Confusing redaction and corruption: A house going to hell

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There are two dimensions to the argument offered in this article, both of them pertaining to methodological issues. The first is that of distinguishing textual criticism from redactional criticism, especially with recourse to the critical apparatus of the Stuttgart Hebrew Bibles. Secondly, the danger of over-emphasising the sound distinction between so-called 'literary' and 'historical' exegetical modes into an unsound separation between them. Proposals for the emendation of the text in Proverbs 2:18 are used as an example of both issues at once. It is advanced that a historical enquiry into the origin of the text can shed light on an analysis of the text 'as it stands', which undermines the reading of the 'final text' as an exercise that can, and may, have nothing to do with enquiry into the growth of that text. This article endeavours to advance its argument by means of a practical contribution to solving the perceived textual problems of the *crux interpretum*, rather than indulging in the kind of theoretical skirmishes that characterised South African debates at the end of the previous century.

Introduction

Professor J.H. le Roux has made a major contribution to the establishment and well-being of the historical dimension to handling the Old Testament in South Africa. I would therefore like to honour this achievement in a way appropriate to the fact that this was and continues to be so. As a key aspect of his work was hallmarked by the metaphor of the two ways from the Book of Proverbs (cf. Le Roux 1993), it seems fitting that this book should provide the material for the purpose. To paraphrase the thrust of Proverbs 2, it says that wisdom will come into the heart of those pupils who accept the words of the speaker-author to help them recognise the two ways pertinent to their learning and act accordingly. Although these two ways do not translate into the 'historical' and the 'literary' approaches to the text, we do have a story of two ways. These may intersect at places and even become a dual carriageway. I now propose to take a passage from Proverbs 2, in which reading the text 'as it stands' (text-immanent reading, as the buzzword had it at the turn of the century) and the historical question as to the growth of that text intersect inseparably.

Proverbs 2:18 and the organisation of its context

The whole of Proverbs 2 can be read as one long conditional sentence with a whole series of clauses and sub-clauses. Murphy (1998:14) credits Skehan (1971:9–16) with this insight, but it was already noticed long before Skehan, for example by Ewald (1837:375–376), who charmingly says, '*Ewaldus unam tantummodo totius capitis … sententiam esse judicat …*', (cf. Delitzsch 1874:76; Toy [1899] 1914:31; Wildeboer 1897:5).

Although an analysis of the whole chapter would exceed the limits of this article, it is important to keep the context of verse 18 clearly in mind. Therefore, I first provide a translation in which the main syntactic units are marked grey to facilitate recognition of the contours of the syntactic logic within which verse 18 has its place (Figure 1). The complex syntactic structure of the chapter can be sketched as follows in Figure 2.

The complex sentence has two main parts, notably a triple protasis ('if'-clause) and a double apodosis ('then'-clause). After the typical address, 'my son', the threefold protasis comprises verses 1–2 + 3 + 4: 'if ...' and the twofold apodosis is made up of verses 5–8 + 9–22: 'then ...' It is possible to take verse 20 as a final construction, presenting the purpose of the conditional argument in verses 1–11 (see Fox 2000:107, 122–123): if you accept ..., then you will understand ..., so that you may walk. This would require a break after verse 11. However, since the caesura at verse 11 is quite weak, because it stands in the middle of an ongoing final construction, it is better to take verse 20 as consequent not only upon verses 1–11, but upon all that precedes it in the chapter. Verses 12–19 continue with a double final construction of their own, in that two clusters of similar structure (vv. 12–15 and 16–19) flow from verse 11. That means that verses 12–19 (of

which our *crux interpretum* is part) are already integrated into the fulfilment clause and that the purpose spoken of at the beginning of verse 20 is consequent upon all the aspects of the condition and its fulfilment.

The idea of a capstone at the end of the chapter seems better supported by this analysis than by Fox's (2000) proposal. The fourfold phrase in verses 21–22 contains no pithy summary of the foregoing, but only announces its reward. But if verse 20 introduces the conclusion, it does contain a powerful summary of the whole argument (walking in the good path), as well as the motivating force of the expected reward.

