


# Where elders cry, the young laugh: Proverbs 3:31–35 and the examining of malpractice in Nigeria

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This article examines Proverbs 3:31–35 in the exam malpractice crisis ravaging secondary schools in Nigeria. Proverbs 3:31–35 has the central thesis of the call to avoid the company of evildoers and the blessings of going on the right path. Scholars have approached the issue of examination malpractice from an economic, social and psychological lens. In this study, the Old Testament was used as the lens for tackling the situation. This is a qualitative study using the rhetorical method. The data were obtained from the Bible, Bible commentaries, gazettes, journal articles and other periodicals. Emerged themes include: (1) warning not to join bad people; (2) consequences of the warning and (3) end point of one's decision. Exam misconduct reflects deeper societal concerns such as corruption, weak regulatory enforcement and the temptation to succeed at any cost.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** Proverbs 3:31–35 has shown that the increasing number of graduates who cannot defend their certificates and corruption is caused by the blatant and obscene nature of exam malpractice in Nigeria. Old Testament and Practical Theology were implicated in the study.

**Keywords:** Proverbs 3:31–35; shame; honour; morality; exam; malpractice; Nigeria.

## Introduction

Proverbs 3:31–35 has the central thesis of the call to avoid the company of evildoers and the blessings of going on the right path. The rhetor in Proverbs 3:31–35 began with the call that the wise should not follow or envy the evil ways of those who follow the wrong path to get to their destination. Proverbs 3:31–35 emphasise the tremendous worth of wisdom and understanding, implying that they are more profitable than earthly goods like money and gold (Greene 2024). Also, Habtu (2006) avers that the contrast between two lifestyles in Proverbs 3:31–35 is brought into clear relief in the concluding verses' antithetical lines, where the second line of each couplet depicts the inverse of what is portrayed in the first line. The Lord curses one lifestyle while rewarding the other; he mocks one while giving favour to the other; and lastly, the wise inherit dignity while fools are put to shame. This difference in the destinies of the wise and the idiots will be continually emphasised throughout the book of Proverbs. The pericope shows that the immoral person defies God's wisdom and brings curses upon themselves, which can impact others as well. Thus, the aphorisms in the pericope bear important models that could serve as a lens for observing the increasing spate of exam malpractice among youth in secondary schools in Nigeria.

In Nigerian secondary schools, there are so many examinations that go on. Firstly, there is the West African Examinations Council (WAEC); secondly, there is the National Examination Council (NECO), the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), the National Business and Technical Examination Board (NABTEB), the National Common Entrance Examination (NCEE) as well as the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB). These examinations are held every year, and they are being written by students ages 10 and above. Unfortunately, there have been unprecedented cases of examination malpractice going on, as students and staff have been napped for engaging in examination malpractice. In 2024, a parent was caught in the joint admission and matriculation board exam trying to write an exam for the son (Isenyi 2024); or the case of Mmesoma Joy Ejikeme, the Anambra schoolgirl, who scored 249 but manipulated it to 360 and one Atung Gerald from Kaduna, who never participated in the 2023 UTME but forged the result and scored himself 380 (Ajayi & Erunke 2023). There is no year that passes without the issue of examination malpractice recorded on a large scale. Furthermore, the Nigerian government ignores these facts so that fraudulent practices and manipulation and jockeying in various exams in Nigeria are more profuse. Also, students, schools and other exam centres have overlooked the legal implications of being caught in examination malpractice. For instance, a student can be expelled and his or her

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

scripts cancelled. This is in accordance with the *Examination Malpractice Act 1999* promulgated by the national assembly to regulate examination malpractice of any form in the examination body or any other body established by the government (Olawaju n.d.). Unfortunately, the perennial lack of political will on the part of government to enforce the Decree 20 of 1984 and the *Examination Malpractice Act 33 of 1999* has caused the examination misconduct to remain on the increase in Nigeria (Onyibe, Uma & Ibina 2015). It is on this basis that the researcher feels that the implications of this sad development may be curbed in light of the aphorisms in Proverbs 3:31–35.

