

DECODING THE "BIBLE CODE"

J. Paul Tanner

IN 1997 MICHAEL DROSNIN'S BOOK, *The Bible Code*, captured the attention of both the secular and the religious world with its astounding claims of having discovered hidden messages in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament.¹ Drosnin's book captivated many readers with the alleged "Bible code" and became a bestseller. Scores of books, articles, and websites are now available for the curious. The "code" finds adherents in Jewish and Christian circles and among those who make no claim to belief in God.

The lure of the code is its claim to provide "secret messages" in the Old Testament that predict events. Hitler and the Holocaust, the assassinations of John Kennedy and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, the Gulf War, and man's landing on the moon are all supposedly predicted in secret codes in the Hebrew Old Testament. The question naturally arises as to whether this technique is valid and whether Christians should place any confidence in it. Many already have, and therefore a careful evaluation is in order.

This article presents a brief introduction to the rise of the Bible code, explains how it works, provides examples of the method, and offers an evaluation. This writer is convinced that the method (despite its attraction to even very learned individuals) does not hold up when carefully examined, is inherently flawed, and must be exposed as a hoax being propagated on the unsuspecting.

BACKGROUND

The Bible code has its roots in Jewish mysticism and a belief that the letters in the Hebrew text can be counted and "rearranged" so as to spell out additional words beyond those that appear in the surface text.² Medieval rabbis often made claims that special words

J Paul Tanner is Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Studies, Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary, Amman, Jordan

¹ Michael Drosnin, *The Bible Code* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997)

² For a helpful introduction to the Jewish background of the Bible code, see Jef-

could be found in the Hebrew text by counting out letters that occurred at equal intervals. For instance, the Hebrew word for “Torah” (תורה), a word often used to refer to the first five books of the Old Testament, can be found in the first few verses of Genesis—right at the very beginning of the Torah! Disregarding any vowel points that might be involved, one could start with the ת at the end of the first word (בראשית, “in the beginning”), count fifty letters over, and the next letter is ו. Counting fifty letters more, ר is the letter, and then counting fifty more is ה. Thus the Hebrew word for “Torah” is spelled out. This might seem remarkable, were it not for the fact that over four thousand similar “strings” of text spelling “Torah” can be found in the Book of Genesis alone.³

Before the computer age such observations were restricted to very limited contexts. In the earlier part of the twentieth century Michael Dov Weissmandl, a Czechoslovakian Jewish scholar in astronomy, mathematics, and Judaic studies, made special effort to locate and record these “encoded words” made up of letters occurring at evenly spaced intervals. His work, however, was interrupted by the events of World War II, in which he was forced to flee from Nazi soldiers. Eventually he made his way to the United States, and some of the results of his research was published posthumously in the book *Torat Chemed*.⁴ In 1983 Eliyahu Rips, an Israeli mathematician, began to conduct quantitative research into the subject of “equidistant letter sequences” (ELSSs), building on the work of Weissmandl. Rips worked with Doron Witztum, a graduate student in physics specializing in studies of general relativity who had turned his attention to religious studies of the Torah.⁵ By the spring of 1985 Witztum and Rips had discovered the phenomenon of convergences between pairs of “conceptually related words” in the Book of Genesis.⁶ They defined a method for evaluating the significance of these convergences, and were further assisted by

frey Satinover, *Cracking the Bible Code* (New York: William Morrow, 1997), chapters 1–2.

³ Using a freeware program called “Torah4U” (Beta version 2.11) developed by Arikh Anpin of Israel, the present writer found the coded sequence תורה 4,284 times in Genesis alone, using a *skip value* of two to one thousand, which means that the interval between letters must be at least two but not more than one thousand. The program is available at <http://members.xoom.com/anpin/index.html>.

⁴ H. M. D. Weissmandl, *Torat Chemed* [“Torah of Delight”] (Mount Kisco, NY: Yeshivath Mount Kisco, 1958).

⁵ Satinover, *Cracking the Bible Code*, 11.

⁶ Doron Witztum, “A Brief History of Codes Research,” <http://www.torah-codes.co.il/debate.htm>, October 14, 1999. (The hyphen after “torah” in this web address is not part of the address.)

Yoav Rosenberg in the preparation of the necessary computer software. By 1988 they published an article in the eminent *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, reporting that when pairs of related words were found in Genesis as ELSSs, at minimal skips, they appeared in close proximity too often to be accounted for by chance.⁷ In an attempt to establish their research on a firm scientific basis, they conducted an experiment in which they utilized the names and appellations of famous rabbinical scholars along with their dates of birth and death.⁸ They claim that there was a measurable convergence between the famous personalities and their associated dates. The results of their work were published as a technical statistical presentation in the respected journal *Statistical Science*.⁹

Rips and Witztum did not make the kind of extraordinary claims that Drosnin later became noted for in his book. Furthermore they decried attempts to predict the future based on code discoveries. Although Drosnin drew on the work of Rips and Witztum, the latter have publicly denounced Drosnin's attempts to use Bible codes for predicting the future.¹⁰ Some have mistakenly thought that the invitation given to Rips and Witztum to publish their findings in *Statistical Science* meant that the editors and reviewers of the journal endorsed what they had presented, but this is not the case. While it is true that the article did create quite a stir in the academic community (giving the impression that the Bible might be, after all, a book of supernatural origin), the article was not universally applauded. Satinover presents a quotation in his book that leaves the reader with the impression that Robert Kass, then editor of *Statistical Science* (currently chairman of the department of statistics at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh), personally endorsed the article of Witztum and Rips: "Our referees were baffled their prior beliefs made them think the Book of Genesis could