On the literary level, this is further substantiated by the fact that the motif of the way occurs throughout both preceding clusters, as well as in the last one beginning with למען. Being saved from the way of evil or crooked paths (vv. 12, 13, 15, 18, 19) precedes the ending as the logical prerequisite for keeping to the paths of the good and the just (v. 20a and b). The last cluster (vv. 20–22) is also a motivated final construction, this time introduced by למען. Apart from the stylistic argument that the variation from ל, with the infinitive in the other final constructions sets verses 20–22 somewhat apart, למען as a conjunction can also express 'causation as intention' (cf. *KBL*[1] and *KBL*[3] *s.v.*, *GKC* §107*n* & *q*), so that the final intention of the fulfilling of the condition begins here.

The strophic structure of the poem is not a linguistic, but a literary matter. However, it contradicts neither the syntactic analysis just offered nor the logical build-up described above. It has often been pointed out (from Wildeboer to Fuhs) that two quatrains are followed by a tercet twice over; that is, two strophes of four lines each are followed by one consisting of three lines. Gemser (1963) observes a similar structure in the hemistichs, *viz*. twice 8, 8, 6, which essentially amounts to the same. The poetical stichs of predominantly twice three beats each coincide with the Masoretic verses (*p*^{e}*suqím*) (see Figure 3).

Focusing on our point of interest, the drift of the sage's argument in Proverbs 2 can be paraphrased as follows:

My son,
if you accept my words,
then you will understand righteousness,
for wisdom will come into your heart,
to save you from the loose woman,
for her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the shades.

1 My son,
if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you,
2 making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding,
3 if you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding,
4 if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures –

5 then you will understand the fear of Yahweh and find the knowledge of God,
6 for Yahweh gives wisdom, from his mouth come knowledge and understanding,
7 he stores up ingenuity for the upright, a shield for those who walk blamelessly,
8 to guard the paths of justice, protecting the way of his faithful,

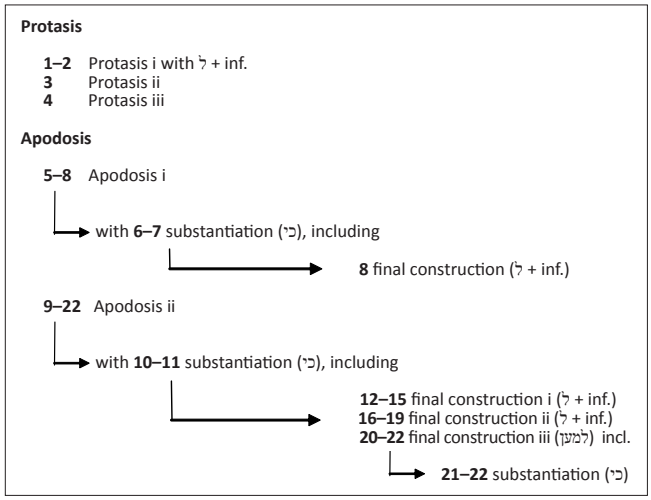
9 then you will understand righteousness and justice and honesty, every good path,
10 for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul,
11 prudence will watch over you, understanding will guard you,
12 to save you from the way of the evil man, from him who speaks perversely,
13 those who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness,
14 who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil,
15 whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways,

16 to save you from the loose woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words,
17 who forsakes the partner of her youth and forgets her sacred covenant,
18 for her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the shades,
19 those who go in to her never come back, nor do they regain the paths of life,

20 so that you may walk in the way of the good, and keep to the paths of the just,
21 for the upright will abide in the land, and the innocent will remain in it,
22 but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.

