Text Criticism and Literary Criticism

Michael V. Fox

1. The Problem

Nineteenth century scholars called text criticism “Lower Criticism,” not to disparage it but to indicate that it was foundational and preparatory to what they called the “Higher Criticism,” also known then as literary criticism, which involved composition history and an attempt to reconstruct the original meaning of the text. For practical purposes, it is indeed helpful to think of preparing the text as a preliminary to literary analysis of it. But on closer examination, text criticism and literary criticism prove to be interlaced rather than discrete domains of scholarship. The Lower Criticism cannot really precede the Higher. A textual judgment is at heart a literary-critical decision, and as such it is not devoid of the subjective assessments, individual circumstances, and personal inclinations that make exegesis interesting.

This is not all that text criticism is. There are preparatory steps, namely the gathering of variants (including ones retroverted from the ancient versions) and consideration of bibliography, meaning the physical history of books. When enough exemplars are available, it is also necessary to establish stemmata in order to determine the historical sequence of variants and eliminate some demonstrably later ones. But all this preparation serves only to line up and eliminate demonstrably erroneous mutations. This leaves an irreducible core of variants for the critic’s choice. At this point, if one is to make a critical decision and not merely use whatever text-state is at hand, such as BHS or a particular manuscript, the scholar must exercise literary judgment, both exegetical and aesthetic.

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1 Abbreviations:
AB: Anchor Bible Proverbs (Fox)
K Kennicott
M Masoretic text
G Septuagint
OG Old Greek: the original translation of G, as reconstructed.
OS Old Syriac: the original translation of S, as reconstructed.
Σ Syriac (Peshitta, Leiden edition)
θ′ Theodotion
σ′ Symmachus
α′ Aquila
BHQ Biblia Hebraica Quinta
BHS Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia

2 George Brooke too has challenged the distinction between the Higher and Lower criticisms by showing that the line between the two has become blurred (“The Qumran Scrolls and the Demise of the Distinction between Higher and Lower Criticism,” In New Directions in Qumran Studies: Proceedings of the Bristol Colloquium on the Dead Sea

Comment: This article is forthcoming in a Festschrift (recipient not yet announced). Your comments and corrections would be welcome. Please let me know if you find any typos. Michael. mvfox@wisc.edu.
Practical need required me to reflect on text criticism from a theoretical standpoint when I accepted the editorship of an eclectic edition of the book of Proverbs for the Oxford Hebrew Bible. The OHB, under the editorship of Ronald Hendel, seeks to produce eclectic texts of the biblical books. This bold goal immediately presented me with a conundrum: Which text of Proverbs would I aim to produce? I can hardly aim at the Urtext, which is a meaningless notion for this book. The book of Proverbs is a collection of collections, with later additions of varying scope, some entering before M was formed, some after (with G as their main witness). The book of Proverbs, like all wisdom books of which we have multiple exemplars, grew in stages. What reason is there, outside a religious context, to privilege one of them as earlier or to combine variants from different text-forms, such as M and G? Such quandaries led me to ask, Can this text be criticized?

One possible answer is No: M is the final form, whatever its prehistory, and there is no point in tampering with its integrity. This answer is problematic, for the notion of “final form” is rather strange. Usually we would prefer the earliest form available, not the final form with the errors and intrusions it inevitably holds. In any case, “final form” is a teleological concept, appropriate only in a religious setting. In fact, even within the religious-communal setting of rabbinic Judaism, we do not actually have the “final form” of M. As Mordecai Brauer, the editor of the strictly Halakhic Jerusalem Crown edition, says, “The text of the Bible was fixed by the Masorah only as a theoretical teaching.” Every existing edition of M requires, or at least justifies, correction.