Scholars have succeeded in addressing the issue of examination malpractice in Nigeria (Anzene 2014; Udim, Abubakar & Essien 2018). Anzene (2014) took a sociological point of view, noting that since examination malpractice sows seeds of fraud and criminal values in our society, this vice cannot allow us to realise our future greatness because it renders our certificates useless and debases the foundation for assessing our skills and capacity. The issue was viewed from a socio-economic angle by Udim, Abubakar and Essien. The fear of failure, craving for certificates, desire of parents to choose the profession and university and pressure on kids to pursue subjects that they have no aptitude for were some of the causes of examination malpractice in Nigeria (Udim et al. 2018). Literature that approaches the issue of examination malpractice through the lens of Proverbs 3:31–35 is difficult to find. This is a qualitative study using the rhetorical method. The data were obtained from the Bible, Bible commentaries, gazettes, journal articles and other periodicals. The aim of this study is to examine the increasing spate of examinational malpractice in light of Proverbs 3:31–35. Firstly, this study gives a close understanding of Proverbs 3. Secondly, it provided a close reading of the pericope. Thirdly, it sketched the phenomenon of examination malpractice in Nigeria. Fourthly, it carried out a hermeneutic that embedded the text and the context within an African hermeneutical framework.

## Understanding Proverbs 3

Proverbs 3 is part of the wisdom books. In the words of Hubbard (1996), wisdom literature is a literary genre common in the ancient Near East in which instructions for successful living are given or the perplexities of human existence are contemplated. Traditionally, the Book of Proverbs was believed to have been written by King Solomon, because of the fact that King Solomon was known as the wisest man who ever lived. This may also be the reason for the attribution of the book of Proverbs as Hebrew wisdom literature (Zaluchu & Engel 2022). He ruled over the kingdom of Israel after the reign of his father, David (Rota 2021). Solomon probably gathered and organised proverbs beyond his own, as mentioned in Ecclesiastes 12:9, indicating that he carefully selected and arranged many sayings. The second compilation of Solomon's proverbs in chapters 25–29 was likely curated by King Hezekiah's scribes, who aimed to spiritually enrich

the people with God's teachings (Nelson 2024). As for the date of the book, the traditional attribution of parts of it to King Solomon must, of course, be discarded. And with this rejection, there is no reason to seek an early date for it. The time when, all things considered, the compilation is best explained is between B.C. 350 and 150. From the nature of the case, it is impossible to fix even approximately the date of the origin of individual couplets. Many of the arguments valid against an early date of compilation are valueless so far as the single proverbs are concerned (Gates 1930).

Proverbs 3 is designed to allow us to know the instruction and moral discipline needed to live one's life successfully, as well as the teachings on understanding and discernment that help the young and the old with the capability to distinguish between what is right and wrong, what is good or bad and what matters most and what does not matter at all (Owen 2018). In the words of Cameneti (2024), the book of Proverbs teaches us how to succeed and prosper in this life. Proverbs 3 discusses wisdom and knowledge. Proverbs 3 emphasises the value of wisdom and understanding in life. It encourages readers to place their full trust in the Lord and not rely on their own wisdom. Furthermore, Proverbs 3 stresses the importance of trusting in God. Proverbs 3 emphasises the need to rely on God's guidance and honour him in all areas of life. Trusting in God's knowledge leads to the proper decisions and success. Proverbs 3 emphasises the value of righteousness and integrity. Living with justice and integrity is emphasised throughout the chapter. It urges readers to follow moral values and behave with integrity, which leads to favour with both God and others. It also emphasised the relationship between discipline, correction and success. Discipline is portrayed as a kind of God's love that guides people down the correct path. Proverbs 3 emphasises the significance of accepting correction and not rejecting the Lord's punishment. The question of blessings and prosperity was not overlooked. Those who walk the road of wisdom and righteousness are promised benefits and success. Proverbs 3 argues that obeying God's commands results in abundance and favour.

## Close reading of Proverbs 3:31–35

Proverbs 3:31–35 is finely divided into verse 31 (warning not to join bad people), verses 32–34 (consequences of the warning) and verse 35 (end point of one's decision).

