

Toward a Reading of Proverbs 30:1b: Tracing the Life of the Text in the Versions

Alexander T. Kirk | ORCID: 0000-0002-9160-0030

Department of Theology & Religion, Durham University,

Durham, UK

alexander.t.kirk@durham.ac.uk

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Abstract

Proverbs 30:1b presents one of the most intractable text-critical dilemmas in the HB. Following Ronald Troxel's suggestion that text criticism be reimagined as "a commentary on the life of the text," I suggest the way forward in reading Prov 30:1b lies in carefully engaging with the versions as a window on its history. Emerging from this process, I argue that Prov 30:1b may have once read *לֹא אִי־תִי וְלֹא אֹכֵל, "I am weary and powerless." Early on, however, this text was conflated with another textual tradition that read a proper name thus producing a double reading. In time, scribes harmonized this double reading which then calcified in MT. The versions and analogous biblical passages suggest the proposed text, while documented scribal practice and lexical usage support it.

Keywords

Prov 30:1 – textual criticism – the versions – Septuagint

1 Introduction: The Obscurity of Prov 30:1b

Proverbs 30:1 contains one of the most inscrutable text-critical dilemmas in the HB:

דְּבַרֵי אַגּוּר בֶּן־יָקֶה
הַמִּשָּׁא נָאֵם הַגָּבֵר לְאִיתִיאל
לְאִיתִיאל וְאֶכָּל:

The words of Agur son of Jakeh, [man of] Massa;
The speech of the man to Ithiel,
to Ithiel and Ucal: (JPSV)

The simplest approach to the second half of the verse, illustrated by the JPSV, is to read three proper names identifying the addressees of this collection. Whether or not one adopts this reading, nearly all scholars admit the text is corrupt.¹ Both the two named addressees and the awkward repetition of the first name are unusual since Proverbs, along with instructional material generally, does not identify addressees by name but rather as son(s) of the speaker/author.² Moreover, although the name Ithiel is attested once (Neh 11:7), the name Ucal is unheard of. Finally, v. 2 opens with a כִּי clause that compounds the disorienting effect of these indecipherable characters. Most often כִּי subordinates a clause to what precedes it, suggesting to interpreters the content of the composition began in v. 1.³ Therefore, this string of proper names leaves scholars with the distinct impression that the beginning of Agur's discourse is missing. Darkening the situation, a dearth of Hebrew manuscripts confounds text criticism of Proverbs generally and of Prov 30 in particular.⁴ If one turns to the ancient versions for help, their wildly divergent readings cast disorienting shadows. It is not obvious that the Septuagint (G) and the Vulgate (V) are reading a Hebrew text that bears any resemblance to the Masoretic Text (MT). William McKane despairs: "Where there is hardly a glimmer of light, one feels powerless to make even the first move towards its elucidation."⁵ The text critic who hopes to untangle this knotted palindrome must do so blindfolded. Faced with such impediments, some scholars think it best

1 Sæbø, *Sprüche*, 359 n. 5; Toy, *Proverbs*, 520; Plöger, *Sprüche*, 358.

2 HBCE, 378.

3 Fox, *Proverbs* 10–31, 853.

4 The Masoretic Text is principally available in the Leningrad Codex (M^L), the Aleppo Codex (M^A), and the Yemenite Codex (M^Y). Only fragments survived at Qumran (Prov 1:27–2:1; 13:6–9; 14:6–10; 14:31–15:8, 19–31); see Ulrich et al., *Qumran Cave 4*, 181–186. In *Vetus Testamentum Hebraicum*, Benjamin Kennicott compiled 200 additional MSS witnessing to MT Proverbs. This essential resource requires judicious handling because both the MSS and their presentation are of uneven reliability. For introductions to the texts and versions of Proverbs, see de Waard, *Proverbs*, 5*–12*; HBCE, 17–19; and the comprehensive treatment in Lange and Tov, *Hebrew Bible*, 241–298.

5 McKane, *Proverbs*, 644.

simply to read with MT.⁶ Other scholars—emboldened by the desperate textual straits—propose conjectural emendations that rest on little evidence and shaky theological reconstructions.⁷ The majority of commentators, however, take a measured approach in redividing and repointing MT so a meaningful start to Agur’s discourse emerges.⁸

I propose that we can illuminate this obscure verse by deepening our appreciation of the task at hand. In a recent *Vetus Testamentum* article, Ronald Troxel renewed the call for the collapse of higher and lower criticism.⁹ The task of textual criticism itself might be reconceived, not as a quest for the elusive archetype, but as “a commentary on the life of the text.”¹⁰ This approach treats text criticism as an interpretive task—part of the exegetical process—that persuades to the extent it weaves a narrative explaining the evidence and yields meaningful readings.¹¹ Similarly, Hindy Najman urges scholars to think in terms of “*traditionary processes* that encompass both textual formation and textual interpretation.”¹² Her approach would transform how we see variations within the textual tradition. Once thought of as errors and corruptions, we might now view them “as signs of life—as manifestations of the vitality of the traditions that we are studying.”¹³ Returning to Prov 30:1b, because of the nature of the problems and the available evidence, there is little hope for a solution that will win a broad consensus. Yet contained within the versions is a