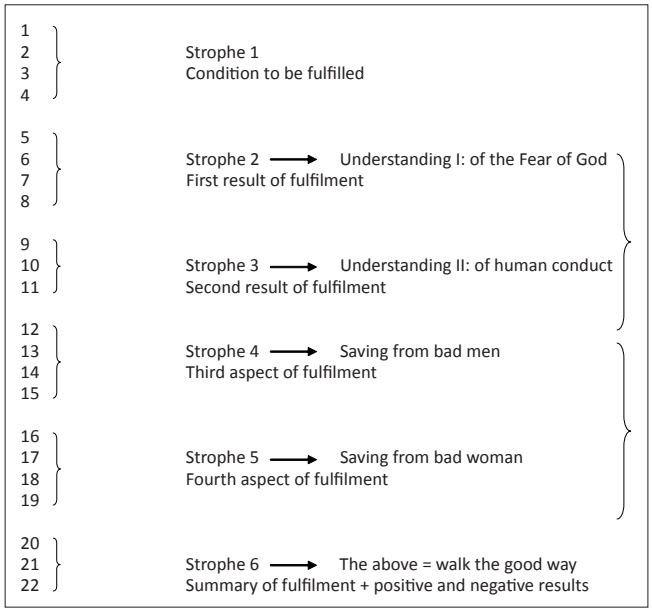
Source: Author's own translation

FIGURE 1: Syntactic units within Proverbs 2:1–22, indicating the position of verse 18.



Source: Author's own construction

FIGURE 2: The syntactic structure of Proverbs 2:1–22.



Source: Author's own construction

FIGURE 3: The strophic structure of Proverbs 2:1–22.

Proverbs 2:18 and its crux

כי שחה אל־מות ביתה ואל־רפאים מעגלתיה

for her house sinks down to death,
and her paths to the shades

The text of verse 18 is uncertain, but the drift of its argument is clear enough: involvement with the strange woman from whom the young man is to be saved, leads to death. Waltke (2004:215) takes כי [surely] as an emphasising adverb because he finds no logical link to the preceding clause. That is possible, but כי can also substantiate why the benefit of understanding is said to be a saving act (vv. 16–17), notably because the strange woman causes death.

The moot point of the verse is the reading of ביתה [her house], as נתיבתה [her path]. This is preferred by Fox (2000:121) and Waltke (2004:215–216), whilst Gemser (1963:24), Plöger (1984:23), Fuhs (2001:59) and Murphy (1998:14) retain ביתה (although the latter does point out the conceptual difficulty). The question is what sense it has to speak of a descending house, especially in a parallelism where the second hemistich contains a clear synonym for 'path' (מעגלתה [her tracks]). The same problem remains for Sæbø (2012:53), who interprets the form שחה transitively, which has already been called 'inadmissible' by Delitzsch (1874:83), either as שוה or as שחה, the Qal form can only be intransitive. In any event, 'she sinks her house' is grammatically not possible.

The suggestion of Fuhs (2001:65–66) that 'house' does not mean a building, but offspring, is unconvincing. The punishment of death would be expected for the offender himself, rather than for any offspring resulting from relations with such a woman. In any event, the parallelism with the second hemistich would then be completely destroyed.

Proverbs 7:27 is referred to as a parallel by several commentators. In this text a house is indeed thought of as a way that descends to the realm of death:

דרכי שאול ביתה ירדות אל־חדרי־מות

> Her house are roads to the Sheol, descending to the chambers of death.

This is quite clear, so there can be nothing against the presence of the concept itself in Proverbs 2:18. Fuhs's (2001) problem, the difficulty of imagining a building going to Sheol rather than the people making up a family-house, can, however, only be tackled after the linguistic problem in verse 18 is solved. Whereas there is no problem with the congruence of gender in Proverbs 7:27, there is in Proverbs 2:18. Here the verb would be feminine singular if the root is שחה, whereas the subject (בית) is masculine singular. Therefore the proposed text-critical emendation to נתיבתה would provide the feminine subject thought to be required. Although the specific form is not attested, a short *a* in the first syllable with virtual doubling of the ח would be expected if the root is שחה. Alternatively, we could accept the existence of a cognate root שוח, in order to explain the stressed *qameṣ* in the first syllable of the feminine singular of an *ʿayin-waw* verb. In that case, the root would occur only here in the Old Testament, although it is attested in the Mesa Inscription (אשוח, Mesa 9, 23), in rabbinic Hebrew (as *ʿayin-yod* root שיח) and in Arabic (*sāḥa*).