Or one might argue that there are several legitimate forms of the Bible. In the case of Proverbs, these are witnessed by M, the Septuagint’s source-text, the slightly different text used by the Syriac translator, extant ancient and medieval Hebrew manuscripts, and the conjectural original. Each stands on its own, and what justification is there for adjusting one to the other? There is some substance in this objection. In the course of history, deliberate revision and undirected textual drift resulted in different text-states of the Bible, and each has its validity in its own context, especially when that context is defined as a religious community. But this does not mean that we are restricted to diplomatic editions or photographic reproductions. Text critics may aim for any text-state they choose or are assigned, whether conjectural, like an archetype, or preserved, more or less, in later documents, such as Quman manuscripts, M and G. In all cases, a critical stance requires an editor to decide which of several valid text-states to privilege.

So, can this text be criticized? The answer is yes, but we have to be clear on the ontology of the text being produced; that is, how it exists, and just what it represents.

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Scrolls, 8-10 September 2003 [ed. J. G. Campbell, W. J. Lyons and L. Pietersen; London: T&T Clark, 2005], 26-42). He argues that the pluriformity of Qumran documents shows (as I think all will agree) that scribes were not only copyists but also were “creative participants in the transmission process” (41). I wish to examine the issue from a different perspective, thinking about what a text critic does and must do.

3 See the project description at http://ohb.berkeley.edu/.

2. Illustrations

Before turning to theory, I want to look at some examples from Proverbs, not to advocate particular textual choices but to examine the kind of reasoning by which text criticism proceeds. In the following examples, the critic must go beyond mechanical sifting to literary explanations, that is to say, judgments based on content, tropes, and the aesthetics of parallelism, assonance, and the like. The examples are organized by the types of conclusions produced by the literary criteria.

2.1 One variant preferable

Proverbs 8:16

By me princes rule, so too nobles, all judges of righteousness.

Occasionally one cannot simply choose “the” Masoretic text because the Masoretic tradition itself preserves variants. Most are orthographic, but sometimes the difference is semantic. All codices and editions in current use, including the Aleppo and the Leningradensis, read קִנְיָן in 8:16, and all modern commentators accept this without further ado. It is easy to see why. It appears in the editions we all use, and it makes good sense. Wisdom, personified as a great matron, declares “By me princes rule, so too nobles, all judges of righteousness [i.e., righteous judges].” The semantic relationship between the parallel lines is, in Adele Berlin’s terms of analysis, syntagmatic. In this case, the second line restricts and disambiguates the first by the added modifier “righteousness.” Not all the earth’s rulers, the second line specifies, but only the righteous ones rule by wisdom. Case closed? No.

Instead of קִנְיָן, a variant reads קְיָם. With this variant, the verse is to be translated, “By me princes rule, so too nobles, all the judges of the earth.” קְיָם is represented in the OG and the OS and also in the Masoretic tradition. A marginal annotation in ms Rossi 314 assigns this reading to the important Hillel Codex, of which now only the Pentateuch is extant. The fourteenth century commentator Yosef Naḥmias confirms this reading, as does the medieval Masoretic tractate Minhāt Shai. This variant is found in many Kennicott manuscripts and even conflated with קִנְיָן in K 76. Thus קְיָם is not an emendation of M. It is an alternative Masoretic reading.

How can we choose? In support of קְיָם, we can note that the phrase קְיָם appears in Isa 40:23 (יהוה) and Ps 2:10 (יהוה), and that the sequence with קְיָם appears in Ps 148:11: קְיָם יְהוָ֣ה יָשָׁ֔ם לְכָל־שָׁמָ֖יִם. To be sure, this same evidence can be used to the reverse effect, as when BHQ explains “earth” as assimilation to the usual form of expression as found in Biblical Hebrew. The problem with such

5 Adele Berlin, The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1985), 75-78.
reasoning is not that it is impossible but that it can undo all evidence that tends toward establishing the likelihood of a variant. Hence it is self-serving (and would never be used to support a non-M variant). In the present case, the expression מָאן הַמַּרְצָמַי is not so common nor יָדַּמְתָּא so difficult that a scribe or translator would see it necessary to assimilate the latter to the former, in the absence of an ideological or aesthetic motive for doing so.