6 For example, Markus Saur reads proper names and looks for symbolic meanings; “Prophetic,” 575.

7 Nearly seventy years ago, Charles C. Torrey hypothesized that in order for our text to become as corrupted as it appears to be, a scribe must have intentionally moved to blot out a statement he found theologically reprehensible by translating it into Aramaic (“Proverbs,” 94). Torrey’s core proposal has been adopted and developed in Scott, *Proverbs*; Murphy, *Proverbs*; and now Sandoval, “Texts and Intertexts.” While these approaches have produced an ingenious solution to the problem, they have done so without recourse to the textual evidence we actually possess. For example, Sandoval interacts with G and V in passing by citing their readings in footnotes, largely to claim, “the textual traditions had difficulty understanding” their Hebrew *Vorlage* (“Texts and Intertexts,” 165; 161 n. 16; 165 n. 31). Sandoval ultimately relies on thematic parallels and theological postulations to reconstruct a hypothetical Aramaic text. My argument contends that the versions, whatever misunderstandings they may contain, constitute our only evidence and should not be dismissed so easily.

8 E.g., Delitzsch, *Proverbs*, 272; Clifford, *Proverbs*, 260; Waltke, *Proverbs*, 455–456; Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 853–854; Sæbø, *Sprüche*, 359.

9 Troxel, “Writing Commentary.”

10 Troxel, “Writing Commentary,” 106. “Archetype” designates a reading for which there is no direct evidence yet whose existence explains all the others, what Ron Hendel has called the “earliest inferable textual state” (“Oxford Hebrew Bible,” 329).

11 Ulrich, “Multiple Literary Editions,” 114–115.

12 Najman, “Ethical Reading,” 516. Emphasis original.

13 Najman, “Ethical Reading,” 517.

narrative of the struggle to understand this verse. This narrative suggests a difficult text, misunderstanding, and competing interpretive strategies and agendas. Though scholarly proposals for emending the line are legion, still lacking is an attempt to trace the life of the text through the versions, weaving a narrative that holds together all the available evidence in a compelling synthesis.¹⁴ If a path forward exists, it lies backwards through the versions.

In this paper, I examine the evidence of the versions then survey some recent text-critical approaches to Prov 30:1b. Emerging from this process, I argue that Prov 30:1b may have once read *לֹא אֶחֱיָי וְלֹא אֶחֱכָל*, “I am weary and powerless.” This challenging text appears to have been understood to contain a name by at least one reading tradition. This interpretation was then preserved within a MS as a double reading. Eventually, scribes harmonized this double reading which then calcified in MT. I will support this proposal by appealing to documented scribal practice concerning the preservation of doublets, the cognitive process of reading, and the creation of “ghost names” in MSS. By offering a solution as a commentary on the life of the text, not only do I hope to offer an illuminating reading of Prov 30:1b but also to model and commend an approach to working with texts that could shed light on other dark passages.

2 Narrating the Versions

The readings of the versions do not allow us to establish an original text with any confidence but rather to explore the backstories of the text, i.e., available interpretations of our verse as it developed.¹⁵

MT: <i>לֹא אֶחֱיָי וְלֹא אֶחֱכָל</i>	to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ukal
G: <i>τοῖς πιστεύουσιν θεῷ, καὶ παύομαι</i>	to those believing in God, and I stop
α': <i>τῷ Ἐθιήλ, καὶ τέλεσον</i>	to Ithiel, now stop
θ': <i>τῷ Ἐθιήλ, καὶ δυνήσομαι</i>	to Ithiel, and I will be powerful

14 The most thorough treatments are by Delitzsch (*Proverbs*, 267–272), Fox (HBCE, 378–380), and Cuppi (“Long Doublets,” 88–93).

15 All translations are my own unless stated otherwise. The readings given here follow the best available critical editions for Proverbs: the Masoretic Text follows de Waard, *Proverbs*. Greek, i.e., the Septuagint, is given according to Rahlfs and Hanhart, *Septuaginta*, while Aquilla (α') and Theodotian (θ') are cited from Field, *Origenis Hexaplorum*, 370. The Syriac (S) follows Di Lella, “Proverbs”; and the Targum (T) follow Díez Merino, *Targum de Proverbios*. The Vulgate is from Weber et al., *Biblia Sacra*.

S: אֶת־יִשְׁרָאֵל
וְאֶת־יִתְחִיאל

and he prevailed, and he spoke
to Ithiel

T: לֵאֱלֹהִים וְאֶת־יִתְחִיאל

to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ukal

V: *cum quo est Deus et qui Deo*

with whom God is, and who being
strengthened by God, abiding

secum morante confortatus ait

with him, said (Douay-Rheims)

Two broad approaches to 30:1b emerge from this line up. The first approach, represented by MT, α', θ', T, and S, recognizes **לֵאֱלֹהִים** as a proper name and the addressee of this composition. Within this approach only MT and T contain two occurrences of **לֵאֱלֹהִים** and also allow for recognizing **וְאֶת־יִתְחִיאל** as a proper name, although nothing requires one to interpret it that way.¹⁶ Aquila, θ', and S register only one occurrence of **לֵאֱלֹהִים** and treat **וְאֶת־יִתְחִיאל** as a verb. The second approach, represented by G and V, interprets all of the words understood to be proper names in other witnesses as verbal phrases. I will look more closely at the Greek versions, followed by S and V in turn, before evaluating some modern scholarly approaches to reading MT.

