



# 'You want to chill with the big boys': Proverbs 21:4–7 and drug trafficking in Nigeria



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Although progress has been made in the study of Proverbs 21:4–7, existing literature is yet to shift focus on the relevance of the pericope in examining the different aspects of drug trafficking by Nigerians. There is no month that passes without the news of a Nigerian caught in a national or international airport for one form of drug trafficking or another by the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA). These drugs include cocaine, tramadol and Indian hemp, among others. This has brought disgrace to those caught in the act, their families as well as Nigerian society. Those who were supposed to protect and fight against these drug traffickers have also involved themselves, as pastors and policemen have also been caught trafficking drugs. Proverbs 21:4–7 is a storehouse of moral instruction and has always been regarded as containing the concentrated deposit of ancient Israelite morality. It was written to sharpen an individual's ability not to be crafty or cunning but to transform a person of evil devices into a person of discretion, turning craftiness into prudence. This study used literary analysis as its research method. There is a close relationship between Proverbs 21:4–7 and the activities of drug traffickers in Nigeria. The themes embedded in the pericope, such as contentment, righteousness, diligence, self-control and patience, are believed to speak anew to the increasing activities of drug traffickers in Nigeria.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** Drug trafficking by Nigerians, nationally and internationally, has increased social crimes and Proverbs 21:4–7 provides new approach for solving this anomaly.

**Keywords:** Proverbs 21:4–7; words of wisdom; drug trafficking; Nigerians; cocaine; National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA).

## Introduction

Organised drug trafficking is a social crime that is becoming a lucrative business among secular and religious people in Nigeria. Nigeria has traditionally been considered a giving and transit country for drug trafficking (Nwosu 2021:1). There is no week that passes without the news of one person or church minister being caught with kilograms of cocaine, tramadol and heroine, among other things. Take for instance the case of the General Overseer of Christ Living Hope Church, Rev. Ugochukwu Emmanuel Ekwem, who on 13 March 2022 was caught with 54 sticks of drugs; 40 parcels of cocaine concealed inside bottles of body cream weighing 9.70 kg were recovered from him at the Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Ikeja, Lagos, while on his way to a crusade in Nairobi, Kenya (Odunsi 2022); or the case of Abba Kyari, a Deputy Commissioner of Police in Nigeria, who on 19 January 2022 was caught involved in the trafficking of 25 kg of cocaine (BBC 2022). One begins to wonder how Nigeria got to the point where people that would have served as examples for others to follow have become models of embarrassment and disgrace as a result of their entanglement in drug trafficking. The federal government of Nigeria formed the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) to tackle the increasing menace, but the issue has continued to escalate with reports of members of NDLEA striking a compromise with dealers of hard drugs (Ejike 2022a). These examples reveal a variety of approaches to the fight against drug trafficking by Nigerians. Even scholars have approached this issue from different points of view (Adeniyi, Eneji & Okpa 2019; Haataja, Gao & Toivanen 2022; Ukwanyi, Okpa & Akwaji 2019). However, none of them give a satisfying explanation through the aphorisms in Proverbs 21:4–7 on how drug trafficking could be curbed, nor do they adequately relate ways of coming out of this deluge through the wisdom corpus.

**Note:** Special Collection: African Hermeneutics.

This article seeks to demonstrate the importance of Proverbs 21:4–7 and its axioms that could help in tackling the issue of drug trafficking in Nigeria. Proverbs 21:4–7 is to have a greater impact, if it is to be the source of more sermons, and if it is to be considered more deeply for its theological contributions, more attention needs to be given to the proper interpretation of its truths (Johnson 1987:420). Von Rad (1974:74) noted that the Book of Proverbs 21 is a storehouse of moral instruction and has always been regarded as containing the concentrated deposit of ancient Israelite morality. Proverbs was written to sharpen an individual's ability not to be crafty or cunning but to transform a person of evil devices into a person of discretion and from craftiness into prudence (Johnson 1987). This article firstly approaches the prolegomenon of the pericope from a historical and literary point of view. Secondly, it gives a paremiological analysis of Proverbs 21. Lastly, the issue of drug trafficking by Nigerians is sketched, and a hermeneutical analysis of the text and the context was explored. Literary analysis was used as the research approach. This helps to understudy why the author used specific ideas, word choices or writing structures to convey his or her message (Academic Centre for Excellence 2009).