⁷ Doron Witztum, Elyahu Rips, and Yoav Rosenberg, "Response to D J Bartholomew, 'Probability Statistics and Theology,'" *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Sect A, 151, Pt 1 (1988) 137-78

⁸ The names were drawn from M Margalioth, *The Encyclopedia of Great Men of Israel* (Tel Aviv Joshua Chachik, 1961)

⁹ Doron Witztum, Elyahu Rips, and Yoav Rosenberg, "Equidistant Letter Sequences in the Book of Genesis," *Statistical Science A Review Journal of the Institute of Mathematical Statistics* 9 (August 1994) 429-38 Drosnin included a copy of this article as an appendix in *The Bible Code* As a control on their research, Witztum and Rips claim that they carried out the same procedure on the Hebrew translation of L N Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (Hebrew translation by L Goldberg, Sifriat Poalim, Merhaviva, 1953), but this work did not yield the same convergences as the Book of Genesis Others, however, have contested this claim

¹⁰ David Van Biema, "Deciphering God's Plan," *Time*, June 9, 1997, 56

not possibly contain meaningful references to modern day individuals, yet when the authors carried out additional analyses and checks the effect persisted. The paper is thus offered to *Statistical Science* readers as a challenging puzzle.¹¹ Kass, however, has since then issued a public statement disavowing any endorsement of the work and clarifying his personal estimation of the research.

Some people seem to think that the publication of the Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg article in *Statistical Science* served as a stamp of scientific approval on the work. This is a great exaggeration. *Statistical Science* publishes a wide variety of papers of general interest to statisticians. Although the referees thought carefully about possible sources of error in the work, no one tried to reanalyze the data carefully and independently to try to uncover the presumed flaw in the logic.

The very few public statements I have made seem to have been misinterpreted to lend support to the notion that there may be some scientific basis for the findings of Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg. My personal belief is quite the opposite: the authors' work did not go far enough to make me seriously think, even for a moment, that their results were anything other than coincidental, and likely due to a subtle flaw in their methodology. As I said in the preface to that issue of the journal, the paper was offered to our readers as a challenging puzzle. We published it in the hope that someone would step forward and do the careful analysis required to solve the puzzle, and that the discipline of statistics would be advanced through the identification of the logical errors in this kind of pattern recognition.¹²

Drosnin and Satinover, in their attempts to sell the Bible code to the public, give the impression that the scholarly community (especially mathematicians and statisticians) has endorsed the work of Witztum and Rips.¹³ This is certainly not true (Robert Kass being a case in point). In addition, Shlomo Sternberg, Harvard University mathematics professor and Orthodox rabbi, has blasted the code phenomenon.¹⁴ *Publishers Weekly* reported recently, "Computational physicist Ingermanson designed a series of statis-

¹¹ Satinover, *Cracking the Bible Code*, 203

¹² Robert Kass, "A Statement about the Bible Codes," <http://lib.stat.cmu.edu/~kass/>, October 14, 1999 (The hyphen after "cmu" in this web address is not part of the address.)

¹³ Satinover for instance, highlights Harold Gans, senior cryptologic mathematician at the National Security Agency, and Professor Andrew Goldfinger, a senior physicist at Johns Hopkins University and number two man at the Space Computer and Technology Group there, as reputable individuals of the scholarly community who have confirmed and endorsed the Bible code (*Cracking the Bible Code*, 191).

¹⁴ *Notices of the AMS* (American Mathematical Society), September 1997, quoted in David E. Thomas, "Bible Code Developments," *Skeptical Inquirer* 22 (March–April 1998): 58.

tical computer tests to discover whether there really is a Bible code, and, if there is, who wrote it. . . . Ingermanson introduces a series of entropy tests, equidistant letter sequencing tests, tigram tests and chi-square analyses to test the theories of Drosnin and his believers—and concludes that the Bible code does not exist.”¹⁵

While it is true that *some* scholarly individuals have given their backing to the Bible code phenomenon, the point here is to clarify (lest Drosnin and Satinover give a false impression) that a far larger number have rejected the work of Rips and Witztum.¹⁶ Since its release in 1994 the article by Witztum and Rips has been evaluated and refuted by others in the field of mathematics and statistics.¹⁷ Thus one must be cautious in reading the popular-level presentations that state that the Bible code has solid backing by the experts in the field. This is simply not true.

Following the publication of Rips and Witztum in 1994, however, Michael Drosnin, a reporter in New York City formerly at the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*, caught wind of their research and recognized the potential that such a story could have. In 1997 he published his own account of the technique in his book, *The Bible Code*, which quickly soared to the bestseller list. The significance of this publication is that Drosnin removed the technical statistical jargon and popularized the matter for the average person to understand. He played on sensationalism by highlighting “secret messages” from the Bible, which in essence prophesied scores of events, including Rabin’s assassination and Hitler’s persecution of the Jews. Drosnin even ventured into prophetic fore-

¹⁵ “Who Wrote the Bible Code? A Physicist Probes the Current Controversy,” *Publishers Weekly*, July 26, 1999, 80. More information from Ingermanson can be obtained at his website <http://www.rsingermanson.com/html/introduction.html>

¹⁶ Brendan McKay presents a selection of opinion articles by noted experts denouncing the Bible code, and a public statement of more than fifty professional mathematicians and statisticians who have studied the evidence and found it unconvincing. Website <http://cs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/dilugim/torah.html>

