanding Proverbs 23

*The Book of Proverbs* belongs to the wisdom corpus, where the aphorist uses persuasive and concise words to get his audience's attention and participation. Other books in the corpus include Ecclesiastes and Job. Lawrence (2006) asserted that the *Book of Proverbs* is a corpus of pieces of advice and counsel from the teacher to the students with the aim of guiding the student's moral life. Proverbs 23 says that when human minds are corrupted and under the influence of alcohol, drugs, or other substances, it impairs their sense of judgement and thinking and inhibits the human ability to reason, according to the Bible, and it depresses the functioning of the conscience (Relevant Bible Teaching 2022). *The Book of Proverbs* is attributed to King Solomon of Israel, but he was not the only author, because this book was likely finished long after his life and reign with King Hezekiah and other wise men between 715 and 686 BC (Heimbigner 2021).

A literary appraisal of the book reveals that Proverbs 23 encourages the wise to live a happy life by avoiding alcohol addiction. According to Scott (2007), anyone who has the fear of God, according to the rhetor in Proverbs will likely make sensible choices that will lead a happy life. These choices are only carried out by the prudent that is one who disciplined himself or herself by objective reasoning. According to Ademiluka (2020), Proverbs 23:29–35 has implications for the church with regard to their role in curbing alcoholism. These implications range from the effects of alcohol on the victim and also on the community. Thompson and Owens (2013:701) are of the view that in the pericope wisdom complains of the contempt of scorners.

It is paramount at this juncture to talk about wine in the Old Testament. According to Fairchild (2022), wine represented

life and vigour. In the Old Testament, it was also a symbol of gladness, blessing, and wealth as was identified in Genesis 27:28. In the words of Thorn (2017):

Wine was the common drink of the Jews, enjoyed with meals and shared with friends (Gn 14:18; Jn 2:3). It was also an essential part in the worship of the people of God in both Testaments. The 'drink offering' consisted of wine (Ex 29:40; Lv 23:13) and the people of God brought wine when offering sacrifices (1 Sm 1:24). The Jews even kept wine in the temple (1 Chr 9:29). In Isaiah 62:9 the people are blessed by the Lord in such a way as is depicted in drinking wine in the sanctuary before the presence of God. (p. 1)

McDonald (2012:1) noticed that wine was for festivity when everyone is happy. Also, among the ancient Jews, the poor in the land were provided with wine whenever there was merriment.

## Emerging themes in Proverbs 23

It was not the entire verses in the *Book of Proverbs* 23 that were chosen in this study. The study only engages verses 19–20 and verses 30–31. The reason is that only these verses touch on the thesis of this article. The chosen pericopes were evenly divided into three sub-themes, as shown underneath.

### Persuasive call to be wise and avoid alcoholism (vv. 19–20, 30–32)

Just as in the manner of the writer of Proverbs, listeners are presented with two ways to choose from: the good path and the bad path. This is also evident in Proverbs 23:19, where listeners were encouraged to follow the right path, because it is the path of wisdom. The rhetor in verse 19 calls on his student to be wise, using the Hebrew שמע. The Hebrew שמע means [listen, hear, hearken], which is a call to obedience. Furthermore, the rhetor said that if the student listens carefully to his instruction, it will guide (ישר) him to be wise. Hebrew ישר also entails [to go straight, go on, advance, direct]. When the wise allows himself to be guided he ends up becoming a happy person because he moves on a straight path. According to Ulrich (2018), the use of ישר establishes the relationship between wisdom, drunkenness, and gluttony; drunkenness and gluttony have no place in the life of the wise. William and Duane (2006) lucidly explained that the entire life of an alcoholic is filled with steady quarrelling, trouble, and fighting. In verse 20, the sage advises his student not to mix up (תהי) with יין [winebibbers] or with דבילי [gluttonous eaters] (Strong 2012). Hebrew תהי means do not appear with them, do not become like them, do not belong to them, do not continue with them, and do not follow them. It is a clear warning against those intending to follow יין [those intoxicated with drink], which the father of the Rechabites warned them against (Jr 35:2) and also kings warned to desist from such practices (Pr 31:4).