## A prolegomenon

In the Book of Proverbs, Solomon has already spent a great deal of time painting a picture of how we are supposed to live. The Book of Proverbs has the theme of teaching human beings biblical wisdom, which is the skill of understanding and navigating the broken, sin-filled environment by conforming to God's pattern for creation (Newton 2019).

It is also worthy to state that the Book of Proverbs is part of the biblical wisdom corpus and literature, and raises questions about values, moral behaviour, the meaning of human life, and right conduct (Alter 2010:xiii). Looking at the Book of Proverbs, its social and theological foundation reveals that the fear of God, which is submission to the will of God, is the beginning of wisdom (Longman & Garland 2009:50). According to Sæbø (2013:53):

The Book of Proverbs presents seven collections: 1–9; 10, 1–22, 16; 22, 17–24, 22; 24, 23–34; 25–29; 30, 1–31, 9; and 31, 10–31.

Further insight by Alter (2010) indicated that 'Chapters 10–22, 16' carries the superscription 'the Proverbs of Solomon', which may have encouraged its inclusion in the Hebrew canon, but it is also seen as a collection, or book, of aphoristic couplets (10 to 22) (New World Encyclopedia 2019). It is amazing that the Book of Proverbs was written sometime during the 10th century B.C. and its words are still viable and important for us to live by in this 21st century (Owen 2018). The Book of Proverbs teaches us understanding and equips people who read it with the ability to distinguish between what is right and wrong, good and bad, and what matters most and what does not (Owen 2018). Proverbs 21:4–7 is relevant in a social and theological context (Dell 2006).

## Paremiological analysis of Proverbs 21:4–7

This section brings out the axioms that persuades one to choose the good path, at the detriment of the bad path.

### Objective one: Description of the wicked person (v. 4)

The wicked are described as having eyes that are always looking for things that are greater than their means and a determination to get them by hook or crook. A wicked person is one who has a proud heart because of their toxic high self-esteem. Consequently, proud looks, 'whether based on social distinctions of inherited title, wealth, education, position or achievement, defy God, who made the poor as well as the rich. God hates such looks' (Edgar 2019:1). A proud person always likes to be respected by everyone, anywhere. Criminal eyes and a dirty heart are features of the lamp of a wicked person. Also, 'proud and ambitious people often work hard in order to exalt themselves ever higher in their own eyes' (Edgar 2019:1). The heart perspires, the eyes require it, and the hands and feet acquire it by any means. Thus, what they actually actualise to get is always evil things. Pride and evil eyes are always on the lookout for illegal ways and means of doing things. The 'sin of pride is a heart attitude expressed in an unhealthy, exaggerated attention to self and an elevated view of one's abilities, accomplishments, position or possessions' (Fairchild 2020:1).

### Objective two: The fruit of patience (v. 5)

Anyone who is diligent in what they do will surely be blessed by God. Diligence is patience in doing the right thing. Diligence is also perseverance in doing the right thing. Be diligent. It teaches us that rushing for success – being unwilling to work steadily and diligently – will lead to poverty (Prince 2018). The rhetor mentions that anyone who practices patience and perseverance will surely get to their destination notwithstanding the time. The diligent employs foresight as well as labour (Henry 1996:954). In the same vein, anyone who refuses to be patient and instead wants to get money through fast means will surely run into problems and challenges. The rhetor also emphasised that anything gotten through dishonest means will surely go like the wind, bringing the perpetrator to shame, penury and destitution.

### Objective three: The price of being dubious (v. 6)

Anyone who is dubious should be prepared to pay the price of sickness, shame and death. They use their mouths to tell lies about what they are not. They involve themselves in crimes and deceive people into thinking that they get their wealth through honest means. Surely, the aphorist emphasised that shame, disgrace and death never elude such as one. The aphorist who is vast in the laws of nature warns his students to run away from dishonest gains. According to Helping Up Mission (2014), the problem in Proverb 21 is not the getting of a 'fortune', but getting it 'by a lying tongue'.