### Warning not to join bad people - verse 31

In verse 31, the rhetor appeals to his student not to אֲבִירָה (Elliger & Rudolph 1977), the violent. Hebrew אֲבִירָה is derived from the word אָבַר, which means envy, jealousy, zealous, be moved or be provoked. On the other hand, violent in Hebrew means עָוֵר (violent, oppressor, malicious). This word refers to actions born of provocation of one's actions. Because others do it, we become provoked to do the same. This implication shows mass behaviour arising from social causes. This entails that the youth should not be jealous of or provoked by the prosperity of the violence in society. It concerns issues of

daily life for proper conduct and a successful existence (Zuck 1991:209). Their mates or peers may be succeeding in their various undertakings through dubious ways or strategies; the righteous should be steadfast and not allow themselves to be lured into accepting that the wrong path is the quick path to success. In verse 31 a, *do not envy the violent man*, and verse 31b insisted that apart from being jealous of an immoral person, the moral man must not even choose any of the ways of the immoral man. This means that the rhetor knows that the wicked man may come to entice the righteous man. Thus, even if the righteous man refuses to envy the wicked, the wicked may entice the righteous to come and join him in his wickedness. To choose in Hebrew is *תִּבְחָר*, which means to select, to test, to desire. This entails that the righteous should not even think of testing some of the actions of immoral men.

### Consequences of the warning - verses 32-34

The rhetor gave warnings against failing to abide by his warning. In verse 32a, he noted that God detests the perverse. The word 'detests' in Hebrew means *תוֹעֵבָה* (Davidson 1970), which is derived from *תוֹעֵבָה*, which means disgust, detests, abhor, hate, disapprove and disdain. The perverse in Hebrew is *לִוּי*, which means to crooked, devious, guile, forward, cunning and crafty. The rhetor emphasised that God hates anyone who undertakes any activity that is crooked and cunning. It calls for intellectual reflection (Crenshaw 1981). In verse 32b, the rhetor describes the end of the righteous. The Lord takes the upright into his confidence; that is, the counsel of the Lord is with the righteous. He will guide the path of the righteous, provided he does not take sides with the immoral. In verse 33a, the rhetor insisted that the curse of the Lord is upon those who are doing evil. Hebrew *קִצְרָה* (Cruden 2010) means curse, condemnation, spell will be on those who engage in evil as an appose to blessing, bliss, benediction and commendation that the righteous will receive (v. 33b). In verse 34a, God shows *לִגְיוֹ* [mocks, scorns, discipline] to those who are *לְלִצְיִים* [arrogant, boastful]. Thus, the rhetor reckons all those who engage in evil as arrogant, who feel that they double-cross the moral process of getting to the top for shortcuts. In verse 34b, the rhetor insisted that God will show *חֵן* [favour, grace, adorn] to the *לְעֲנִיִּים* (Kelly 1992) [afflicted, humble, poor, oppressed, needy]. This shows that God will show favour to those who are oppressed because of their resolve to do the right thing. Apart from God's punishment, some righteous people need to make a personal decision to stay away from it and look at it with disgust, etc.

### End point of one's decision - verse 35

The rhetor noted the end point of the decision for everyone. Those who do the right thing are reckoned as the *חֲכָמִים* [wise, skillful, expert, sage, ethical, religious and prudent]. According to Goldingay (2016), wisdom involves making decisions in a way that is right and has integrity, and it involves awe for Yahweh. The rhetor further mentioned that the *חֲכָמִים* will get honour. The Hebrew word for honour is *כְּבוֹד*, which also means glorious, riches, abundance, wealth and dignity. This shows that those who are wise will be made

richer and more respected than the *כֹּסֵל* [fool, stupid, dullard], among others. In fact, the rhetor quips that the fool will get *קִלְוֹן* [shame, dishonour, disgrace, confusion, reproach]. Thus, the endpoint is that the wise will be honoured, while the fool who engages in immoral things will end up being disgraced.