¹⁷ A quasitechnical article responding to and denouncing the findings of Witztum and Rips appeared in 1998 in a magazine of the American Statistical Association (Maya Bar-Hillel, Dror Bar-Natan, and Brendan McKay, “The Torah Codes Puzzle and Solution,” *Chance* 2 [May 1998] 13–19). Contrary to Witztum and Rips, this article contends that the same method can be utilized on the Hebrew edition of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* and even produce results every bit as remarkable as those found with Genesis. Witztum has attempted to answer the allegations of McKay and others (Doron Witztum, “Challenges to the Validity of the Research,” <http://www.torahcodes.co.il/debate.htm>, October 14, 1999). A more technical and thorough refutation of Witztum and Rips appeared in Brendan McKay, Dror Bar-Natan, Maya Bar-Hillel, and Gil Kalai, “Solving the Bible Code Puzzle,” *Statistical Science* 14 (1999) 150–73. A downloadable copy in PDF format is available at <http://cs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/dilugim/StatSci/StatSci.pdf>, October 14, 1999.

telling and warned that coded messages predict nuclear war in the not-too-distant future Whereas Rips and Witztum felt the Bible code defied chance and thereby authenticated the Hebrew Bible as divinely revealed (thus substantiating that there really is a God), Drosnin basically turned the Hebrew Bible into a kind of crystal ball

In the same year Jeffrey Satinover also published his work, *Cracking the Bible Code*, which explained the Bible code from a more informed viewpoint and without the same level of sensationalism that characterized Drosnin's work He too advocated support for the Bible code that Rips and Witztum had brought to light

Shortly before the publication of the books by Drosnin and Satinover, some lesser known books had already been released in the Christian market by 1996 that built on the work of Rips and Witztum One was *The Signature of God*, by Grant Jeffrey, and the other was *Yeshua The Name of Jesus Revealed in the Old Testament*, by Yacov Rambsel¹⁸ (Rambsel is a Hebrew Christian, and Jeffrey a Christian prophecy advocate) Both of these works sought to highlight Bible codes of a messianic nature in which the name of Jesus (Yeshua in Hebrew) was encoded in the Old Testament Since these two books were published, the market has been inundated with materials from both Jewish and Christian advocates of the Bible code, each using the technique for their own purposes A public presentation entitled the "Discovery Seminary" (sponsored by Aish HaTorah College of Jewish Studies) has been responsible for presenting the codes to Jewish groups and synagogues throughout North America and Israel in an effort to prove the divine origin of the Torah and thereby win Jews over to Orthodoxy

Presently a number of software programs are on the market that enable independent researchers to find their own hidden codes Two of the more highly rated programs are "CodeFinder" and "Bible Codes 2000" (both in the \$60-\$80 range)¹⁹ These computer programs do not always base their searches on the same He-

¹⁸ Grant R Jeffrey *The Signature of God Astonishing Biblical Discoveries* (Toronto Frontier Research 1996), and Yacov Rambsel, *Yeshua The Name of Jesus Revealed in the Old Testament* (Toronto Frontier Research, 1996) A related work by James Harrison, which focuses more on the gematria codes in Scripture, also appeared about the same time (James Harrison, *The Pattern and the Prophecy God's Great Code* [Ontario Isaiah, 1996])

¹⁹ "CodeFinder" is published by Research Systems, and "Bible Codes 2000" is published by Bibletech Inc Both of these programs (and several others) are described and evaluated by Roy A Reinhold, "Bible Code Software Comparisons," <http://members.aol.com/prophecy04/Articles/codessoftware.html>, October 4 1999 A freeware program called "Torah4U" works reasonably well

brew Bible, however. The more commonly used Hebrew text is the Koren edition (Jerusalem Koren, 1962). One can also find programs that advertise search capabilities for the Greek New Testament (and some for the King James Version of the Bible!).

THE BIBLE CODE METHOD

The Bible is full of straightforward prophecies, such as the prediction in Micah 5:2 that the Messiah would arise from Bethlehem. All one has to do to investigate this prophecy is to turn to this passage to see what it says. The Bible code, however, does not work that way. One has to begin with a known word (in Hebrew) and ask the computer to search for that word. The computer then searches the Hebrew text of the Bible, skipping letters at a set interval (called equidistant intervals or skip levels), to find any place where the letters of that word are spelled out. For code searchers the interval between letters can be of any length (even thousands of letters) so long as all the letters in the word are at the same interval.²⁰ In addition it does not matter whether the word is spelled forwards or backwards. Regardless of which Hebrew text one uses, hundreds of thousands of letters are in the Hebrew Old Testament, and only computers could make such extensive searches.²¹ Once an initial "word" is found, and an equidistant interval has been established, then the letters of that word are aligned in the text to create a matrix of letters (a grid) consisting of all letters from the beginning of the sequence until its end. The equidistant interval determines the number of columns in the grid. This matrix can then be searched for other possible "related words" that cross the path of the original

²⁰ Researchers like Rips and Witztum have attempted to put some checks on the interval length by speaking of "minimal ELS's," where the spelling of words with related meanings must occur in close proximity. For a technical discussion see Doron Witztum, Elyahu Rips, and Yoav Rosenberg, "Equidistant Letter Sequences in the Book of Genesis II: The Relation to the Text," <http://cs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/dilugim/Nations/WRR2/index.html#B1>, October 14, 1999 (The hyphen after "dil" in this web address is not part of the address.) See also James D. Price, "Compactness Explained," <http://www.prophezie.com/tcode/obj5.html>, October 14, 1999. Price, however, is not an advocate of the Bible code and has even demonstrated that the same technique can just as readily produce negative codes (e.g., Satan is YHWH!).