And the threat – even sacred promise from God – here is that such a fortune will dissipate as quickly as ‘a fleeting vapor’ and can be as dangerous to the one who has it as a ‘deadly trap’. Having things – nice things, even a lot of nice things – is not a problem with God. But acquiring them dishonestly at the expense of others is.

Honesty has so many advantages, notwithstanding how long it takes. Also, the fruits of honesty are only portrayed by diligent and patient people who do not want to make dishonest gains.

### Objective four: Who is a robber? (v. 7)

A robber always uses violence to achieve his aims and objectives and thinks he is prospering. According to Merriam-Webster (1994), a robber is one who takes something away by force, which may be someone’s personal property. He gets his wealth by dispossessing people of their wealth, health and peace. Anything the robber does is unjust because his gains are obtained at the expense of his victim’s cries. According to Henry (2006), injustice’s consequences will come back to haunt the offender. The offender is the robber. The robber’s actions are unfair, unreasonable, excessive, blatant and obscene in the moral and religious sense of humanity. He will always be caught.

### Objective five: A good and a bad person (v. 8)

The good person and the bad person are compared and contrasted. The bad person is seen as the guilty person, and his ways are crooked. The bad person always seeks for dishonest means of making gains. He indulges in dishonest, criminal, corrupt and fraudulent ways of making wealth. His deals are shady and jagged. According to Guzik (2020):

Every life is on a way, and some people walk a way that is twisted and perverse. Those who walk this crooked way are guilty before God. As for the pure, his work is right: The crooked way belongs to the guilty man, but right work belongs to the pure man. The path we walk will display who we are. (p. 1)

A good person has a transparent character and does not seek dishonest gains. He does the right thing, notwithstanding how long it may take to get there. The character is pure, untainted, uncorrupted and unpolluted.

## Nigerians and drug trafficking

The issue of drug trafficking is not new to Nigerians and the international community. Rotimi (1998 [2011]) explained that in the 1950s, drug peddling was restricted to a few Nigerians who had travelled abroad and returned, especially those who had taken part in World War II; unfortunately, from the early 1980s to the present time, drug trafficking involving narcotics (cocaine, heroin, etc.) has been observed at alarming proportions. Nigerians are now indulging in national and international drug trafficking. Nationally, there is drug trafficking from one state to the

other, from one community to the other, from one compound to the other. Drugs being trafficked nationally include tramadol, heroin, marijuana, and Mkpuru mmiri, among others. Internationally, Nigerians have gained a reputation for trafficking in drugs through airport in Nigeria and also in their destination countries. Trafficked drugs include cannabis, cocaine, heroin and tramadol. Unfortunately, ‘cannabis is cultivated in different parts of the country and there is evidence of methamphetamine producing laboratories’ (Olusola 2021:1) and is also used by ‘10.6 million Nigerians, which is the most commonly used drug, followed by opioids with 4.6 million including tramadol’ (Nwosu 2021:1).

According to the NDLEA, trafficking of heroin and cocaine has become a serious social problem in Nigeria and is second only to politics as the country’s most serious social problem (Rotimi 1998 [2011]). According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime [UNDOC] 2022):

Since 2004 drug traffickers have been increasingly using West African countries, including Nigeria, for smuggling large amounts of cocaine from South America into Europe and North America. The country has a relatively high rate of drug abuse due to the continued availability of illicitly manufactured and diverted pharmaceutical products containing narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. (p. 1)

A study carried out by Molobe and Odukoya (2021) revealed that alcohol (43.2%), marijuana (33.8%) and hashish (24.6%) constituted most of the drugs used by Nigerian immigrants.

## Cases of drug trafficking

Apart from the cases of drug trafficking mentioned in the introduction of this article, other cases include but are not limited to those listed in Table 1.

## Causes of drug trafficking

Some of the root causes of drug trafficking include greed, unemployment, insecurity, poverty, and lack of enlightenment.