## Exam cheating among secondary school students

A definition of examination cheating will be important in understanding the discourse under study. Examination cheating refers to any dishonest or unethical behaviour that occurs during exams or assessments with the intent of getting an unfair advantage or influencing the outcomes. It can also be seen as any deliberate act of wrongdoing, contrary to the rules of examinations designed to give a candidate an undue advantage (Adie & Oko 2016). There are various forms of examination malpractice in Nigeria.

Firstly, there is cheating in exam halls. This cheating includes the use of textbooks, notebooks, lecture materials, writing on palms and laps and the use of phones, among others. This has been a systemic occurrence among secondary school students. Secondly, there is also the sale of exam questions by those who are working in the office of the exam body involved. For instance, during WAEC, question papers are seen by the students even before the exams. This gives the students the opportunity to write the answers anywhere before entering the exam. According to the WAEC, some mischievous supervisors are responsible for the snapshots of examination question papers found on WhatsApp groups (Ugbodaga 2020). At Nodos International Schools, it was discovered that invigilators gather all the candidates into one class and supervised the free exchange of answers, and the Mathematics teacher also wrote out answers on the whiteboard as students hurriedly copied into their answer booklets (Aworinde 2016).

Also, it gives the student the ability to read and recite all the answers to the questions he or she has seen before the exam. Thirdly, exam invigilators are known to be involved in exam malpractice inside the exam hall. During the WAEC, the NECO, the BECE, NABTEB, the NCEE, and JAMB, students are given the opportunity to be copied in the class. A teacher who is good in that subject is allowed to come into the exam hall, write the answers on the board, and all the students copy. The exam invigilator is given money donated by the students at the end of the exam. This is a reoccurring trend in Nigerian secondary schools. According to one student who partook in exam malpractice reports (Okeke 2024):

I left my school to register for WAEC in another school because the teachers there helped students during examinations; they wrote on the board and the students copied and passed with good grades. On getting to the university, I realised that things are different. (p. 1)

Fourthly, those invigilators who are resolved not to partake in exam malpractice are attacked on their way home.

Particularly during private examinations, candidates now go to centres fully armed with guns and other weapons (Onyejeme 2017). Some of them are beaten, and their exam materials are taken away from them. This is the situation that has forced many of the exam invigilators to join the bad gang of those who engage in exam malpractice. Fifthly, students pay people to impersonate them and write their exams. There are the kid mercenaries. Sometimes, they may pay people ahead of them in the class or even a graduate of the secondary school to come and sit for the exam for them. In the lamentation of Damilola (2018), examination:

Malpractice is no longer the indiscretion of pupils of students. It has become a money-making thing. It has become a syndicated affair, whereby the pupils and the students are mere instruments making money. There is also the situation where schools organise malpractice for their students. We have found that the unique proposition of many schools today is that 'if you come to my school, I will give you 100 per cent pass. You cannot fail. Whether it is common entrance or WAEC or NECO, you will get 100 per cent. (p. 1)

This has led to people getting scores that they are not worthy of getting. Thus, there are so many reasons that have necessitated and sustained examination malpractice among secondary school students. The Firstly is the moral decadence in Nigeria. No one wants to care if something is right or wrong. Society has come to see exam malpractice as something that has to be done if one is to enter the university without hindrance. In fact, some parents give their children money for examination malpractice at their school. Youdeowei (2018) noted that parents come together to contribute money to bribe invigilators. Dike (2021) lamented that some parents give them money to look for exam question papers. During each exam, students are asked to donate money so that they can give it to the invigilator, and parents willingly give these monies to their wards. This is how morally bankrupt Nigerian society is. Also, the invigilator who collects the bribe to allow exam malpractice to take place in an exam hall tells how morally bankrupt the learned person could be.

Secondly, is the emphasis on paper qualification. Nigerian schools emphasise paper qualifications over intelligence. Before getting admission into the senior secondary schools, students at the junior secondary schools are expected to get a certain number of A's. This usually forces the students to do anything possible to get the number of distinctions needed. Also, for senior secondary school students to get admission into the university, they are expected to get a certain number of A's (distinctions). This made them engage in all forms of gimmicks and cunning activities to get the needed scores or grades. During JAMB, students are made to score more than two hundred marks ( $N = 200$ ). This makes the students and their parents do anything within their powers to get the mark, including impersonation and altering schools.