Nearly all the major interpretive options are already available in the Greek versions. G's τοῖς πιστεύουσιν θεῷ could represent a periphrastic rendering of **לֵאֱלֹהִים**.¹⁷ Michael Fox suggests that G read **לֵאֱלֹהִים** ("to whom there is God"), with **אֶת־יִתְחִיאל** construed as the Aramaic particle of existence ("there is,"

16 The Masora Parva at **וְאֶת־יִתְחִיאל** has the annotation **לֵאֱלֹהִים**, indicating that the masoretes believed this form only occurs here written defectively. This notation suggests they associate **וְאֶת־יִתְחִיאל** with the plene form **וְאֶת־יִתְחִיאל** (1cs *qal yiqtol* √יָחַל) that occurs in Jer 20:9; Ps 101:5; and Job 31:23 and is always qualified by **לֵאֱלֹהִים**. In other words, the masoretes appear to be reading with θ'. Kennicott records 64 out of 200 MSS with the reading **וְאֶת־יִתְחִיאל** and an additional three originally contained that reading (*Vetus Testamentum*, 474). While this evidence cannot be used to suggest anything about the original text, it does suggest there is a strong minority tradition within MT that read **וְאֶת־יִתְחִיאל** as a *verb*.

17 At first glance, G appears to have no connection to MT. However, it is possible to find correspondences between the two for all the major elements based on etymological exegesis; e.g., HBCE, 379; cf. BHQ. This is an extreme instance of the overall translation character of G Proverbs, which Fox has described as "flexible" for the sake of "control" ("A Profile," 16–17); and Forti has described as "free and even periphrastic" ("Septuagint," 254). It remains a matter of debate, however, to what extent G is working from a different *Vorlage* (Tov, "Recensional Differences"; Cuppi, "Long Doublets," 92) or carrying out a quasi-authorial agenda (Cook, *Septuagint*; Waltke, *Proverbs*, 454 n. 1). In either case, G represents a different recension of the book of Proverbs. G Prov 30:1 does not give a clear indication of what the translator understood **לֵאֱלֹהִים** to mean. On the relationship of G Proverbs to MT consider the works above; as well as Clifford, "Observations"; and Aitken and Cuppi, "Proverbs."

e.g., Ezra 4:16; 5:17; cf. בַּח יֵשׁ).¹⁸ This could plausibly amount to etymological exegesis of the post-exilic name אֵיתִיאל, which appears in Neh 11:7, perhaps meaning “God is with me” (אֵתִי אֵל for אֵתִי אֵל).¹⁹ The Greek plural is universalizing: “to the one whom God is with”=“to anyone whom God is with.” The second element in G, καὶ παύσμαι, suggests G read a 1cs *qal wayyiqtol*/jussive from √לה (to be complete, finished) for ואכל.²⁰

The Hexaplaric recensions, α' and θ', break from G by reflecting לאֵיתִיאל as a proper name + ל. Aquila's reading, καὶ τέλεισον (“now [you] stop”), agrees with G in finding √לה in ואכל, although it transposes the form from the first to the second person.²¹ On the other hand, θ's καὶ δυνήσμαι interprets ואכל as deriving from √ל (“to be able, prevail”). Theodotian thus supports the vocalization represented in M^L and even more so the Masora Parva and the MSS that read ואוכל.²² Interestingly, both α' and θ' use the future tense.²³ This strongly suggests the translators read *yiqtol*s in their *Vorlage*(n), but it does not require a different consonantal text than MT.

Like the Greek versions, S registers just one occurrence of לאֵיתִיאל, which it treats as a proper name. Moreover, like θ', S treats ואכל as a verb from √ל. However, S differs from θ', and from G, by apparently conflating the sense of ואכל with גבר earlier in the verse and altering the word order to produce אֵתִיאל גִּבֹּר (“and was able with strength”=“prevailed”).²⁴ We can deduce this because S has no other element synonymous with *man* that might correspond to גבר, and נאם is rendered verbally by אֵתִיאל. The reading in S tacks most closely to θ', the vocalization of MT, and the Kennicott MSS with ואוכל.²⁵

Although it might appear that V departs drastically from MT, Jerome's interpretation reflects early rabbinic exegesis.²⁶ Consider V alongside the treatment

18 HBCE, 379.

19 Delitzsch, *Proverbs*, 268; cf. Franklyn, “Sayings of Agur,” 241–242 n. 14.

20 Cuppi, “Personal Names,” 35; HBCE, 378.

21 This possibly echoes G's apparent תגור for אגור in v. 1a; Cuppi, “Long Doublets,” 89–90 n. 25.

22 On spelling conventions in ancient Hebrew texts and especially MT, see Barr, *Variable Spellings*. Barr makes the salient point that while most variable spellings were inconsequential semantically, occasionally, especially with I-י verbs, a vowel letter could distinguish one root from another (*Variable Spellings*, 93–94). So, while ואכל could represent either √לה or √ל, ואוכל could *only* represent √ל. Thus it would seem that α' was reading a MS that had ואכל, while θ' could have been reading *either* ואכל or ואוכל, although it seems most likely his *Vorlage* had the plene spelling.