When the verse is read with “earth,” the relationship between the parallel lines is paradigmatic, meaning that the second line is basically the semantic equivalent of the first. In this case the second line serves to emphasize the scope of the nouns in the first. By this reading, the verse grants that gentile rulers too may be wise. The more common Masoretic form, with “judges of righteousness,” does not actively exclude them, but it does allow itself to be understood as confined to Israelite rulers, or at least those who judge righteously, and this may have been the motive for the change from “earth” to “righteousness.” The decision between the variants must base itself on literary considerations and comes close to constituting an aesthetic preference for one. But we cannot avoid the choice, because even within the scope of the Masoretic family, we do not have the “final” or immutable form of the text.

Proverbs 26:23

When a variant is retrieved by retroversion, a large component of uncertainty intrudes, but the final decision still requires a literary evaluation.

G 26:23a explains what the metaphor of drossiness implies: deceit. In 26:23b, λεία represents בְּלִקָּם (“smooth”); see G-Gen 27:11. (Possibly λεία is used of smooth speech in the present verse to allude to Jacob’s smoothness. That the translator allows himself the “freedom” of introducing an intertextual factor in the rendering does not argue against the existence of a textual difference.) גלָּלְפַּם alone fits the imagery: Just as the sheen of drossy silver disguises worthless clay, so does the gloss of unctuous, deceitful speech mask inner hostility. “Smooth lips” is also appropriate to the theme of the proverb-cluster in 26:20-28, namely hostile speech. And note how בְּלִקָּם describes an enemy’s flattery in Ps 55:22a. The emendation presupposes only the loss of the left vertical of the ﬂ. The grammatical incongruity of the masculine adjective with the feminine בָּשְׂרָא remains.

Proverbs 21:20

According to Berlin’s terminology in ibid. 73-74.

In some cases, all extant variants are (it may be argued) wrong, and the original must be reconstructed. In G 21:20, ἀνασαφότεται represents מיהן. The letter ב can easily become ג by the detachment of the left vertical (thus Baumgartner), and the reverse fusion is equally possible. אֵ֑י סֹֽמְמִיָּ֑ו = מָֽב or an ungrammatical מָֽב. A ג ligature can resemble א in several early square scripts. Though מָֽב is the proper form of the construct, מָֽב is to is the preferred retroversion as being closer graphically to מָֽב. A retroversion should aim for the exact form of G’s source text, even when this is erroneous. But an error in one item of a verse does not invalidate other components.

G 21:20a means that the wise man has a “treasure” of wise things to say. This makes sense, but G 20b—with “on the mouth of”—is difficult because it seems to assert that the fool will swallow and absorb the wise man’s wisdom, which a מָֽב, by definition, would not do. But M is awkward too, reading, “A delightful treasure and oil is in the house of the wise …” as if “treasure” and “oil” were distinct and commensurate goods.

The correct text can be restored by combining G and M: אֵ֑י תַֽהְבָּה וַאֲרֵ֣קה חֵ֥ד לֵ֥ב מִלְּחַמָּֽו (“A delightful treasure dwells in the habitation of the wise, but a foolish man devours it”). That is to say, he consumes his family’s wealth, quickly and improvidently. In this case, literary considerations support both the reconstruction and the acceptance of a text evidenced only indirectly in M and G.

2.2 Both variants equally valid

Sometimes it is unnecessary to prefer one variant over another, not simply because the case is undecidable but because the development of a book allows for two valid forms of a sentence. There are many variant proverbs within M-Prov, and it would make no sense for the critic to assimilate one to the other, or to assimilate a variant within M to its match outside it.