Thirdly, there is the activity of quack teachers, inadequate teaching, a lack of teaching instruments and facilities, and a

noisy teaching environment. The majority of the teachers hired have had no teaching or training because the Nigerian government has confused holding a degree with having the competence to teach (Ladipo 2020). Nigerian secondary schools are busy employing fake teachers. There are some teachers who cannot make a complete sentence and cannot spell correctly. Yet these teachers are teaching the English language as a subject. The reason is that the intelligent people who are supposed to be teaching in secondary schools are discouraged because of the low salaries paid to teachers. Also, some teachers do not come to class as expected. Some teachers can be teaching in three to four secondary schools; hence, they may teach the students in one school just two times in a term. For example, students of chemistry are supposed to be involved in practicals, yet in a complete term, they are only doing theory with its attendant inadequate teaching. There is also a lack of teaching instruments and facilities such as laboratories, white boards, light, fans, good chairs and tables and a neat environment. Instead, students are made to do practicals in the classroom under high temperatures. When exam officials come to inspect some of these facilities, they are bribed to give fake reports that the school has good laboratories and teaching instruments.

It is also needed to provide a legal framework for cheating in examinations. When there is legal neglect, the system will move with the people in it in a negative direction and cultivate evil. This is what social action in Parson's system theory entails. Action, according to Parsons (1973), does not take place in isolation because it is not 'empirically discrete but occurs in constellations', which constitute systems (Hamilton 1983). This entails that there are several factors that have sustained the activities of exam cheaters in secondary schools in Nigeria. Exam cheaters do not understand the legal implications of what they do. These exam cheaters include the students and the invigilators and supervisors who collect bribes and allow students to engage in malpractice. A foremost intervention to promote examination integrity in Nigeria is the 1999 *Examination Malpractice Act* (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999), which criminalises examination malpractice and specifies jail terms and fines for offenders (Agwu et al. 2020). However, the government has been lukewarm in her approach towards tackling exam cheating in Nigeria. This is because, to a great extent, those said to be caught in malpractice are rarely made to face the full wrath of the law. The police who are there to maintain law and order only go to the exam venue to chat with their colleagues, and others collect their own share of the bribe.

## In times of crises: Proverbs 3:31

In Proverbs 3:31a, the sage warns his audience not to follow those doing evil or contemplate joining them in any of their actions. Thus, the injunction is practical, dealing with the art of living and grounded in the law of God (Hale 2007). Bringing this to the Nigerian context, students are warned before any examination that examination malpractice is not

good, and if they are caught, they will be expelled. The sage insists that students should not be annoyed when they see other students doing exam malpractice and getting away with it. Their prosperity is just for a short time, which makes envying the immoral person a waste of time. In verse 31b, students are encouraged not to partake in donating money for malpractice, going into exam halls with textbooks, notebooks, or phones or any of the models of examination malpractice.

In verse 32, the sage insists that God is angry with anyone who engages in any immoral act. In the context of this article, exam malpractice is an immoral thing. God hates the actions of any Nigerian student who indulges in examination malpractice. This shows that his anger is with them. For those students who refuse to partake in exam malpractice, God sees them as upright, and the sage insists that God is proud of them (v. 32b) because they have fulfilled what is required of a human life (Rylaarsdam 1976). An upright person is someone who sees doing the right thing as obeying God. Thus, students who refuse to pay money as a bribe commit exam malpractice and uprightness, and God promised to make them glorious.

In verse 33a, the sage was equivocal in lamenting the anger of the Lord on those who do wrong things. He noted that God's curse is on them and their house (Kohlenberger 1987). This is applicable to Nigerian students in secondary schools who partake in examination malpractice. Thus, they should recognise that they have brought the curse of God upon themselves. In verse 33b, the sage says that the righteous will be blessed by God. He also mentions that even the home of the righteous will be blessed by God. Thus, the student who refuses to engage in exam malpractice brings honour to the family. But those who engage in exam malpractice, if caught, are placed on social media and published in newspapers, and this brings shame upon them, their families and all their friends. Also, they will fail the exam for which they have been caught.