23 For G, Rahlfs and Hanhart, Swete, and Holmes and Parsons all record a variant with the future: παύσμαι.

24 Sokoloff and Brockelmann, *A Syriac Lexicon*, 815; cf. Cuppi, “Long Doublets,” 90.

25 Fox, “Peshitta of Proverbs,” 53.

26 Gordon, “Rabbinic Exegesis,” 411.

of our verse in Midrash Tanhuma, Vaera 5: “The man saith unto Ithiel is written because he [Solomon] would say: ‘God is with me (iti-el), and I will be able (ukhal) to withstand temptation.’ [...] The names Ithiel and Ucal were written in that verse because he said: ‘I will multiply wives, but I still will not turn my heart away (Ithiel) from God; and I will multiply the number of my horses; but I will not cause the people to return.’”²⁷ This midrashic approach to the names in the verse is reflected in Jerome’s translation; he may even be our earliest witness to it.²⁸ The etymological exegesis Jerome engages in to translate the names as phrases is not far from the impulse reflected in G’s reading. However, G registers only one occurrence of **לאִיתִיאל** while V exhibits two equivalent elements: 1. **לאִיתִיאל** = *cum quo est Deus*, 2. **לאִיתִיאל** = *et qui Deo secum morante*. V appears to witness clearly, albeit at low resolution, to MT.

3 Evaluating Contemporary Readings

Having thus oriented ourselves to the versions, we can now consider stories modern scholars have told about them. Jan de Waard thinks the longer text represented in MT, T, and V is the earlier one, based on his attribution of haplography to G and S.²⁹ However, I find this unlikely. Why would the older witnesses—G, α', θ', and S—all exhibit an element corresponding to only one occurrence of **לאִיתִיאל**? Surely the slavish α' and θ', which render **לאִיתִיאל** as a proper name, would have repeated that name again had it appeared twice in their respective *Vorlagen*.³⁰ This observation is strengthened by the fact that S, α' and θ' all read **לאִיתִיאל** as a proper name, whereas G reads it as a verbal phrase—the only thing they all agree on is that **לאִיתִיאל** appears once. Dittography in the tradition behind MT seems more likely than haplography behind G and S.³¹ However, a more complex process is at work than a simple scribal slip.

27 Berman, *Midrash*, ad loc. Note Midrash Mishle employs the same strategy as Tanhuma when handling the names but arrives at a different interpretation: “to Ithiel (*iti'el*)—[so named] because he understood the letters of God (*otīyyotaw shel el*); or because he understood the signs (*otīyyotehen*) of the ministering angels; and Ucal (*ukal*)—[so named] because he could (*yakol*) stand by them” (Visotzky, *Midrash*, 117; emphasis original). Both Tanhuma and Mishle derive Ucal from **כָּל**, suggesting their Hebrew MSS contained **ואִכָּל**.

28 Barthélemy, *Proverbes*, 774–775.

29 BHQ ad loc.; also Cuppi, “Personal Names,” 34–35.

30 Meade, “Hexaplaric Greek Translations,” 268; cf. HBCE, 380.

31 HBCE, 380; cf. Barthélemy, “On ne peut conclure avec certitude s’il y a eu dittographie ou haplographie”; *Proverbes*, 775.

Lorenzo Cuppi and Fox redivide and repoint the consonants of MT to arrive at the same suggestion: לָאִיתִי אֶל לָאִיתִי אֶל וְאָכַל, “I became tired, God, I became tired, God, and I may fade away.”³² Dominique Barthélemy has a slightly different take: לָאִיתִי אֶל לָאִיתִי אֶל וְאָכַל, “Je me suis fatigué, ô Dieu, je me suis fatigué, ô Dieu, pour y réussir.”³³ All three scholars agree on redividing לָאִיתִיאל and identifying it as 1cs *qal qatal* from לָאֵה (to be weary, impatient) with אֶל as a vocative. The vocative of אֶל tends to be signaled by the article ה, but it is possible to find exceptions (Num 12:13; Ps 83:2). More significantly, however, none of the versions or ancient MSS suggest that this vocative was ever part of the reading tradition. It appears to be the invention of modern scholars.