### Greed

When people want to get more than what they are supposed to get, it results in greed. Nigerians who indulge in drug trafficking are insatiable. They want to make millions from dishonest gains. They always want to get more and more at the detriment of people’s safety, health or other things. A greedy person is always looking for additional money. Bernock (2019) explained that a:

Person can be greedy for money, but also for fame, possessions, attention, compliments, gifts, another person’s time, and more. In the Bible, the words ‘greed’, ‘gruesome’ and ‘greediness’ are always used to describe the selfish motivation of a person. (p. 1)

This is the situation of those involving in drug peddling in Nigeria.

**TABLE 1:** Cases of drug trafficking in Nigeria.

S/N	Case	Date	Source
1	A 52-year-old father, Okeke Adolphus Anayochukwu, of four children was arrested with black liquid cocaine at the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport.	15 March 2022	Omonobi 2022
2	Ms Ayeki Happy who arrived at the airport from Italy on a Turkish Airline flight was arrested with 69 850 euros in cash concealed in her luggage and about 649 300 capsules of tramadol 225 mg were recovered.	28 February 2022	Olugbode 2022
3	4000 tablets of tramadol 225 mg were recovered from 24-year-old Abdulmiminu Abubakar who was arrested at Gidan Madara, Mubi North Local Government Area of Adamawa State.	27 February 2022	Usman 2022
4	In Abuja, two consignments were intercepted from transport vehicles in the Abaji area of the FCT. While the first contained 12 kg cannabis, the second had 356 kg of the same substance owned by Ayomide Adewale.	27 February 2022	Ejike 2022
5	34-year-old Nasiru Abdulrahman was arrested at Kano in connection with 476 kg of cannabis at Kwanar Dan Gora, Kiru local government area.	25 February 2022	Ailemen 2022
6	A Nigerian woman was arrested after being caught with 600 grams of heroin at Alghero Airport, Sardinia, Italy.	19 February 2022	Sahara 2022
7	Antinarcotic officers seized 649 300 capsules of tramadol 225 mg weighing 460.95 kg from Nwadu Christian imported from Pakistan via Addis Ababa through Ethiopian Airline.	16 February 2022	Ailemen 2022
8	A mother of a 2-month-old baby, Mariam Adetilewa Dirisu, was arrested for trafficking 5 kg skunk and 8.1 gm of molly. The suspect, who claimed to be a part-time 400-level student of International Studies and Diplomacy at the University of Benin, was arrested barely a week after she was nabbed and granted bail for attempting to smuggle drugs concealed in cassava flour called 'akpu' into NDLEA cell for another suspect in custody.	01 November 2021	Bertram 2021
9	Okey Eze was arrested by operatives of the NDLEA at the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, Abuja, with 350 wraps of cocaine worth over N2.3billion in street value.	22 September 2021	Omonobi 2021
10	NDLEA arrested a mother of three with 100 wraps of cocaine tucked in her private part and handbag.	04 July 2021	Odita 2021

FCT, federal capital territory; NDLEA, National Drug Law Enforcement Agency.

## Poverty

As a result of lack of money, food and shelter, and the enormous responsibilities on the shoulders of Nigerians, many people have devised ways of surviving. For some Nigerians, drug trafficking is the safest and simplest way to make quick money and pay off mounting debts. Nwannenaya and Abiodun (2017) elaborated thus:

The failing economy, insecurity, high rate of graduate unemployment, poverty, failure of government to provide basic necessities of life, high level of corruption and get-rich-quickly syndrome among the youths in Nigeria, constitute the various banes behind the practice of illicit drug trafficking in the state. (p. 1)

Poverty can also produce violent crimes because many poor drug traffickers think that the hope of treasure is worth more than going to jail.

## Toxic self-esteem

Nigerians who go into drug trafficking are proud. They want to place themselves in a position they have not yet reached. They want to gain respect from their communities, in urban and rural areas. They want to get chieftaincy title and exert influence in the community, and to achieve this, they indulge in activities such as drug trafficking. For instance, Abba Kyari, a deputy commissioner of police in Nigeria, was

discovered to be a drug trafficker; while he headed the Nigeria police intelligence team, the detective lived a socialite lifestyle strange to his profession (Adenakan 2021).