In verse 34, all those who engage in exam malpractice are doing that so that people will think they are intelligent. They score many distinctions, and they are given key roles in secondary schools. In fact, they score high and are given courses like medicine and law to study at the university. In verse 34, the sage made it clear that they would end in mockery. Their shame will come at a time when they never expected it. When they are employed anywhere, they will find it difficult to prove their worth because they fraudulently get it. But in verse 34b, the sage noted that God will favour those who are oppressed because they refuse to do immoral things. Bringing this to bear in the Nigerian context, students who refuse to take part in exam malpractice in Nigeria are subjected to intimidation, molestation and oppression. Sometimes, the school principal distracts the moral students so that he or she might fail. Sometimes, the student is not allowed to enter the exam hall because of a failure to pay the exam malpractice fee. However, the sage noted in verse 34b

that God will show favour to the moral student. This entails that the moral student is assured that he or she will score better and still maintain his or her good name.

In verse 35, the sage mentions that the wise inherit honour. The wise is the student who refuses to follow other students to do evil. But those who engage in exam malpractice are termed foolish (v. 35b). The sage insisted that shame and dishonour come to the fool. In this structure, folly is not simply ignorance but also wickedness, and wisdom is synonymous with righteousness (Schnabel 2001). Thus, students who engage in exam malpractice and end up becoming medical doctors become thorns in the medical profession. Alhassan and Anya (n.d.) noted that exam malpractice breeds criminals, 'fraudsters' and killers, creating a havoc that fake medical doctors can cause to people and nation. They end up leading many people to their early graves. They end up forgetting scissors and razors in the stomachs of people they have performed caesarean sections on. The shame is seen in the fact that the student who partakes in exam malpractice finds it difficult to impart knowledge when he or she becomes a teacher. This is the reason there are so many graduates who can neither read nor write. Also, pharmacists who are products of exam malpractice engage in the sale of fake drugs and also recommend drugs for headaches to be given to someone with stomach pain. This is the shame that comes to the individual who engages in exam malpractice and the society that failed to do anything for people caught engaging in exam malpractice.

The essence of education is to instill moral values in the life of a child. With regard to formal education, the essence is to instill Christian values. The instruments that are available to instill these values are the teachers, especially those who teach Christian religious education or civics education, and the church or any faith-based organisation. Before now, church missionary impacts have been felt in schools, hospitals and microfinance banks (Uroko 2024). Because the social system of education has been massively damaged, it needs to be resolved by building inner values that rely on the word of God, which can be achieved by the church, teachers or concerned stakeholders.

## Conclusion

Proverbs 3:31–35 warns against dishonesty, an immoral lifestyle and the repercussions of indulging in wicked acts such as the examination malpractice that plagues Nigeria. The emerging themes in the pericope highlighted the significance of integrity, righteousness and humility in one's actions and dealings with others. These ideas are especially applicable in the context of examination malpractice in Nigeria. Examination malpractice undermines the ideals of honesty, justice and meritocracy that are fundamental to a just society. It undermines trust in educational institutions, diminishes academic achievements and eventually damages individuals and the nation as a whole. Exam misconduct reflects deeper societal concerns such as corruption, weak regulatory

enforcement and the temptation to succeed at any cost. To overcome this issue, concerted efforts are required at all levels. Educational institutions should enhance their examination methods, impose strong penalties on offenders and foster an academic integrity culture. Government officials should allocate enough resources for monitoring and oversight, as well as execute policies that address the core causes of malpractice, such as poverty and a lack of access to quality education. Furthermore, cultural reform is required, including the nurturing of ethical principles and the promotion of an attitude that values honesty, hard work and fair competition. This could be accomplished by schools holding discussions with students and alerting them about the short- and long-term consequences of indulging in examination misconduct. Also, religious reform is necessary that calls on students and staff in exam matters to be Godfearing above their ambitions and desires that may lead them to evil actions with its attendant consequences. By respecting the ideals of integrity and righteousness outlined in Proverbs 3, Nigeria can combat examination malpractice and create a more just and prosperous society in which everyone has the opportunity to thrive based on their merit and efforts.

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