Where scholars differ is their handling of וְאָכַל. Following the vocalization implied by G and א', Cuppi and Fox repoint וְאָכַל as a 1cs *qal wayyiqtol*/jussive from בָּלָה. This form does not occur in the HB but is plausible (cf. Exod 39:32; Job 33:21). Fox argues בָּלָה fits the context well since it “reverberates in the clause ‘before I die’ in 30:7b.”³⁴ Drawing connections to Ps 73:22 (בָּלָה) and 2 Sam 23:1 (נָאֵם), Fox construes Prov 30 as Agur’s last words. Cuppi speculates לָאִיתִיאל was understood as a proper name first and this interpretation eventually contributed to וְאָכַל being taken the same way.³⁵ But why this text was misread in the first place remains a question. Cuppi tentatively suggests that without vowels an Aramaic speaker might have scanned the consonantal text of MT as לָאִיתִי אֶל לָאִיתִי אֶל וְאָכַל, meaning, “God is not with me, God is not with me, and I will succeed.”³⁶ The translations of G and V, along with the Midrash Tanhuma, support the plausibility of this. Barthélemy, however, opts to retain MT’s pointing of וְאָכַל as a 1cs *qal yiqtol* from יָכַל. He is supported by θ', S, and indirectly by V. Moreover, Barthélemy’s suggestion has the strength that it does not require altering MT at all and is even supported by the Kennicott MSS reading וְאָכַל.³⁷ Barthélemy’s most significant insight—the scale-swaying piece of evidence—is his observation that לָאֵה is followed by יָכַל in Isa 16:12; Jer 20:9; and Job 4:2. No verse, however, brings together לָאֵה and בָּלָה.

32 Cuppi, “Personal Names,” 35; HBCE, 378.

33 Barthélemy, *Proverbes*, 775.

34 HBCE, 378.

35 Cuppi, “Long Doublets,” 91.

36 Cuppi, “Long Doublets,” 91–92.

37 See n. 17 and 23 above.

4 Weary and Powerless: A Proposal for Reading Prov 30:1b

Taking all this evidence and scholarly ingenuity under advice, what can we say with any confidence? Lines of correspondence connect elements of G, V, and MT despite the meaning being changed systematically. This indicates the periphrastic interpretation in G and V is intentional and exegetical. The midrashic tradition latched on to these words. Because interpretive traditions are in play, and G's translation style is flexible overall, retroversion is challenging. Still, first and foremost, it is probable that only one instance of **לְאִיתִיאל** is original and **וְאָכַל** began life as a verb. This is the majority opinion of the ancient versions, including all of the oldest witnesses. I cannot see how **וְאָכַל** could have originated either as a second addressee or hanging off the end of the title line as a lonely verb, stranded from the body of the poetic composition as in G. If **וְאָכַל** was originally a verb then **לְאִיתִיאל** probably represented a verbal phrase as well. We already have two early interpretations represented in Greek. G takes **לְאִיתִיאל** as a verbal phrase ("to those believing in God") while α' and θ' take it as a proper name ("to Ithiel"). But these traditions both interpret this phrase as indicating the addressee through the use of the preposition **ל**. Perhaps this was the inciting incident. If **לְאִיתִיאל** originally contained a verbal phrase, then it is easy to imagine how a **ל** on a strange lexeme in the superscript of a discrete collection could have triggered a scribe to think in terms of an addressee. Perhaps eventually both the verbal phrase and the tradition representing an addressee were included in one manuscript by a scribe who did not know which was the correct reading. This scribe may have inserted a double reading that differed by as little as a word division or the transposition of two letters. Over time, MT's baffling reading calcified as the distinctions between these two interpretive options were lost.

But how might this have occurred and what could the original text have been? Building on Barthélemy's approach, I will suggest a reading for Prov 30:1b that produces a plausible history of the transformation of the text grounded in both the evidence of the versions and emerging text-critical methodology. Recall that Barthélemy connects **וְאָכַל** to **יָכַל** and observes that **לֹאֵה** is collocated with **יָכַל** in Isa 16:12; Jer 20:9; Job 4:2. The verb **יָכַל** occurs just thirty-four times in the *qal*. Twenty-seven of these are negated. Two of the three examples where **לֹאֵה** is followed by **יָכַל** fall into this category:

Jer 20:9

וְנִלְאִיתִי כִּלְכֵּל וְלֹא אֶכָּל

I am weary from containing [it] and I am no longer able.

Isa 16:12

וְהָיָה כִּי־נִרְאָה כִּי־נִלְאָה מִזֶּאֱבַב עַל־הַבִּמָּה
וּבָא אֶל־מִקְדָּשׁוֹ לְהִתְפַּלֵּל וְלֹא יוּכַל׃

So it will be when he appears that Moab has wearied himself on the high place, and he will enter his sanctuary to pray but he will not be able.

Might Prov 30:1 be reflecting this collocation of לָאָה + negator + יָכַל that we find in Jer 20:9 and Isa 16:12? Perhaps in place of אֵל—the proposed vocative—the text had the adverb לֹא negating the verb?³⁸ The proposed earlier text would then have been:

1. לֹא־יָכַל וְלֹא אֵל (ו)כָּל*

I am weary and not able (i.e., powerless).

Apart from the optional ו, this phrase contains identical consonants to MT, differing only in word division and the transposition of letters.³⁹ In contrast to other text-critical solutions, a compelling case can be made that such a primary text produced the readings in the versions.