In verse 30, the sage warns that alcohol addiction makes one to search (קנה) everywhere for it and when they find a

drinking place they linger long there (אָהר) making the person less productive. In the words of Bruce (2004), 'to tarry long' in verse 20 is one word and not a phrase because it is derived from the preposition 'after' which entails to remain at the back seat or to sleep late. The drunkard will always return late to the house because he spends most of his time in the drinking joints. Hebrew תִּקַּח means to [search, find, ponder and seek] for where they can take in the alcohol. In verse 31, the student is encouraged not to be enticed (תִּרְאָעֵל) by the colour or sparkling nature of the drink set before them. Hebrew תִּרְאָעֵל also means not look upon, not see it, do not enjoy, do not observe, do not stare, do not heed, do not visit, do not watch. According to Poole (1990), the usage of תִּרְאָעֵל means that the student should not look at the colour of the drink so as to inflame the appetite towards it. The rhetor carefully advises his son not to be enticed by those who gather around to drink and even get to stupor. In verse 32, the rhetor mentions that wine, beer, and alcohol, when over-consumed makes your eyes red, makes you see strange things, makes you stagger back and forth, and is a pointless addiction that leaves you wanting more (Romig 2019).

### Consequences of alcoholism (v. 29)

Conventionally, alcoholism has severe implications, which include the fact that it weakens the immune system, makes one fall sick easily, bringing about liver diseases and high blood pressure. The rhetor in the pericope mentions other consequences that may befall a drunkard if he continues in the act of alcoholism. The rhetor spells out the consequences of the student deciding to abandon his advice and seek after those who are addicted to alcohol. There are several potential negative results of being a drunkard. In verse 29, they include woe, sorrow, contentions, complaints, bloodshot eyes, hallucinations, nightmares, addiction, a lack of self-control in speech and other matters, and bodily injuries without apparent cause (v. 29, vv. 33–34) (Staff 1984). Firstly, in verse 29 the drunkard experiences woe צָוִי [expression of grief and despair], experiences sorrow צָבִי [pain, want] and secondly, they also experience contention מְדוֹן [strife, quarrelsome, discord, brawling, shouting]. On the implications of צָבִי, צָוִי, and מְדוֹן, Smith (2015) noticed that these key terms illustrate the fact that people who consume strong drink are identified as having a predilection for 'woe' and 'sorrow' or what some today describe as 'mental illness' and depression. Benson (1839) observes that alcoholism has destroyed homes, marriages, caused suicides and homicides, and even sexual abuse either as the aggressor or victim. For Buzzell (1985), the proverb begins with a poetic use of six questions that draw attention to three kinds of trouble caused by intoxication: emotional ('Who has woe? Who has sorrow'), social ('Who has strife? Who has complaining?'), and physical ('Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes?'). Ellicott (1897) observed that alcoholism would have been avoided because it serves no good end. Also, Morgan (2020) relates that alcoholism or drunkenness, like so many of our unhealthy behaviours (getting high, overeating, gambling, pornography, etc.), is ultimately a worship disorder.

### The end result of alcoholism (v. 21)

When one thinks that he is going out of his life challenges by becoming an alcoholic, little did he know that he is only deceiving himself. In the words of Ross (1991), drunkenness is a symptom of deeper problems. In verse 21, the epilogue of the matter was spelt out. The sage insisted that the audience who fails to heed his advice and continues to be an alcohol addict will come to poverty (יִגְרַשׁ) and the poverty will be so severe that he will end up wearing rags (קִרְעַת). In the understanding of Tremper (2006), engaging in alcoholism leads to one experiencing a lack of money for food, housing or clothing, which in itself is an unwise decision. The money that should have been used to settle certain bills are used for drinking of many bottles of alcohol. When alcohol addicts drink, they fail to report to office or their business enterprise because of the laziness that comes with being a drunkard. They end up wearing rags because they cannot separate the good from the bad, because their sense of reasoning is clouded (Gill 2011). The type of poverty described here is extreme poverty, a state of having no money to eat, pay for house rent, or even mend a torn cloth, not even buying a new one. The Hebrew word, יִגְרַשׁ derived from יָגַרְשׁ [will come to poverty] means dispossess, destroy, expel, impoverish, *bring to ruin, disinherit*; it shows that the type of life the drunkard is taking himself into will consume him, and dispossess of what they would have achieved. According to Charles and Evereff (1979:21), 'This section seems to be not just a condemnation of excessive drinking, but an exhortation to avoid drinking because of its fatal consequences.'