Another possibility is to explain the vocalised form as it stands as the third person *masculine* singular of yet another cognate, שחה [bend down]. This root is well known and occurs in the Qal once (Is 51:23), but would require the accent to be shifted to the second syllable. Joseph Kimchi accepts this solution and shifts the emphasis to read שחה as *šāḥā* instead of *šāḥā* By contrast, Moses Kimchi opts for the previous solution ('The word שחה is a verb and its root is שיח'), whilst declaring that [this time] בית is in the feminine gender. He also seems to provide support for Fuhs's (2001) idea that the house is the woman's offspring by stating that 'all that is near to her' (i.e. 'the bad woman') descends to death (cf. Driver 1880:3).

In my opinion, Loretz (1982:141–148) points in the right direction. His proposal entails that the problem of the text as it now lies before us can be solved by investigating the way in which it came into existence. That is, the 'immanent' problem is not to be away. The latter is what Moses Kimchi, in effect, seems to be doing when he merely states what all can see, namely that the feminine gender is 'this time' used with reference to בית. However, this is not the same as 'explain away', which is not attempted by Kimchi. He does not attempt to provide reasons for the fact, but only accepts the text as it stands – 'immanently', so to speak. But that only restates the problem.

As opposed to Kimchi, the proposal by Emerton (1979:153–158) illustrates a classic text-critical approach to this kind of problem. The text is not in order: the Septuagint reads שחה as שתה (ἔθετο [put]), the Peshitta reads it as שכחה (ܫܟܚ [forget]), the Vulgate has *inclinata est* [be slanted] and general uncertainty is evident. In the light of the fact that the versions highlight the difficulty rather than suggest a solution, Emerton offers philological textual criticism. His proposal is to read the first word as שוחה (written either with *scriptio plena* or *defectiva*) [pit]; meaning, 'a pit [leading] to death is her house'. As a feminine noun replaces the feminine verb as part of the predicate in a nominal sentence, this would get rid of the problem of gender discrepancy. But the new difficulty is that the resulting noun clause with the preposition 'pit unto' (שוחה אל), is not supported by parallels in Hebrew, as Fox (2000:122) notes.

Loretz's (1982) proposal does not entail explaining the problem away, neither does it ignore the problem as a 'text-immanent' given to be accepted, or declare *x* or *y* to be a better reading. Rather, he tries to find a solution for the problem 'immanent' in the text by investigating how the text came into existence in this form. That is a classic historical-critical procedure. He suggests that the text has been adapted both in verse 18 and in Proverbs 7:27 under the influence of three further texts in Proverbs 5:8; 7:8 and 9:14–18, in all of which the house of a strange woman is mentioned:

- Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house (Pr 5:8).
- [A youth] passing along the street near her corner, taking the road to her house (Pr 7:8).

- She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the high places of the town, to call to passers-by going straight on their way (Pr 9:14–15).

This would mean that the original text ('her way [נתיבתה] sinks down to death, and her paths to the shades') was changed to refer to the woman's abode ('her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the shades'). That would be a redactional revision, not an error for textual criticism to correct. If this is right, the redactor adapted the text in order to align the various passages where the motif occurs in the collection of Proverbs 1–9. In the light of the other cases where the strange woman's house is mentioned, this verse, too, points out the danger of going to her residence. In that sense, her house could also be seen as a gateway to death, especially when compared to the verses following on Proverbs 7:8 and 9:14. In the first of these, the young man is said to be walking on the way (דרך, Pr 7:8) to the strange woman's house, following her there (Pr 7:22) and encountering the trap of death in her house (Pr 7:23), all of which is summed up as 'her ways' and 'her paths' (דרכיה and נתיבתה, Pr 7:25). In the second instance, Folly invites him to her house, where the shadows are (רפאים, the same word used in Pr 2:18), so that Fox (2000:302) can say, 'Folly's house, like the Strange Woman's (2:18; 7:27), is at once the path to death and the place thereof'. There is no reason why this is not what the redactor wanted Proverbs 2:18 to say as well (see the discussion of v. 19 below for further instances of death presented as a place or house and simultaneously as the path thereto). On this submission, the consonantal text presented no problem, as שחה could be read as the Qal participle (with *ḥolem* and *segol*), so that a masculine verb form could fit the masculine subject בית; one may note that the previous and the following verses also begin with participles. The Masoretes vocalised it with *qameṣ*, which would point to שוה or שחה, the accent favouring the former.