First, note that לָאָה is a relatively rare verb with just nineteen occurrences and of those only three are in the *qal*. This form would be unique in the HB although it is quite plausible. Second, remember that אָכַל potentially derives from several different roots when written defectively. Third, consider the density of *lameds* (3x), *alephs* (3x), and *yods* and *waws* (3x) in the proposed text. These four graphemes account for nine out of eleven letters. Considering the semantic and graphic difficulty in this clause, there are many things that could go wrong in transcription. All it would take to trigger a process of transformation is one of several common scribal errors. This is the first stage in the process. By simply misdividing the words and running them together the scribe may have produced לֹא־יָכַל. Graphic confusion between ו and י would

38 In 1891, Gustav Bickell proposed something similar: אָכַל [לֹא]־יָכַל אֵל ו / לֹא־יָכַל אֵל (Kritische Bearbeitung, 293). He translates, “Ausspruch des Mannes, der sich um Gott abgemüht hat: ich habe mich um Gott abgemüht und es nicht vermocht.” Unfortunately, Bickell’s project concerns justifying a theory of prosody and he provides little explanation for his proposal, but he anticipated two important aspects of mine. He discerned that the repetitions of לֹא־יָכַל originally preserved different readings and that אָכַל was likely negated.

39 I represent the ו in לֹא־יָכַל (ו) in parentheses to indicate it may or may not have been present in different MSS and stages of the transmission process. If one considers plene and defective spellings, various orthographic options emerge. My argument is not married to one spelling, but is aided by the fact that orthography was not standardized in ancient texts. See Barr, *Variable Spelling*, 7–11.

yield *לאיתו ולא* or *לאיתי ילא*. These readings are primed for elision, producing *לאיתולא* or *לאיתולא*. Likewise, the back-to-back אס could easily have been elided. Finally, metathesis of the ל and the א would produce *לאיתי ואל*. Once one of these shifts occurred a second would be even more likely if only to make sense of the first. For example, the elision of an א could have produced *לאיתי ולא וכל*. Searching for a meaning for וכל a scribe may have vocalized it as the imperative (פלה) and then overcorrected by adding a ה. Once וכלה is read as an imperative there is no meaningful role for לא, which could have been absorbed into לאיתי to create *לאיתאל וכלה*—a reliable retroversion of α' is born. It is easier to arrive at a retroversion of θ'. The letters of ולא simply have to be reversed and redivided and לאיתי ולא אובל* becomes *לאיתאל ואובל*.

In my opinion, such errors need not represent stages in manuscript transmission. Rather, they probably occurred as simultaneous elements of the translator-scribe's natural mental process of reading. As John Srenock argues in *Traductor Scriptor*, scribes and translators both construct mental versions of texts based on but not identical to the physical *Vorlagen* in front of them.⁴⁰ By using resources from translation studies, particularly *intralingual* translation, Srenock argues that translation and transmission of MSS involve fundamentally similar cognitive processes.⁴¹ He explains, “the translation process does not involve one single move from the physical *Vorlage* directly to the physical text of the translation; rather, there are additional intermediary stages in the translator's mind, appropriately conceived of as texts, through which this move is channeled.”⁴² Through a process of working memory and phonological loops, the translator-scribes produce physical copies of their *Vorlage* from their mental text.⁴³ One of the implications of Srenock's study is that many variants in the textual tradition stem from the decoding (i.e., reading) process within the translator's mind rather than errors of the eye and ear or the *Vorlagen*.⁴⁴ To recall Emanuel Tov's dictum, many reliable variants never actually existed in writing.⁴⁵

I propose that a reading glitch triggered a scribe to decode לאיתי ולא as a proper name. While it is possible one of the classic errors of textual criticism was at work (e.g., dittography, haplography, or metathesis as described above), it is equally likely that the scribe simply misread a difficult string of letters

40 Srenock, *Traductor Scriptor*, 178–179.

41 Srenock, *Traductor Scriptor*, 92.

42 Srenock, *Traductor Scriptor*, 177.

43 Srenock, *Traductor Scriptor*, 86–88.

44 Srenock, *Traductor Scriptor*, 35 and 179.

45 Tov, *Text-Critical Use*, 178. Tov's original wording is, “One simply has to accept the fact that some reliable retroversions never existed in writing.”