## Unemployment

Some of these drug traffickers are graduates with no employment in the future or are underemployed. Some of them are also skilled and unskilled people who have no idea of where the source of their income will come from. In order to survive, they engage themselves in drug trafficking. They are the drug barons, with no gainful employment but living high class life compared to those with gained employment (Rotimi 1998 [2011]).

## Corruption

Despite the efforts of national and international institutions, enormous amounts of drugs are produced, trafficked and consumed throughout the world, and drug trafficking undermines the rule of law and legitimate economic growth necessary for development and stability in Nigeria (Ekpenyong 2016). Furthermore:

The threat of drug trafficking has been identified globally, especially in Nigeria, and it is a major destabilising factor in the security parameters. Poverty, illiteracy, corruption, weak institutions/law enforcement agencies, and lack of funding for enforcement agencies contribute towards increasing trends of drug trafficking in Nigeria. (Ekpenyong 2016:2)

## Contextualising Proverbs 21:4–7 in Nigeria's environment

### Who is a 'big boy'?

In the Nigerian parlance, the 'big boy' is the person who is putting his hands where his economic status cannot sustain them. He is so proud of himself and tries to do everything to meet the particular status he has placed himself. According to Fairchild (2020:1), 'the greatest danger in the sin of pride is that it keeps our eyes on ourselves instead of on God Almighty. In essence, pride causes spiritual blindness and eventual death'. In fact, proud people do wicked things such as drug trafficking because the drugs they traffic are injurious to people's health and lives. It is also worthy to note that wicked people are the *big boys* in Nigerian society. These 'big boys' think that the blessings God reserved for the godly belong to them (Johnston 2019:1). These big boys do anything to traffic these drugs from one state to another in Nigeria, and also from Nigeria to other nations. Students also want to live a *big life*. For instance, on 10 June 2021, Ali Mohammed, a 27-year-old final year petroleum engineering student of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University (ATBU), was arrested with 3.032 kg of cannabis sativa at a motor park in Iddo, Lagos (NAN 2021).

The situation has escalated to the point that security personnel and personnel saddled with the responsibility of arresting culprits have started to indulge in drug trafficking themselves. They have seen the type of money that drug

traffickers are making, and they are enticed. They also see the expensive cars, mansions and respect that drug traffickers command in Nigeria, and they are tempted to live that type of life. Drug traffickers refer to themselves as 'big boys' and anyone who wants to join is asked if they 'want to chill with the big boys', which means they want the same wealth, prestige and followership that drug barons have. Unfortunately, religious people, such as pastors, also want to live a high-class life that is more than them. As a result, they lose sight of their moral compass and engage in a variety of illegal activities in order to gain an unfair advantage. These are all the hallmarks of pride, which is a sin, and pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall (Riggleman 2020).

### Consequences of trying to chill with the 'big boys'

Proverbs 21:4-7 mentions that the consequence that awaits the big boys and those who want to 'chill with the big boys' is that all the money they have made will go away. Take, for instance, the Nigerian Deputy Inspector General of Police, Abba Kyari, who built houses and hotels, and also petrol filling stations with proceeds from drug trafficking. The federal government of Nigeria has started the process of confiscating his properties, assets and bank accounts (Isaac 2022). In Proverbs 21:6, the big boys tell lies to achieve their aims. These drug traffickers usually tell lies to the immigration officials that what they are carrying is food, beverages or even spiritual materials, whereas what is inside the luggage is cocaine, heroin, marijuana, cannabis, tramadol, among others. Proverbs also mentions that shame, destruction and death are the end points of these big boys. Take a look at some of these drug barons caught. They are disgraced beginning with the airport. In fact, the newspapers and mass media take snapshots of these drug traffickers and upload them online, and it is a known fact that the Internet does not forget anything. Some of those drug traffickers caught in other countries were sentenced to death. For instance (International Centre for Investigative Reporting):

The People's Court of the southwestern province of Tay Ninh, Vietnam, has sentenced a 25-year-old Nigerian, Unachukwu Chiluba Paulinus, to death for illegally transporting narcotic substances into the country from Cambodia.