All of this has nothing to do with textual criticism, but offers a redactional, that is, a historical-critical explanation of how the text developed from an earlier stage to the stage lying before us. It also offers an explanation as to why this took place, as well as an explanation of the sense this made in earlier stages and the sense it makes now in the edited form of the text. If we, in a next step, check the congruence or otherwise of this reconstruction with the second hemistich of the verse, we find further substantiation for the argument.

The second hemistich has רפאים as parallel of מות. This is not an exact parallel because it is not a synonym for 'death'. The רפאים (plural) are neither the condition nor the place of death, but a collective of entities *in* death. The 'shadows' (רפאים) are the dead, leading a nebulous existence in the netherworld. The word should not be confused with the identical sounding name of an ancient ethnic group in Canaan (Gn 14:5; 15:20; Jos 12:4; 13:12; 17:15, etc.) or with the Valley of Rephaim (southwest of ancient Jerusalem), referred to in Joshua 15:8; 18:16; 2 Samuel 5:18; 23:13 and 1 Chronicles 11:15, et cetera. McKane (1977:287–288) believes that they allude to the *rpum*, apparently chthonic deities in Ugaritic mythology and, as such, contribute to a warning that becoming entangled with such a woman brings about estrangement from society as well as death. But the etymology of רפאים is uncertain (derived from רפה or אפר [to be weak], or from רפא [heal]?), the parallel between people and deities is forced and we do not need the Ugaritic connection to understand the metaphor of the house of, or way to, death. Moreover, although the overall sapiential warning against this kind of conduct, of course, has a broad social dimension, the motif of social ostracism is neither present nor needed in the presence of the stronger threat of death.

Nevertheless, they relate to 'death' in the same way that 'paths' or 'tracks' (מעגלות) relate to 'house'. One would have expected a closer parallel to מעגלות than בית. The proposition that the earlier form of the text read נתיבה [path] gains in probability because this is exactly what the parallelism requires. But that does not mean that the present text has to be altered in order to 'restore' its original form – as if that means correcting a wrong text to its previous correct state. In the light of the above argument, it seems possible to accept Plöger's (1984:27–28) description of the strange woman's house as a thoroughfare. According to him, such a house is no home because it is not a normal family home-*cum*-wife and therefore not a permanent residence, but a passage to death. This reading is appealing on another count as well: because a house visited for nothing more than a one-night stand is quite aptly seen as an establishment where one does not live but just passes through.

This is developed further by the ensuing categorical statement in verse 19, which confirms the argument just deployed. All who go in to her neither return nor reach the ways to life. The inclusive formulation in the negative (here with כל and לא) is logically ambiguous: not all return who enter (i.e. some may return), or: none of those who enter return. But the Hebrew formulation is the idiomatic way to express the latter meaning, *viz*. all who enter this house perish without exception. The verb בוא, in turn, is not ambiguous, but ambivalent. It means entering the strange woman herself *and* entering her house. Like נשג [return] in the second hemistich, בוא is a verb of movement and suits a context where roads, ways, tracks and returning are dominant concepts. Going into (*sic*) this woman requires going in to (*sic*) her. Entering her house for that purpose means to forego ways leading to life (ארחות חיים), which is the same as entering the ways leading to death. Once inside, there is no return, in other words, life has been left behind. That implies that the house is a place of death. But the lack of a way *back* also implies that the strange woman's house is indeed seen as a way in the other direction (cf. Maier 1995:106, who points out similar terminology used in the context of death metaphors [Job 7:9–10; 10:21; 16:22] for the impossibility of returning; also Pr 15:24 and Ps 16:10–11 for the opposite 'road of life'). If the verse 'unpacks the metaphor of v. 18', as Waltke (2004:232) claims, this in itself argues against emending ביתה of verse 18 to נתיבתה. The metaphor of verse 18 is 'unpacked' to the effect that a definite way to the netherworld passes through this house as a point of no return.