²¹ According to Jeffrey H. Tigay, of the University of Pennsylvania, the Koren edition of the Pentateuch has 304,805 letters. On the other hand, the Michigan-Claremont-Westminster (MCW) computerized text of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (the critical edition of the Leningrad Codex B19^A, currently in use by most scholars) has 304,850 letters. C. D. Ginsburg's edition of the Torah contains 304,807 letters. See Jeffrey H. Tigay, "The Bible 'Codes': A Textual Perspective," <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~jtigay/codetext.html>, October 13, 1999 (The hyphen after "up" in this web address is not part of the address.)

word. The original search word and all related words are then interpreted, that is, one must ascertain what the “message” is on the basis of examining all these words that have “converged.”

As an example, one could do a search for “Hitler,” the greatest modern-day nemesis of the Jews. First, one must determine the Hebrew spelling for Hitler, which would be היטלר. Then a computer search can be made to find all places in the Old Testament where these five letters occur in sequence at equally spaced intervals. Such a sequence will occur numerous times (even by random chance), but one such sequence occurs in Deuteronomy 10:17–19 with a skip level of twenty-two.²²

Deuteronomy

10:17–19

Start here
with ה

Count every 22nd letter

כי יהוה אלהיכם הוא אלהי האלהים ואדני האדנים הַאֵל 17

הגדל הגבר והנורא אשר לא־ישא פנים ולא יקח שחד:

עשה משפט יתום ואלמנה ואהב גר לתת לו לחם ושמלה: 18

ואהבתם את־הגר כ־גֵרִים הייתם בארץ מצרים: 19

If these five letters are shifted so that they stay in the same order but so that the five letters of היטלר line up vertically, then one could look for converging words.

א	ו	מ	י	ה	ל	א	ה	י	ה	ל	א	ו	ה	מ	כ	י	ה	ל	א	ה	
ה	ו	ד	ב	ג	ה	ד	ל	ה	ג	א	ה	ה	מ	י	נ	ד	א	ה	י	נ	ד
ח	ק	י	א	ל	ו	מ	י	נ	פ	א	ש	י	א	ל	ר	ש	א	א	ר	ו	ר
א	ו	ה	נ	מ	ל	א	ו	מ	ו	ת	י	ט	פ	ש	מ	ה	ש	ע	ד	ח	ש
ת	ב	ה	א	ו	ה	ל	מ	ש	ו	ח	ל	ל	ו	ל	ת	ת	ל	ר	ג	ב	ה
מ	צ	ר	א	ב	מ	ת	י	י	ה	י	מ	ר	ג	י	כ	י	ג	ה	ת	א	מ
ו	ת	א	א	ר	י	כ	י	ה	ל	א	ה	ו	ה	י	ת	א	י	מ	ר	י	צ

²² The chances of finding “Hitler” (היטלר) in the Bible are not so remote as one might think. Using the Torah4U program, the present writer found 262 occurrences of “Hitler” in the Old Testament with the skip sequence varying from two to five hundred.

In the Bible code method, dates can be identified on the basis of their Hebrew letter equivalency (א = 1, ב = 2, etc.). Converging words run in any direction (horizontally, vertically, or diagonally) and can also have skip intervals. The determination of converging words is a subjective choice of the reader. For instance, one could take the first three letters from the last line from the matrix above, צרי. Since צר is a Hebrew word meaning "foe, adversary," and י signifies the personal pronoun "my," one could *claim* that this means "my foe." When combined with "Hitler," the total message would be "Hitler is my foe." To some people (particularly Jews), this would make a lot of sense. The claim could then be made that the Bible predicted centuries ago that Hitler would be the foe of the Jews.

The same method could be applied to other search words, depending on what the researcher hoped to find. Yacob Rambsel, a Hebrew Christian, has pointed out that within the writings of the prophet Isaiah the very name of Jesus is recorded. Furthermore, he claims that it is found in one of the most messianic references of the entire Old Testament, namely, Isaiah 53. According to Rambsel the message "Jesus is my name" is encoded in Isaiah 53:8–10.²³ The name Jesus would be Yeshua (ישוע) in Hebrew, and "my name" would be שמי. Omitting the verb "is," Rambsel then looks for the sequence of letters ישוע שמי (in this case, not a convergence of words but one long sequence). By his claim the entire sequence is spelled backwards (from left to right) at a skip interval of twenty, beginning with the second י in the word יאריך in verse 10.

EVALUATION

Several problems with the Bible code lead to the conclusion that it is not a valid source of divine insight or revelation. One must keep in mind, however, that not all advocates of the Bible code share the same presuppositions. Although they use essentially the same method, they may employ that method for completely different ends. Many code advocates are Jewish and would not accept the messianic claims being made by others.