These drug traffickers can no longer get visas to many countries. They are also imprisoned for life in Nigeria. Their names have been tarnished for life, notwithstanding how long they lived. Their family lost respect. Their wicked life has finally destroyed them. With respect to Nigeria, the international community views Nigeria as a drug transit and destination nation. Once a Nigerian is seen in any country, people become scared of Nigeria because it is believed most Nigerians are drug traffickers and criminals. The international community cannot be blamed because the indicators are online for everyone to see how Nigerians are embarrassing themselves with their quest for quick wealth through drug trafficking. Unfortunately, '90% of criminalities in Nigeria today, ranging from banditry to

insurgency, kidnapping, rape and others, are linked to the use of illicit drugs' (International Centre for Investigative Reporting 2021:1). Other social consequences of drug trafficking by Nigerians include the high number of people who are dropping out of school. Also, there is an increasing rate of cultism among youths and the elderly. There is violence by groups negotiating for a share of their dishonest gain. There is an increase in armed robbery in Nigeria, with armed robbers carrying out their operations in broad daylight. High assassins are on the increase because they are high on these trafficked drugs. Also, those who would have contributed meaningfully to the growth and development of Nigeria have shifted attention to drug trafficking and recruited more members as drug barons. Drug trafficking has led to 'increased school dropouts, cultism, violence, armed robbery, lawlessness, cultural disorientation, assassinations and loss of productivity, among other significant damages to the body and internal organs' (International Centre for Investigative Reporting 2021:1).

### Gains of living a pure life

In Proverbs 21:8, human beings are encouraged to run away from the menace of drug trafficking. They do things the right way, but without breaking society's laws, policies and injunctions. Dixon (2022) calls it a 'clean heart', void of engaging in any form of inimical to the health of people close to them or far from them. Someone with a pure life pleases God and also lives a transparent life. In fact, a person who does the right thing because of the purity of his/her heart promotes caution, discernment and good choices while preventing corruption in thought, word and deed. They also support good health and a long life, which leads to satisfaction and peace (Chadwick 2022:1). In Nigeria, drug traffickers live impure lives because they have corrupted their thoughts, words and deeds. They are always thinking about how to make dishonest gain, that is, while they cut short their lives when they are caught, coupled with the fact that they will lose their peace of mind. It was this lack of satisfaction that placed them in the sad situation they found themselves in. Nigerian drug traffickers who participate, encourage and protect other drug traffickers are only destroying themselves (Agency Report 2021).

### The way forward

In a bid to curb the increase in drug trafficking by Nigerians, the following recommendations are made:

1. Families need to educate their children from the cradle about the dangers involved in getting money, affluence and prestige through dishonest ways.
2. The church needs to teach its members contentment, perseverance and diligence.
3. Drug traffickers should be prosecuted in accordance with the extant laws of the federal republic of Nigeria without fear of favour with regard to tribe, religion or ethnic group. This will discourage other Nigerians

from being enticed by the wealth and activities of drug traffickers.

4. Teachers at the primary, secondary and university levels need to continually affirm and confirm to their students the dangers involved in trying to live a life beyond their means.
5. Traditional institutions should not give any form of recognition to anyone with a questionable source of income. This will discourage others from trying to emulate that individual, who may be a drug trafficker.
6. The NDLEA should start looking critically at routes used for drug trafficking and also start profiling these traffickers systematically so as to nip their business in the bud.

## Conclusion

Proverbs 21:4–7 provides axioms for contentment. From a close literary reading of the pericope, trying to live a life beyond the means and capacity of someone pushes the person into so many illegal and obscene practices. Drug trafficking has been recognised by Nigerians as the surest and fastest way of making quick wealth, notwithstanding the national and international laws against it. Proverbs 21:4–7 relates that anyone who puts his hands into any evil activity, inclusively drug trafficking, is sure to receive shame, disgrace and evil death. The best way to live a pure and happy life is by following the way of nature, which is patience, perseverance and diligence. The church, religious institutions such as faith-based organisations and communities, society and civil-based institutions should stand on their toes in sensitising and admonishing drug traffickers on the implications of their activities on themselves, their families, the church and society at large.

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F.C.U. and S.A.N. contributed equally to the writing of this article.

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

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