Proverbs 12:16

מְרֵ֑ב מָֽב מַֽהְכַּֽו מְֽיָּחַֽו מִֽלְּחַמָּֽו יָֽאָֽשָּ‏֣ו אֵ֑י שְֽׁמוֹמִיָּ֑ו אֲֽרוּֽת נֵֽמֶר מְֽיָּחַֽו מַֽהְכַּֽו מְֽיָּחַֽו מִֽלְּחַמָּֽו יָֽאָֽשָּ‏֣ו אֵ֑י שְֽׁמוֹמִיָּ֑ו אֲֽרוּֽת נֵֽמֶר מְֽיָּחַֽו מַֽהְכַּֽו מְֽיָּחַֽו מִֽלְּחַמָּֽו יָֽאָֽשָ‏֣ו אֵ֑י שְֽׁמוֹמִיָּ֑ו אֲֽרוּֽת נֵֽמֶר מְֽיָּחַֽו מַֽהְכַּֽו מְֽיָּחַֽו מִֽלְּחַמָּֽו יָֽאָֽשָ‏֣ו אֵ֑י שְֽׁמוֹמִיָּ֑ו אֲֽרוּֽת נֵֽמֶר מְֽיָּחַֽו מַֽהְכַּֽו מְֽיָּחַֽו מִֽלְּחַמָּֽו יָֽאָֽשָ‏֣ו אֵ֑י שְֽׁמוֹמִיָּ֑ו אֲֽרוּֽת נֵֽמֶר מְֽיָּחַֽו מַֽהְכַּֽו מְֽיָּחַֽו מִֽלְּחַמָּֽו יָֽאָֽשָ‏֣ו אֵ֑י שְֽׁמוֹמִיָּ֑ו אֲֽרוּֽת נֵֽמֶר מְֽיָּחַֽו מַֽהְכַּֽו מְֽיָּחַֽו М vocalizes the verb in 12:16a as passive (hence: “The fool—his anger is made known on the same day” or “at once”), whereas G (εξειγελήλει) and S (ἐξειγελήλει) (hence: “The fool makes his anger known on the very same day”; that is to say, immediately). The latter variant makes for a tighter parallel to 16b, with both lines describing how one chooses to deal with his anger. It is, however, uncertain whether the tighter parallelism was original or introduced by the translator, since both can be

8 Ibid. מָֽב is translated by ἀνασαφότειν in Isa 13:21, 32:16, and Ezek 17:23.
motivated by literary values, such as achieving a tighter parallelism, with closer semantic and morphological correspondence between the two lines.\(^{10}\)

Proverbs 17:14

עֶשֶׂר יִקְשָׁר רָעָשִׁים (לְפָנֵי הַמַּעֲשָׂתָיו) "Releasing water—the start of a quarrel, so before a quarrel breaks out, leave off.” That is to say, provoking a quarrel is like opening a sluice: The flow begins as a trickle but quickly surges out of control.\(^{11}\)

G (to be translated, “Righteous rule gives authority to words, but sedition and strife go before poverty”) is a guess at a difficult verse, corresponding to M only in miscellaneous words. (G does not know the meaning of מְשָׂכָה, but renders it differently in each occurrence.\(^{12}\) In fact, modern lexicographers too are guessing its meaning.) Nevertheless, it is possible to retrovert לְוָגוֹיִם to מִלָּה, where M has מְשָׂכָה. The validity of G’s reading is supported by the idiom in Ps 22:8b, מְשָׂכָה וּמִלָּה: “they let loose with the lip”), that is to say, “shoot off their mouths” in insult (cf. Jäger). The graphic mechanism of the dittography or haplography מְשָׂכָה ↔ מִלָּה is unclear, but there is no reason for a translator to change “water” to “words.”

Assuming that G’s source-text had מִלָּה, it should have been translated, “Releasing words starts a quarrel, so before a quarrel breaks out, leave off.” That is to say, uncontrolled speech provokes conflict. This is a teaching found often in Wisdom literature, such as in Prov 10:19 and 17:27.

Both forms of the verse are valid. Whichever is later arose by the process of proverb permutation, which is well-attested in M Proverbs itself, for example in 14:27 and 13:14. In 17:14, this factor may have been activated by the graphic similarity of the two words. Text criticism in such cases seeks to recover valid text-forms rather than ascertaining the better one.