THE METHOD WRONGLY ASSUMES MANUSCRIPT UNIFORMITY

Because the Old Testament's original manuscripts have never been found, what is on hand are copies made and passed from one generation to the next. Over the course of many centuries (despite the fact that great attention was given to transmitting these manu-

²³ Rambsel, *Yeshua: The Name of Jesus Revealed in the Old Testament*, xxi.

scripts faithfully), scribal errors have crept in.²⁴ Unfortunately careless statements about transmission are naively propagated in an attempt to lure people into a fascination with and belief in the Bible code. The following was posted on an internet site. “A 3,000-year old tradition states that God dictated the Torah (i.e., The Law, the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament), to Moses, in a precise letter by letter sequence, and that historic events, past, present and future, are encoded in the Hebrew Scriptures by an encryption system which can be described and unlocked. The Gospels may refer to this when they state in Matthew 5:18 ‘I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.’”²⁵

The Hebrew manuscripts available today are not identical and variations (mostly of a minor spelling nature) do exist. The main problem is that Bible code theory presumes manuscript uniformity. If even one extra letter was inserted (or omitted) in any given code sequence, the message would be nullified. Even Drosnin, probably the most well-known Bible code advocate, falsely assumes manuscript uniformity. “There is a complete version of the Bible in the original Hebrew almost 1000 years old, the Leningrad Codex, published in AD 1008 It is the oldest intact copy of the Old Testament. . . . All Bibles in the original Hebrew language that now exist are the same letter for letter.”²⁶

Drosnin’s statement is blatantly false. The manuscript known as the “Leningrad Codex” is but one of several Hebrew manuscripts now available. This and the “Aleppo Codex” are two of the best (and most complete) Hebrew manuscripts. Actually the “Aleppo Codex” is slightly older and generally regarded by Israeli scholars as superior. It resides in Jerusalem and is the basis for the Hebrew University Bible Project. These manuscripts are close in detail, but there are differences between them.²⁷ Though most of the differ-

²⁴ For a helpful introduction to the subject of textual criticism in reference to Hebrew manuscripts, see Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis Fortress, 1992)

²⁵ “History of the Theory of the Bible Codes,” <http://www.biblecodesplus.com/bible-codesplus/hisoftheorof.html>, October 14, 1999 (The hyphen after “bible” in this web address is not part of the address) Cf Maimonides, *Introduction to Perek Helek* (Sanhedrin 10 1), Eighth Principle, R Joseph Albo, *Sefer haIkkarim*, 3 22, and David Isaac Abrabanel, *Introduction to Commentary on Jeremiah* (Tel Aviv Torah veDaat, n d), 298–99

²⁶ Drosnin, *The Bible Code*, 194

²⁷ In his doctoral studies the present writer wrote a research paper that compared and analyzed these two manuscripts (J Paul Tanner, “A Comparative Study of the

ences are minor, they are relevant for the discussion here. For example in Deuteronomy 28:18 the Leningrad manuscript spells "lambs" as ועשחררה, whereas the Aleppo Codex spells it as ועשחרה (the letter ך is missing before the final letter in the Aleppo manuscript).²⁸ While such a variation makes no difference in meaning, it would make all the difference in the world if a person were counting letters and intervals. The manuscripts from the Dead Sea Scrolls make the situation even more problematic. As noted earlier, Rambsel claims to have found the phrase "Yeshua is my name" in Isaiah 53:8–10. In that segment, however, there is a significant textual difference in verse 10 between the Leningrad Codex and 1QIsa^a, the primary Dead Sea Scroll for Isaiah:

Leningrad Codex: םחלי

1QIsa^a: םיחללהו

These differences between the manuscripts would have a substantial bearing on the counting of letters and intervals.²⁹ Despite the publication of a recognized Authorized Text of the Hebrew Bible in the sixteenth century (on which the Koren edition is based), this did not eliminate the need for textual criticism, as Menachem Cohen of Bar-Ilan University has ably shown. He writes that "even within the transmission tradition of the Authorized Text there remained a slender swath of variants, as can be seen via a comparison between the best texts of MT. No one model copy is identical to any other, and the variants between one copy and the next amount to a few hundred over all of Scriptures."³⁰

ADVOCATES OF THE BIBLE CODE SOMETIMES MISREPRESENT THE DATA

In keeping with the title of his book, Rambsel has supposedly found

Leningrad Codex and the Aleppo Codex" [paper submitted for Methods of Research in Hebrew Studies, University of Texas at Austin, May 1987])

²⁸ This is a minor spelling difference in Hebrew, which represents the difference between *plene* and *defective* writing. Both words are spelled with a long "o" as the last vowel, but one with a "historically long o" and the other with a "tone long o."

²⁹ Satinover understates the case when he remarks that "between the 100 B C Isaiah texts and the A D 600 text, a mere handful of minor single-letter or punctuation differences were found!" (*Cracking the Bible Code*, 52)

³⁰ Menachem Cohen, "The Idea of the Sanctity of the Biblical Text and the Science of Textual Criticism," <http://cs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/dilugim/opinions/CohenArt/>, October 14, 1999. In the same article Cohen notes that "even today, there is no universally agreed-upon version of the Masoretic Text." For a list of variations in spelling and conjunctions in the first nineteen printed editions of the Torah, see Torah Shelema 23:111–12.

scores of examples where "Yeshua" is spelled out in the Old Testament. However, it is noteworthy that he did not always rely on the same spelling of "Yeshua." In most of his examples he assumed the spelling ישוע . In one case, however, he presumed a spelling יש (the letter ע is missing so that there are three letters instead of four).³¹ His example was taken from Genesis 4:4 where the Bible states that "The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering" (NIV). Rambsel seeks to find "Yeshua" in the verse in this way: "The word in Hebrew used for *looked* is *yishah* יש , which means, *to look with compassion*. Also, it is another way of spelling *Yeshua*."³²

Here Rambsel relies on a different spelling of Yeshua, and he actually misrepresents the data. The word in the Hebrew Bible is ישע . The first letter is actually a conjunction (waw consecutive), and the remainder is a verb derived from the root השע . But Rambsel used only part of the word (omitting the first letter). Furthermore the verb השע has nothing whatever to do with the word for Yeshua. The verb means "to gaze at, regard with favor."