A prognostic analysis of the pericopes has shown that the sage warns his students to avoid the path of alcohol addiction because of the life-threatening consequences obtainable in it. The sage insisted that the lifestyle is not wise and may consume the victim. It is on this premise that a sketch of alcohol addiction in Benue State, Nigeria, was explored.

### Alcoholism in Benue state

Currently, reports reveal that in Africa, when it comes to consumption of alcohol, Nigeria ranks first (Dumbili, Uwa-Robinson & Odeigah 2022). Notwithstanding the increasing consequences of alcoholism, many more persons are still victims, and in the context of this essay, the Tiv and Idoma tribes of Benue seem to be indicted. Benue State is located in the middle belt of Nigeria. It is one of the popular states known to have the highest wave of alcoholism in Nigeria. The early drinking habit shows the likelihood of future alcohol dependence or abuse among teenagers, youths and adults with its resultant effect of multiple sexual relationships (Audu et al. 2020). Unfortunately, while concerned individuals were trying to curb this anomaly, the crisis of alcoholism escalated, with many people getting involved in drinking on a day-to-day basis.

In most streets in Benue State, there are joints where the young and the old meet in the morning and evening to drink themselves into a stupor. In the state, apart from the normal

type of alcohol, there is another one that is known as *Burukutu* where sometimes mentholated spirit is added to a fermented solution of millet or guinea corn and people take it under the guise of getting over their life challenges. According to Eshemorkha (2020), it is a popular alcoholic beverage made from the grains of Guinea corn, millet, and maize. Little did they know that it heralded the beginning of their social, economic, and mental challenges as active men in the state.

Unfortunately, in Benue State, there is this kind of apathy the government shows towards controlling the distribution of alcohol such as *Burukutu*. Sometimes students leave their school to come to these joints to drink themselves into a stupor, and they end up raping their classmates, beating their teachers, stealing in the school, and being expelled by the school authorities. Agberotimi (2021) observed that it is not uncommon for bars to be situated near schools, which makes them easily accessible by the students. The school authorities have done much to salvage the situation, but the issue keeps escalating.

## Causes of alcoholism in Benue state

Several reasons have been given for the alcohol addiction in Benue state, especially among the Tiv and Idoma tribes. Firstly, there is the belief that depression causes people in the state to turn to alcohol. They see alcoholism as a way to forget the challenges they are going through. Sometimes one may have lost the job, and starts indulging in alcoholism just to get over the situation. Merikangas and Gelernter (1990) noticed that alcoholism plays an aetiological role in some depressions, while Beck, Weissman and Kovacs (1976) noted that the joint effect of depression, hopelessness, and alcoholism can increase suicidal attempts. Also, people who might be having problematic relationships or marriages may see alcoholism as a way out.

Secondly, some people feel that life has no purpose. This may be based on boredom, or the fact that they have not accomplished as much as expected or as their mates have. It happens mostly among the youths. This is the basis for the report of the World Health Organization (WHO 2022) that alcohol consumption causes death and disability relatively early in life, especially among those aged 20–39 years. They further revealed that approximately 13.5% of the total deaths are attributable to alcohol. For the victim, there is nothing to fall back on, nothing to make them feel okay. Thus, alcoholism seems to be the only way out.

Thirdly, some of the drunkards are unable to manage their personal life challenges. It seems that the problem is just too much to bear. When one becomes intoxicated with alcohol, it may trigger suicidal thoughts and also homicide (Klimkiewicz et al. 2012). They seem to be struggling between suicide and attempted suicide. In fact, even when they are unable to handle their personal issues, family, environment, and work issues tend to compound the problems, making the victim develop low self-esteem, and see alcohol as an escape mechanism from these challenges.