2.3 Plus-minus variants

\(^{10}\) On the problem of determining the origin of tighter synonymy (or antonymy) in G, whether it is was introduced by the author, a scribe, or a translator, see my review of Gerhard Tauberschmidt, Secondary Parallelism: A Study of Translation Technique in LXX Proverbs. Review of Biblical Literature (2004). Online: [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4192_4111.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4192_4111.pdf).

\(^{11}\) See Michael V. Fox, Proverbs 1-9 (Anchor Bible 18A; New York: Doubleday) and Proverbs 10-31 (Anchor Bible 18B; New Haven: Yale University, 2009). Cited ad loc as “Fox AB.”

How do we treat a significant quantitative difference? In these cases, one state must be earlier than the other. Though both the longer and the shorter forms may be valid within their respective textual traditions, the critic wants to know which is closer to the original.

Proverbs 1:16

For the most part, material lacking in one version is probably an addition in the other. The OG lacked the present verse. (In the manuscripts that have this verse [notably G^A,Sc], it is sometimes placed before v 17, sometimes after it, supporting the likelihood that it is a later restoration.) Lagarde considers M 1:16 a later addition based on Isa 59:7.

It is, however, integral to context and original. M 1:16 presents an ambiguity (whose blood are they really hastening to shed?) which is resolved in v 18 (their own!). The technique of delayed resolution of ambiguities is a feature of the passage (Fox AB). Isa 59:7, for its part, may draw on the book of Proverbs or both on a common wisdom source. As Ehrlich notes, it is unlikely that a glossator would remove “innocent” from the Isaiah passage in the course of borrowing it.

The verse was lost by homoioteleuton.

The decision is nothing other than literary criticism, in which analysis and evaluation are intertwined. I have told you which proverb I prefer, and why. The evaluation grew out of a literary analysis, looking at the verse’s context and its congruence with other proverbs, which was adduced (somewhat problematically) as evidence of originality. The evaluation included philological criteria, as literary criticism does—or should. The classification of the loss as homoioteleuton facilitated the argument by indicating a reasonable mechanism for the change, but it was not part of the decision itself, since an explanation is available for the alternate decision, namely scribal addition. This is not to say that the choice is shaky or arbitrary, but only that it can claim no grounding more objectively verifiable than literary criticism. The text critical moment is not prior to exegesis; it is of a piece with it.

G-Prov has much material lacking in M. Sometimes it is clear that the addition was introduced in Greek translation or transmission (for example, G 6:8a-8c, an epigram on the bee). It is usually uncertain whether a G addition is translated from a Hebrew source-text, but sometimes an argument can be made for a Hebrew source. Then—assuming that the reconstruction of the Hebrew is right—how should that text be evaluated?

For example, after 9:12 the Septuagint has a six-line epigram condemning reliance on deceits. Should this be omitted as a “later addition,” as it certainly is, even if (as I have argued) it is based in part on a retrievable Hebrew? If I omit G 9:12a-c from

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15 Michael V. Fox, “The Strange Woman in Septuagint Proverbs.” *JNSL* 22 (1996): 31-
my eclectic text, does consistency require me to omit material found in M but absent in G, such as 11:4 and 13:6, which were probably added after the split from the Septuagintal forerunner? The decision is a difficult one, because, after all, much of M-Proverbs is a later addition to something. And how can I apply my principle that text criticism rests on literary judgment?

In cases like this I would return to the concept of “literary criticism” as the Higher Critics of the nineteenth century understood it, to embrace a keen interest in the historical dimension of literature, with regard to both the development of a document and the historical context of its successive stages. The critic must decide what stage of the text’s history is determinative. He can then eliminate additions later than that stage from the body of his text. The decision is determined by the editor’s goals and practical constraints. The choice of M is not inevitable. One may aim for the earliest, or for the fullest Hebrew text attainable, or for an intermediate state. Someone, the editor or his employers, makes that decision based on criteria external to the documents, such as the expected uses to which it will be put. There is no privilege inherent in any text-state. Rather, the editor decides which text-state to privilege and attempts to reconstruct it.