in a fraught context. For example, in the Antiochene recension of G, Natalio Fernández Marcos has identified a phenomenon he dubbed “ghost names.”⁴⁶ Ghost names appear when a challenging string of letters in a Hebrew *Vorlage* is interpreted as a proper name and then translated as such.⁴⁷ This device creates a meaning in the target language that did not exist in Hebrew.⁴⁸ For example, in 1 Kgs 15:22 the Hebrew phrase *אין נקי* (“without exception”) emerges in the Antiochene recension as *Ἐνααεῖμ* (cf. G: *Ανααειμ*).⁴⁹ Or, in a different kind of example, 1 Sam 14:33 has the verb *בגדתיכם* (“you acted treacherously”) represented in the G as a place name *Γεθθεμ*. The Antiochene recension, however, represents it as a place name *twice*; once as in G and again as *Ημάρτετε*—still a proper name but translated “*ad sensum* with recourse to the verb *ἀμαρτάνειν*.”⁵⁰ Fernández Marcos emphasizes the vast majority of ghost names are “attested in sequences of double readings,”⁵¹ and “occur especially in the genealogical material at the start of 1 Chronicles where the absence of a meaningful context cause [sic] major confusion of similar letters in Hebrew and throughout the Greek tradition.”⁵² He cautions scholars to attend to proper names because they often convey semantic information: “[...] they have been incorporated by the scribes to the narrative, circulated for centuries as part of the official biblical text for a community, and gave rise to new meanings, exegesis and commentaries. And in a few cases they preserve very ancient, alternative variants that may go back to a Hebrew text different from the Masoretic one.”⁵³

The phenomena analyzed by Screnock and Fernández Marcos help explain the process I believe took place in the transmission of Prov 30:1b. While transcribing the superscript of a new collection within Proverbs, a scribe sees a ל followed by a string of letters (*לאיתי*). In context, he processes this relatively rare set of letters as the name Ithiel (Neh 11:7). Once *לאיתי ולא* was transcribed into a physical MS as a name, the traditions diverge—the earlier verbal phrase

46 The term “ghost names” is derived on analogy with the phenomenon of “ghost words” famous in classical philology from Greek lexicography. Ghost words are “created in the minds of the editors of texts (especially papyri and inscriptions) as a set of conjectures which eventually, in the light of new studies or new witnesses, have proved to be false readings” (Fernández Marcos, “On the Borderline,” 14). The lexicons typically record these words in brackets.

47 Fernández Marcos, “On Double Readings,” 598.

48 Fernández Marcos, “On the Borderline,” 20.

49 Fernández Marcos, “On the Borderline,” 16.

50 Fernández Marcos, “On the Borderline,” 16.

51 Fernández Marcos, “On the Borderline,” 19.

52 Fernández Marcos, “On Double Readings,” 600.

53 Fernández Marcos, “On the Borderline,” 21.

was preserved in one tradition and the newly fashioned addressee in another. At stage two the novel text may have read:

2. לֵאִיתִיאל א(ו)כֵּל*
To Ithiel: I am able.

At this point—if they had not already done so—the traditions represented by the Greek and Syriac versions diverge from MT. Orthography—the optional ו in אכֵּל—could have been the factor differentiating α' and θ's readings. In my opinion, G probably also witnesses to example 2, although it interpreted the name by translating its constitutive elements.⁵⁴ A conjunction on אכֵּל may have been inserted at any stage in the process after לֵאִיתִיאל was interpreted as a proper name in order to make sense of the verb and smooth out the reading. Alternatively, if אֹכֵל was in the *Vorlage*, the scribe could have engaged in exegetical metathesis of the ו and the א, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in order to make sense of his text.⁵⁵

Years pass. Faced with alternative readings in competing *Vorlagen*, a scribe is unable to adjudicate between them and represents both side by side in a fresh MS, presenting them as complementary options for the interpreter.⁵⁶ This is stage three and the text may have looked like this:

3. לֵאִיתִיאל לֵאִיתִי וְלֹא א(ו)כֵּל*⁵⁷
To Ithiel, I am weary and powerless.

Despite the lack of direct evidence for this stage, a double reading seems the most plausible explanation for how לֵאִיתִיאל came to be duplicated in MT.⁵⁸

54 Fernández Marcos, "On Double Readings," 592. There is no way to rule out the possibility that G is working from a Hebrew *Vorlage* similar to example 1. In which case, G represents a rendering of the translator's mental text.

55 de Waard, "Metathesis."

56 Shemaryahu Talmon details the process whereby this happened relatively frequently in many different mss. He emphasizes that identifying instances where doublets entered the text is devilishly hard; "Double Readings."

57 There would have been a consonantal difference between the two options at this point in order for the scribe to preserve them as variables.

58 Indirectly supporting this conclusion, both Otto Plöger and Bruce Waltke prefer emendations that handle the occurrences of לֵאִיתִיאל differently. Building on Bickell's proposal, Plöger takes the first לֵאִיתִיאל as part of the superscript, a further description of הַגִּבֹּר: לֵאִיתִי אֵל, "Der sich um Gott abmühte." This third-person description is immediately echoed in the first-person in the opening of Agur's discourse: לֵאִיתִי אֵל (*Sprüche*, 353–354, 358). I believe Plöger is correct in offering two readings that are similar consonantly but

First, the versions testify that there was a time before the double reading entered the MS tradition. Second, **לֵאִי־יָאֵל** has not always been a name but has sometimes been understood as a verbal phrase, and the midrashic approach of G and V suggests it was originally a verbal phrase different from those that have been preserved. Third, the phenomenon of incorporating alternative textual traditions into one MS as a double reading is a known practice whereby texts grew and preserved “alternative wordings of the same texts.”⁵⁹

In the fourth and final stage of transmission, the traditions preserved in the double reading—still graphically and semantically challenging—were harmonized toward one another. This could have been accomplished through a similar set of scribal errors described above or through a simpler process of homeoarchy resulting in dittography of **לֵאִי־יָאֵל** triggered by the reduplication of no less than five consonants in the postulated *Vorlage* (**לֵאִי־יָ**). Once both readings were harmonized as this double addressee, we arrive at the text of MT and at T and V, which witness to it. The move to interpret **וְאֵלֵךְ** as a name only comes at this stage. Strictly speaking, “Ukal” is not part of the textual tradition, since MT can still be read as a verb, especially if one adopts the minority reading of the Kennicott MSS. The same is true of T (cf. Dan 2:10; 5:16). Only V, in reflecting the midrashic tradition, demands to be read as a name.