Drosnin is also guilty of this type of misrepresentation. He attempts to argue that encoded in the text of Deuteronomy 12:11-17 is the message, "The Bible code is sealed before God."³³

Supposedly this message is derived from a combination of vertical and horizontal "words." The vertical words are the "encoded words" based on letters occurring at equal-distant intervals (i.e., each letter of the vertical words is seventy letters apart in the Hebrew text). The horizontal words, on the other hand, are adjacent letters from Deuteronomy 12:12. The first horizontal word is supposedly חס , which Drosnin says means "sealed." Here is the fallacy to his scheme: What he does not tell the unsuspecting reader is that he has taken the last half of a Hebrew word and made an artificially new word from it. The word is not חס ; it is ושמחה , which means "and you shall rejoice." To take the last three letters from "rejoice" to make a new word "sealed" is simply a fraudulent method. Though convenient for Drosnin, this cannot be accepted as a valid approach.

This is not an isolated example. Drosnin also claims to have discovered this message: "The next war . . . will be after the death of the Prime Minister (in July)." He claims that this pertains to

³¹ Of course in Hebrew ש can be an alternative spelling of שׁ , but the point here is that it seems a bit too convenient for the Bible code advocates to capitalize on such variations in spelling to suit their purposes

³² Rambsel, *Yeshua The Name of Jesus Revealed in the Old Testament*, 14

³³ Drosnin, *The Bible Code*, 186

Netanyahu, who, by delaying a trip to Jordan in July 1996, actually avoided his own death.³⁴ That is, the Bible code predicted Netanyahu was to have died on that occasion, but his last-minute change of plans prevented this fate. From this observation Drosnin concludes that the Bible code is not absolute; situations can be avoided if the warnings are heeded.

The message he claims to have found has two parts. The first part—the vertical words forming the phrase “the next war”—is derived from equal-distant letters stretching from Genesis 36:15 to Numbers 12:8. The second part—the horizontal words forming the phrase “will be after the death of the Prime Minister (in July)” —are not encoded words at all (i.e., words formed by letters occurring at equal-distant intervals). Instead this occurrence is what Drosnin refers to as a “hidden text.”³⁵ They are the letters occurring in Genesis 25:11, shortly before the encoded words. These letters are:

א ב ר ה ם	מ ו ת	א ח ר י
Abraham	(of) death	after

Drosnin takes the word for Abraham, divides it in two, and creates two new artificial words:

ר ה ם	א ב	מ ו ת	א ח ר י
Prime Minister	Av	death	after

“Av” is the Hebrew name for one of the months of the year, approximately July. The technique is as ridiculous as it is illegitimate. When read with the rest of the verse, these words become absurd: “After the death of the Prime Minister in July, God blessed Isaac his son.”³⁶

THE METHOD IS NOT SO “AMAZING” MATHEMATICALLY

One of the appeals that Bible code advocates make to unsuspecting readers is their pretense that the coding is statistically too amazing to have happened by chance. However, the vast number of professional mathematicians and statisticians who have examined this

³⁴ Ibid., 161.

³⁵ Ibid., 230.

³⁶ To those acquainted with Hebrew, it is obvious that this would involve a blatant grammatical violation as well. The Hebrew words מוֹת אֲבִרָהִם form a “construct relationship.” With Drosnin’s proposal, the words רהם and מוֹת would be in construct, with the word אב inserted between them. Yet Hebrew does not interrupt a construct relationship to insert the name of a month.

matter have rejected the statistical claims being made.³⁷ As mentioned earlier, Bible code proponents say the intervals between letters can be tens and even hundreds of letters apart (Drosnin even claims thousands!). That means for every single letter in the Hebrew Bible (and, as already stated, there are many hundreds of thousands), one could generate an almost endless number of possible combinations of letters. For every single letter, a person could count in either direction at every possible interval. Furthermore words can be spelled forwards or backwards. Doing that for every letter in the Old Testament would produce millions of possible letter formations. Given that many possibilities, random chance alone would yield a number of times where the combination ישוע (Yeshua) would turn up. In fact one search that the present writer ran turned up 26,990 occurrences of ישוע in the Old Testament.³⁸ The same can be done with other letter sequences.

This task is easier in Hebrew than in English, since the method rests on counting consonants rather than vowels.³⁹ For example, the English word "truth" requires five letters in sequence. The Hebrew, however, requires only three (אמת). Using a computer to generate letter sequences, almost any desired word could be found. Perhaps Bible code advocates would reply that it is not simply the finding of one word but often several from the same matrix (hence we can obtain not only a name but also additional information such as a date). But this involves working with the hypothetical words that are found and then selecting ones that spell something known to the researcher. Since one letter can generate thousands of possible words, three verses from any part of the Old Testament can produce millions of letter sequences. Out of that many possibilities, some are bound to resemble known words, and one can make out of these words what one wishes to find.

The Hebrew consonants in the name "David" are "dvd." Out of

³⁷ For a helpful article dispelling the claims often made about statistical probability and explaining the logical flaws in such presentations, see Barry Simon, "The Case against the Codes," <http://wopr.com/biblecodes/TheCase.htm>, October 27, 1999. Simon is the IBM professor of mathematics and theoretical physics at California Institute of Technology.

³⁸ This search was performed on the Torah4U software using a skip value of two to five hundred.