3. Theory

Given the dependence of text criticism on literary-critical judgment, just what is the status of the edition produced? To understand this issue better, it is worthwhile turning to general text critical theory, also known as editorial theory. Footnote 16 lists a few of the publications in this area that I found most stimulating and cogent. Here are

44, at 38.


Idem., Text Criticism and Scholarly Editing (Charlottesville: The Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia at the University Press of Virginia, 1990).


some central principles. The formulation is my own but the principles are dependent in large part on text critical theorists, in particular George Thomas Tanselle.

3.1 Every edition is a construction of meaning and the editor is a collaborator in the creation of this construction—thus Erne who titles his study Shakespeare’s Modern Collaborators.\(^{17}\) Erne writes, “Since every Shakespeare play has been perceived to need emendation in a number of passages, every modern editor can be said to be participating in this authorial reconstruction.”\(^ {18}\) The value of the construction will be judged by its conformity with authorial meaning, as recovered by interpretation. It should be stressed that to prefer a Masoretic reading or an entire Masoretic edition is in effect to participate in this construction of meaning by aligning oneself with a particular text-state, a medieval one.

3.2 Every critical edition is an innovation. Whether exhibited as an eclectic text or implicit in critical annotations, a particular critical edition is something that probably never existed previously in that exact form. In the case of Proverbs, at least, it is almost impossible that there was ever a manuscript that held the text I will produce, no matter how well I succeed. That is because the changes, both accidental and intended, that the book underwent in the course of its history were introduced at different times, some even before the later parts of the book were added. Nevertheless, the text produced may be closer to the original (or to the text set as one’s goal) than any text-state that happened to survive.

Most modern editions of Shakespeare aim at just this—a better text than exists in any surviving document. Twelve of Shakespeare’s plays survive in two editions, sometimes radically different, as in the case of King Lear. Lear exists in two very different recensions, the Quarto printing of 1608 (Q1, slightly edited and reprinted in Q2, 1619), and the considerably expanded and different Folio of 1623 (F). None of the extant text-states is considered correct, and unless an editor is producing a diplomatic edition, decisions must be made that aim at a better form than any surviving document. Moreover, it is recognized that there is not necessarily a single correct form.

Most editions since the nineteenth century have been based on the Folio. Though the Quarto was printed earlier, while Shakespeare was alive and active, it is usually considered flawed. This is choice an oversimplification, because no two early printings of Lear are the same, and F itself is based on a variety of sources. Recent editors have produced parallel editions rather than conflating the two recensions. However, the important third Arden edition\(^ {19}\) does conflate F and Q, using F as its copy-text but

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\(^{17}\) Lukas Erne, Shakespeare’s Modern Collaborators (London: Continuum, 2008).

\(^{18}\) Ibid. 20.

\(^{19}\) William Shakespeare, King Lear (ed. by R. A. Foakes; The Arden Shakespeare, 3\(^{rd}\) edition; Walton-on-Thames, Surrey: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 110-127. Foakes surveys the history of the Lear problem, which resembles in no small way the problems facing Bible text critics.
embedding some 300 lines absent from F. There are a variety of legitimate approaches to
the editorial problem of King Lear. Almost all editions other than reproductions aim at
restoring a chosen phase, or phases, of Shakespeare’s intention, on the grounds that this is
imperfectly preserved in the extant text-states. By such decisions, each critical editor
becomes a collaborator in recreating King Lear for contemporary use, and the decision is
based on a literary judgment informed by textual history, not on a quality inherent in a
particular text-form. Likewise, a modern editor of the book of Proverbs is faced with two
main text-states, M’s and G’s. He must choose whether to represent a corrected edition of
one of them, or to combine them in some fashion, or to reconstruct their shared prototype.