In the salutary tradition of historical criticism, we may now also pose the question how all of this relates to the cultural history of the ancient Near Eastern context in which the text originated and from which the intellectual movement

whence it came emerged. The Mesopotamian texts cited in most commentaries on Proverbs 2 give an answer that provides collateral support for the interpretation proposed. They refer to death as 'the road from which there is no way back' ('The descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld', obverse, lines 1–11 [ANET, 107]; Gilgamesh VII, iv, lines 33–40 [ANET, 87]). But there is more to it than that. In these texts, the notion of death as a land 'from whose bourn no traveller returns', is expressed by means of the concepts of a way as well as a house: Ishtar goes to 'the land of no return' (line 1) and it follows in lines 4–7:

> To the dark *house*, the abode of Irkalla,
> To the *house* which none leave who have entered it,
> To the **road** from which there is no way back,
> To the *house* where the entrants are bereft of light …

Both here and in the Gilgamesh variant, a triple usage of 'house' occurs in parallelism with 'road', which confirms the close association of the two concepts. This is especially clear when the parallelism of lines 5 and 6 is considered:

- house – none leave
- road – no way back.

Waltke (2004:233) also finds a chiastic order in Proverbs 2:19, but that is only partial in that לֹא + an imperfect verb ends the first hemistich and opens the second, whereas the beginning of the first hemistich contains the *subject* of the first verb and the ending of the second hemistich contains the *object* of its verb. I would therefore not be inclined to advance this as further evidence for the argument developed here – and I do not think we need more.

Conclusion

Reviewing what we have covered in the paragraphs above reveals that there is a clear distinction between two dimensions of our handling a textual problem in our proof-text. We have focused on one verse, but in order to address its problem, we had to do what 'immanent' scholars have always done before, during and after the golden age of Old Testament studies, as Professor Le Roux has typified in the latter three decades of the twentieth century. We have considered the linguistic and structural aspects of the whole poem within which our crux finds itself. Both the complexities of the syntactical form of the text as it stands and those of the strophic pattern and style of a poem divided into stichs and hemistichs were respected. The crux featured as constituent of a literary whole. All this amounts to good 'immanent' stuff (cf. Williams 1980, for a specific sapiential aspect of the power of literary form).

But our investigation of the specific problem (house or path) could not be completed without the historical perspective. Considering the crux not only in the context of the one poem of which it is part, but also in the context of the literary unit as part of which it was edited, compelled us to account for another aspect. There are reasons to reconstruct a previous or 'original' form of the text that differs from the form as it now stands. The redactional dimension as a full-blown historical-critical way of handling an ancient text not only showed 'what happened' to the text, but also why the text should not be emended. The redactor responsible for the so-called 'final' text (which never existed and still does not exist, but that is another matter, cf. Loader 2005:31–50) forged a text in which all the different passages featuring a bad woman's house within the collection of Proverbs 1–9 are aligned to each other. He (for it was not a she) was fully steeped in the history of the ancient Near Eastern sapiential movement, because his concept of a house as a path to death was known and used by other sages before him. And, most of all, he added value to the text.

Finally, we have observed how – as in the treatment of this text – matters of a *literary-critical* nature are often unobtrusively handled as *text-critical* efforts of improving the text 'as it stands'. This can often be seen in critical editions of the Old Testament, in my experience very often in *BHK* and often in *BHS*. However, noticing what *tandem* attention to the 'immanent' and the historical-critical dimensions of the text can deliver, also has the advantage of showing that problems traditionally seen as the realm of correcting the text, can actually become invitations to several and different readings of a text, often in a historical relationship to each other.

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Competing interests

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