³⁹ Biblical Hebrew was originally written without vowels. This would be like writing the word "Hebrew" as "Hbrw." At some point, a few of the consonants (ו, י, and ך) were used to indicate certain vowels. These letters were known as *maters*. Eventually in the eighth to tenth centuries A.D. Jewish scribes added some *points* around the consonants to indicate what the vowels should be. The result is what is known as a *pointed text* (or Masoretic text, since the Jewish scribes who added the pointing were known as Masoretes).

millions of possible three-letter sequences, it is not difficult at all to find one that begins with "d" and is followed by "v" and "d." For modern words, Bible code researchers sometimes use transliterations of English words while other times they rely on Hebrew translations. Since Hebrew words are more "compact," this reduces the odds. For example, for the word "holocaust" with nine letters, the Hebrew word **שואה** is used (only four letters).⁴⁰ The name "Clinton," however, is simply transliterated **קלינטון**.⁴¹ Though the transliterated form has the same number of letters as in English, the average reader might not notice that Hebrew vowels have been included. Hence, vowels are included when they facilitate finding a desired word, but are left out other times. This use or exclusion of vowels based on convenience shows that the authors bend the evidence to force their method to work and get the messages they want. For example, in *The Bible Code* the word for "holocaust" is spelled with the long "o" vowel (ו) on page 107 (**שואה**), but without the vowel on page 134 (**שאה**).

If coded words were included in the Old Testament by divine intention, then one could expect to find them at shorter intervals (on average) than would happen by random chance. If, however, the occurrence of certain words is merely a product of random chance, then one would expect that longer words would tend to have a longer skip sequence on average. In Drosnin's example of Yitzhak Rabin, the letters making up the former prime minister's name are 4,772 letters apart!⁴² This is not too surprising since Drosnin had to find eight letters at equally spaced intervals to make the Hebrew name. He also claims that the words "assassin" and "Amir" (the assassin's name) *cross* this pattern in the resulting matrix. To the unsuspecting, this might imply that they are in close context. But actually they are not close at all. The first letter of "Yitzhak" is 9,552 letters from the closest letter of "Amir," and the name Amir is about 14,324 letters from the word "assassin"! Furthermore Drosnin greatly misleads his readers with the claim that the word "assassin" is in the Hebrew text, when it is not.⁴³

⁴⁰ Drosnin, *The Bible Code*, 64.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴³ Supposedly the letters of Rabin's name are constructed from eight letters appearing at intervals of 4,772 letters each. The word "assassin," however, is not constructed from an encoded word at equally spaced intervals (*ibid.*, 28). Rather, the horizontal words of his example are straight out of Deuteronomy 4:42. The Hebrew text reads **ירצח רוצח אשר**. The Hebrew word **רצח** means "to kill," but in this context it has nothing to do with assassination. Deuteronomy 4:41–42 reads, "Then Moses set

THE METHOD IS DANGEROUSLY USED TO BUILD DOCTRINE

Does the counting of letters to spell out words and phrases really do any great harm? The answer is yes if false teaching results from it. Rambsel, a Hebrew Christian, is guilty of this in his discussion of Enoch and Methuselah: "In Genesis 5:22, starting with the *chet* (ח) in Cha'nok's name, counting 129 letters three times from right to left, spells, *Mashiach* משיח. M'tushalach lived to a ripe old age of 969 years. According to tradition, he died seven days before the great flood of No'ach's times, when [God] poured out His wrath upon a sinful and rebellious world. . . . Could the believers be removed (resurrected), *one week* (seven years), before the Judgment of the nations? Hopefully."⁴⁴

In essence Rambsel is trying to suggest a pretribulational rapture from this. But where is the validity in this type of hermeneutic? Does the occurrence of the coded name *Mashiach* (Messiah) in proximity to Methuselah, who supposedly died seven days before the Flood, suggest that a resurrection will occur seven years before the judgment of the nations? And did Methuselah die seven days before the Flood? Even if he did, why should seven days be a symbol of seven years? The believers' hope in a pretribulational rapture rests on clear New Testament teaching, not on Rambsel's style of hermeneutics. His method could easily give rise to false teachings in the church.⁴⁵

Drosnin makes no secret about some of his blatantly unbiblical views. He wrote, "I told Rips that I could not believe in a supernatural salvation. I was certain that the only help that we were going to get was the Bible code itself."⁴⁶ Elsewhere he remarked, "The Bible code is not a promise of divine salvation. It is not a threat of inevitable doom. It is just information. Its message is that we can save ourselves."⁴⁷

aside three cities east of the Jordan, where *anyone who had killed* a person could flee and find refuge if he had unintentionally killed his neighbor without malice aforethought" (NIV, the italicized words reflect the three Hebrew words above in Drosnin's example) This is a typical example of how Drosnin twists the data to serve his own purposes

⁴⁴ Rambsel, *Yeshua The Name of Jesus Revealed in the Old Testament*, 17

⁴⁵ One can find numerous examples where Drosnin is guilty of propagating false doctrine. He claims that encoded in the very verse that describes the engraving of the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone are the words "it was made by computer" (Drosnin, *The Bible Code*, 95). Three pages later, he jumps to an even greater extreme when he asserts, "The Bible that 'God' dictated to Moses was really a computer program" (ibid., 98).