If my proposal is compelling, Agur’s **כִּי** clause in v. 2 now depends on a line that confesses his weakness and ineptitude in a striking manner. Both **לֵאֵה** and **יָכַל** have clear uses where the emphasis is on an acute mental weariness and emotional exasperation over sin (Exod 7:18; Isa 1:14; 7:13; 47:13). In Job 4:2 and 5, Eliphaz uses **לֵאֵה** twice to describe Job as edgy, impatient, easily offended. Similarly, in certain distinctive phrases **יָכַל** means “to endure” within the spiritual/psychological realm (Ps 101:5; Job 31:23). In Ps 139:6, **לֵאֵה** + **יָכַל** describes the psalmist’s inability to attain to the knowledge of God. Notably, when **לֵאֵה** and **יָכַל** are used in close quarters they focus on spiritual exasperation. In Isa 1:13–14, YHWH denounces Israel, saying he cannot endure (**לֵאֵה־אֶכְרֹךְ**) their iniquity and assemblies; and he grows weary of bearing (**נִלְאִיתִי נִשְׂאָה**) their feasts (cf. Jer 20:9 above). Agur’s combination of these two lexemes in a context where he is confessing his intellectual limits suggests his weariness is not necessarily physical but acutely psychological and even spiritual. Agur opens on a note of profound exasperation.⁶⁰

distinct semantically. Similarly, Waltke deduces the purpose for which I believe the doublet was originally preserved by transliterating the first instance as “Ithiel” and translating the second instance, “I am weary, O God” (**לֵאִי־יָאֵל**) (*Proverbs*, 455).

59 Talmon, “Double Readings,” 150.

60 Sæbø, *Sprüche*, 363.

5 Conclusion: Text Criticism, Interpretation, and the Life of the Text

Proverbs 30:1b was always a challenging string of letters and it has been understood and interpreted in various ways throughout its history. Early on, at least one scribe expected an addressee and read a proper name. The resulting texts, one with a proper name and one without, were eventually conflated producing a double reading. Midrashic traditions came into play to explain the text. In time, various readings calcified. If I were editing a critical edition of Prov 30, I would probably offer a retroversion of θ' as the “the earliest recoverable Hebrew text” of v. 1b, e.g., * לֹא־יֵאֵל וְאֹכֵל . But I remain convinced this “earliest recoverable Hebrew text” is not the “earliest inferable textual state.”⁶¹ I believe the text of Prov 30:1b could have once read * לֹא־יֵאֵל וְאֹכֵל , “I am weary and powerless.” But this reconstruction still necessitates interpretation. I have argued for reading וְאֹכֵל as 1cs qal *yiqtol* from יָכַל with support from θ' , S, the midrashic tradition, and וְאֹכֵל in the Kennicott MSS. Reading יָכַל then supports the contextual reading of לֹא־יֵאֵל on analogy with the collocation of לֹא־יָכַל + negator + יָכַל in Isa 16:12 and Jer 20:9. As an opening to Agur’s discourse, “I am weary and powerless” offers intriguing possibilities by connecting to Agur’s core themes of human finitude and the location of wisdom.

The approach modeled here is what I take Troxel’s collapse of higher and lower criticism to entail. Tracing the life of a text back through the versions can suggest a reading that might plausibly lie behind all of them, particularly where we lack sufficient MSS evidence to compare, count, and weigh readings. Counter-intuitively, the more cautious approach of redividing and repointing MT probably creates a text that never actually existed in the history of transmission. It is true, as Moshe Goshen-Gottstein has said, that “there is no retroversion without a residue of doubt.”⁶² However, it is equally true that every reading in the versions contains a fragment of the history of wrestling with and transforming the text. As text critics we are interpreters who concern ourselves with that history. We bring the most light to bear on the text and offer the richest interpretations when we judiciously engage all the evidence the textual traditions have preserved.⁶³

61 Troxel, “Writing Commentary,” 128; cf. *ibid.*, 106 n. 6.

62 Goshen-Gottstein, “Theory and Practice,” 132.

63 Goshen-Gottstein argues that we would do well to identify doublets and preserve both readings in the apparatus of our critical editions because, on principle, we cannot know which readings preserve true variants and which readings do not. Recently, Screnock (“A New Approach”) has proposed updating Tov’s methodology for retroverting the Septuagint in order to admit more data into the text-critical process.

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