Fourthly, some become alcohol addicts because of the curiosity of wanting to know how sweet it is to sit among people and drink and talk about useful and mostly useless things. In the words of Cowley (1992), alcohol addicts were previously non or moderate drinkers who, at different stages, ignored their speed and increase in the quantity consumed at any point in time. Thus, some drink alcohol on the quest to learn something new, and ignorantly, they become addicts within a short time.

Fifthly, many of the alcohol addicts joined the bandwagon based on peer pressure from their friends to belong. Hawkins et al. (1997) are of the view that youths who engage in alcohol use do so because of a lack of parental care and discipline, emulation, sickness, and a lack of self-control. They want to belong to the 'big boys' community. This impairs the physical and psychological health of the drinker and also exposes others to the risk of accidents, violent behaviour, and several other adverse conditions, including death (Asagba, Agberotimi & Olaseni 2021).

## Proverbs 23 in the context of Benue state

The decision to pick out verses 19–21 and 29–32 of Proverbs 23 is because they speak directly to the issue of alcoholism, which has become a pandemic among the Tiv and Idoma people of Benue State. Looking at the exegesis of Proverbs 23:19–21, 29–32, the problem of alcoholism and its implications – societal and personal – were analysed and described. These problems and implications of alcoholism suit the contemporary happenings in Benue state. According to Eniojukan and Chichi (2014:48), the prevalence rate was 21%; initiation age was 10–17 years (62.2%) with more male drinkers (89.2%); the most preferred drink is beer (79.3%) and major source are friends (56.8%). Furthermore, because of increased hypertension, heart disease, liver problems and cancer in Benue state, these diseases are found to be higher amongst alcoholics (Chafa 2018). Unfortunately, the number of alcoholics has continued to increase. For instance, in a study carried out by Chafa (2018), the alcoholic prevalence rate was 70.0% among the youths but was relatively low on a male female ratio of 7:3. The aphorisms in the study texts reveal thought-provoking themes that would speak anew to the increasing alcoholism among the people of Benue State. These themes include the relationship between peer pressure and alcoholism, and consequences of being an alcoholic and addict. In Benue state, peer pressure is a major factor promoting alcoholism. Also, adequate information on the dangers of being an alcoholic seems to be lacking among the people of Benue state. Proverbs 23 is believed to provide a new lens to the people of Benue state.

### Peer pressure and alcoholism

The pericopes show that peer pressure pushes people to become alcohol addicts. In verse 19, the rhetor informs his audience not to make friends with drunkards because they

are always excessively drinking and eating meat. Maclaren (2009) revealed that the sage is of the view that there is a right way to follow in life and this way demands contentment and suppression of appetite. This is a clarion call for the Tiv and Idoma people of Benue State, especially the youth, not to allow themselves to be lured into drinking alcohol. Among the Tiv and Idoma people, there are certain factors that make people to become drunkards and influence their drinking habits. According to Borsari and Carey (2006:1), they are the lack or breakdown of quality peer relationships, alcohol use being an integral part of peer interactions, and if peers disapprove of alcohol use or do not drink. Thus, pressure plays an enormous role in the increasing number of alcohol addicts in Benue State. Also, Tiv and Idoma people who go into alcoholism have other alternatives; however, they decide to pitch a tent with alcohol addicts. These alcohol addicts usually drink in addition to excessive pepper soup that swindle all their money that would have been used for other necessary things. The sage in verses 30–31 pleaded with the audience not to make such people friends. According to Dunn (2022), the sage in Proverbs 23:30–31 warns his son that a bad friend negatively influences one's life and cares less about one's success. In this light, the Tiv and Idoma alcohol addicts are warned that their first mistake is going to alcohol drinking joints and joining friendships that will lead to the destruction of one's future, especially for the youth. Furthermore, from the first time of drinking ordinary beer they are lured to take *Burukutu* and thereafter alcohol made from mentholated spirit.