3.3 An edited text is an attempt to recreate the work, which is, as Tanselle defines it, an
“ideal verbal construction” that does not necessarily coincide with any documentary
text. As E. J. Kenney says, the text critic’s task “is with the reconstruction of what no
longer exists. A text is not a concrete artifact, like a pot or a statue, but an abstract
concept or idea.” Documents record (imperfectly) the work, or a stage thereof, but they
are not the work itself, which would still exist if all documents were lost and only their
memory remained. To give an example of the distinction between a work and a
document: When I publish an article with a typo, the physical, “documentary” text is not
what I want people to read; rather, I want people to read past the document to the
work. An editor will even correct an author’s autograph to get to the work.

The aim of reconstructing the work legitimates combining elements from
different versions or editions—such as Q and F for Lear, or G and M for the Bible, a
procedure that some have objected to. We are using documents and versions not as
goals in themselves but as evidence of the work that lies behind them.

3.4 The primary aim of text criticism is representation of authorial intent. The recovery of
intention is the essence of interpretation. A text, strictly speaking, doesn’t mean; it
transmits meaning. Again, the willingness to correct typos is proof that we all are ready
to override what is written in favor of what was intended.

20 Tanselle, A Rationale, 15.
21 Kenney, “Textual Criticism,” 2.
22 Thus Brooke, on the grounds that eclectic texts “minimize the contribution of
individual scribes and the specific creative traditions to which they may severally belong”
(“Qumran Scrolls,” 39). But this is precisely what non-critical editions, and even
diplomatic editions do, by enshrining one text-state as the text, giving the impression that
any variant from this is somehow a divergence from the correct text form. Moreover, an
eclectic edition, when properly annotated, such as the great Arden and Oxford editions of
Shakespeare, preserves and contextualizes the variants that would otherwise not come to
public attention. In any case, should an editor give pride of place to Hamlet’s now-
discredited “O that this too solid flesh would melt” just because the former is in the
most prominent and commonly used document, the First Folio, over the first two
Quartos’ “… sallied” (= sullied)? (On this variant see Fredson Bowers, “Hamlet’s
’Sullied’ or ’Solid’ Flesh,” Shakespeare Survey 9 [1956] 44-48.)
But “author” doesn’t mean only the original author. There can be many authors along the way, all of whom have something they want to communicate. This includes active editors. In the case of Proverbs, authorship is extremely diffuse and multiplex. We can think of the author of composite works as a construct comprising that collectivity. Still, every textual decision means weighing what the person who wrote a particular proverb really meant.

From the standpoint of reception history, textual errors can become part of the text. The errors of M became right for the community that used it, and their interpretations and usages cannot be understood apart from the text they received. But their usage does retroactively delete the earlier, better text-state.

3.5 Different eclectic texts can be created, depending on stated goals, for no text is definitive and final. Every one is produced in tandem with interpretation. That is not to say that the text produced is “just an interpretation.” It is, rather, a truth claim based on interpretation. Each choice is, at some point, right or wrong, not just more or less interesting. A critic, true to the word’s etymology in krínein, is making a judgment, and a judge cannot remove himself from his position between facts and verdict and still render a credible decision.

23 Tanselle offers an observation particularly relevant to biblical text criticism: “The way one threads a path through these uncertainties—to arrive at a defensible reconstruction of the text of a work of literature—depends on the position one takes regarding two questions: what agency is responsible for the production of a work, and what point is the most significant in its history. On the former question, one may feel that the author has sole responsibility for a work and that a text reflecting the author’s intention (and purged of elements contributed by others) best represents the work; or one may believe that literature is a social art, the collaborative product of a number of people, and that the text resulting from the publishing process (though cleansed of scribes’ or typesetters’ errors) provides the truest record of the work” (A Rationale, 73). The production of the Bible was certainly a “social art,” but the decisive point in its creation is not necessarily the crystallization of the Masoretic text.