⁴⁶ Ibid., 91

⁴⁷ Michael Drosnin, "The Bible Code Final Day," *Daily Mail*, May 30, 1997, 53

From such presuppositions as these Drosnin asserts the most preposterous views. For example regarding the extinction of dinosaurs he suggests, "Sixty-five million years ago an asteroid bigger than Mount Everest struck the Earth, exploding with the force of 300 million hydrogen bombs, and killed all the dinosaurs."⁴⁸

At the secular level this method has already given rise to prophetic speculation. Drosnin has used the Bible code to conclude that a nuclear holocaust will occur in either the year 2000 or 2006, which he associates with biblical Armageddon.⁴⁹ This could easily set off another round of "date-setting." Sadly some Christians will place faith in this prediction and end up causing embarrassment to themselves and the cause of Christ.

THE BIBLE CODE METHOD HAS NO BIBLICAL SUPPORT

Perhaps the strongest argument against the so-called Bible code system is the total lack of biblical validation. Not once did Jesus or any of the apostles ever utilize such a technique, despite the fact that the Old Testament is quoted or alluded to hundreds of times in the New Testament. If this were the way God intended the Old Testament to be used, Jesus would have given some hint about it. Advocates of the Bible code try to counter this argument by claiming that God was saving this discovery until this time in history when computers would make it possible to find these codes. That may be theoretically possible, but it still leaves the system without divine validation. If Christians today embrace the Bible code, then they have accepted a truth system without apostolic foundation and have moved beyond "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

Drosnin even says that the Bible *refers* to this secret methodology in Isaiah 29:11, which mentions a "sealed book."⁵⁰ But he uses this reference completely out of context. Isaiah 29 discusses God's judgment that would fall on Judah and Jerusalem because of their disobedience against God. Because of their spiritual blindness the people could not comprehend the written Word. For those Jews God's Word was like a sealed book. This verse has nothing to do with a secret Bible code; it was a reference to the Jews' inability to understand what God had revealed in the Bible.

⁴⁸ Drosnin, *The Bible Code*, 148

⁴⁹ Elsewhere Drosnin claims that the "End of Days" started sometime in 1995–1996 (*ibid.*, 89)

⁵⁰ Drosnin, "The Bible Code Final Day," 52

SIMILAR RESULTS ARE ACHIEVABLE IN OTHER LITERARY WORKS

One of the contentions made by Bible code proponents is that their findings of equidistant letter sequences in the Hebrew Bible (especially multiple related words converging in the same matrix) are not replicable in other literary works. Drosnin, for instance, has boldly claimed, “In experiment after experiment, the crossword puzzles were found only in the Bible. Not in *War and Peace*, not in any other book, and not in ten million computer-generated test cases.”⁵¹ As previously mentioned, Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg attempted to check the results of their research in Genesis with a control case from the Hebrew translation of L. N. Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. According to them, the same yield of convergences found in Genesis did not result in the latter work by Tolstoy, and so this supposedly substantiates the uniqueness of their research with the Bible.⁵² This claim, however, has been disproved more recently by Bar-Natan and McKay.⁵³ ELSs, even minimal ELSs with small skip values, have been demonstrated in Tolstoy’s work, both in regard to the famous “Rabbis Experiment” initially used by Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg, as well as other converging ELSs. David E. Thomas has shown that words like “Hitler” and “Nazi” (words often used by code advocates) can easily be found even in an English translation of *War and Peace* or the King James Version of Genesis.⁵⁴

In other words the same method that was used to find coded messages in the Hebrew Bible based on the theory of equidistant letter sequences can be utilized with other literary works (especially Hebrew documents) to obtain similar results. Actually the results (regardless of the literary document used) are not astonishing at all. As previously noted, out of millions of possible letter sequences even random chance would yield desired patterns.

The present author and his son Brandon decided to do a search for his name (ברנדן) in the Hebrew Bible. Based on a skip sequence of two to five hundred, his name “occurred” 238 times. That means

⁵¹ Drosnin, *The Bible Code*, 26

⁵² Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg, “Equidistant Letter Sequences in the Book of Genesis.”

⁵³ Dror Bar-Natan and Brendan McKay, “Equidistant Letter Sequences in Tolstoy’s ‘War and Peace,’” <http://cs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/dilumim/WNP/>, October 27, 1999. Bar-Natan teaches mathematics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and McKay is a mathematician in the department of computer science at the National University in Canberra, Australia.

⁵⁴ David E. Thomas, “Hidden Messages and the Bible Code,” *Skeptical Inquirer* 21 (November–December 1997): 33–34.

we could generate at least 238 matrices (even more if the skip sequence was increased) from which to look for related words. Out of that many possibilities, a person could surely find almost anything he might be looking for.

CONCLUSION

The so-called Bible code has no biblical warrant and is not substantiated when carefully examined. Because of the unique nature of biblical Hebrew and the numerous and indiscriminate ways that patterns are established, these coded words are not so mathematically astonishing as the advocates of the Bible code suggest. The same technique can be used in other literary documents (particularly those written in Hebrew) to find predetermined words sought for by the researcher. Furthermore the method rests on the assumption that the copies of the Hebrew Bible available today are exactly the same as originally penned. Yet the reality is that the manuscripts today do differ in some ways and textual criticism cannot simply be ignored.

People do not need some "biblical crossword puzzle." Instead they need to read and meditate on the revealed truths of God's holy Word. They need to be engaged in Bible study to learn the marvelous truths that God has revealed, rather than being diverted by the speculative counting of letters (for which there is no divine sanction or apostolic precedent). Believers ought to have as their goal the pursuit of spiritual maturity in the Lord Jesus Christ, "no longer to be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Eph. 4:14, NIV). Pastors and Bible study leaders should urge believers to shun this speculative endeavor and be diligent in "handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).



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