### Consequences of being an alcoholic and addict

The aphorist in verse 29 was concerned with the welfare of his student, which made him to mention the consequences that await his son if he decided to abandon his advice. According to Gillespie (2019), the mind of the sage is that addiction to alcohol will affect the body, mind, and spirit of the individual and those who love them, and no matter how effective we may think it is for a season, it does alter our ability to handle real life. He noticed that the man ends up increasing his problems and engaging in more trouble. This is exactly what is happening to alcohol addicts in Benue State. They are involved in fighting in the streets. When they return home, they beat their wives and chase their children away. In the research of Prof. Toba Elegbeleye, alcoholism is a major cause of divorce, because the woman can no longer put up with the abusive attitude of the man (Sesan 2017). Furthermore, according to a study conducted by Yu et al. (2019), people who are alcohol dependent are likely to engage in domestic violence such as wife battering, sexual abuse and rape when compared with those who are not alcohol dependent. Furthermore, in verse 21, the aphorist initially warned that drunkards usually end up in poverty. Calvary (2010):

The second thing that happens to those who indulge in these sins is that drowsiness will come upon them. It is a drowsiness that will clothe them with rags. Both of these sins lead to a lack of awareness and also - honestly - a person who has to sleep more.

The drunk has it because he has to sleep off the affects of his drinking. The glutton experiences it because he is too full - or too overweight to exercise. The result of that is that he is sleepy all the time. There are also problems that result from blood sugar levels and other medical conditions that rob the glutton from the alertness that he should have. These things, if left undealt with long enough, will clothe these men with rags. They will miss promotions - and some will even lose their jobs. (p. 1)

Furthermore, in the words of Spence-Jones (1883), the aphorist mentions in verse 21 that intemperance leads to prodigality, carelessness, and ruin and that drowsiness will make a man to lose sight of the world of reality. He further opines that the luxury of alcoholism spoken of here leads to drowsiness and the inability of the alcoholic to work, which leads to poverty in the long run (Spence-Jones 1883). In the case of Tiv and Benue men in Benue State, poverty is an understatement, but extreme poverty is the right word. In the words of Scrolls (2019):

[T]he consequences of extreme consumption produce immediate and long-term effects (Prov. 23:21). Poverty often results from excessive consumption. The cost of consumption can be wildly outrageous and can quickly create debt. Poverty can also produce a loss of health. Medical bills can pile up from the abuse the body. (p. 4)

Most of the drunkards, after being paid salaries, end up in these alcohol joints, where they drink and eat without returning home with a single penny. Sometimes there is no food at home for the children to eat. Some of them even drink this alcohol on credit, and their creditors come to their house and carry away any valuable property they can see.

### Conclusion

Proverbs 23 tells humanity that the essentials of moral living are the same in all ages, and the wisdom embedded in these ancient advices fits very well with what is happening in contemporary developments in Benue State. The pericope made it clear that people put themselves at risk of injuries, accidents, health problems, relationship problems, mental disorders, and poor school performance when they engage in alcoholism (Agberotimi 2021). There are some faith-based interventions that can curb alcoholism in Benue State. There is the need for the church to liaise with civil-based organisations and non-governmental organisations and engage in mass sensitisation on some drinking joints, telling alcohol addicts on the dangers of continuing in the wrong path. Also, alcohol addicts should see the path they are pursuing as very dangerous looking as what the rhetor in Proverbs 23 projected for them. The rhetor warns that alcohol addicts may end up in poverty and penury. This prompts alcohol addicts in Benue State to readjust their lives and follow the wise path by shunning alcoholism. Consequently, the government needs to start closing down some of these joints that sell mentholated spirits mixed with fermented maize to young people. This will drastically reduce the number of intoxicated people on the streets of Benue State. There should be some form of rehab unit in churches where alcohol addicts may be kept for a while so that they can lose

contact with their fellow alcoholics. This will help them to overcome addiction. There is the need for alcoholism to be included as a subject in secondary schools, and in advanced level education. This will help to sensitise the students on the dangers of them indulging in alcoholism or its addiction. There is also a need for hospitals to have a special section for counselling. This is important so that those people who were brought to the hospital as a result of their involvement in alcoholism will be told persuasively on the dangers of their continual indulging in alcohol and other related substances.

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F.C.U., is the sole author of this research article.

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## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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